

**Looking for Ways to Increase Student Satisfaction:  
Internationalisation and Value Innovation**

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### **Abstract**

Understanding what constitutes the perceived value of foreign education to international business students is critical for business schools in order to achieve their recruitment targets. One established method relies on a financial interpretation of the costs and benefits of business education. By contrast we pursue a holistic approach that employs the concept of “internal” and “external” career success as a theoretical underpinning for determining the constituents of the perceived value of education. We test the validity of the holistic *versus* financial view using as a tool a survey of Chinese students in two British business schools. Unlike previous studies we apply this approach to undergraduate rather than MBA students. Our empirical study provides confirmation of the importance of an individual’s judgment of his or her own success as the foundation of value related expectations.

**Keywords:** business education; career perception; internationalization, value creation

### **Introduction**

The institutions of higher education (HE) in many countries, of which the United Kingdom is a prime example, are no longer immune to concerns about market share, productivity, return on investment and customer satisfaction (Marginson, 2006; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Olssena and Peters, 2005). Following the commodification of the tertiary education, the HE sector increasingly acquires features characteristic of a service market. This situation makes it admissible and even necessary to employ some of the tools developed by marketing and management scholars for the analysis of the relations between universities and students. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role and dynamics of “value creation” in the educational

market, using UK business schools as an example. The concept of “value creation” is widely used in marketing, but far less so in the HE studies. We focus on international students, whose importance for universities in OECD countries in general and business schools in particular has increased dramatically over the recent years and, by all accounts, is unlikely to subside in the foreseeable future. Foreign students are attracted to western business schools by the value that their programs generate for them. Understanding what constitutes this value is therefore critical for business schools in order to continue to be successful in recruiting foreign students and expanding their share in a very competitive international market.

Determining the value of business education as perceived by students is not a new question for educational literature. One established method is to look at career success defined in terms of promotion and particularly in terms of the increase of remuneration triggered by a successful completion of a business degree (see for example Tracy and Waldfogel, 1997). This method relies on a rather straightforward financial interpretation of the costs and benefits of business education, allows easy quantification of results and provides convenient data for compiling the ranking tables. Recently, however, there has been growing concern that the adequacy of this approach may be compromised by its narrowness. The attention of researchers increasingly focuses on factors beyond those of a financial nature that influence the vision of value held by students. Educationalists are urged to pursue a holistic approach and explore “perceptions rather than numbers, and aspects other than financial” (Carmichael and Sutherland, 2005) in order to reveal the true value of education as seen by potential students and, as a consequence, to help universities to strengthen their competitive position by making sure that they provide maximum response to the expectations of their potential students. However, as far as business schools are

concerned, research is focused on the exploration of the attitudes of postgraduate students, mostly on MBA courses. Postgraduates do not make the majority of student population and differ from it in a number of important characteristics, thus raising a question mark over the appropriateness of regarding their attitudes as representative of the other categories of students. We have undertaken to investigate if the outlook of international undergraduate business students shows a pattern similar to that of their senior colleagues.

We begin this paper by introducing the notions of customer value and value innovation and their relevance to the university sector. There is a conflict of opinions in the literature regarding the appropriateness of viewing university students as customers (see for example Bay and Daniel, 2000; Kamvounias, 1999; Sirvanci, 1996). There is no doubt that following functional difference between profit seeking organizations and universities the student-as-customer paradigm has serious limitations in its application. However, we share the position of those authors who, like Brennan and Bennington (2000), believe that this paradigm has a useful purpose as long as the term customer is used in a wider sense - as anyone who uses or experiences the services of another - because it throws new light on teaching and learning. We advocate a holistic approach to value creation and apply the concept of “internal” and “external” careers and career success as a theoretical underpinning for determining the constituents of the value of education perceived by students. We proceed to test the validity of the holistic *versus* financial view on the value of education using as a tool a survey of Chinese students in two British business schools. In the concluding sections of the paper we summarize our findings and discuss their implications.

**Internationalization and customer value innovation**

Nowadays an increasing proportion of undergraduate and post graduate students is recruited abroad. The number of foreign students in the OECD countries has doubled over the past 20 years to 1.6 million, which represents 85% of world's foreign students. Europe is the largest receiving region among OECD countries with 840,000 foreign students (Internationalization of Higher Education, 2004). Over 270,000 international students study at UK universities. They pay £1.5bn a year in fees and contribute £3bn to the economy (BBC 03.09.2004). As a consequence of the mobility of student population HE institutions in one country are effectively in direct competition with similar institutions anywhere in the world. This is particularly true of business schools: according to Global Graduate Management Education Database, there are approximately 2,700 programs that use English as the primary language of instruction delivered at more than 350 institutions in 35 countries (Wilson, 2007:84). Some authors convincingly argue that globalization has made necessary the restructuring of higher education and educational practices (in particular in business schools because of their student cohort which has a reputation for demanding value for money) leading to the commodification of education (Healey, 2008; Sappey and Bamber, 2007). As a result the task of sustaining engagement with international students as customers acquires great importance, forcing universities to face the challenge of adjusting to the demands introduced by international competition (Currie and Newson, 1998; Sappey and Bamber, 2007).

The commodification of the HE sector could be expected to make perfecting "customer value proposition" a priority for HE institutions because of its importance as a competitive tool (Woodruff, 1997). In marketing a customer value proposition consists of the sum total of benefits

which a vendor promises that a customer will receive in return for the customer's associated payment. The term was first used by Lanning (1998) and emphasizes the extended interpretation of value as the customer's total experience with a product (service), which contrasts to the narrowly defined "economic value" linked to price alone. Accordingly, for an organization developing a value proposition implies defining this total experience as much as delivering it to the customer. And yet, all the major recent student surveys, such as the 2004 UKCOSA Survey "Broadening our Horizons" (in association with the British Council, Universities UK, and the Standing Conference of Principals), the Ipsos Mori/UNITE Student Experience Survey and the National Student Survey, indicate that although the majority of international students studying in the UK are satisfied or very satisfied with their overall study experience, they are far less satisfied with its value for money (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2007:50-51). Research has also revealed a significant difference between the levels of satisfaction between home and overseas business students (Mai, 2005), suggesting that foreign students may have not necessarily higher but different expectations. This highlights two challenges traditionally identified with commercial concerns that now face HE institutions - determining value offerings that (a) constitute real value for customers and (b) need to be introduced or increased to meet customer needs. The strategy addressing these issues is known as *value innovation*.

Literature conjectures that the globalization and commodification of education force the institutions of HE to pay more attention to customer value (Sappey and Bamber, 2007). This can be defined as "the customers' perception of what they want to have happen in a specific use situation, with the help of the service or product offering, in order to accomplish a desired purpose or goal" (Woodruff and Gardial, 1996:54). We posit that, for business students, the

customer-specific perceived value of education abroad is linked to the value added that foreign education offers, in comparison with home education, in terms of developing the graduate's competitive advantage (Baruch et al, 2005; Carmichael and Sutherland, 2005; Rapert et al, 2004). Consequently, business schools cannot be effective in their mission of meeting the demand for quality education if they are not fully aware of what may possibly represent such perceived value added; what foreign students expect and what the demands of the global market place are.

The literature points out a variety of perceived benefits that attract students to studying abroad, from an opportunity to learn a new language and the expectation that the study conditions and facilities would be better than in their own countries to a desire to experience a different teaching and learning tradition (Healey, 2008). A 1998 survey of Italian universities by Avveduto (2001: 233) found that overseas experience is rated by the vast majority of students as highly desirable and is often cited as a value *per se*; 96% of respondents who had not studied abroad wanted to do so. This finding was later supported by the outcomes of a large scale international study by Ipsos Mori, a leading UK survey research organization (Ipsos Mori/UNITE 2006).

At the same time, research has established (see Devos, 2003; Isserstedt and Schnitzer, 2005; Wende, 2001) that for business students, whatever are the specific reasons for choosing a foreign university, the prime motivation for an overseas education is career development expectations. Thus, Isserstedt and Schnitzer (2005) asked foreign students to rate a list of considerations that influenced their decision to study in Germany. The reason cited by the majority of respondents (79%) was an expectation that this would improve career opportunities. A survey in Greece also

indicated that students' expectations were related to enhanced employability and career advancement (Mihail and Elefterie, 2006). Summarizing existing research Middlehurst and Woodfield (2007:56) conclude that study abroad is "as much about gaining a cultural experience and enhanced career prospects as about academic study for its own sake".

Students are aware that professional competence is not the only asset that employers associate with a foreign university degree: they head abroad motivated by the desire to acquire complementary skills resulting in enhanced capabilities and adaptability that increasingly become important features of a successful career (Murray and Robinson, 2001; Teichler, 2004; Queensland Government, 2006). Independent of the amount of extra knowledge gained at a foreign university, the very fact that the individual has studied abroad is often sufficient for employers as a proof of a strong personality, perseverance and substantial social skills. Many recognize that the acquisition of intercultural competence increasingly becomes a necessity for the modern labor force (Baumgratz, 1993; Stier, 2003). It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that in the already mentioned survey by Isserstedt and Schnitzer respondents particularly valued the challenge of coming to terms with a foreign culture and situations in a foreign country (62% of respondent). This can be interpreted as an expectation to acquire the skill of adjustability to change. This finding has serious implications. It suggests that study abroad, because of the employers' attitude, becomes an increasingly appealing option for students who previously were reluctant to do so for the reason that they saw little use for the knowledge acquired in a foreign country during their later professional life.



This and similar evidence makes it apparent that, in terms of customer value as perceived by international students, exposure to educational and social experience in a foreign surrounding may be as important a potential career advantage as a formal degree from a foreign university. This is bound to have consequences for business schools as and when they pursue value innovation in search of a competitive advantage. Hosting institutions and academics can no more be satisfied with simply playing the role of knowledge providers and skills developers; they are expected to offer learning experience that overreaches conventional academic boundaries. There is no denying that the multifaceted enhancement of student competency has always been the prime responsibility of the tutor. The point is that in the modern context the creation of value within the university sector goes beyond the process of merely transmitting the knowledge: the existential component becomes as important. Consequently, understanding the reasons of why students want to study abroad is not sufficient. Equally significant is the understanding of what students expect to gain from their time overseas. As far as business students are concerned this involves discovering the priorities of their long-term career agenda.

### **Career success as a measure of customer value**

Our examination of the literature provides clear evidence that, for a modern business professional, exposure through learning to a particular social experience becomes as important as obtaining formal knowledge. This suggests that in a customer driven market the providers of education services are increasingly required to accommodate the expectations by customers who wish to experience an exposure to a different educational and cultural system. It is appropriate therefore to question the measure to which the traditional approach towards evaluating the benefits of business education based on comparing the financial costs and gains of investment into tertiary education (analysis of this approach can be found in Baruch and Peiperl, 2000;

Connolly, 2003; Schoenfeld, 2007) can account for the existential aspect of acquiring a university degree.

This concern has had its materialization in the stream of literature that focuses on the perceived non-financial benefits of studying on a business degree program that follows from a realization that career success in personal terms may not necessarily equal public success. This approach, therefore, advocates a distinction between “external” and “internal” careers and, accordingly, the external and internal measures of career success (Hay and Hodgkinson, 2006). The internal career is defined as a person’s own subjective idea about work and life, and his or her role within it (Schein and Van Maanen, 1977). Internal career success thus refers to an individual’s judgment of their own success (Gattiker and Larwood, 1986) and is frequently psychologically defined in terms of self-fulfillment, challenge and satisfaction (Weick and Berlinger 1989). The external career, on the contrary, is judged almost exclusively in terms of progression in hierarchical positions and salary increases and can be achieved on the grounds of formal evidence. It is conventionally known as “fast track” career advancement. Scholarly evidence of comparative levels of internal and external career success of individuals is unfortunately missing in career development research, so it is difficult to say how often they occur simultaneously (Mintzberg, 2004). It is argued though that an internal career progression is no inferior to an external progression and might be as satisfying.

Accordingly, in respect of value creation it is important that universities recognize a distinction between the explicit elements of value added related to the anticipated financial remuneration, following the completion of a university program, and the “inner-value” elements that need not

necessarily hold a monetary representation (Baruch et al, 2005; Carmichael and Sutherland, 2005; Useem and Karabel, 1986). Carmichael and Sutherland identify as the most important the following three “inner-value” components: (a) increased confidence, (b) broader worldview/insight/wisdom and (c) significantly greater knowledge. These non-financial benefits may begin to develop in class as students make progress with their studies, but it is likely that the full impact will only be brought to bear once they return to a full work commitment and are able to compare themselves to their peers and colleagues who have not undertaken an international experience. Carmichael and Sutherland (2005:67) point out that “learning facilitators should view students as key stakeholders of the business, with both obligations and expectations of the relationship. They should be aware of and empathetic to the cost and benefit variables that are important to students, and support them to experience the holistic range of benefits that they may enjoy”. Faculty, therefore, can enhance the effectiveness of learning interventions by using methodologies that go beyond traditional subject-related knowledge transfer.

#### **Value added of foreign education: the study**

The studies on “inner-value” referred to in the previous section are based on the exploration of postgraduate students, mostly on MBA courses. Their attitudes may or may not be representative of other categories of students such as international undergraduates. We have undertaken to fill in a gap existing in the literature and investigate whether the perceptions of educational value held by international undergraduate students is also influenced by the inner value perspectives. The study was exploratory, qualitative and perception based and was intended as an attempt to provide a basis for further research rather than generalizable results.

A survey of undergraduate Chinese students doing a course of study at two British business schools was organized in academic year 2007/8. Students from China made a natural choice as a target group as they currently constitute the biggest population of foreign nationals studying in the UK (UCAS, 2009:29). Empirical data were collected through questionnaires. This method was chosen as the most practical way to monitor the opinion of the relatively large group of people and also because in the literature on research methods surveys are described as a powerful tool for collecting data on human characteristics such as attitudes, thoughts and behavior (Johnson and Duberley, 2000; Easterby-Smith et al, 2002). Our choice of method was also influenced by the consideration that surveys were used in some previous studies investigating students' perceptions (Baruch and Leeming, 2001), making possible a comparison of results.

In developing the questionnaire a wide range of sources on the perceived value of foreign education has been consulted. This includes academic studies, anecdotal evidence, participant observations, international and national reports, including those on employers' expectations from the recruits in terms of experience. The variables that we have chosen were extracted by content analysis of the works of Baruch et al (2005), Carmichael and Sutherland (2005) and Useem and Karabel (1986). The variables are described in Table 1. A self-administered questionnaire was tested in a pilot survey of a selected group of Chinese students to check that the questions were formulated in a way that created no comprehension difficulties for the respondents. Participation in the survey was a matter of free choice for the students. The main survey has produced 54 valid returns, providing the response rate 96%. In terms of the size of the sample our survey is similar to other published research in this area (see, for example, Carmichael and Sutherland, 2005: 58).

Table 1 about here

Following Aupperle et al (1985) and Angelidis and Ibrahim (2004) a forced choice format was adopted as especially suitable for social research because of its ability to limit a respondent's social desirability bias. Questions that were designed to elicit information on students' perception of the expected value added of being educated abroad and the factors that determine this perception requested answers on a five point Likert agreement scale (e.g., 1 to 5 = *very unimportant* to *very important*; *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*). To maintain anonymity of the respondents, they were not required to provide personal details.

### **Findings and Discussion**

The outcomes of the survey broadly confirm the views on educational value added of studying abroad expressed in the literature. We first undertook to find out if our respondents would confirm the opinion that the prestige of a foreign degree is not the main stimulus to study abroad. Our survey revealed that the respondents did not necessarily consider domestic education inferior: the answers to the question "Do you think that obtaining your degree in the UK will give you more status than a similar degree received from a Chinese university?" has brought very close results: yes – 55%; no – 45%. We proceeded to establishing the relevance of what some authors call the "internal measures of career success" (Baruch et al, 2005:52; Gattiker and Larwood, 1986). The students were asked to choose on the scale from 1 to 9 between preference for the financial benefits of business education in the UK (increased salary, improved job mobility, faster promotion, etc. – scale range from 1 to 4) and preference for the non-financial benefits of business education in the UK (improved self-confidence, broader worldview, greater sense of ethics, etc. – scale range from 6 to 9) with the choice of 5 indicating that the respondent valued both types of benefits equally. The data (see Figure 1 and Table 2) demonstrate that the majority of respondents put significant value on non-financial benefits of foreign education: 82%

indicated that they attributed equal or higher value to what may be called the human capital elements such as improved self-confidence, broader worldview, greater sense of ethics, self-efficacy, etc., whilst 20% preferred non-financial benefits over financial benefits. The mean score was 5.34 with a reasonably low standard deviation of 1.44 - also an indication of a bias towards non-financial values.

Figure 1 about here

Further, the survey has allowed us to rank different “inner-value” elements according to the importance that international students attributed to them (see Table 3). “Self development” (S\_Dev) came out on top with the mean of 4.16 and a fairly narrow dispersion of results ( $\sigma = 0.69$ ), suggesting that this preference was robust across the whole sample population. Together with “self development”, “increased confidence” (Conf) and “enhancing your ability to understand the world around you” (Understand) completed the group of the three most favored choices with the mean above 4. The second group contained such variables as “gaining an insight into a new culture” (Insight\_culture) and “increased ambition for achieving career goals” (Ambition) with the mean of respectively 3.96 and 3.80. The next group of priorities included “control own destiny” (Destiny), “improved self-esteem” (S\_Esteem), “getting new social skills” (Soc\_VA) and “getting a different perspective on things” (Persp) with the means ranging from 3.68 to 3.64. Finally, “greater job satisfaction” (Job\_Sat) occupied the last place with the mean of 3.48. Importantly, the means for all variables are noticeably above the midpoint of the scale, indicating that all these parameters were perceived as important by the respondents.

Table 2 about here

These findings are evidence that the sought outcomes of foreign education are far more comprehensive than those that can be measured in salary increases and visible career

advancement. The “internal career” clearly is an important consideration for international students. Internal career’s success refers to an individual’s judgment of their own achievements, and is frequently defined psychologically in terms of self fulfillment, challenge and satisfaction. This entails that academic practice should be concerned with a wider range of competencies and responses to individual attitudes than is normally associated with the learning provisions.

It is true that the enhancement of student competency has always been the prime task of the universities. However, the modern context mandates that the creation of value within the university sector goes beyond the process of mere knowledge transfer. It begins to incorporate what Carmichael and Sutherland (2005) call meta-competencies. These fall broadly into the areas of communication, gathering and interpretation of data from a variety of sources, problem solving, systems thinking, ability to apply the use of technology in the workplace, working in groups, teams or communities, using mathematical concepts and managing oneself and one’s own learning and development. The meta-competencies are “essential skills that underpin success in education, employment, lifelong learning and personal development” (Carmichael and Sutherland, 2005:58).

Table 3 about here

### **Conclusions and recommendations for future research**

The internal career theory provided the starting ground for the hypothesis that straightforward knowledge transfer had been losing its role; instead international students were increasingly looking for social skills and experience that enriched them as individuals. This attitude seems to be a reaction to the realization, first, that the very fact of possessing the experience of studying abroad may in itself be a competitive advantage in the labor market, and second, that the importance of self-fulfillment, challenge and satisfaction grow as inducements for choosing to

study abroad. Our empirical study provides confirmation of the importance of an individual's judgment of his or her own success. This suggests that academic practice should be concerned with a wider range of competencies and responses to individual attitudes, shifting emphasis towards a greater spectrum of social values.

Cross-cultural diversity of students is clearly a challenge; academics need to amend their practices and routines to effectively manage this diversity and use it to the benefit of the teaching process rather than ignore or suppress it. A possible solution is to examine international students' self-knowledge in order to investigate whether tutors can learn from the students themselves more about the expectations and demands of overseas students. In this context it is particularly important not to lose sight of the notion commonly acknowledged in literature that teaching is not just a product of training but first and foremost a personal interaction between individuals. Accordingly, the ability of the tutor to be flexible, approachable, responsive, intuitive and imaginative grows in prominence and presents itself, in our opinion, as a promising avenue for research in academic practice.

Our research findings have identified some positions on which academics could put an emphasis while reconsidering their own academic practice and raising their awareness of international market demand for their particular skills and routines. Academics should reflect on their assumptions and traditions and enter into professional discourse with colleagues and the students regarding these issues. In this way tutors and students could move closer together in their expectations, without either group abandoning own unique identities and beliefs (Durkin, 2008).



Our findings are also important from the point of view of the contribution of academic practice towards increasing student satisfaction. According to Fornell (1992), satisfaction is typically measured as an overall feeling or as satisfaction with elements of the transaction. For the tutor to be aware of the whole spectrum of expectations of international students and their relative importance is a major step towards achieving student satisfaction. From the student's point of view, good quality education is strongly associated with the fulfillment of expectations which brought them to a foreign university in the first place (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998).

Our study has obvious limitations. The results are based on self-reporting of the respondents. Despite the fact that this method is widely accepted in social sciences further research will benefit from some form of triangulation that synthesizes data from multiple sources. One other issue is that available research suggests that student perceptions may differ by country (Middlehurst and Woodfield, 2007). Accordingly, the investigation of groups of students other than covered in this report is necessary to achieve a comprehensive view on the issue of customer value in higher education. Despite its limitations we believe that our study is sufficiently robust to encourage HE institutions to pursue a more inclusive approach to internationalization, in which "universities become internationally-minded communities, not simply institutions with increasingly large numbers of international students" (Robson and Turner, 2007).

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**Table 1 Variables description**

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Description</b>
S_Dev	self-development
Conf	increased confidence
Understand	enhanced ability to understand the world around
Insight_culture	getting an insight into a new culture
Ambition	increased for achieving career goals
Destiny	control own destiny
S_Esteem	improved self-esteem
Soc_VA	getting new social skills
Persp	getting a different perspective on things
Job_Sat	greater job satisfaction



**Table 2 Preference of financial (<5) and non-financial (≥5) benefits**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1.00	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
	2.00	1	2.0	2.0	4.0
	3.00	5	10.0	10.0	14.0
	4.00	2	4.0	4.0	18.0
	5.00	16	32.0	32.0	50.0
	6.00	15	30.0	30.0	80.0
	7.00	9	18.0	18.0	98.0
	8.00	1	2.0	2.0	100.0
	Total	50	100.0	100.0	

**Table 3 The relative importance of human capital elements of international HE value-added (for variables description see Appendix 1)**

		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	S_Dev	25	3.00	5.00	4.1600	.68799
2	Conf	25	3.00	5.00	4.1200	.72572
3	Understand	25	2.00	5.00	4.1200	.88129
4	Insight_culture	25	3.00	5.00	3.9600	.78951
5	Ambition	25	2.00	5.00	3.8000	.95743
6	Destiny	25	2.00	5.00	3.6800	.94516
7	S_Esteem	25	2.00	5.00	3.6800	.94516
8	Soc_VA	25	2.00	5.00	3.6800	1.02956
9	Persp	25	2.00	5.00	3.6400	.95219
10	Job_Sat	25	1.00	5.00	3.4800	1.12250
	Valid N (listwise)	25				

**Figure 1: Frequency of preference for financial (<5) and/non-financial (≥5) value-added**

