

# Learning and teaching challenges in project management

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to examine how considerations of future pedagogy will impact on the student experience. This examination utilises data gathered from a survey of students studying project management. The data are analysed using CATPCA in order to establish the key components of students' experiences. Overall, two key components emerged from the data (representing students' perceptions of what is significant in their project management learning experiences). The first component, *transferable skills*, addresses parameters such as interpersonal skills, time management, curriculum coherence, critical thinking and communicating. The second component is *virtual learning* which includes the quality of e-resources and how relevant and accessible information is managed online. We conclude that the effective use of virtual learning environments is more crucial for students who are less skilful at managing their studies independently. This study brings an important contribution to literature on teaching and learning project management as traditionally studies have either focused on teaching and learning (within project management) or students' experiences relating to pedagogic factors generally. What research has not done is link these two concepts together.

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## 1. Introduction

The argument that current approaches of educating and training project management professionals requires a major re-assessment is now well accepted (Berggren and Soderlund, 2008). Such a re-assessment however will not be complete without a re-examination of the experience of students studying project management. Understanding the student experience will enable institutions of learning to address pedagogic factors within project management more effectively in the future.

Teaching and learning was identified as a major theme in the debate on re-thinking project management (Cicmil et al., 2006; Winter et al., 2006). This is not unexpected as it has recently grown in popularity and has become the focus of numerous theoretical debates and studies (Collofello, 2000; Reif and Mitri, 2005; Rodriguez et al., 2006; Atkinson, 2008). This

growing interest in the teaching and learning of project management has been driven by various factors including:

- 1) An acceptance of the need to enrich and extend project management scholarship (Cicmil et al., 2006; Winter et al., 2006).
- 2) A recognition of changes that have occurred in project management conceptualisation (Packendorff, 1995; Turner, 2006a,b); for example, an increasing focus on softer parameters (Winter and Checkland, 2003; Pollack, 2007) such as emotions (Hartman, 2008).
- 3) Growing stakeholder interest in the education of project managers (Wearne, 2008) and the need to affect a successful transformation of project managers to reflective and creative practitioners (Hodgson, 2002; Dvir et al., 2006; Kolltveit et al., 2007; Ojiako et al., 2008).
- 4) Acceptance that a 'one-fits-all' approach to project delivery is not viable due to difficulties and vagueness in defining project management (Ojiako, 2005).

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All these challenges have led us to seek answers to three research questions.

- 1) How are student experiences and learning opportunities conceptualised in the literature?
- 2) What are the key components of student engagement experiences when studying project management?
- 3) What are the implications from this study for the future pedagogy in project management?

The paper is divided into six parts, beginning with this section (serving as an overall introduction to the paper). Section 2 is linked to the first research question (How are student experiences and learning opportunities conceptualised in the literature?); where the authors seek to briefly examine parameters that impact on the project management teaching and learning agenda. While Section 3 provides an overview of the study, in Section 4, we present the research methodology. Section 5 addresses the second research question by presenting the analysis of data and discussion of the findings. The implications from this study (third research question) are presented in the conclusions which are drawn in Section 6.

## 2. Theoretical position

This section utilises the literature to address the first research question (How are student experiences and learning opportunities conceptualised in literature?). Learning<sup>1</sup> has traditionally been conceptualised as not only rational and linear, but deterministic and quantifiable (Mengel, 2008). The reality however is that complexity (Jaafari, 2003; Dillon et al., 2005; Thomas and Mengel, 2008) and chaos (Singh and Singh, 2002) in projects requires managers who not only have the ability to demonstrate depth and creativity of thought, but also are able to create a compelling vision for the customer (Grant et al., 1997; Turner and Muller, 2005; Dvir et al., 2006).

The expected characteristics of the ideal project manager create several learning, teaching and pedagogic implications (Friedman and Deek, 2003; Mengel, 2008) for various stakeholders. These include academic institutions, employers, practitioners, researchers and academics (Reif and Mitri, 2005) and perhaps most crucially, students. Project management teaching and learning initiatives however require new and non-traditional ways of thinking on the part of those who are involved not only in the articulation of its agenda, but also in its design and delivery. We argue that in order to affect an effective project management teaching and learning agenda, those who design and deliver the project management teaching and learning management agenda must be willing to address a set of crucial pedagogy parameters which have arisen because students are now extremely technology ‘savvy’ and may have very different expectations of higher education than that which they currently receive. In addition, the birth of the ‘digital native’ (those who have been born into a digital age and know

no other) is driving the need for change in the student–educator relationship within higher education. When we incorporate our acceptance of the role of *learner customisation* in education (Del Corso et al., 2005), then we accept that effective teaching and learning of project management is only possible when it is acknowledged that the views and perceptions expressed by students MUST be taken into consideration.

To summarise, it is important to highlight the resonance of *the student as a customer* as discernable in higher education, receiving both full support (McCollough and Gremler, 1999) and rigorous opposition (Franz, 1998; DeShields et al., 2005) from various scholars. This paper however takes the position that the student can indeed be regarded as a customer, based on the fact that students now pay for a service (to be taught). Rather than instructors having the authority to transmit knowledge (Long and Holeton, 2009) educators need to become coaches and facilitators of learning. Such changes place more emphasis on the student as an independent learner, being able to extract their own meaning from interpreting information rather than being passive recipients (Wegner et al., 1999).

## 3. The study

The study focused on two Russell Group higher education institutions<sup>2</sup> in the UK (*UnivA and UnivB*). The authors chose to conduct the study within these two institutions, because although both maintain a similar focus on research (Molas-Gallart et al., 2002), project management teaching and learning philosophies are considerably different, with project management currently being taught extensively at one institution (*UnivA*), while at the other, it is still in its infancy (*UnivB*). We utilised a questionnaire to collect data. Data collection commenced with a pilot survey of 11 students taking the project management module (as part of the MSc Leadership and Management in Health and Social Care) at *UnivA*. In line with earlier research (Kaplowitz et al., 2004), the authors informed all students who were identified to be part of the study in advance (orally) of the oncoming study. We eventually sampled an additional 183 students taking project management modules (across the two institutions), bringing the total number of students surveyed to 194.

## 4. Research methodology

The framework for the survey questionnaire<sup>3</sup> was developed from earlier studies conducted by Ainley (2001), Ginns and Ellis (2007) and Kember and Leung (2009). The questionnaire (Table 1) consisted of six sections and was designed with sequential questions, with respondents being asked to rate each question.

Table 1 shows the data we gathered. The data obtained from questions 1 and 2 and 3 of the questionnaire are not presented in Table 1 as these data only provided consent and demographic information. Question 3 focussed on information relating to gender, the degree programme (undergraduate or postgraduate),

<sup>1</sup> Key learning approaches include the use of case studies, group work (which emphasises communication and communities of practice) and e-learning.

<sup>2</sup> The Russell Group represents the 20 leading research focused universities in the UK.

<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire will be made available on request.

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