

## **Educating Business Marketers: A Lack of Common Ground in the Curriculum?**

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### **Abstract**

The paper is concerned with the issue of curriculum development in the field of business to business marketing. While there is no single right way to teach business marketing, many students, educators and practitioners prefer a curriculum composed of a single, widely accepted body of knowledge. By analysing textbooks (in French, German, English and Swedish) and course designs (from five countries) it is established that there is no single accepted business marketing curriculum, and that there are implicit controversies in the curriculum. The purpose of the paper is to make explicit those implicit controversies, and to promote debate on the transmission of business marketing knowledge through the undergraduate and postgraduate curricula.

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### **Educating Business Marketers: A Lack of Common Ground in the Curriculum?**

#### *Introduction*

In institutions of higher education business-to-business marketing seems to be both ubiquitous and unloved, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries (see e.g. Brown 1998, Scheuing 1996). Yet in recent years some of the most important theoretical and practical marketing developments have taken place in this field. Business-to-business marketing (or, simply, ‘business marketing’) researchers and practitioners were engaged in the study and conduct of relationship marketing before the term had been invented (see e.g. Håkansson 1982), and it is in the field of inter-firm business that electronic commerce is furthest advanced (The Economist 1999). The purpose of this paper is to engage with the issue of business marketing curriculum design.

Obviously there is no single right way to teach business marketing. However, many students, educators and practitioners prefer a curriculum composed of a single, widely accepted body of knowledge (see e.g. Feuerhake 1994). Where two or more substantial bodies of knowledge coexist, and cannot readily be reconciled, the scholar faces a dilemma. Such a dilemma has been faced in business marketing in recent years. The old way of teaching business marketing was based on a transactional view of the world, and emphasised an understanding of organisational buying behaviour as a basis for the creation of a successful marketing mix (Bonoma and Johnston 1978). A new business marketing approach is based on a relational view of the world, and emphasises the need to understand inter-organisational relationships and networks in order to develop and manage portfolios of relationships and positions in networks (Håkansson and Snehota 1995; Turnbull, Ford and Cunningham 1996). What, then, should we be teaching our students?

#### *Objectives, Method, and Outline of Paper*

In order to open up a debate within the academic community on business marketing curriculum design, this paper aims to establish current practice in course and textbook design, and to analyse current practice in order to identify controversies, consensus, and plurality in the curriculum. While in part an exercise in induction, there are certain preconceptions that are difficult to avoid and

which contribute a deductive component to the study. A key preconception, identified in the introductory paragraphs, is that there are two principal competing views that inform business marketing curriculum design, which can be summarised as the “transactional” and the “relational” approaches. A second preconception is that courses in business marketing are primarily taught from a managerial perspective. That is to say that there is a presumption that the fundamental purpose is to teach students how to function as marketing managers, and that the engagement of students with academic research is mainly justified as a means to this end.

In order better to understand current practice in business marketing education, the researchers conducted a literature review of prior research into marketing curriculum design. The purpose of business marketing education was examined using e.g. Carson 1993, Coates & Koerner 1996, Feuerhake 1994 and Walker et al 1998. Particular emphasis was also given to contributions concerning the business marketing curriculum (Hutt and Speh 1998a, Meffert 2000, Meffert and Bongartz 2000, Meffert and Kirchgeorg 1994, Narayandas et al 1998, Narus & Anderson 1998). On the basis of the review, three curricular dichotomies in addition to the previously mentioned transactional/relational distinction were established.

Thereafter the authors analysed the content of major business marketing textbooks, building upon a previous analysis by the first author (Brennan 2000), as well as the four dichotomies. Nine English language, as well as two French language, two German language, and two Swedish language textbooks were analysed. Finally the researchers collected and analysed 18 course descriptions for business marketing courses (from Australia, Finland, New Zealand, UK and USA). These were obtained primarily via a request distributed to an English language e-group of academics in business marketing and purchasing, which was supplemented by additional English language course descriptions obtained from public postings on the World Wide Web.

In the following section, the marketing curriculum literature will be assessed. The focus will first be on the debates concerning the purpose of business marketing education and the relation between the curriculum and the purpose. Thereafter the above-mentioned four dichotomies in business marketing will be discussed. In the subsequent sections, the focus will move to the reviewed business marketing textbooks and the acquired course descriptions, respectively. Here the analysis will be based on the categories identified by Brennan (2000) as well as the four dichotomies. Additionally, for the case of the acquired course descriptions, we will elaborate upon the problems caused by the dichotomies as well as ways in which business marketing course instructors have sought to overcome them. Two in-depth case presentations will also be used to this end. Finally we

will present avenues for future business marketing curriculum research and for further scholarly discussion on the subject.

### *Review of Business Marketing Curriculum Literature*

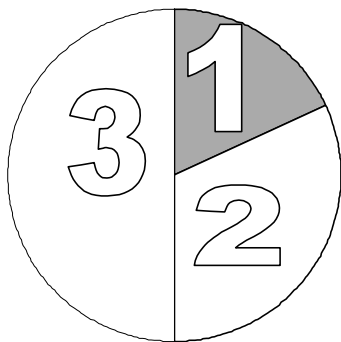
The development of business marketing education is influenced by debates about the nature of the education itself. One underlying debate, on which there is no sign of consensus, is “what is business (or marketing) education for?” In England, Garneau and Brennan (1999) investigated the views of three stakeholder groups: employers, lecturers, and students. They detected a relatively narrow perspective among employers, with an emphasis on generic skills (e.g. numeracy, literacy) and attitudes (e.g. punctuality), although employers also indicated that they would prefer greater emphasis to be given to business marketing in the general marketing curriculum. Students, too, demonstrated largely instrumental attitudes towards marketing education, exemplified by the focus group response “we’re here to get an edge – not for textbook stuff, but to learn how to do things when we work for a company”. Not surprisingly, lecturers had a broader view, agreeing that generic skills and practical knowledge were important, but also aspiring to provide an “education for life” rather than simply an “education for work”.

Coates and Koerner (1996) conducted a study of the alumni of a British BA in Business Studies programme, in order to establish what practising managers with direct experience of undergraduate business education thought the business curriculum should comprise. Their respondents asserted that too much time was devoted to behavioural science, sociology and psychology, a response which clearly implied that the main purpose of an undergraduate business education is to provide students with basic knowledge, routines and skills that will be of direct use to them in the workplace. By contrast, the Australian researchers Walter et al (1998) argued for a more integrative, multi-disciplinary marketing education, on the basis that there are key weaknesses in the university marketing curriculum when measured in terms of the needs of business, and that business needs are the primary driver of curriculum design.

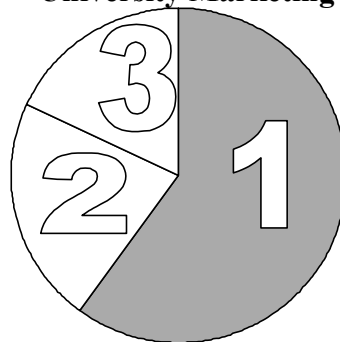
In a similar vein, but another cultural context, Swiss doctoral student Feuerhake (1994) drew on Reineke and Sauer’s (1993) study of skills used in marketing department employees’ daily work to contrast these with the types of competencies that German language university marketing programmes provide students. Not surprisingly, his results indicated that general working and social skills are used on a daily basis more than marketing and general knowledge (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Competencies Used in Marketing and Sales Work Versus Competencies Taught in German Language University Marketing Programmes (Feuerhake 1994:144)

**Use of Competencies in M&S Work**



**Competency Profile of German Language University Marketing Programmes**



**Legend:**

**1. Scientific and General Knowledge**

General level of knowledge  
Marketing knowledge and know-how  
Knowledge of analytical and scientific methods

**2. Working skills**

Ability to identify main points  
Learning skills  
Ability to generate creative ideas  
Ability to solve problems, also after having eliminated some factors  
Individual working skills

**3. Social skills**

Skills in working in teams  
Communication skills  
Empathy  
Ability to convince others of one's viewpoints  
Ability to manage conflicts

However, concerning marketing knowledge, i.e. the home domain of business marketing education, Feuerhake (1994) also specified three curriculum needs in German speaking regions:

- (a) A need to include more theories and methods that describe and explain real-life marketing practices
- (b) A need to include more theories and methods that are often used by practitioners
- (c) A need to include theories that will be relevant in the business world of the future

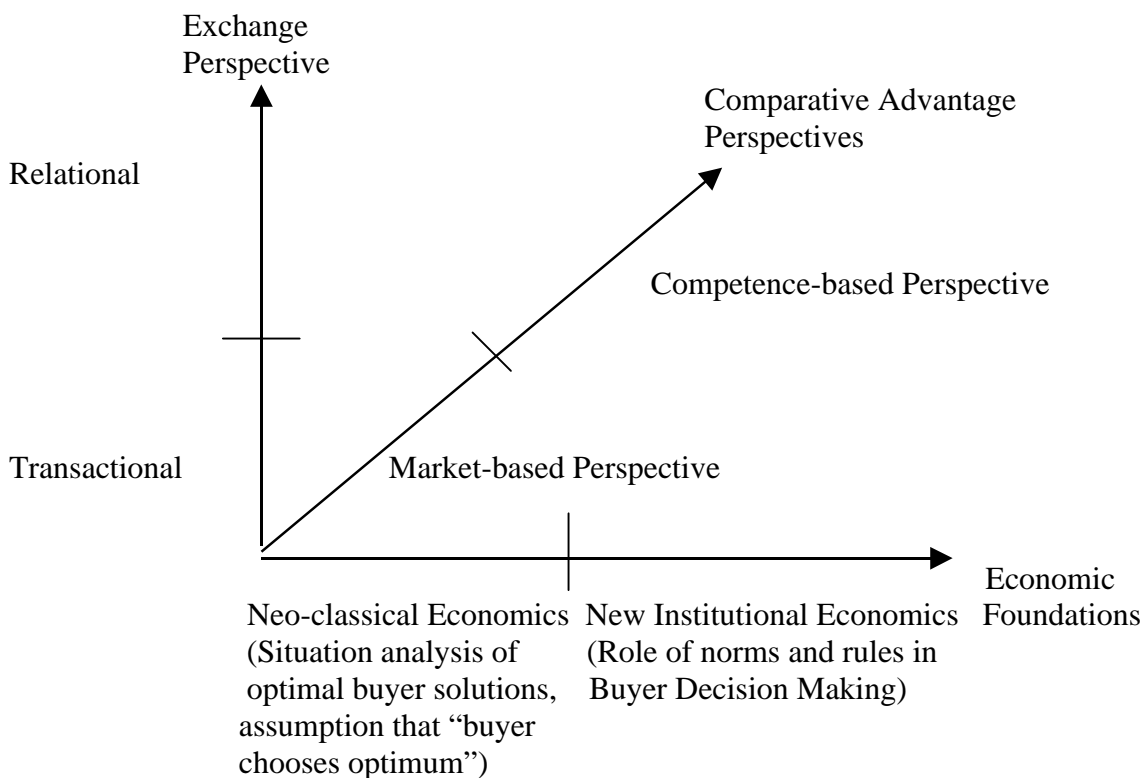
Another German language source, Dichtl 1995, also suggested that the marketing curriculum at German universities did not reflect the practices of German marketing departments in the early and mid-nineties. However the author claimed that the reason for this might have been that marketing is a younger discipline in Germany, compared to, for example, the USA, and that relatively few German marketing graduates had yet reached higher management levels. Therefore German companies' marketing departments often were staffed with non-marketing business administration or engineering majors, who mainly provided information deemed relevant for business strategy to the companies' non-marketing specialist top management.

However, on the basis of a recent survey of 173 German firms and 73 German marketing professors (Meffert and Bongartz 2000), which was a repetition of a 1994 survey (Meffert and Kirchgeorg 1994), Meffert (2000) claimed that German businesses' understanding of marketing has converged substantially with that of German marketing academics since 1994. Furthermore, his assessment of

German marketing education and research included the following strengths: strong orientation towards marketing practice, pluralistic approaches, and high placement rates for graduates.

Curriculum is, as previously mentioned, a second issue about which the literature suggests a lack of consensus. In addition to the transactional/relational divide, Meffert (2000) identified two further dichotomies, which we believe also could be applied internationally: (1) the view of the primary source of comparative advantage (firm-internal competencies versus a profound understanding of market wants) and (2) the (often implicit) economic ontological assumptions (those of neo-classical economics versus those of new institutional economics). These are depicted in Figure 2, which is an adaptation and translation of a figure in his article (ibid. 333):

Figure 2. Classification of Marketing Research and Curriculum “Schools”



A fourth dimension, which could be added to the dichotomies of the above figure, is whether or not a critical management theory perspective (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott 1992) is included in the business marketing curriculum. Critical management theory is concerned with “the social, political and moral nature ... of management” (Grey and Mitev 1995:76) and “seeks alternative modes of thought and behaviour from which it creates a standpoint of critique” (Kellner 1991:xiv). Although contributions providing vociferous support for the incorporation of a critical theory element into the business education curriculum (Reed and Anthony 1992, Grey and Mitev 1995, Mutch 1997, Reynolds 1998) abound, especially in the English language literature, Reynolds (1998) observes

that critical reflection is not commonly found in management education. This is, however, an issue that we will also treat empirically in the next sections, in addition to the other three dichotomies.

### *Review of Business Marketing Textbooks*

Table 1 presents fifteen reviewed textbooks, identified by author, year of publication, language and country of origin. The classification of curriculum elements is adapted from Brennan (2000) and so is based on this author's pre-understanding of the structure of the curriculum as described above.

Some care must be taken in interpreting Table 1. First, there are occasions on which the same meaning is conveyed by different English language expressions. For example Anderson and Narus cover market segmentation in a chapter entitled "market sensing: generating and using knowledge about the marketplace". Second, with regard to translation of non-English categorisations, the translation has in some instances required substantial judgmental decisions – a phenomenon not uncommon in translation and multi-language comparisons (Hansen, 1995). Third, both within and across language boundaries, there is a risk of comparing works that are not strictly comparable. For example, Hutt and Speh's English language 6<sup>th</sup> edition (recently replaced by a 7<sup>th</sup> edition – Hutt and Speh 2001) was a highly developed "full service textbook", including case studies, boxed real-world snapshots, and a full instructor support packages, whereas the English language books by Wilson and Ford et al. are smaller, more limited and in their first edition. With regard to the German language books, the Kleinaltenkamp and Plinke text follows the common English language textbook format of including summaries of the chapters and questions to be answered by students, whereas the 812 page text by Backhaus omits these elements, yet includes a comprehensive presentation and assessment of major English and German language models and theoretical results not found in any of the English language textbooks. Concerning the Swedish texts, both are relatively short and old, and in connection their assessment it must be remembered that English language textbooks are very commonly used at Nordic universities and are sometimes also used in the polytechnics of these countries. (This is also reflected in the Scandinavian co-authorship of two of the English language textbooks, Ford et al 1998 and Hayes et al 1996.) Of the two French texts, Michel et al (2000) is a substantial (529 page) work in its second edition, while Léonard's (1994) text is more limited in scope.

Of course, such a summary table can only indicate the main curricular emphases of the works, and a fairly arbitrary cut-off has to be made about how much coverage a topic must get in the text before it merits inclusion in Table 1. For example, a quick half-page dash through segmentation clearly

Table 1: Comparison of curriculum coverage in fifteen business marketing texts

	Business Marketing Texts														
Language	English USA	English USA	English USA	English USA	English USA	English Multiple	English UK	English UK	English Multiple	German Germany	German Germany	Swedish Sweden	Swedish Sweden	French France	French France
Country of origin	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	Multiple	UK	UK	Multiple	Germany	Germany	Sweden	Sweden	France	France
Curriculum covered	Hutt & Speh 1998	Brierty et al 1998	Dwyer & Tanner 1999	Gross et al 1993	Anderson & Narus 1999	Hayes et al 1996	Chisnall 1995	Wilson 1999	Ford et al 1998	Backhaus 1997	Kleinaltenkamp & Plinke 2000	Flodhammar et al 1991	Gustaffson & Rennemark 1991	Léonard 1994	Michel et al 2000
Nature of business markets/marketing	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Purchasing (and materials management)			x	x	x			x		x	x				x
Organisational buying behaviour	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x
Relationship strategies for business markets	x		x	x						x					
Business market research & intelligence	x	x	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x		x
Business market segmentation	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	
Organisational demand analysis	x	x	x	x						x	x				
Business marketing planning/strategy	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x	x
International/Global business marketing	x	x	x				x			x	x	x			x
Business-to-business product management	x	x	x	x		x				x	x	x		x	x
Business-to-business NPD	x	x	x	x		x		x			x	x			
Business services marketing	x	x	x	x		x				x				x	x
Business marketing channels	x	x	x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	x	x
Business marketing logistics	x	x		x								x	x		
Business market pricing strategy	x	x	x	x		x				x	x			x	x
Impersonal communications for business markets	x	x	x	x		x	x			x	x	x	x	x	x
Business-to-business direct marketing			x			x				x		x	x		
Personal selling in business markets	x	x	x			x						x			
Organising and controlling the salesforce	x	x	x	x		x							x		
Controlling business marketing strategy	x	x	x	x						x	x	x	x		
Technology and the industrial marketplace				x											x
Innovation strategy							x								
Competition and cooperation in business markets				x		x		x		x	x				
How companies relate to each other								x	x	x					
Managing relationships with suppliers									x						
Managing customer relationships					x				x	x				x	x
Distribution (reseller) relationships					x	x			x			x			
Relationships and technology									x						
Managing business relationships									x						
Managing market offerings					x	x				x	x	x	x		
New offer realisation					x	x				x	x	x	x		
Gaining customers					x	x				x	x	x	x		



doesn't count, a 30 page chapter does, but judgement has to be exercised between these two extremes.

Even allowing for these caveats, some general conclusions about the nature of the business-to-business marketing curriculum seem justified. One large cluster of textbooks (e.g. Brierty et al 1998, Dwyer and Tanner 1999, Flodhammer et al. 1991, Gustavsson and Rennemark 1991, Hayes et al 1996, Hutt and Speh 1998b, Kleinaltenkamp and Plinke 2000) seems to suggest that the 'core' of the business marketing curriculum consists of a single set of marketing management processes, that apply, albeit with a few modifications, to most marketing situations, whether consumer or business. This is the viewpoint once epitomised by e.g. Fern and Brown (1984) and more recently espoused by Simkin (2000). The authors of these textbooks may diverge somewhat concerning exact context; however most are keen to suggest that marketing planning, marketing research and analysis, and marketing communications, both personal and impersonal, belong to the core of an initial course. Furthermore, a substantial number of these authors would also want to include pricing, logistics, distribution, and customer service in the core.

The diverging viewpoint is that business markets are fundamentally different from consumer markets; this view is best represented by the Michel et al (2000), Ford et al (1998) and Gross et al (1993) textbooks. The latter provides an impressively long list of some 58 differences between business and consumer marketing, including both differences in management processes as well as underlying structural differences. Michel et al go so far as to argue that the fundamental value of marketing remains in doubt in business markets: "There is a continuing debate regarding the usefulness of marketing to firms. Although there is no doubting the value of marketing to consumer businesses, in business to business marketing situations the usefulness of marketing remains problematic." (Michel et al 2000:3; translation by the researchers). However, Michel et al then elaborate an explicit contingency framework for marketing situations, arguing that the fundamental approach to marketing should be based on an appreciation of the intensity of the interaction between the customer and supplier, and on the relative size of the two parties (relative size is used as a proxy variable for mutual dependence).

Three approaches to the basic definition of business marketing emerge from this analysis. First, that "marketing is marketing" and a single approach, slightly modified, suits all marketing situations. Second, that the nature of the customer and the product alters the appropriate marketing approach – consumer goods marketing, services marketing, business marketing and so on. The third approach, which the authors find the most persuasive, is that different marketing situations can

be assigned to different marketing approaches based on a small set of contingency variables – such as the intensity of interaction and relative size (dependency), as Michel et al suggest. Most consumer marketing is allocated to the “marketing mix” approach, because in most consumer markets there is limited supplier/customer interaction and the supplier is much larger than the customer – but in a consumer market in which other conditions prevailed another approach would be more suitable. In business markets we find the whole range of interaction intensities and of supplier/customer relative sizes. Hence the scope for disagreement over the correct approach to business marketing, and hence the need for an explicit contingency approach to the subject. It would be a reasonable deduction, on this basis, that business marketing is intrinsically more complex than consumer marketing, making for greater inherent difficulty in curriculum design.

### *Analysis of Business Marketing Course Syllabuses*

Our preliminary examination of business marketing textbooks suggests that the “business-to-business marketing” course varies considerably in terms of content, and that no academic consensus exists. Although we previously asserted that “there is no single right way to teach business-to-business marketing”, the absence of any agreement on the core curriculum is cause for concern, as it calls into question the validity of the scientific foundations upon which our discipline rests. However we will not try to solve this fundamental problem in this paper. Instead we will turn to our analysis of how “business-to-business marketing” course instructors tackle this problem in widely varying institutional contexts.

Tables 2 and 3 present details of eighteen business marketing courses delivered at universities in Australia, Finland, New Zealand, the UK and the USA. Basic details on the course are provided in table 2, including an indication of the educational level of the course (since this could affect content) and its overall theme. This information was distilled from a reading of the course syllabus provided by the instructor. Each course is given a unique identifier, with the number identifying the university, and the letter (if any) distinguishing between different courses at the same university. One clear outlier should be mentioned – a solitary doctoral level course (13a) in organisational buying behaviour, which cannot be used in the comparative analysis owing to its specialist nature, but has been retained since it may be of wider interest to readers. In table 3 the eighteen courses are mapped against the curriculum elements identified in table 1. Additionally the hours of instruction for the course are indicated, since this may be a relevant factor affecting the instructor’s thinking on course design, perhaps a limiting factor in the breadth and depth with which topics are treated (cf. courses 14a and 14b).

From table 2 it can be seen that there is little evidence that business marketing is explicitly taught using a contingency framework. The impression is given that there is a single, right approach to business marketing. This may be because of the limitations of the data, and further research involving deeper investigation into course design might reveal more widespread use of a contingency approach. There does not appear to be any consistent differentiation between undergraduate and graduate courses in business marketing, although it may be that differentiation is achieved in terms of the sophistication of treatment, rather than through topic selection.

Table 2: Eighteen Courses in Business Marketing

Course code	Country	Title	Textbook	Level	Themes
1	Australia	Business Marketing	Dwyer & Tanner (1999)	Undergraduate	Relational
2	Finland	Business-to-Business Marketing	Ford et al (1998)/ Hayes et al (1996)	Undergraduate	Relational/ Transactional
3	Finland	International Industrial Marketing and Networks	Webster (1991)	Undergraduate	Relational
4	New Zealand	Business-to-Business Marketing	Anderson & Narus (1999)	Undergraduate	Relational
5	UK	Business-to-Business Marketing	Hutt & Speh (2001)	MBA	Transactional
6	UK	Marketing (for Master's degree in Engineering)	Ford (ed) (1997)	Graduate	Transactional
7	UK	Organisational Buying behaviour and the Management of Marketing	None	Undergraduate	Explicit contingency; not managerial
8a	UK	Business Marketing	Ford et al (1998)	Graduate	Relational
8b	UK	Business-to-Business Marketing	Hutt & Speh (2001)	Undergraduate	Transactional
9a	USA	Business-to-Business Marketing	Hutt & Speh (2001)	MBA	Transactional
9b	USA	Industrial Marketing: B2B Markets	Hutt & Speh (2001)	Undergraduate	Transactional
10	USA	Business-to-Business Marketing	Bingham & Gomes (2000)	Graduate	Transactional
11	USA	Business-to-Business Marketing	Dwyer & Tanner (1999)	MBA	Transactional
12	USA	Business Marketing	Mentzer & Beinstock (1998)	Undergraduate	Transactional
13a	USA	Organizational Buying Behavior and Business-to-Business Marketing	Bonoma, Zaltman & Johnston (1977)	Doctoral	Integrated approach
13b	USA	Business-to-Business Marketing	Hutt & Speh (2001)	Undergraduate	Transactional
14a	USA	Business Marketing	Anderson & Narus (1999)	MBA	Value orientation
14b	USA	Business Marketing	Anderson & Narus (1999)	MBA	Value orientation

The data in table 3 suggest that in the USA business marketing is usually taught using a “marketing management” approach, around the processes of analysis, planning and marketing mix development (however courses 14a and 14b do not conform to this pattern). The approach outside the USA appears to be more eclectic, with more integration of relational aspects in the curriculum (e.g. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8b). Notice that “relationship strategies” is often included in the curriculum at American universities, but in the context of a course that is designed around the marketing mix. Outside the

Course code	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8a	8b	9a	9b	10	11	12	13a	13b	14a	14b
Country of origin	AUS	FIN	FIN	NZ	UK	UK	UK	UK	UK	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA	USA
Hours of instruction	42	23	30	36	15	24	25	36	24	45	45	30	30	30		45	15	30
Curriculum covered																		
Nature of business markets/marketing	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X
Purchasing (and materials management)	X	X	X				X						X					
Organisational buying behaviour	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X		
Relationship strategies for business markets	X	X						X		X	X	X	X	X		X		
Business market research & intelligence				X	X	X		X	X							X	X	X
Business market segmentation		X				X		X	X				X			X		X
Organisational demand analysis				X						X	X	X	X			X		
Business marketing planning/strategy		X			X	X		X		X	X	X		X			X	X
International/global business marketing		X	X							X	X	X				X		X
Business-to-business product management				X	X	X		X		X	X	X						
Business-to-business NPD				X						X	X	X	X			X		
Business services marketing	X				X	X				X	X	X						X
Business marketing channels				X	X			X		X	X	X				X		X
Business marketing logistics																X		
Business marketing pricing strategy	X			X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X			X		X
Impersonal marketing communications for business markets		X			X	X		X		X	X	X	X			X		
Business-to-business direct marketing		X																
Personal selling in business markets		X								X	X	X	X			X		
Organising and controlling the salesforce		X						X		X	X							
Controlling business marketing strategy		X								X	X							
Technology and the industrial marketplace																		
Innovation strategy																		
Competition and cooperation in business markets		X				X												
How companies relate to each other	X	X	X	X			X		X						X			
Managing relationships with suppliers			X															
Managing customer relationships	X	X							X								X	X
Distribution (reseller) relationships	X	X		X														X
Relationships and technology																		
Managing business relationships	X	X				X			X									
Managing market offerings		X															X	X
New offer realisation																	X	X
Gaining customers																	X	X

USA, the marketing mix has often been dismissed as an organising framework for the business marketing curriculum.

The evidence from both tables 1 and 3 is consistent with the hypothesis that American universities predominantly take a managerial approach to business marketing, emphasising marketing mix development as central to the manager's job, with relationship strategy essentially relegated to the position of a component of the mix. Some universities outside the USA take a similar approach. But there is another approach, which emphasises the management of inter-firm relationships as the basic function of business marketing, and neglects (or perhaps rejects) the marketing mix as an organising framework for the curriculum. Assuming that this hypothesis has some validity, it is interesting to speculate whether this difference is based in the conditions of the marketing environment, or emerges from broader cultural and educational traditions. For example, applying Michel et al's contingency framework would suggest that a transactional, impersonal marketing mix approach would be more suitable in a market with low intensity interaction and where large suppliers deal with much smaller customers. Perhaps these conditions prevail to a greater extent in the USA than elsewhere. Alternatively, it may be that because the USA was the birthplace of modern marketing thought the conventional model of marketing based on a fast-moving consumer goods model is more firmly entrenched.

Going beyond the transactional/relational dimension, it is clear that most business marketing courses focus on the delivery of a set of techniques for "doing marketing". Whether preference is given to a set of marketing mix tools, or to procedures for managing inter-firm relationships, the predominant goal is one of preparing students for the role of marketing manager. Decisions on the fundamental goal of a course are embedded in the national and institutional educational cultures of the host university. To illustrate the way in which prevailing educational conditions and culture influences course design in business marketing, we now present two contrasting case studies.

#### *Case 1 - Business Marketing at Middlesex University Business School*

Middlesex University Business School is located in London, UK. It employs around 160 academic staff and has approximately 5,000 students enrolled on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Middlesex University was, until 1992, a polytechnic, and retains an emphasis on vocational education as an important part of the curriculum. The Business School is the largest school in the university, followed by the School of Computer Science. Business-to-business marketing has been taught at Middlesex for over ten years at undergraduate level, and for four years at graduate level. The subject is compulsory for students taking the Bachelor of Arts degree in Marketing, but is

otherwise optional. The undergraduate course is a single-semester course involving twelve taught weeks, a total of 36 classroom hours, divided into 24 lecture hours plus 6 workshops each of two hours. The graduate course is also a single-semester course over twelve weeks, a total of 24 classroom hours.

In keeping with the vocational orientation of the university, the undergraduate course in business marketing has a distinctly managerial orientation. Primarily it is a textbook-based course, built around Hutt and Speh (2001) and using case studies from this book. Students taking the course are required to have prior knowledge of elementary marketing, which is presumed to have a consumer goods marketing bias. The course begins with a discussion of the distinctive nature of business markets, proceeds to a discussion of customer and demand analysis in business markets (organisational buying behaviour, marketing research, segmentation), followed by a discussion of each of the marketing mix elements from a business-to-business perspective. In the associated workshops the primary activities are case study analysis (with formal, assessed presentations) and a “market intelligence project”. The market intelligence project is an extended industry sector profiling project, involving the collection and analysis of secondary data for a notional client organisation (the client organisation does exist, has been consulted about the project design, and operates in the industrial filtration and separation business). A formal report and presentation are required for the market intelligence project.

While the undergraduate course in business marketing adopts a very conventional approach to the subject, the graduate course adopts an explicitly relational perspective. In practice, a few students each year do progress from the undergraduate to the graduate course (e.g. complete their BA Marketing and proceed to take an MA in the same area). The subject matter of the courses is largely complementary (around 25% content overlap). The primary focus of the course is on the nature and theory of inter-firm relationships and networks, and attempts by scholars to develop workable managerial frameworks. Case studies are not used, nor is there a standard textbook (although Ford et al 1998 is recommended). Students are referred to scholarly work for their reading. For students with access to a business marketing organisation (e.g. part-time students in employment), there is the opportunity to conduct an action research project of a live business relationship as 50% of their assessment for the course. However most students prefer the “easier option” of writing a paper on a contemporary issue in business marketing!

Overall, the issue of how to design the business marketing curriculum has, at Middlesex University, been “solved” by delivering the more straightforward marketing mix approach to undergraduate

students and the conceptually more complex relational approach to graduate students. This is more a “solution” of convenience than of principle. Students attending a university such as this, with a tradition of vocational education, expect to learn about “how to do business marketing”, i.e. a set of managerial tools. Limited research indicates that this is what employers local to the university expect students to have learnt (Garneau and Brennan 1999), literature in the field suggests that this is a widespread employer expectation in the UK, while the UK government has prioritised “graduate employability” as a key output from higher education. A set of well-established and well-documented tools exists in the conventional literature, so that students certainly gain the impression that they are acquiring real-world knowledge and practical skills. The approach is scarcely less managerial at the graduate level. There is little attempt to convey “theory for theory’s sake”. The ultimate purpose, clearly articulated to the students, is to provide them with formal methods of analysing inter-firm relationships and networks *so that they will be able to function as more effective managers*. Of course, there is a clear downside to the curriculum design used at Middlesex University, since undergraduate students gain negligible exposure to an important school of thought in business marketing (interaction and networks), while graduate students receive only a cursory introduction to the conventional marketing mix approach, before being whisked on to relationships and networks. Whether this is a justifiable compromise, or an unjustifiable oversimplification, is a moot point.

#### *Case 2 – Business Marketing at the University of Oulu, Finland*

The University of Oulu is located in Oulu, Finland, which is the largest town in Central and Northern Finland, with a population of around 110,000 inhabitants. Traditional manufacturing (e.g. paper) and natural resources (e.g. logging) business are still of some importance to the Oulu region; however the town has been marked by the rise of high-tech industry in the past decade (see the *New York Times* article by Andrews, 2000). The university employs an academic staff of over 1700 persons; these are responsible for the undergraduate and postgraduate studies of 13,000 students. The Department of Marketing is a small, dynamic unit (with 7 ½ academic positions); the first marketing majors were admitted in 1991. Today about 55 students are admitted annually to the marketing programme by means of entrance examinations; additionally 1-2 foreign adjunct professors and 1 domestic adjunct professor visit the department annually to teach courses.

The department is specialised in business marketing; thus courses in business marketing have been taught since 1991. According to the department’s Annual Report 2000:

“The aim of its education is to provide students with a good understanding of the effects of business relationships and networks upon marketing efforts. Marketing is viewed as

dynamic, goal-minded interaction between customers and suppliers, buyer and sellers, and with yet other counterparts, e.g. governmental, civil society, and commercial actors. In addition to sharpening the marketing skills of our students, our aim is to provide them with the analytical abilities to assess new scholarly contributions, enabling the most talented of them to proceed with post-graduate studies”

Marketing majors can either choose a special Master’s degree in software business or the basic Bachelors/Masters programme of business marketing with obligatory foreign language courses (in two of the following languages: English, German, Swedish, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, or Japanese) and other business administration course requirements. The former alternative entails taking a number of courses offered by the Department of Information Processing Science in lieu of most of the foreign language requirement. The Department of Marketing’s languages of instruction and examination are Finnish and English.

The basic course in business marketing is obligatory for both marketing majors, yet also open to all university students. It is the initial course in marketing, and it is taught as a multiple textbook course, built around Ford et al (1998) and Hayes et al (1996), two English language textbooks relatively widely used in the Nordic countries, due to the Scandinavian origins of some of their authors. Furthermore business marketing-relevant sections of Usunier (1993) and one academic article or conference paper are assigned as obligatory course reading, to increase the international element of the course as well as to introduce the students to academic research from the very beginning.

The course runs over 6 study weeks, with 5 hours of lectures weekly in the first four weeks, and intensive small group case presentation sessions in the last two weeks. During the presentations, the participants present a written case solution in a group and make an oral individual presentation of another case, on the basis of a practice case and the instructor’s model solution of the practice case. Thereafter a four-hour final examination of the 475 pages of assigned readings is held.

The introductory course adopts a non-conventional, multi-perspective approach to the subject, in that the opposing relationship and transaction dichotomy is introduced. Furthermore the students are encouraged to think critically about multiple and/or opposing models’ application in the case solving sessions. The instructor often states: “Firms achieve business success either by learning to excel at applying given practices of doing business or by finding ‘holes’ in the existing practices and filling these.” Moreover, the critical perspective is briefly introduced in the initial course, as the instructor deems discussions of ethics important.



Overall, the issue of how to design an overall business marketing curriculum has not yet been 'solved' at the University of Oulu, aside from the general mission statement from the department's annual report (see above). Thus the individual instructors are very free to design the courses according to their own preference, and little co-ordination between the courses takes place. However, most instructors place more emphasis upon relationships than transactions; this emphasis seems also to be accepted by Finnish industry (see e.g. Coviello 1999). Additionally the lecturers underline the importance of linking research to practice and teaching students to extract practically relevant lessons from research. The reason for this perhaps lies in the Finnish system of higher education. In Finland, the distinction between polytechnics and universities still exists. University entrance examinations are highly competitive, and most research is also done at the universities. Thus one message that many Finnish university marketing academics seek to convey to their students is as follows:

1. The students have been accepted to a competitive and demanding Finnish university.
2. University education requires that they learn to assess the relevance of scientific contributions for their business practice, to enable them to independently update their knowledge in accordance with societal developments after completing their university studies.

These high goals are not always achieved. The less academically successful students tend to use models from the different schools of marketing thought in exams and papers somewhat 'randomly', i.e. without a deep understanding of the reasons for the underlying theoretical differences and without challenging their own 'common-sense' understanding of the world of business.

### *Case Study Discussion*

These two case studies have illustrated the way in which the design of the business marketing curriculum is influenced by broader economic, social and educational circumstances. At a vocational university in the UK, the instructor feels the need above all to demonstrate the "usefulness" of the course. There is pressure to teach "techniques" and "models" because of the impression they give of practical value. British higher education has had to respond to explicit government calls to provide skilled, employable graduates. The business marketing curriculum at Middlesex University, whether or not it genuinely delivers this, has clearly been designed to maximise the impression that this is what it does. By contrast, at the University of Oulu it is considered important to differentiate courses from those on offer at more vocational institutions. The impression has to be created that higher-level thinking skills are being nurtured, through engagement with leading-edge academic research. The aim is not just to produce graduates who can regurgitate knowledge and apply known frameworks, but to produce graduates who can

critically evaluate knowledge and have the ability and confidence to develop their own frameworks. Clearly, at both institutions the design of the business marketing curriculum is not a simple technical matter, with the designer picking and choosing among the available elements on the basis of unfettered academic judgement. Broader social and economic factors, national educational policy, and local competitive conditions in the higher education “industry” all have an influence on course design.

### *Controversies in the Curriculum? Conclusion and Avenues for Further Research*

Two controversies in the business marketing curriculum emerge very clearly from our analyses. First, there is the issue of whether business marketing should be taught as the management of a marketing mix, or as the management of inter-firm relationships. Our answer would be “both”, although how to do this within the confines of a single course is problematic. We are persuaded that the appropriate practice of business marketing management varies according to structural and behavioural characteristics of the market, and that it is legitimate for students to be taught business marketing within a contingency framework. Michel et al (2000) have suggested interaction intensity and relative size as appropriate contingent variables, but we would suggest further research is necessary into the contingency framework. Two fruitful points of departure would be (a) to find further possible contingency variables via an examination of the meta-theoretical assumptions of the various business marketing research traditions (see e.g. Möller 1994) and then test them or (b) to test contingency variables identified in other marketing sub-disciplines such as services marketing (see e.g. Shostack 1977). Second, there is the issue of whether business marketing should be taught from a managerial perspective or an academic perspective. Here again, perhaps the principled answer is “both”. In practice, however, individual course design is likely to be heavily influenced by the institutional mission, local competitive conditions and local educational policy.

Concerning the three other dimensions uncovered in the literature review, controversy seems to be largely absent. There is little or no debate within the community of business marketing scholars concerning the place of “critical management studies” in the curriculum. Perhaps there is no place for a critical approach to business marketing. From our own observation of the curriculum, however, we would observe that “business marketing ethics” seems to be a prominent absentee, and should have a higher profile within the subject. Regarding the appropriate economic ontology to use as a foundation for business marketing teaching, this issue is closely aligned with the transactional/relational spectrum. Those courses that are built around the marketing mix approach tend implicitly to adopt a neo-classical economic framework, whereas “relational” courses

inevitably have to give greater prominence to concepts from new institutional economics. However, our observations suggest that economic ontology remains implicit in course design, and that students are not invited to engage with the underlying economic debate. Finally, we have found no evidence that Meffert's (2000) dichotomy concerning the primary source of comparative advantage (internal competencies versus understanding market wants) has influenced business marketing course design.

As IMP researchers, we also find it relevant to ask: How can we ensure that our research results are reflected in firms' daily marketing practice? In a previous paper Brennan and Turnbull (2001) argued that the research stream generated from the interaction and networks perspective (cf. IMP) on business markets has had surprisingly little effect on management. They cited three reasons for this: sophistry, loss of relevance owing to the high rate of change in the business world, and deficiencies in "technology transfer" – the process by which academic research is converted into management technologies. Backhaus (1997b), Bruhn and Bunge (1996), and Meffert (2000) suggest a fourth reason: The research stream has, until now, mainly produced (rather situation-specific) descriptive analyses, instead of general theories and models.

Management education is a central part of the technology transfer process, where aspiring or practising managers are exposed to the extant body of academic knowledge, usually in the expectation that this will assist them with their (current or future) management tasks. If academic research in business marketing and purchasing is to influence management thinking and practice, then the business school classroom is one of the conduits by which this influence will be exerted. Appropriate curriculum design is essential if this conduit is to be used effectively. A greater explicit contribution to curriculum design from IMP researchers would be desirable.

With regard to further research, certain limitations in the research design of this project limit the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn. We have relied mainly upon text-based material for analysis of the business marketing curriculum. This has not allowed scholars to explain the reasoning behind their course design, to expand upon the philosophy underlying the design, or to explain the general educational philosophy at their university or polytechnic. This study could not capture and describe national, institutional, or individual differences of opinion regarding the nature and purpose of marketing education, or of higher education in general. With regard to national differences, the business administration disciplines are marked by an alarming lack of knowledge about national differences in research, teaching, and business practices (Reber 1998). However initial efforts, e.g. relationship marketing's Contemporary Marketing Practices research program

(see Coviello 1999), are being taken to rectify this situation. Another limitation is that this study has not directly accessed the views of business marketing managers – such views have only been accessed at second hand from prior literature. On the basis of the above, it is proposed to conduct qualitative interviews, then surveys with scholars, practitioners, and experts in the differences between national educational systems to rectify these weaknesses.

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