

Towards an Integrated Framework, for the Development of Sustainable Provision of Project Management Courses within Higher Education

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Summary

This developmental paper identifies four key aspects that support the sustainability of Higher Education Project Management courses towards developing a framework for the development of sustainable project management courses within HE. It investigates the aspect of applicant motivation, as one of four key identified elements of the framework and, through qualitative research, with Masters and Apprenticeship students. The findings will support sustainable future course design and enhancement.

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1.0 Introduction

As a Higher Education (HE) provider, it is important to recognise the importance of Project Management and ensure our provision equips students and employers with the knowledge and skills that provide appropriate value, both today and moving forward.

Significant growth in the need for Project Management related employment is predicted. The Project Management Institute (PMI, 2017) predicts 200,000 more jobs in Project Management by 2027 within the UK employment sector. PMI (2017) further predicts that globally, by 2027, employers will need nearly 88 million individuals in project management-oriented roles. China and India will represent more than 75 percent of the total project management-oriented employment.

The Associate for Project Management (APM) is the key professional body in the UK and received Chartered Status in 2017. The APM is currently targeting the next generation of project professionals (16-24 year olds) raising awareness of “project management as a profession and a career of first choice.” (APM, 2020). The increase in demography will lead to demand for 50,000 additional undergraduate places by 2030. (HEPI, 2018). Apprenticeship numbers at Level 6 (final year undergraduate degree) and Level 7 (Masters’ degree) more than doubled from the academic year 2017/18 to 2019/19 (House of Commons, 2020).

From recent changes to UK Visa rules in 2019, there would be a reasonable expectation of growth in international student numbers within the UK HE sector. (Gov.uk, 2020). There is evidence to suggest that there is a need for research around sustainability of HE. This developmental paper aims to firstly identify the key aspects and themes of ‘Sustainability of Project Management Courses in Higher Education’, towards developing a framework for the development of sustainable project management courses within HE. Then, with this focus on project management courses, investigates applicant motivation, this being one of four key identified elements of the framework; applicant motivation, pedagogy, content and external stakeholders, (including employers and the HE environment).

Aim

To investigate applicant motivation for joining Project Management courses at University of X, to support sustainable Project Management course provision.

Objectives

To understand key motivations for studying Project Management at the University of X Business School;

To explore alignment between student expectations and Project Management course learning;

To inform Project Management course provision design at University of X to support sustainable provision;

Questions

- 1) What are the motivating factors that influence students to study Project Management at the University of X?
- 2) How important do students feel that Project Management studies at the University of X are to their future employability/careers?
- 3) What are the key Project Management skills and knowledge that students expect to obtain as a result of their Project Management studies at the University of X?

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Sustainable Provision of Project Management Courses in HE Institutions (HEIs)

A radical redesigning of educational systems is required in HEIs to ensure sustainability of the provision. HEIs have a dominant role in developing students' abilities to be critical, a unique ability that allows them to critique, construct and act with a high degree of autonomy and self-determination, if not in their personal lives then at least in their professional lives (Wales, 2000). More importantly, HEIs have the unique freedom and autonomy to comment on society and impact industries, by bridging the gap between what students are taught and the expectations of the employer, as well as engaging in radical empirical experiments contributing to the creation and dissemination of new knowledge (Wals & Jickling, 2002).

The provision of Project Management courses is no exception. Given the interdisciplinary and complementary nature of the project management field, HEIs providing Project Management education will have a greater impact on a large spectrum of industries. Shifting towards a more sustainable education system represents increasing levels of change required in the provision of courses in HEIs, both in terms of teaching and learning approaches and delivery mechanisms. A transformative pedagogy underlies and contributes to the extent of the change, as more argue for a range of analytical and context-related skills to be developed in students (Thomas, 2009).

This developmental research contributes to the design and development of sustainable HE provision in Project Management, demonstrating the engagement and alignment of the academic community and the student in a sustainable manner. In this paper, it is argued that sustainability must be achieved through the four key supporting features which are: understanding applicant motivation, pedagogy for the digital age, course content and interaction with external stakeholders. Each of these features are addressed in more detail in the following sections.

2.1.1 Motivation

In order for the sustainability features, discussed, above to be fully implemented and contextualised to local HEIs settings, it is of paramount importance to identify the underlying motivational factors that compel prospective students to want to study in the first place.

Intrinsic or interest motivation has been identified as an influencing factor in the personal choices individuals make that are highly internalised in nature (Skatova and Ferguson 2014). As stated by Lukianova (2016), an adult learner's internal motivation is driven by an ongoing desire to learn. Building on this, McClelland's theory of motivation explains and predicts behaviour and performance based on three driving motivators: Achievement: students may aim to achieve a high standard of success and master complex tasks, Power: surpass others (Daft, 2008) and Affiliation: experience affiliation from familiar surroundings (Lussier and Achua, 2007). Furthermore, a rudimentary application of additional motivating factors by Herzberg (1971) to student needs highlights a number of factors for potential consideration by HE professionals: Recognition: feedback received, Work: the act of studying itself should be meaningful, challenging and interesting, Responsibility: responsibility for studying and self-learning, and Advancement: entering the workplace or obtaining promotion.

Studies have been undertaken on the 'value' of HE, and Tomlinson (2018) refers to the marketization of HE, with applicants acting as 'rational investors' and 'informed choice-makers', when choosing a course, with 'consumer' expectations. Tomlinson further identifies the necessity for HE to enhance the immediate and future value of the student experience.

Prospective students commonly consider their HE studies as a stepping-stone towards improved employability (Lord Baker, 2013) and this is a powerful motivating factor. Matsuka and Mahail (2016) state that “employability consists of a set of qualifications, skills, attitudes and personal characteristics that enable the university graduate to seek and find a job and, crucially, to be successful in it”. HEIs have increasingly deemed employability to be a strategic priority (Tomlinson 2012). However, a gap exists between what employers are looking for in job candidates and the availability of candidates with the requisite skills and personal attributes needed to successfully assume workplace positions. By and large, HEIs have struggled to make their students more employable and specifically, nurture their employability skills to the standards that satisfy employer expectations, (Chammoro-Premuzic and Frankiewicz, 2019).

2.1.2 Pedagogy For the Digital Age

It is essential to implement a pedagogical redesign of teaching and learning practices to better equip students with skills such as interdisciplinary thinking, problem solving, team working, and holistic thinking (Bawden and Wals, 2000). Given recent COVID-19 events, the importance of adaption and agility necessary for businesses, (Wharton, University of Pennsylvania, 2020) and the necessity for remote working, needs to be reflected in the pedagogy for teaching and learning and the course content. Sustainable provision of Project Management courses in HEIs requires:

- a focus on proficiencies and critical thinking skills linked with the expectations of employers as a guide in design and delivery of curriculum;
- a focus on reflecting on one’s own teaching practices;
- empowerment of learners by enabling them to work on the resolution of real issues that are reflective of the needs of the industry;
- creativity as there are no recipes (Wagner and Dobrowolski, 2000);
- a shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred arrangements and from individual learning to collaborative learning and problem solving;
- a shift from pure knowledge acquisition to practice-based problem solving.
- the provision of a resource-based learning environment, as well as online and blended approaches to learning and teaching, offer potential in ensuring sustainability in the digital age (Hanaffin, 2007).

2.1.3 Course Content

Course content needs to be aligned with industry needs, with mappings to standards and benchmarks, such as Associate Project Manager and Project Manager Apprenticeship Standards, Professional Body benchmarks, such as the APM’s Body of Knowledge, Competency Framework and Code of Professional Conduct.

2.1.4 Interactions with External Stakeholders

One promising approach for implementing a sustainable education delivery provision is through Apprenticeship programmes (Waas, 2012), with employer and professional body engagement and accreditation. Degree apprenticeships are essential and a mechanism for widening access (Education Parliamentary Monitor, 2018, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2016).

2.2 Summary

The salient points from the literature highlight two imperatives for HEIs. Firstly, a need to fully assess the motivational forces that influence students. And secondly, the need to ensure appropriate alignment between current and future employer requirements, course content and the pedagogical approach to teaching and learning in the digital age.

3.0 Research Methodology

This is a phased research project and the focus of this paper is solely on the motivation of applicants to undertake a Project Management course at University X. Following further literature review, a qualitative approach to research will be taken to analyse the motivation and expectations of applicants taking a Project Management course at University X, in order to seek answers the three research questions, specified earlier.

Semi-structured interviews will be used to collect respondents' subjective point of view about key motivational aspects for joining project management courses in HEIs.

The University's Ethical Approval will be acquired before any primary research is undertaken. A random sample of 20 students from the population of current MSc and the Apprenticeship students (totalling approximately 80 students) will be interviewed. It is anticipated that there would be around 10 questions and interviews would take about an hour. Interviews would be transcribed, and thematic analysis will be used to examine themes and patterns of meaning within data using Nvivo. The research deliverables will include categories of motivation and expectations of applicants, to inform the development of a framework for the provision of sustainable project management courses within HE.

Later phases of the research project will investigate the other features, external stakeholder engagement, course content and pedagogy, identified in supporting sustainable provision of project management courses in HE.

4.0 Plan to Develop the Paper Prior to Discussion/Presentation at the Conference

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| June – August 2020 | Literature Review extended |
| September – October 2020 | Research Design: development of semi-structured interview questions, identification of sample; ethical approval sought; |
| September 2020 | BAM Conference feedback |
| September 2020 – April 2021 | Address feedback from BAM Conference, with intention to complete data collection, analyse findings and produce recommendations re Motivation aspect. |

Post April 2021, additional research is anticipated on the three other aspects identified, to develop a framework for sustainable project management course design in HE.

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