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## PROFESSIONALS AS ONLINE STUDENTS: NON-ACADEMIC SATISFACTION DRIVERS

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### ABSTRACT

As student populations become more heterogeneous, it is becoming apparent that the traditional and learner-specific predictors of student satisfaction are not the only important variables that predict students' experience. Using a two-stage data collection process, we examined predictors in a sample of online MBA students over the course of a two-part survey. Regression analysis suggested that perceived control over one's schedule at work was a significant predictor of distance learning satisfaction and program satisfaction. This suggested that the MBA students' ability to maintain a work-life balance (which allows for both work and studies) plays a significant role in shaping student satisfaction. Correlations further suggested the higher the expectations of the students about program provisions and feedback, the lower their subsequent distance learning satisfaction scores. The results bring the importance of pre-enrolment program communication (rather than program efforts) as well as inclusion into focus.

### KEYWORDS

Distance learning education; Expectation management; Program satisfaction; Inclusion

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The number of students enrolled in Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programs in the UK who hail from abroad has risen continuously in the last few years (see also Rowland and Hall, 2012). Universities are increasingly experiencing competition on the MBA, a trend that is further driven by corporate MBA programs (Sharkey and Beeman, 2008), Executive MBAs, online MBAs and other specialized programs (Kathawala, Abdou, and Elmuti, 2002).

This trend reflects the increasing role of technology in MBA education and the emergence of online MBA programs in markets around the world. Distance learning programs such as online MBAs are particularly interesting to mature students who need to balance demands due to their jobs, family and education (Liu and Schwen, 2006). Program directors are also increasingly under pressure to stand up to the international competition. This means minimizing students' dropouts and increasing student satisfaction with the program.

As the number of online learners rises from one year to the next (with 35 million learners in 2015 as reported by Sunar, White, Abdullah, and Davis, 2016), attrition and dropout levels are a major concern for many program managers. Given the lack of real-life interaction in distance programs, students and educators may normally rely on communication media such as email and chat to interact, particularly when geographic distance means different time zones take effect. Providing high quality instructional tools is often seen as key to ensuring student and tutor interaction in online settings (Strang, 2011). Despite many platforms being available, this remains a challenge for many distance learning programs when teaching staff and students are located in different time zones and the classes are quite large.

Keeping this in mind, many program directors are seeking to identify all variables that help them to improve student satisfaction on distance learning programs. Traditionally, the focus has

been on program-specific or system elements. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many other, non-academic predictors come into play. The current paper considers the kind of predictors that might also play a role in determining satisfaction as education opens up to less traditional student groups such as professionals. This is where inclusive efforts also require some reflection of which factors will foster success among more heterogeneous student groups.

## 2 NON-ACADEMIC PREDICTORS

Distance learning comes with a number of challenges, many of which are connected to non-academic predictors. Expectancies, perceived extrinsic utility and intrinsic value in education (Chiu and Wang, 2008; Plante, O'Keefe, and Theoret, 2013) are among these. A mismatch of expectations between staff and students in terms of full-time MBA students' ability and skill to engage in self-regulated learning further adds to the puzzle (Schedlitzki and Witney, 2014).

This leads us to the second point. Student expectations of success may also be based on their assessment of their personal and work circumstances that support or hinder their ability to handle the requirements of a program, such as their ability to take control over their time and schedule. The ability to manage time effectively may further impact satisfaction with a program, as those who struggle may also perform more poorly. We propose that external facilitating conditions include the actual support provided, and control students have, over their schedule, to accommodate their studies. Scheduling control in particular may facilitate and enable distance learning students to juggle several simultaneously held roles as member of families, communities and organizations (Liu and Schwen, 2006).

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we consider our core research question, the methods and the results of a study conducted with professionals enrolled in a suite of online

MBA programs in the UK. In the second section, we discuss study-specific implications, limitations and future research. Lastly, we summarize our thoughts on inclusion of non-traditional, professional students in education.

### 3 RESEARCH QUESTION

In line with the previous research, we wish to answer the following question:

*Which specific non-academic predictors (e.g., perceived extrinsic utility and scheduling control) in the context of an online MBA program increase distance and program satisfaction?*

In order to reduce the influence of learner specific variables, the research design also considers the role of self-efficacy, learning motivation, planning skills, and use of performance feedback. This is based on previous work according to which self-efficacy correlates with satisfaction measures (Alshare et al., 2011), while learner motivation (Dakduk et al., 2016) as well as planning and implementation skills can influence the degree to which students are satisfied with their program and continue to take distance learning courses.

## 4 METHODS

### 4.1 PROCEDURE/PARTICIPANTS

Following ethics approval, MBA students in a suite of online programs were invited to participate via email invitation and a survey link. No personally identifying information was obtained (no names, IP or email addresses were collected). However, we collected the eight digit student IDs to match participants (data collection between 2017 and 2018). Only participants who completed part 1 of the survey ( $n = 139$ ) were invited via email to participate in part 2 ( $n = 54$ ). The data collection rounds for the two parts were 3 months apart. Survey part 1 was accessed and completed by 139 participants. Survey part 2 was completed by 54 participants

(who also completed Survey 1). The final sample included 29 males and 25 females (between 23 and 56 years old, average age  $M = 37.40$ ,  $SD = 8.73$ ). Due to attrition, some of the analyses had to be limited to the sample size of the second survey only.

### 4.2 MEASURES

Part 1 Survey measures are indicated with S1 (and vice versa for part 2 of the survey = S2). Information about the used items can be requested from the second author.

**Past experience (S1).** This was assessed using a dichotomous question “Is this your first distance education course?” The response options were (a) “Yes” ( $n = 32$ ), and (b) “No” ( $n = 22$ ).

**Progress and programme expectations (S1).** This was assessed using six items (two from Ritter Pollack (2007, pg. 98-104) and four inspired by the work Deggs, Grover, and Kacirek (2010). The items focus on expectations regarding course flexibility, interactivity and the nature of course materials, assignments, and the distance learning system. When combining all items into one composite, higher scores represented higher expectations about the progress and the program. The five response options ranged from (1) “strong disagree” to (5) “strongly agree” ( $\alpha = .42$ ,  $M = 4.32$ ,  $SD = 0.37$ ). This suggests low reliability, a potential concern for subsequent analyses.

**Extrinsic utility (S1).** The extrinsic utility was measured using three items (copied from Chiu and Wang, 2008). The focus was on the usefulness of the degree for future jobs, one’s career or promotions. The response options ranged from (1) “strongly disagree” to (7) “strongly agree” ( $\alpha = .81$ ,  $M = 6.22$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ).

**Intrinsic value (S1).** The three items used to measure intrinsic value were taken from Chiu and Wang (2008). The items focused on the experience of learning as interesting, enjoyable and fun. The response options were the same as for the utility value assessment ( $\alpha = .87$ ,  $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ).

Measures	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1. Feedback expect. (S1)	1	.18	-.04	.03	.07	-.05	-.11	-.25	-.05	-.26	-.40**
2. Extrinsic utility (S1)		1	.52**	.36*	.42**	.53**	.20	.15	.12	.16	.13
3. Intrinsic value (S1)			1	.29	.49**	.63**	.20	.41**	.39*	.41**	.37*
4. Self-efficacy (S1)				1	.38*	.43*	.28	.31*	.25	.25	.18
5. Learning motiv. (S1)					1	.68**	.14	.27	.22	.34*	.42**
6. Planning skills (S1)						1	.22	.44*	.24	.41	.50*
7. Perc. control (S2)							1	.39**	.42**	.48**	.42**
8. Use of feedback (S2)								1	.46**	.79**	.73**
9. Actual support (S2)									1	.51**	.51**
10. Progr. satisfact.(S2)										1	.81**
11. Distance satis. (S2)											1

Note. Participants  $n = 54$ . \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . Participant age did not correlate with any of the other measures.

**Table 1. Correlations of main constructs.**

**Self-efficacy (S1).** This was assessed using five out of 10 items taken from the general self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer and Jerusalem, 1993, 2000). The response options were (1) “not at all” to (4) “exactly true.” Higher scores are indicative of higher self-efficacy ( $\alpha = .73$ ,  $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ).

**Learning motivation (S1).** Intrinsic learning motivation was assessed using five items from the self-directed learning scale developed by Cheng et al. (2010). The response options ranged from (1) “strongly disagree” (SD) to (5) “strongly agree” (SA) ( $\alpha = .73$ ,  $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 0.43$ ).

**Planning skills (S1)** were part of a five-item subscale from the self-directed learning scale (Cheng et al., 2010). The response options ranged from (1) “SD” to (5) “SA” ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 4.09$ ,  $SD = 0.49$ ).

**Actual support experience (S2).** This involved four items inspired by the work of Deggs et al. (2010). The response options ranged from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree” ( $\alpha = .74$ ,  $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ).

**Use of performance feedback (S2).** The use of feedback participants received was also assessed using three questions from Jeske (2012). The response options ranged from (1) “SD” to (5) “SA” ( $\alpha = .91$ ,  $M = 4.02$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).

**Perceived control (S2).** The four items were taken from a subscale on work control produced

by Tetrick and LaRocco (1987). The response options was changed from seven to five options that ranged from (1) “not at all” to (5) “very often” to be in line with other response options ( $\alpha = .77$ ,  $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).

**Program satisfaction (S2).** This measure was based on four items by Ritter Pollack (2007). The response options ranged from (1) “SD” to (5) “SA” ( $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ).

**Distance learning satisfaction (S2).** This included one question: “How would you rate your satisfaction with this distance education course?” with response options ranging from (1) “very dissatisfied” to (5) “very satisfied” ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ).

**Demographics (S1 and S2).** This included age, enrolment date and gender. This information was collected in both surveys.

## 5 RESULTS

The correlations of all measures were summarized in Table 1 above. Only the most relevant are briefly discussed. Essentially, correlations suggest that the higher the expectations of the students about program provisions and feedback, the lower their subsequent distance learning satisfaction scores ( $r = -.399$ ,  $p = .009$ ). Perceived control (related to work-life management and balance) correlated positively with distance outcomes ( $r > .4$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Learner-specific predictors	Satisfaction (S2)	
	Distance learning	Program
Self-efficacy (S1)	$\beta = -0.17$	$\beta = -0.05$
Learning motiv. (S1)	$\beta = 0.28^*$	$\beta = 0.16$
Planning skills (S1)	$\beta = 0.07$	$\beta = -0.10$
Intrinsic utility (S1)	$\beta = -0.05$	$\beta = 0.09$
Use of feedback (S2)	$\beta = 0.70^{**}$	$\beta = 0.73^{**}$
Total $R^2$	.60**	.63**
$N$	43	43

**Table 2. Regression results.**

Correlational results do not, however, imply, causality, nor do they clarify the directionality of effects. In some cases, they may be mutually reinforcing. For example, what is not clear is whether the positive correlation between actual program support and perceived control ( $r = .422$ ,  $p = .006$ ) was related to the fact that more support increases the perception of control among students - or the perception of control by participants led to more seeking of and subsequent reception of support from instructors.

**Learner-specific predictors.** We considered the extent to which learner variables collected in part 1 would predict satisfaction outcomes collected in part 2 of the survey. We also included the actual use of performance feedback as a predictor (also collected in part 2) as engaging with feedback is very much a learner-specific option. First indications suggested that neither gender, age nor enrolment date played a role. As a result, the regression was run without covariates in the first step. Our results (see Table 2) showed that distance learning satisfaction was predicted by students' learning motivation ( $\beta = 0.28$ ;  $p = .039$ ) and own use of performance feedback ( $\beta = 0.70$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Program satisfaction was predicted by the use of performance feedback ( $\beta = 0.73$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

**Non-academic predictors.** In the next step, we wanted to assess if the non-academic predictors explained satisfaction with distance learning and program satisfaction (Table 3). We controlled for the learner-specific predictors in the first step

Non-academic predictors	Satisfaction (S2)	
	Distance learning	Program
Expectations (S1)	$\beta = -0.38^{**}$	$\beta = -0.23$
Extrinsic utility (S1)	$\beta = 0.12$	$\beta = 0.11$
Perc. control (S2)	$\beta = 0.36^*$	$\beta = 0.43^{**}$
Total $R^2$	.32**	.29**
$N$	42	42

*Note.* \*\*  $p < .01$ . Sample size declined due to the degrees of freedom and missing variables. S1 includes measures collected in part 1 of the survey. S2 refers to measures that were collected in part 2 of the survey.

**Table 3. Regression results.**

of the model (self-efficacy, motivation, planning skills, intrinsic utility, and use of performance feedback).

Preliminary results showed that only one of these (planning skills) remained a significant predictors of distance satisfaction in the presence of our main variables (expectations, extrinsic utility, and perceived control). Controlling for planning skills ( $\beta = .50$ ,  $p = .005$ ), distance learning satisfaction was predicted by expectations ( $\beta = -.49$ ;  $p > .001$ ), but no other factors such as perceived extrinsic utility and scheduling control. However, in the absence of planning skills (Table 2), both expectations ( $\beta = -.38$ ;  $p = .009$ ) and perceived control were significant ( $\beta = .36$ ;  $p = .014$ ).

In the case of program satisfaction, planning skills were again a significant covariate measure ( $\beta = .41$ ;  $p = .025$ ). Both expectations and extrinsic utility were only marginally significant predictors ( $p < .10$ ). However, as soon as planning skills were excluded, perceived scheduling control emerged as the main predictor ( $\beta = 0.433$ ;  $p = .004$ ).

## 6 DISCUSSION

In the current paper, we considered predictors of satisfaction with an online MBA program experience. Both perceived control and expectations predicted satisfaction, however, the actual ef-

fects were dependent on the learners' own planning skills. Whereas perceived control over one's schedule predicted later satisfaction, expectations had a negative relationship with distance learning satisfaction.

This suggested that the MBA students' ability to maintain a work-life balance (which allows for both work and studies) plays a significant role in shaping student satisfaction. This means the ability to control work commitments and one's schedule has a significant impact on satisfaction. In addition, expectations matter specifically in relation to program satisfaction – potentially due to the online nature of the programs attended by our participants. Specific student expectations may backfire if they are unrealistic and reduce distance learning satisfaction as a result, a finding also noted by Eagleton (2015). This suggests there is a need to proactively engage in expectation setting and management, rather than assuming that students have a realistic picture of the comprehensiveness of the course, the challenges involved, and the interactive nature of the distance learning system.

## **6.1. TOWARDS INCLUSION?**

Ensuring student satisfaction is just one of the outcomes of interest to educators, but the results of our study highlight the need for a more encompassing understanding of what drives student satisfaction among non-traditional, professional students. Digitization alone will not solve these challenges in education. The following section outlines some future-oriented contemplations for educators.

One important misperception is this: Professionals who are re-entering education are expected to be miraculously competent or equipped to succeed in their educational journey regardless of their background on the basis of their experience. However, they engage on a journey that is normally designed for young adults enrolled full-time with no competing demands on their times. This misperception generates a number of challenges for the effectiveness and success of

educational programs and should come as no surprise. We comment on four developments that deserve more consideration.

First, career shifts are no longer a rarity, particularly as entire industries disappear in favor of new ones, leading to the disappearance of many roles. Responding to this development, many educational institutions offer new educational paths to non-traditional students with vocational rather than higher education experience under their belt. This is certainly praiseworthy. However, such endeavors must be met by the appropriate support from tutors, peers, and student services. For example, how many 40, 50 or 60 year old student models are currently featured on university websites or catalogues? And how many of the many tutors and representatives of student services have the insight and knowledge to relate to the social and information support needs of this age group (measures we did not assess specifically in this study)?

There is still room for improvement to ensure that higher education becomes an inclusive and supportive environment for those from non-traditional backgrounds. For future research, we need to examine whether or not traditional recruitment and application processes, student admissions, induction and online support of distance learning programs are fit for purpose and fit the intended target audience.

Second, more and more individuals return to education after a life time as employees. Many will follow up their original Bachelor's degrees by seeking degrees such as MBAs. In our experience, many of these professionals have the practical, managerial and leadership experience on par with many senior leaders in education. Their wealth of experience enriches class interactions and expands on known practice and theory. The dialogue with professionals to address their skills, their skill gaps, and their expectations is not, however, a common feature yet.

Third, while student expectations are often not examined or addressed (leading to disappointment later on), many academics are in the same

boat. Everybody has expectations of what students know. Educators assume certain things about their preparedness for education, or how they will perform under pressure. However, how many reflect on these? If we want professionals to be successful upon their return to education, life-long learning has to go both ways. New competence models for educators may be just as worthy of consideration as new programs for those returning to education.

Fourth then, and this is related to the above points, work-life balance and scheduling control are both concepts that need to be central to the discussion around inclusion. Those entering education in their 30s and 40s are often part of the sandwich generation. They will juggle responsibilities for work, their children and their parents at the same time (so-called crossover and spillover effects). These circumstances also impact upon their ability to plan ahead and meet rigid academic deadlines. Putting lectures online is only one way to support these professionals on their educational journey. If we want to support their participation in education, it will be important to review how we design our curriculum, our assessment and teaching modes. Including work-life balance as a topic worthy of discussion and relevant to inclusion in education will become more and more important over time.

## **6.2. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The results suggest that satisfaction might be positively influenced by program leaders by: (a) communicating the importance of scheduling control to succeed in distance learning programs; and (b) engaging in expectation management and appropriate inter-departmental communications.

In terms of the first point, the influence of scheduling control on satisfaction is one aspect educators have little influence over as this is largely affected by the personal circumstances of the learner. Nonetheless, it does hint at the fact that some satisfaction outcomes may be subject to

external factors outside the educational experience made available to students and general provisions provided by the university.

This brings us to the second point on expectation management and appropriate inter-departmental communications. Eom and Ashill (2016) observed instructor-student dialogue and interactions between peers as significant predictors of student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Gonzalez-Marcos et al. (2016, pg. 172) further proposed that student performance can be facilitated by “(1) positive expectations of future professional development, (2) clear learning objectives that consistently relate to the content of the course, (3) positive feelings induced by teachers' support in resolving doubts, and (4) academic self-perception.”

## **6.3. STUDY LIMITATIONS**

The study was based on self-reports from students, but did not include reports from instructors. The reliability of some of the measures were lower than desirable (with coefficient alpha's below .7). For example, we do not have a sense of the amount of interaction that was promoted by their instructors or the degree to which students experienced personal support and feedback (different approaches exist to encourage quiet or disengaged students to engage more with an instructor; see also Strang, 2011). In addition, we did not collect information about the nationality of each of our participants as this might have compromised anonymity due to the small sample size. Differences in educational and cultural backgrounds require content adjustments (including more global and international dimensions; Mellahi, 2000). This raises the question of how national cultures and values as well as career expectations vary across countries (Ng, Burke, and Fiksenbaum, 2008). This may have been a potential confound in our analysis on extrinsic utility.

## 6.4. FUTURE RESEARCH

As educational providers recruit more professionals, it may be important to investigate alternative influencers. For example, what is the role of word of mouth or online program reviews? Which platforms do professionals use to identify program options, and who do they turn to for advice? What is the role of alumni and other (professional, industry, or regional) networks? Answering these questions might be important in order to understand how expectations are formed. The role of diverse agents being used for international recruitment is just one variable here.

Future research endeavors may therefore wish to explore some of avenues we did not follow ourselves. For example, what effects do different degrees of instructor-student or peer-to-peer dialogue have on satisfaction scores? This question may also provide a better sense of how and when (unrealistic) expectations about the distance learning course or program influence satisfaction (thus expanding on Eagleton, 2015).

In addition, how do nationality and thus cultural influences shape student expectations and satisfaction? And third, modifications of teaching methods, but also attitudes towards assessment forms (Rowland and Hall, 2012) may be worth studying among instructors. Instructors may also need to find assessments that pre-empt potential performance differences between MBA cohorts (Tse, 2010). Prior overseas experience may help instructors to understand these differences (Rowland and Hall, 2012), enabling them to accommodate students accordingly. Research on MBAs may therefore be helpful to understand the implications of previous national learning experience, cultural values (e.g. Hofstede, 1984) and diversity experience in terms of satisfaction with distance learning programs.

## 7 CONCLUSION

A key challenge in distance learning education is to identify what factors contribute to student satisfaction. Factors of interest in the discussed

study included circumstances external to the distance learning program, but relevant to students' engagement with online content. The results of the study suggest that professional programs may benefit from the following efforts.

First, as more and more non-traditional, professional students (re-)enter education after several years in employment (often in middle or senior roles), it is important to emphasize scheduling control from the outset, but also develop flexible modes of assessment and delivery in programs. Second, it is important for educational providers to implement communication practices that explicitly clarify and adjust upfront expectations regarding the learning experience and support provided to students enrolled in distance learning programs. Both recommendations require effective pre-enrolment and interdepartmental communication strategies (linking marketing, international office, student counselling and program management), a significant challenge considering the number of departments involved and the frequent use of overseas agencies and representatives in the recruitment of students for distance learning programs.

The debate around student satisfaction is but one indication that we need to rethink what matters in the education as new cohorts of students join the ranks of more traditional, younger, full-time students. Digitalization in education is not itself a guarantee that new cohorts will be included in the educational experience. Greater heterogeneity requires a renewed focus on inclusion, and how this might be achieved. Focusing on traditional and learner-specific variables may not be sufficient in the world where students come from different walks of life, carry different and potentially competing responsibilities.

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