

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

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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. This project studies postgraduate student expectations and experience of course selection in the Department of Management (DoM). The research is based on the reported experience of postgraduate students at the DoM. Using Qualtrics software an anonymous survey has been conducted consisting of two parts. The first part is an experiment to study whether different kinds of course descriptions influence the likelihood to choose the course. It creates a hypothetical situation, where a student is asked to select an elective course based on the provided information. The second part is an experience review questionnaire to map participant's journey to course enrolment.

Background & Motivation

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, DoM 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 DoM 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 DoM were invited to participate in the survey by reaching them through emails from programme offices. The full list of the questions is available upon request.

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. In order to ensure that none of the respondents have taken the course or have known the lecturer, a hypothetical course has been created based on the existing undergraduate course in the DoM. 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 (polymous) 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.

$$\Pr(Y_i = K) = 1 - \sum_{k=1}^{K-1} \Pr(Y_i = k) = 1 - \sum_{k=1}^{K-1} \Pr(Y_i = K) e^{\beta_k \cdot X_i} \Rightarrow \Pr(Y_i = K) = \frac{1}{1 + \sum_{k=1}^{K-1} e^{\beta_k \cdot X_i}}$$

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

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 DoM.

Data analysis

The figure below presents the distribution of students in the sample.

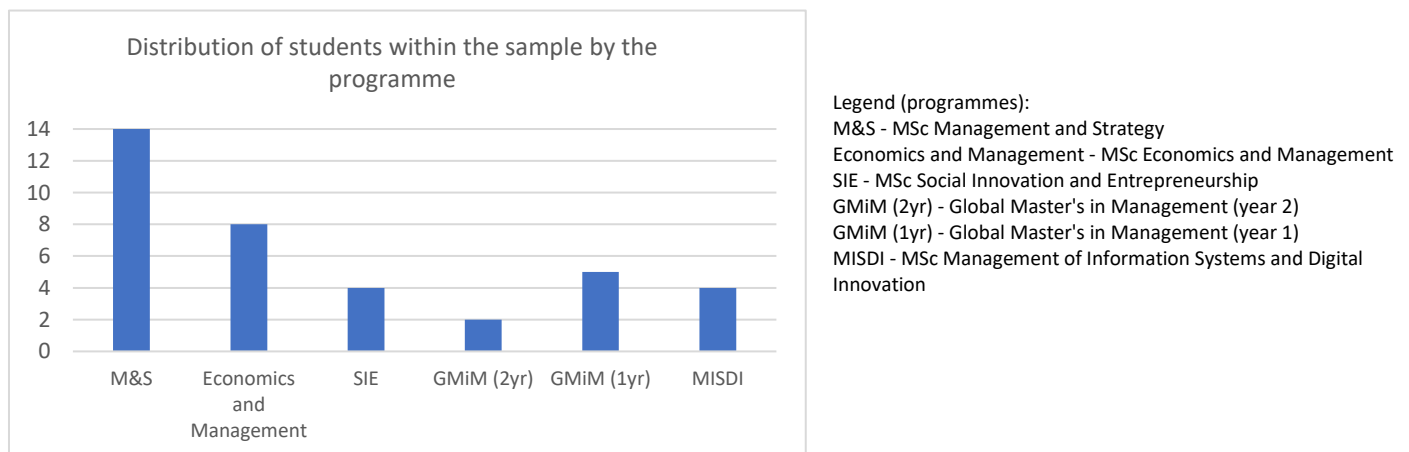


Figure 1. Distribution of students within the sample by the programme

37 students from six different DoM 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 DoM:

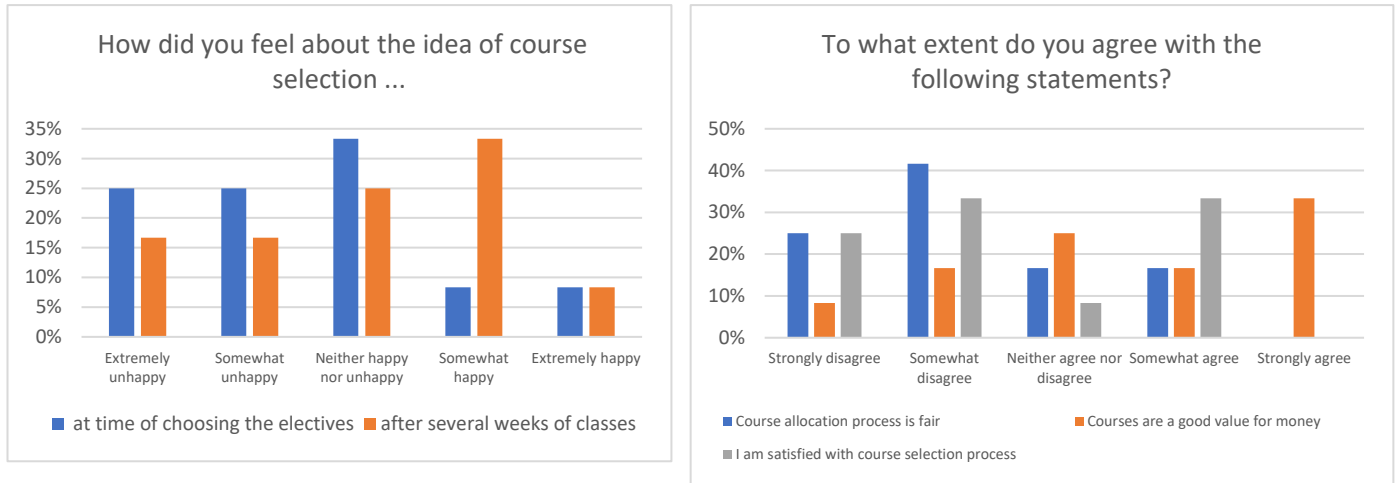


Figure 2a, 2b. Student expectations and experience of course selection

- Overall satisfaction
 1. Only 50% of students are happy the School promotes 'tailoring your own educational path'.
 2. Most of the respondents disagree that (1) a course allocation process is fair and (2) they are satisfied with the course selection process.
 3. While the majority of respondents do not have a strong opinion, only 1/3 of students believe that courses they are doing are good value for money.
- Allocation process
 1. Almost 60% of respondents applied to a greater number of electives than they could potentially take.
 2. Among students who made excessive application, only 1/3 have been allocated to their first preference course versus 2/3 among students who applied to a few courses within the department.
 3. For second preference electives the situation is the opposite, almost all students who applied excessively got their second choice courses, but only 50% of students did not apply excessively.
 4. Half of the respondents were rejected from at least one course, in most cases their first preference choice.
 5. 2/3 of students were waitlisted.
 6. Students who applied to a limited number of courses were more likely to reapply.
- Selection process

Students were answering the question: "Considering the information provided to you, will you choose the above course as your elective?" by selecting one of the options: No, Maybe, Yes. With a randomized approach, respondents are evenly allocated to the groups. Due to the non-response error, two students are excluded.

The figure below shows the predicted probability of the outcome and 95% confidence intervals(CI) for the combined sample of respondents.

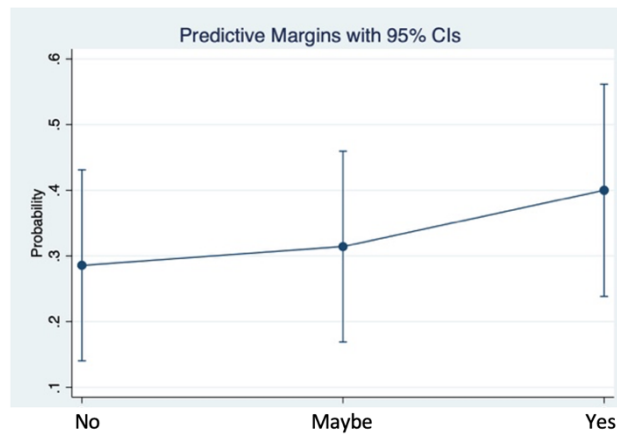


Figure 3. Summary description of outcome probability based on the whole sample of respondents.

The figures below show the predicted probabilities and CI separately for the control group and treatment group.

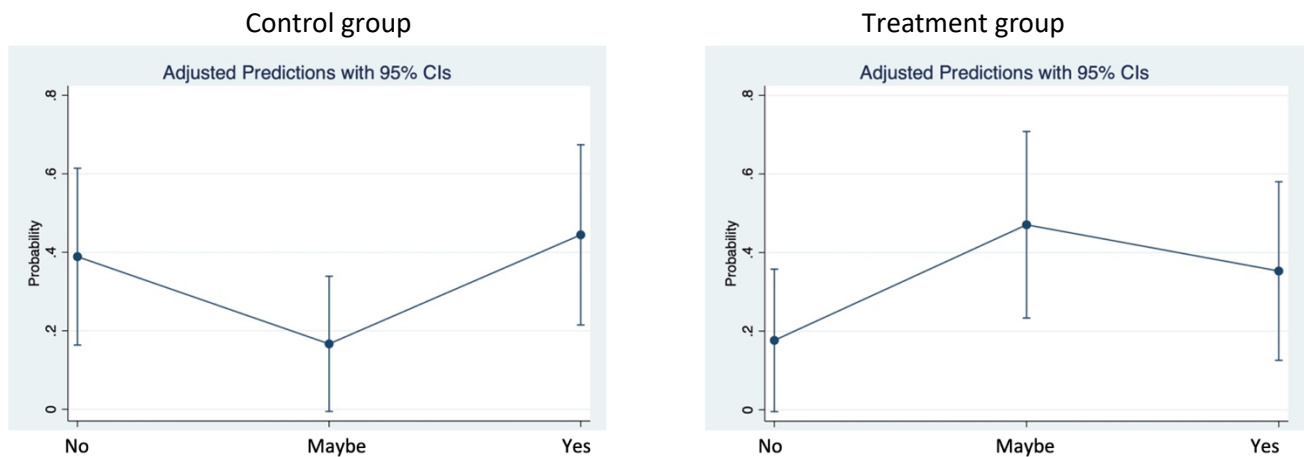


Figure 4a, 4b. Summary description of outcome probability for control and treatment group.

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 DoM. 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. It 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 ...

1. Enhance course description of the courses offered by the DoM with video description.
2. Test whether a requirement to submit a motivational statement expressing the preference to take the course can discourage students from taking the course.
3. Test the effect of a motivational paragraph and video separately through having different treatments. One can use four distinct groups: control group with simple course description; group with additional video description only; group with a statement only, and a group with both video description and opportunity to submit motivational text.

Learnt from the broader experience:

LSE should ...

4. Provide an opportunity to express relative preference when choosing electives offered by the DoM.
5. Introduce a point-based system that would allow students to assign their preferences by giving a number of points to the every course they are applying to. Ordinal ranking system fails to account for relative distance between ranked priorities, whereas a point-based system enables to stress the importance of first preference over the second preference.
6. Inform postgraduate students about available courses and provide them access to course descriptions prior to the start of the Michaelmas term.

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 DoM, 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.

References

Engel, J. (1988). "Polytomous logistic regression". *Statistica Neerlandica*. 42 (4): 233–252. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9574.1988.tb01238.x.

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/services/course-choice/controlled-access-courses>

Data sources: Authors analysis + survey based in Qualtrics (data is available upon request)

Appendix

Selected messages that students said in the survey reflecting their experience:

- Concern about the course selection process in the Department of Management:

1. “I think it is completely non-sensical that I was unable to gain entry to a module explicitly part of M&S. Equally, why list modules outside of Management Department as the courses for M&S and then not even get a look in for them. For the amount of money we pay, ESPECIALLY, in a virtual world of courses, there should be no limitations into people gaining access to the courses they want to do.”

2. “It was a terrible experience this year! Few courses that I was interested in before starting MT, had been cancelled, so had to look for other options which also got cancelled just before LT. Cancelling would have made SOME sense if classes were on campus, however it is all online so if anything, more students can be accommodated. Also the fact that they require a statement on why you want to choose a specific course PLUS get picked at random is just so odd. I am paying £30,000 and I should be able to study what I want without worrying about competing with other students.”

- Do you have any suggestions how to improve your experience of course selection?

1. “People have to be able to gain access to the courses listed as part of their degree full stop.”
2. “System where preferences can be indicated.”
3. “Course preference according to allocation of numbers to courses out of a total of 100.”