What are postgraduate student expectations and experience of course selection in the Department of Management?

Kristina Sosnina

See this project presented by the researcher: https://youtu.be/SH-Lfw2QgZE
If this project has informed your practice, let us know at lse.changemakers@lse.ac.uk

Introduction

In the 2020/2021 academic year LSE has welcomed a larger postgraduate cohort than expected. However, due to changes caused by COVID-19 some courses were not offered this year. It has resulted in fierce competition to receive a space in a course.

The process of allocating courses in the Management department stipulates (LSE website): *"Places on oversubscribed courses will be allocated via a random ballot process with priority given to students with the course in their Programme Regulations, followed by other Department of Management students […] Providing an additional written statement will not aid a student's chances of being accepted onto a course, and statements are not read."*

From master students' viewpoint, the crux of a course registration lottery is to manage the balance between prioritizing student preferences and maintaining quality/practicality of teaching, such as a student-to-teacher ratio, through headcount caps. It is believed that this year's balance has been heavily struck towards the latter priority at the expense of the former. In addition to the course allocation process, d master students face difficulties in understanding the difference between similar courses based on the description available on the 'Calendar'. Several departments at LSE provide short videos describing the course content, and explaining how the course is different from others and how it can be applied. The project aims to explore the experience of postgraduate students at the Department of Management when they choose courses during the first weeks of Michaelmas term, and to determine if non-content related features can help students make a choice regarding taking the course.

Research Methodology

The project is based on the data analysis collected via Qualtrics software. Students from all 8 taught master programmes in the Department of Management were invited to participate in the survey by reaching them through emails from programme offices. The survey consists of an experience review questionnaire to map participant's journey to course enrolment and studies what courses students have selected and their feelings about the process. Each student specifies the course she applied to and the perceived preference, as a result, each student submits a ranked list of electives. This approach allows determining whether it was possible to reallocate students differently and increase aggregate 'satisfaction'.

Experimental set-up

An experiment is designed to test whether the presence of a video course description and an opportunity to communicate the preference via providing a written statement increases the likelihood student applies to the course. Using Qualtrics software, participants are randomly allocated to control or treatment groups. The control group includes only simple course descriptions, similar to the ones currently available on the 'Calendar'. The treatment group is presented with a short introductory video, text course description, and an option to submit a personal statement to indicate students' preference to take the course. Both groups are asked the same question: "Considering the information provided to you, will you choose the above course as your elective?". The outcomes are No, Maybe, Yes. A statistically significant difference between outcomes of control and treatment groups shows a joint impact of two non-content related features on course choices.

Statistical Models

Multinomial (polytomous) logistic regression analysis is applied to determine the statistical significance of non-content related features. (Engel, 1988) because the variable of interest takes three possible values.

$$\Pr(Y_i = K) = \frac{1}{1 + \sum_{k=1}^{K-1} \exp\left(\ \beta_k * I(Treatment = 1)\right)}$$

Where K – a ranked number of the outcome; $I(Treatment = 1) = 1$ if a responder belongs to treatment group; β- model parameter; exp() – exponential function.

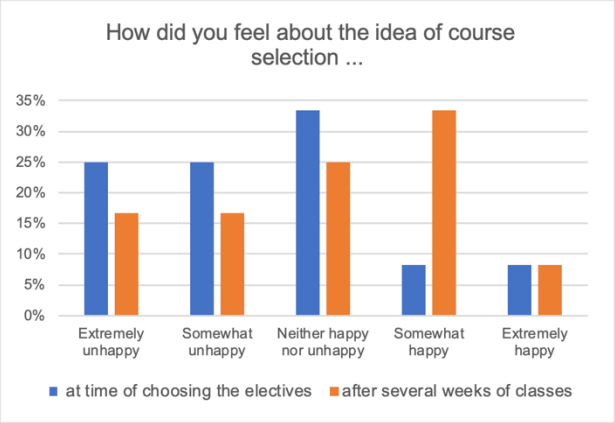
Hypothesis

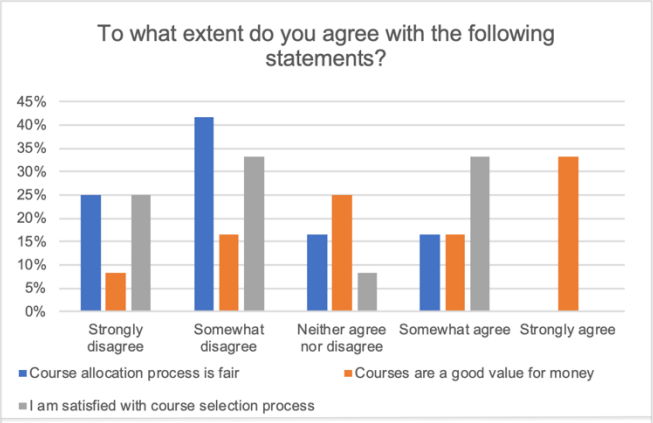
H1: Having a video course description and an opportunity to submit a written motivational statement increases the likelihood that a student would apply to the course, controlling for the course-related specifics.
H2: Master students are satisfied with the course selection process in the Department of Management.

Data analysis

37 students from six different Department of Management programmes participated in the survey. Despite being invited to participate, students doing MSc Human Resources & Organisations and MSc Marketing did not take the survey. The highest number of participants are from Management & Strategy programme.

The result of the survey has brought the same insights about course selection in the Department of Management:

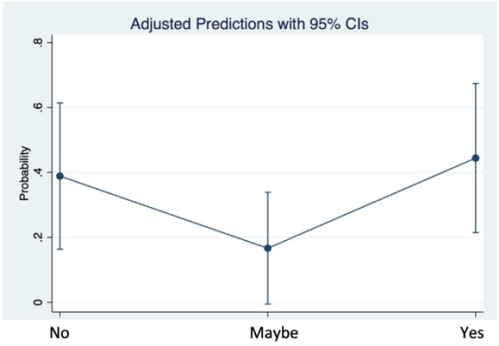

How did you feel about the idea of course selection ...
35%
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
Extremely unhappy
Somewhat unhappy
Neither happy nor unhappy
Somewhat happy
Extremely happy
at time of choosing the electives
after several weeks of classes


To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
45%
40%
35%
30%
25%
20%
15%
10%
5%
0%
Strongly disagree
Somewhat disagree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat agree
Strongly agree
Course allocation process is fair
Courses are a good value for money
I am satisfied with course selection process

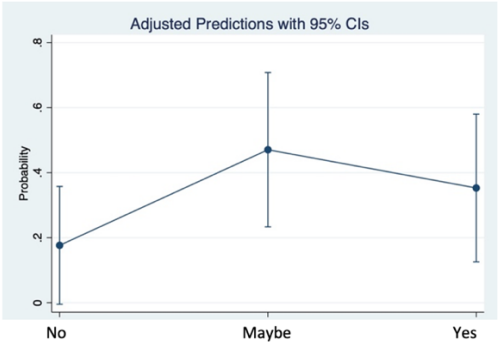
Selection process

The figures below show the predicted probabilities and CI to take the course.

Control group



Treatment group



The regression analysis shows that the likelihood of taking the course, corresponding to the outcomes 'Maybe' and 'Yes', increases in the presence of non-content related features, such as video description and preference-indication option.

Findings & Research limitations

The responses show conflicting student beliefs and feelings towards the course selection process in the Department of Management. While some students do not have any complaints, others have encountered difficulties and stress.

The results of the experiment yield that students are more likely to apply to the course if it has a video description and allows them to state a preference by submitting a motivational statement. However, in the treatment group students who have chosen 'Maybe' option are less likely to submit a written statement. This signals to reverse causality problem. There are two scenarios: (1) a requirement to submit a statement discourages them from taking the course or (2) students are not submitting statements because they are less interested in taking the course. It should be tested in future whether there is a behaviour aspect and it leads to cognitive burden that then reduces the likelihood of choosing the course if a student is asked to write a motivational text. In should be noted that the experiment tests for the joint significance and can not disaggregate the effect into individual effects of video course description and an opportunity to submit a motivational statement.

The proportion of 'Yes' outcomes is almost the same in the control and treatment groups, while the proportion of 'Maybe' outcomes significantly increases in the presence of non-content related features. In the control group there are more 'No' outcomes than 'Maybe' outcomes meaning that students are strictly worse off by taking this course. Once in the treatment group, some students are going from being strictly worse off to being indifferent, corresponding to higher proportion of 'Maybe' outcomes, and possibly taking the course. Students who were already certain about taking the course are not affecting by introduction of additional features. Plausible explanation is that they could have done an extensive research on the available options using sources outside the 'Calendar'. For instance, during welcome week some students approached recently graduated students during the Alumni Panel asking about the courses. One can conclude that introducing additional feature would benefit students who are uncertain.

Another limitation is the lack of representativeness that could have an impact on the ability to effectively answer research questions. Selection bias occurs because students have opted in to take the survey. One of the potential participants claimed: “Why should I care about it if I am already graduating?”. It tends that students interested in this issue have been more likely to participate in the survey. Selected student messages from the survey are provided in the Appendix.

Recommendations

Experiment-based:

LSE should enhance course description of the courses offered by the Department of Management with video description.

Learnt from the broader experience:

LSE should provide an opportunity to express relative preference when choosing electives offered by the Department of Management.

Overview

In the light of COVID-19 pandemic, students in the Department of Management have become more concerned about the elective course selection process. Using a sample of master students in the Department of Management, this study analyses students’ experience of a random ballot process and investigates the effect of non-content related course features, i.e a short video description and significance of motivational statement, on the likelihood to apply for the course. This project should be treated as a pilot because it sets a potential direction for further studies on postgraduate student expectations and experience of course selection at LSE.