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"There's just something about the place" – an exploration of students' relationships with their university

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**IMPACT STATEMENT**

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# Introduction

This impact statement documents my personal reflections regarding elements of the learning which has taken place during my journey to the submission of a thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Business Administration. This statement also forms part of these requirements, along with an article prepared for a specific academic journal. The research itself is detailed in my thesis and elements of it are presented for a wider audience in the journal article. Within this impact statement I explore the impact of undertaking an academic journey, through the DBA programme. This is considered in terms of my own individual, and professional learning. It is possible, should my journal article be published, that it could have an influence have on higher education marketing beyond my own institution, and so this is, briefly, considered too.

## Structure of the document

In order to put my journey in context I will begin with an outline of my career to date. Next I explore what led me to the research question I address in my thesis. I then consider the impact of the DBA journey on myself and on my role as marketing professional in higher education, both in terms of learning and personal development. This is explored specifically in terms of impact on my leadership style. An important part of the DBA journey was the process of maintaining a learning journal – and the progress of this journal is explored. The penultimate brief section reflects on the potential impact on HE marketing more widely, and the concerns I had about giving away any competitive advantage that my research findings might have brought to my own university. Finally I reflect on the strength of the structure of the DBA programme in allowing me to achieve my goals.

# My journey

This impact statement documents the personal journey I have undertaken through my DBA studies. It provides my own views on that journey, my interpretation of the effects it has had on my working practice, and on the effect this has had on my interactions with colleagues. To provide some context for my learning and research journey, it may be helpful to provide some background on my career to date.

My name is Jenny Grainger and I am the marketing and communications director at the University of Huddersfield. The marketing, communications and student recruitment (MCSR) department is responsible for student recruitment, publications, the website, social media activity, alumni relations, international marketing, public relations, internal communications, and corporate events. I have worked in the education sector for 17 years, and before that in marketing in the private sector, undertaking both in-house and agency roles. My first experience of higher education was as a student when I studied for an undergraduate degree in English Studies, at the former Sunderland Polytechnic. I then undertook professional qualifications while working in marketing roles, and gained the Chartered Institute of Marketing's graduate diploma. As my career in the private sector progressed I became aware that senior managers that I dealt with tended to have different backgrounds to my own – they were overwhelmingly male, and had financial qualifications, or perhaps legal backgrounds. I began to feel that my gender and my humanities background could hinder my career development, particularly as marketing tended to be viewed as a 'soft' subject too. I therefore decided to undertake a part-time MBA programme at the University of Bradford. At the time this programme seemed widely respected certainly in the Yorkshire region and its graduates seemed to be judged to have 'good' management potential. Looking back I am not sure where I absorbed this opinion from, probably from those I met within the business world. Whether this in itself really helped my CV, or whether

it simply provided me with greater confidence I cannot judge.  Immediately after completing the MBA I made the move into marketing in the education sector, first in further education for roughly three years, and then into higher education.  My move into higher education was to a college of higher education.  The college's degrees were validated by another institution, a university based nearby.  It successfully applied for taught degree awarding powers of its own, a process which is lengthy and rigorous.  In light of this change a complete re-brand was required, alongside the day to day business of student recruitment and communications. This kept the marketing department extremely busy.  After four years I moved to my current role at Huddersfield, a much larger institution, but one that, at that time, had not fully exploited the potential that a professional marketing department could offer.  As I developed in this role from time to time I did consider undertaking doctoral level studies but the moment never seemed quite right.  This was because the next work challenge was always already looming.  However, one summer day, I received a phone call from the Vice-Chancellor.  He wondered if I might like to undertake a DBA.  This was the final push I needed and I went along to meet the course leader to see if I would be a suitable candidate, and fortunately I was.  The emphasis on research with a professional practice focus was the deciding factor for me.   I should say here that I had no idea of what a complex and enjoyable journey I was embarking upon, or quite how much self-doubt would assail me along the way.  However helpful discussions regarding 'imposter syndrome' made me realise that my feelings of doubt were not unusual.  This new knowledge might have been helpful earlier in my career at the period when self-doubt led me to my MBA studies.

## What drove the development of my research

From the outset of the DBA programme, I wished to undertake research that would inform my professional practice.   This was not simply due to the fact that my studies have been

sponsored by the University.  My role as Marketing and Communications Director at the University is something I take very seriously, this is not a 9-5 job. I find my role challenging and enjoyable, it is constantly evolving and making new demands of me.  Therefore development relevant to my professional role was important to me.   The Vice-Chancellor talks about the importance of staff having authenticity – and asking ourselves the question – 'would I be recruited to my role if I applied again today?'  I think these are good maxims for any professional to be guided by.

While my responsibilities cover many areas, all of which are challenging, there was one area in particular that was moving into uncharted territory as I began my DBA studies.  It therefore seemed the right place to focus my research as it lay at the centre of my professional anxieties.   My concern was based in the government led changes with regard to the home full-time undergraduate student market.   The changes had already prompted me to commission an external audit of the marketing activity at the institution to ensure that there were no gaps in the work that was being undertaken (Huddersfield, 2013a, 2013b).

The changes in the home full-time undergraduate student market are explored in detail in the thesis itself.  In summary, the government has introduced a higher education 'market' in which students have greater choice about where to study.  In addition it has taken steps to ensure the availability of specified information on which students can base that choice (Brown & Carasso, 2013).  There is a focus on ensuring that institutions provide statistical, comparable data about their courses to allow students to make informed choices.   The audit of marketing activity at the university identified no significant gaps in the work being undertaken.  We had taken early action to comply with the additional demands made by the Government's new information scheme, the Key Information Set (KIS) (HEFCE, 2011; Oakleigh & Staffordshire, 2010) and had increased the level and reach of our marketing and

recruitment activity in order to attempt to generate increased student interest in the institution's undergraduate programmes. However, I remained aware of one apparently indefinable element of student choice that had not been addressed through our work. The missing element is the gap in our understanding of the 'something about the place' that leads students to feel a sense of belonging or attachment to their university. I have not been able to identify existing academic research in which this had been explored.

My DBA research has been undertaken from the assumption that being able to capture what creates this feeling could be useful when communicating with potential students, in order to help them choose the institution that will most meet their individual expectations. My doctoral studies provided me with an opportunity to explore this phenomenon with the support of the team of academics who oversee the DBA programme, and, importantly, with the support of fellow research students in the action learning set. This support has been extremely valuable. It has challenged my existing thoughts around issues, and made me rethink some of my assumptions about things happening in my professional work. As I began to develop my research proposal the support helped me shape a plan for how I might address the issues I wished to explore. In these ways it has been an integral part of my DBA journey. I have been able to raise concerns and frustrations with the learning set, and gained valuable insight from my colleagues. They have been able to approach issues from a different perspective, without being constrained by the assumptions that I myself bring to the issues. Experiencing this different focus on several occasions has helped me in circumstances beyond the DBA work. I am now much more disciplined about stopping and taking time to think about something outside the bustle of the department than previously. Engaging in this discipline regularly within the learning set seems to have enabled me to give myself permission to take time to step back in 'real life' too, rather than feeling that it is a luxury that day to day pressures rule out.

# Impact on the researcher, and the higher education marketing professional

There are two aspects of the DBA experience that have had the most impact on my professional practice and my research journey.  The first is the learning gained from the review of literature that was undertaken for the context chapter of the thesis, and the second is the personal development gained through the process of regular reflection, reflexivity and discussion in the action learning group.

## Learning I gained from the process of undertaking the literature review for the context chapter

The literature review undertaken to inform the context chapter of the thesis fulfilled two distinct purposes.  Firstly, and as would be expected, it informed the development of the research, and as such is documented in my thesis.  Additionally it has led me to a greater awareness and increased understanding of the issues that affect the ethos of the academic community and the complexity that contributes to the sometimes heated debates that take place regarding 'what higher education is' (Brown & Carasso, 2013).  This has been, and will continue to be, of practical use in my professional role. Researchers in the field of marketing in higher education have debated this issue at length, and found different ways of dealing with the debate.  Some have gone so far as to try to avoid using marketing terminology in their work (Goonawardana & Hemsley-Brown, 2007).  However, if, as seems likely, the push to introduce a free market to the higher education sector is continued, the view that effective marketing has an important role to play may gain ground.  It has been proposed that marketing can help in achieving the balance that is required between higher education that retains its prestige, and the opening up of HE through widening participation (Hemsley-Brown, 2011).  This is a view that I, both as researcher and marketing professional, agree with.

## Personal development gained through the process of regular reflection, and discussion in the action learning group.

Exploring the academic literature regarding the role of reflection and reflexivity in respect of learning has had an impact on my personal development with regard to both the DBA research journey and my professional marketing practice. Considering the latter, reflection on the reading undertaken in preparation of the thesis has led to a greater understanding that any reaction to marketing professionals, or plans submitted by them will be part of a deep-seated response to the discipline of marketing itself. This will be in addition to reactions to the person or people presenting the idea, or to the plan itself. This deep-seated response will be the result of an individual's prior experiences of marketing, both at work and in their personal life. In an academic environment in particular it will also be heightened by the individual's views on the commercialisation of higher education.

With regard to my own research journey, the DBA programme guided me to reflect on the different research methodologies that could be adopted. The process of choosing the most appropriate research design to address the research question reinforced my awareness that my own ontological and epistemological perspectives are founded in the interpretivist traditions. This is based on a social constructionist view that posits that individuals are the sum of their previous, present and future experiences, that "... the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the relationship between human thought and the social context within which it arises" (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 16). I first encountered this approach during my undergraduate studies in English Literature. My dissertation explored the work of Sartre and Bergson, as they influenced the writing of Virginia Woolf and her treatment of time in her novels. It had underlain my world view without being acknowledged until the DBA journey began. Being reminded of these philosophers' work during reading regarding phenomenology highlighted this connection for me, which I had not made previously. The structure of the taught programme, and reading around different research methods also

provided me with a new confidence that qualitative and interpretive views can and do have their place in the academic community.  It also gave me confidence, that what I had judged to be the 'softer' disciplines such as humanities do have a robust and valid role to play in understanding the world around us.  This links back to the concerns that had prompted me to undertake MBA studies which are outlined above.  At that point, though I lacked the academic terminology to describe it, I had assumed that it was only by gaining credibility in the measurable world of management qualifications that I could progress in my career.  Interestingly now, from the perspective of a novice qualitative researcher there have been times when I have wished I had taken a quantitative approach to my research.  This was borne from a feeling that it might have been more straightforward to propose a hypothesis and then simply seek to prove or disprove it.  As I worked through the complexities of the students' descriptions of their experiences, and read around phenomenology, I did wonder if the apparently greater certainties of an ontology and epistemology based in positivism might have been less challenging.  Such an approach, producing statistically valid results which provide a yes or no answer to pre-defined questions based on hypotheses about the student experience might have been a simpler journey for the research.  However, of course, this would not have addressed my concern that student's own voices are not being heard among the plethora of surveys and measurements that are being undertaken in the HE sector at the present time.  Taking a qualitative approach to my research, and a phenomenological one in particular, has greatly increased my understanding of the differences in approaches.  Work I would previously have classified as being qualitative in nature (ie holding focus groups to ask students their opinions on various aspects of the university experience), had not been truly qualitative in the academic definition of the term.  The research was still being undertaken from a positivist perspective – checking the researcher's hypothesis about a particular issue, rather than an interpretivist approach – allowing the students to describe what they feel is relevant.

These experiences, of reflecting on what has been learnt, and how my learning has progressed, lead me to a greater understanding of the value of undertaking critical reflection. Of course, prior to my DBA studies I would not have framed the discussion using this academic terminology. I believe the value of this change is summed up in the following quotation:

> … the transformation of these uncritically assimilated habits of perceiving, thinking, remembering, problem solving, and feeling affords the most significant opportunities for learning, creativity, self-realization, and social action in adulthood (Mezirow, 1990, p. xiv).

This change has had, and will continue to have a significant impact on my professional practice.

An additional example of the understanding I have gained during this journey is through gaining an awareness of different levels of learning. This had not been clear to me during previous structured learning experiences. Before beginning my DBA studies I had, as explained above, studied for an MBA, part-time. During this experience I think, with the benefit of hindsight, that I had reached stage 6 in 'the reflective judgement model' (Kitchener & King, 1990):

> Individuals at this stage believe that knowing is uncertain and that knowledge must be understood in relationship to the context from which it was derived. In addition, they argue that knowing involves evaluation and that some perspectives, arguments, or points of view may be evaluated as better than others (Kitchener & King, 1990, p. 165).

I believe that towards the end of the learning involved in the research and writing of the DBA thesis I've reached stage 7 in this model – described as below:

> Although individuals at this stage believe that knowing is uncertain and subject to interpretation, they also argue that epistemically justifiable claims can be made about the better or best solution to the problem under consideration (Kitchener & King, 1990, p. 165).

## Leadership style

During my research journey, changes continued to occur in the work being undertaken by the marketing and recruitment team. Previously the team, and its activities, were such that I had direct experience of each of the functions within it. However, with the advance of social media, the increasing sophistication of web technology and a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, this has changed. I know that my style of working results in me finding it very uncomfortable to hand over projects to colleagues. If I am honest I would prefer to be kept updated on every step taken in order to action a project so that I am in control. However, with the increased size of the department this is impossible. I also know that this is not helpful for the development of marketing and recruitment staff, or my own sanity. Therefore, despite it taking me outside of my comfort zone, my aim is to operate under what could be described as a 'democratic' style (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). Within this I am clear regarding goals that the team needs to achieve, and do get involved in some projects, but I take advice and suggestions from colleagues. I do not always take the final decision, but will do so if the group needs me to. This is something I value, and I believe is a style of leadership that is helpful in terms of developing the skills and confidence of the members of the team. It seems to have parallels in a comment regarding the leadership of knowledge workers:

> Their relationship ... is far more like that between the conductor of an orchestra and the instrumentalist than it is like the traditional superior/subordinate relationship. The superior in an organization employing knowledge workers cannot, as a rule, do the work of the supposed subordinate any more than the conductor of an orchestra can play the tuba (Drucker, 2001, pp. 79-80).

I think this quotation sums up the strength of leaders being able to set the general direction that is needed and to allow professional colleagues to travel there in the way that they see fit, rather than along the exact path that the leader would have taken.

## Learning journals – like the curate's egg?

The process of maintaining a learning journal was an integral part of the DBA programme. During the first part of the programme, when taught sessions were being delivered, and the formulation of the research proposal was underway, my journal proved helpful, and I maintained and referred to it regularly. I used the journal to record what I judged to be significant events in my working week – when things had gone very well or badly. The learning journal fulfilled the role of helping to enhance my problem solving skills (Moon, 2002) but it remained focussed on practical issues based around work. This pattern continued for the first two years of the DBA programme.

However, once the process of undertaking field work and writing the thesis began, I no longer used the journal. This was partly due to time pressures, but also partly from the resurfacing of an original feeling of discomfort about the process, which is captured in the following quotation: "To choose to reflect can seem self-indulgent or an excessive formulation of what is perceived to be an essential act (Boud, 2006, p. 165)". I think this comes from long experience of extremely pressured work environments, where the focus is to get the task completed, check it has been done properly and move on to achieving the next task, not to think about its impact on myself.

Reflecting on this now I think that the action learning set came to replace the function of the learning journal in years three and four of the programme. Having begun work on what would become my thesis, and starting fieldwork, I did not abandon the process of reflection, but changed its form. I replaced the use of the journal with a changed use of the support of the learning set. From this point forward our discussions changed to be centred around our research, rather than discussions of more general management issues. Each of us knew a

considerable amount about our colleagues' research, and we shared our anxieties about our progress. The group became an important sounding board for the development of the research being undertaken by each of us. Personally I found that when I thought I had written myself into a cul de sac the group understood the issues and helped me get back on track. So, for me it began to perform the function of "… making sense of one's own experiences through describing one's own experiences to others and gaining perspective of one's own through their stories" (Boud, 2006, p. 166). As the DBA studies progressed, the learning set became increasingly helpful to me with regard to my research. While action learning sets are not always helpful for students (Yeadon-Lee, 2013), in my experience the group was both supportive, and helpfully challenging in terms of the process of preparing the DBA thesis proposal and later through the development of the thesis itself. I always found the suggestions and critiques of the group helpful and did not experience any negative feelings or anxiety about sharing my draft work with these colleagues.


I think the most important thing was that both the journal and the action learning set forced me to reflect on my own behaviours. As Revans comments when writing about the first group of managers to undertaken action learning (who were managers of coal mines), Action Learning …

> … by being question-based rather than answer-based (as is most other training) tells managers a lot about themselves; they begin to see how it is that their own personality is stamped upon the mine they are appointed to run (Revans, 1982).

It is interesting that when in discussion with colleagues about this, they have, unprompted, confirmed this. They feel that different departments within organisations approach new challenges in line with the lead set by their managers. The university recognises this, and through its staff development department has introduced a 'leadership framework' which documents the behaviours expected of managers.

## Impact on marketing at the university

As the doctoral research I have undertaken is part of a taught DBA programme its aim was to have a practical focus.  For me, engaging in this process was timely as the HE sector is facing a period of considerable change.  An opportunity to reflect on how the university's marketing, communications and student recruitment department might respond to this with the assistance of new knowledge, and in a process situated outside the normal marketing operation was extremely helpful.  The lengthy timescale for the investigation of research methodology, undertaking a literature review, the fieldwork and the writing up process has run in parallel with four undergraduate recruitment cycles.   During each of these cycles the research being undertaken has impacted upon the activity of the department as I have reflected on the knowledge I gained through my research.  This has been through both the new understandings generated by the conversations with students in the sample and also through the literature review around place attachment.

As documented in my thesis, and as will be no surprise given the fact that I am a marketing professional, I believe that marketing practice does have a role to play in the future sustainability of higher education.  As this document is an impact statement, which reflects on the way in which the research journey has influenced me, my professional practice, and potential future marketing activity it seems appropriate to reflect on the impact that the tone of some articles debating the need for marketing in HE have had on me.  As a professional marketer, I have a great sense of pride in the work undertaken by myself and my colleagues, and confidence in the ethics of our behaviour.  The attitude taken to marketing by some writers has been both annoying and upsetting (Gibbs & Murphy, 2009).  However, it has also opened my eyes to those views.  It has ensured that I will think in a much more considered way about how marketing campaigns are introduced to academic colleagues.  It has also highlighted the need to be sure to represent both myself and my department, as qualified

professionals.  The team is carrying out work that is in line with institution's values and mission, not attempting to introduce marketing goals or tactics that appear to exist in isolation from the institution.  This is not the same concern that I used to have, that marketing was regarded by some colleagues as 'fluffy' or 'soft' and unimportant. I now realise that I am dealing with a fundamental difference in world view, with different ontological and epistemological perspectives.  So I am now much more aware that there is a clear need to stop and explain the rationale behind some of the department's activities more fully.   Prior to this research journey I suspect that the principles of marketing were so ingrained in both myself and the team of professional colleagues I work with that they have become simply common sense.  This difficulty is not uncommon:

> Becoming aware of assumptions so internalized that we perceive them as "second nature," "obvious," or "common sense" is problematic precisely because of the familiarity of these ideas (Brookfield, 1990, p. 178).

Reflecting on several encounters with academic colleagues in the journal kept during the early part of my DBA studies also led me to a greater awareness of how to approach these challenges.  This was particularly clear in an entry I made regarding a difficult meeting regarding possible amendments to the university's website.  Sadly it did not enable me to accept the criticisms of the web without feeling frustration.  Of course I did not show this frustration in the meeting.  However, the journal did provide me a structure in which to reflect afterwards.  It provided me with the space to realise that myself and those who criticised the web had started from opposite ends of a problem.  Understanding this meant that I was able to follow up after the meeting in what I believe was a far more effective manner that would have been possible otherwise as I was able to reframe my own position.   In a similar meeting that has taken place more recently I was able to discuss issues with the web, and handle criticism of it without feeling frustration – having taken time in advance of the meeting to understand what was driving the criticism, and endeavouring to understand the perspective of those who were frustrated with the system.  In this instance I was able to

reframe the issue before the meeting, and I believe it led to a far more positive solution for everyone involved.

## Impact on higher education marketing

Having explored the impact of the research undertaken for the DBA thesis in terms of myself, my professional practice and the marketing activity undertaken at my own university, this document concludes with a brief consideration of how it might have an impact on HE marketing in general.  The possible applications are considered in the concluding chapter of the thesis and are not re-rehearsed here.   Within this impact statement it seems more appropriate to consider whether such sharing is desirable in the increasingly marketised environment that the HE sector is becoming.  As a professional marketer, keen to recruit undergraduate students in the numbers required by the institution's targets, this is an issue that has caused me some anxiety as I prepared both this statement, my thesis and journal article.  However, within the marketing department's commitment to recruit students, a key concern is to recruit the right students to the right course.  Thus, those responsible for the marketing of higher education need to be able to ensure that students understand the character of the place they are considering applying to.  The students also need to be confident that it will meet their expectations.  Any model or framework which can help achieve this should be of benefit to both recruitment and retention targets for those operating across the sector.  While institutions may offer a similar 'product' they do offer varying courses, and have different locations.  Therefore students do need to be provided with tools and information to make informed choices between them.  Supplying qualitative information to support and enhance the statistics that prospective students can currently access should enable them to make better informed decisions.  This should ensure they will be happy at their chosen institution and complete their studies.  The findings of my research should allow institutions to move towards becoming consciously competent (May & Kruger, 1998;

Thompson & Martin, 2005) in their marketing communications to potential students regarding this previously unexplored area.   Gaining conscious competence means that an organisation not only does things in a way that works, but it knows how and why this happens.   This awareness ensures that future decisions about processes and procedures will be taken in the light of this knowledge and planned changes should not have any unforeseen consequences.

## Final reflection on the structure of the DBA programme

The requirements of taught DBA programme I have followed include becoming a member of an action learning set, as mentioned earlier in this impact statement.  This was my first experience of action learning.  Reflecting on this I believe that what Revans, (1982) describes as the key questions of action learning helped me shape the research I wished to undertake for my research – to ensure it is something that can help me in my professional role.  The action learning set enabled me to be clear about:

> (1) What am I (or what is my firm) really trying to do, first and last?
> (2) What is stopping me (or my firm) from doing it?
> (3) What can I (or my firm) contrive to do about it? (Revans, 1982)

Our discussions allowed me to be clear about my single most pressing concern – and that the steps I had taken so far had not resolved it.  The programme provided me with the toolkit to shape my research to answer Revans' next questions:

> (4) Who *knows* what the line of action that we are trying to implement is?
> (5) Who *cares* about getting this line of action really implemented?
> (6) Who *can* actually contribute anything towards getting it implemented?
>  (Revans, 1982)

Reflecting on these questions it became clear that I needed to seek the views of the students themselves about the missing element in our marketing toolkit.  This dictated the research I undertook, and the ontological and epistemological perspective that I judged to be necessary to achieve these goals.

The strength of the support I gained from the action learning set with regard to my first steps to becoming a researcher are what has made the DBA programme such a coherent and rewarding process for me. I believe this is what made this approach more suitable for me than a traditional PhD route, as it was firmly grounded in my professional practice, helping me take practical steps to resolve an issue that was causing me concern in my role.

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