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## **Viewpoint: Addressing the Market Research Skills Gap**

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The nature of the gap between academia and practitioners is one that has been regularly visited in this journal (see, for example: Schulz, 2005; Piercy, 2006; Keegan, 2007; McDonald, 2008 etc.). Whilst cathartic, this debate is unlikely to be fully resolved due to the differing philosophies, motivations and incentives of academic and practitioner research. This debate is also focused on research output, a factor that misses the key role that universities play in provision of market research skills. My argument is that it is this gap, a *skills gap*, that should be of growing concern in the context of the changing commercial environment in which researchers operate.

At this point the hype over 'big data' has begun to exceed its utility, yet the corresponding increase in board level interest over the strategic use of data should be good news for market research. However, a common theme in conferences, in print and online discussion is the potential for negative impact upon the research sector. As Don Schulz (2005) noted nearly a decade ago: "marketing research can do better. But why don't we? Why don't we attack the problem with the idea of solving it, not just agreeing it exists?"

The problem, I suggest, lies in a shortage of the necessary skills. The extent of this problem can be seen in reports highlighting the shortage of skills in managing and analyzing data - as many as 1.5 million within the US alone (Lund et al, 2013). Helpfully, McKinsey provides suggestions as to where such individuals might be found. Unfortunately, the answer isn't in market research. In a series of long reports centred on analysis of customer and market data the only mention of market research is that it a profession for the merely 'data savvy' who are lacking analytical skills. This skills shortage is all the more puzzling given the huge numbers of students taking form of market research training within business school courses.

As to a solution? I will attempt to address both sides of the problem.

Firstly, business schools need to embed a wider range of analytical skills in the curriculum. Whilst there are notable exceptions, market research education often takes the form of enough training in basic survey design or interviewing needed to pass an academic dissertation. One argument I have heard is that analytically minded students will choose to study more traditionally 'numerate' subjects. Yet this risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy – to succeed in the future such courses need to position themselves to attract students who are analytically minded.

Secondly, research firms and the professional bodies that represent them, need to take a broader interest in engaging with market research education in business schools. Engagement is not simply about identifying future employees, but ensuring that any what is taught is embedded in practice and influencing future management decision makers. Even if few end up as researchers, many tens of thousands of students in the

UK alone are leaving business schools each year with some concept of what market research is, and taking these concepts into their careers as managers – and as clients.

My argument here is that the future of research as a profession, and its perception by those outside the profession, will be based upon the quality of people it attracts and trains as much as methods, technology or other elements in the external environment. Closing this skills gap may not be easy but it represents an effective way to respond to uncertain times.

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