

“Elective Choice” - An exploratory study of the factors that influence undergraduate student elective choice in a ‘General Business’ degree programme.

Abstract

Third level undergraduate students taking business programmes are typically provided with the opportunity to choose modules from elective options across their programme of study.

Student elective choices impact the eventual skillset of graduating students and the programmes ability to deliver suitably robust graduates in line with its accreditation.

Academic research indicates that student’s elective choice is influenced by many different factors including module content, lecturer style, grade potential, career plans, timetable and one’s peer group. Understanding these influencing factors can aid programme managers and lecturers as they design, develop and promote elective options within a general business degree.

Key Words: Programme Design, Electives, Student

Problem Background:

Perceptions among the academic community suggest students select elective options for many different reasons including ‘perceived interest in the subject, perceived difficulty of the subject material, perceived leniency of the instructor, exposure to future career skills, influence of others, popularity or personality of the instructor, day of the week and meeting hour, reputation of university, suitability of the subject and size of the classes.’ (Ting and Lee (2012: 309). There is a dyadic tension between a structured top down design of programmes undertaken by programme stakeholders and academics and a bottom up approach which sees students elect modules to shape their own qualification. The top down approach reflects a design which is linked to the achievement of defined programmes outcomes which has been predominantly shaped by academics, programme managers and external stakeholders such as employers. Where students have an opportunity to choose their own path via a choice of electives the programmes takes a form of individual customisation driven by student choice. This poses a challenge in ensuring the authentic achievement of the programme outcomes regardless of the student elective pathway chosen and the motivation behind the choices.

Schön (1995: 30) emphasises the importance of reflection on the education offering when suggesting “*We should think about practice as a setting not only for the application of knowledge but for its generation.*” Studies considering students views on elective choice allow for a more considered view of elective options for programme developers going forward. For example, the choice of elective option offered from the University perspective may be influenced by resource issues such as costs, availability of skilled labour, physical resource constraints, and student numbers. While the choice of elective may be based on university determined factors, the uptake is determined by the student decision. In some instances, resource constraints can be an indeterminate zone which falls outside the epistemology of the University. In this study for example as funding is provided by the

government the opportunities for securing additional resources and the degree of choice may be very restricted.

The nature of elective choice can also be tied in with the conflict between Edgar Schein (1972) “normative professional curriculum” where students are taught the basic theories, the application of those theories and problem solving and the need to allow customisation for different career trajectories to meet the challenges of the real world demands. (Schön 1995:29). Students elective choice may be influenced by factors such as level of interest, lecturer and grades but the nature of elective choice can alter the graduates being produced. This study seeks to address two questions taking cognisance of whether electives are chosen with the normative professional curriculum in mind or the real world demands of practice. Firstly, is the choice of student elective skewing the programme design and secondly what are the factors influencing student decision making process with respect to elective choice.

Rationale Behind Problem

In the case of the majority of general business degrees offered, programme design incorporates a wide variety of choice to broaden career paths and facilitate students to extend their knowledge beyond their core mandatory modules in their degree. A lack of understanding of the forces or drivers behind elective choice in Universities and third levels has led to an inefficient allocation of resources caused by under-registration in some electives and over-registration in others (Ting & Lee; 2012). Programme design normally includes a reflection of current industry needs when module offerings are being compiled. O'Brien and Deans (1995) who found that employers when recruiting marketing degree graduates sought “all round” business skills suggesting a preference for graduates with a more rounded education as opposed to a limited and narrow overall attention to their majors. The research focused on marketing education and the study highlighted that the demand for a more

rounded education necessitates the need to offer a choice of electives to complement a student degree. Yu (2010) believes that the offering of electives shifts a narrowly-focused learning on a core area towards a more flexible broad-based learning which supports a broader skill base for the student. This is in line with what a Business programme with considerable choice offers a student. While the benefits of pursuing major / minor options are not specifically being explored in depth in this portfolio, the findings from a better understanding of the key drivers behind student elective choice will influence future programme design decisions. Synthesising the literature identifies a number of factors which may influence elective choice and these are summarised as set out in Table One.

Table one: Range of Factors influencing student elective choice.

Factor	Research
Employer requirements	O Brien & Dean 1995; Yu 2010
Perceived interest in the subject	Ting & Lee 2012
Perceived difficulty of the subject material	Ting & Lee 2012; Schuhmann & McGoldrick 1999
Perceived leniency of the instructor	Ting & Lee 2012;
Expected Grades	Brimm and Bush 1978; McGoldrick and Schuhmann 2002
Exposure to future career skills	Ting & Lee 2012;
Links to future study or career opportunities	Pritchard, Cotter and Saccucci (2004)
Influence of others	Ting & Lee 2012;
Popularity or personality of the instructor	Ting & Lee 2012; Brim and Bush 1978; Miller, Chamberlain and Seay 1991; Takeshita and Maeda 1999
Lecturer expertise of Knowledge on subject area	Waithanji Ngware, & Ndirangu, (2005)
Timetable / day of the week and meeting hour	Ting & Lee 2012; McGoldrick and Schumann 2001; Takeshita and Maeda 1999
Reputation of the University	Ting & Lee 2012;
Suitability of the subject	Ting & Lee 2012;
Size of the classes	Ting & Lee 2012; Cranton and Smith 1986; Kulchitsky 2008; Mitra and Golder 2008
Students strength quantitatively	Pritchard, Cotter and Saccucci (2004)
Elective promotion or marketing campaign	Dexler & Kleinsorge, 2000; Galotti, 1999; Amin, Rahman and Ramayah 2009
Student characteristics and perceptions: second level subjects, gender bias, beliefs around employability, mode of study	Beggs, Banthan and Taylor, 2008; Worthington & Higgs, 2004; Sugahara, Boland and Cilloni, 2008; Dawson-Threat and Huba 1996; Griffith 2014; Spicer 2004

This study proposes to examine the influence factors place on student elective choice and through a bottom up approach based on the findings of this analysis reflect on how the research findings may impact future effective programme design and develop awareness around communication strategies adopted to promote elective options.

Methodology

To address the research question “What are the factors that influence student elective choice in a ‘General Business’ degree programme,” a mixed method approach adopting both quantitative and qualitative dimensions in a single case study will be used. This research proposal is designed around the idea of action research where the findings of the research are based on a real problem, can be related to other studies, existing theory can be tested, new insights may emerge and the findings will have practical implications for participants involved in the project (Eden & Huxham, 1996; Argyris et al 1985). In the context of this proposal, the problem is linked to why so many elective options are being offered to students and why are some modules more popular than others? This study will involve the collection of quantitative and qualitative data which sits well with the notion of Action Research (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

The study will be based on a third level college and will review elective options available to final year Business students over a five year period and gain a deeper understanding of module trends. Historical trends will establish at the outset of the study the typical elective class size. Mandatory class size will be weighted against elective choice to establish trends in a non-bias format. Electives will be grouped into thematic areas such as quantitative or qualitative nature and disciplines. Following this students will be surveyed around the factors that influenced their choices. Quantitative data analysis on elective choice trends and the

survey will be followed by qualitative research based on focus groups with students and semi structured interviews with lecturers and programme managers to gain further insights into the local understanding of the factors that influence student elective choice.

The nature of the study is more interpretative than positivist and the interpretative nature will also contribute to an action research model. The findings will influence programme managers and designers in developing and assigning non-core or elective content to programme. The research will be repeatable with different cohort of students in the business domain in different institutions or in different years showing a consistency of measurement of data. The study is replicating work already clearly identifiable in the literature review around elective choice considerations for students. The conclusions of the research will validate or question existing literature and offer insight into a course design question of relevance to students, lecturers and programme managers.

The study limitations are confined to its scope and size. The first is the narrow focus on one third level Institute / University in Ireland as a case study and the second the focus on one programme type in the form of a General Business degree. There may also ultimately be a limit placed on the number of measures under investigation which will potentially impact the study in terms of its broad acceptance among the research community. Nevertheless despite these limitations, the research will offer further insight into the factors that influence student elective choice.

Findings and Contribution

By developing a greater insight into the factors that influence elective choice among student, connection can be made between modules, programmes of study and career progression.

This supports the Scholarship of Integration (Schön, 1995) as the insights generated will make connections between decisions and fact revealing more information on the nature of the

module versus the rationale for its adoption. While data collection is complete, data analysis is still ongoing. However initial results and findings suggest that career path is not a key driver of choice and students are positively motivated to select electives based on level of interest, lecturer style and opportunity for a good grade.

In the case for example of the limited influence of career path for students, this will raise questions around the rationale behind industry linked career preparing programmes designed from a top down perspective where programme motivation is not matching student elective choice decisions. In the case of lecturing style further investigation may be warranted into what students identify as a positive versus negative lecturing style. The findings from the study will be of benefit to lecturers, programme designers and college management. This will inform module choice, communication campaigns and resource allocation for future programme delivery. Finally, under the Scholarship of Teaching (Schön, 1995) module lecturers convey information to students as subject experts and students need to extend this knowledge into their overall degree studies. Informing lecturers of the reasons students have selected their modules will assist in their teaching plans for content delivery and allow the lecturer to better appreciate student motivation.

By developing an understanding of the factors that influence student elective choice, this insight can be used to influence future programme design decisions. The factors can be revisited to establish shifts in trends and better understand the strength of influence of factors as the education environment changes and evolves. This information will benefit future student cohorts choosing electives, the communication strategy adopted by programme leaders to explain elective offerings, module and programme designers when developing and refining business programmes and finally provide insight for quality assurance reviews on elective performance within programmes which will assist with resource planning and decision making.

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