

Where have all the flowers gone?

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We are all aware of the need to sample the views of our existing students and perhaps all too aware of the frequency with which this is undertaken but it seems that much less importance is attached to the perspectives of our ex-students, even though these have a considerable impact on an institutions standing. . . This paper reports back on a survey of MIT graduates from the NDBC and Degree programs over the last ten years. It examines their current working situation and to what extent their qualifications have assisted their career. The long-term goal is to examine the feed-back mechanisms and how our current intakes of students can be affected by our existing graduates.

1. INTRODUCTION

Those of us who remember the words of the Peter, Paul and Mary song will remember that the lyrics were suggesting an underlining circularity to events and relationships. It is the contention of the authors of this paper that the same can be applied to the relationship between an educational institution and its students. In this case the 'flowers' are our past students.

A great deal of effort is traditionally put into surveying the state of mind and attitudes of our current students, typically by means of surveys and student evaluations. However it seems that considerably less is put into the research into our past students, beyond the occasional generalized graduate survey, which is usually applied to the previous year's graduates.

A search of the internet shows that there are many institutions which conduct exit surveys of their students but in the great majority of cases they refer only to those students who have recently left the institution and they tend to fall into two classes. In the first type are surveys which are eliciting responses about the students' perceptions of courses and teaching standards while the second type, which apply mostly to research institutions, focus on the

papers and seminars that the student has written or participated in while they were enrolled.

If we consider how an institution builds its image and reputation it is only partially from current considerations such as facilities and staff. A considerable portion arises from what our past students (and their employers) are saying about us. Since, as an institution, our ability to attract new students depends to a large extent (we presume) on image and reputation it would behove us to know exactly what our graduates and non-graduates were thinking and saying about us.

The theme for this conference is change, progress and innovation and any intelligent change requires the vision to see where we are, where we want to be and the best route to get there.

To some extent this study is motivated by anecdotal evidence that students graduating with IT qualifications are moving out of the IT field or moving out of the country and that any feedback mechanism that would reflect on future enrolments would be diluted or lost.

This paper is part of what will be an ongoing study into what has happened to students who have studied at MIT over the last ten years. The present component of the study looks at graduates from the BIS degree program, Diploma in Information Systems and NDBC graduates and the next phase will look into the students who failed to complete those programs.

2. THE SURVEY DESIGN

The initial graduate survey was developed by senior lecturers in collaboration with marketing staff and was administered as a phone survey with re-

sponses coded into an Access database. As with all collaborative efforts the final set of questions was something of a compromise with some questions not really relevant to our initial objectives.

The survey was administered by the MIT call center staff and after a few initial hiccups with data entry the process went reasonably smoothly.

We had initially considered whether to conduct the research in either a postal form or as telephone survey. Traditionally postal surveys tend to have a poorer response rate, which can be as low as 10% or less, while telephone surveys (if contact information is up-to-date) can elicit response rates of 90% or more. Even though the latter format is more expensive to administer it was decided to proceed with that choice since the overall pool of students was not unduly large.

Hoinville and Jowell outline some strategies for increasing the response rate from a postal survey to as high as 75% but among other things this involves several waves of follow-up reminders which are both costly and potentially irritating to the recipients and whose usefulness is restricted by the law of diminishing returns.

In retrospect the decision to conduct a telephone survey might in this case not have been the correct one primarily for two reasons. Firstly many of the contact phone numbers we had for the students were no longer correct and secondly no funds were available to contact students who lived or had moved overseas. It is true that had we conducted a postal survey the addresses would have been equally out of date.

The option of using an Email survey would probably have overcome these problems as we discovered that ex-students tend to retain their Email addresses for a good deal longer than their phone numbers. On the positive side, there are some advantages to be gained from direct person-to-person contact and many of the students we were able to contact were happy to amplify and clarify their responses in a manner which would not have been so likely via an Email survey.

2.1 The Survey Objectives

Some of the key questions we are seeking to answer in this study are:

- Whether the graduates are currently employed in an occupation related to their qualification.

- How relevant is their qualification to their current occupation.

- How relevant is the content of their qualification to their current position.

- How easy was it for them to find employment after graduation

- Whether they were planning to undertake further study in the near future

- Whether they would recommend their qualification to others intending to enter the same field

Of less relevance to the authors of this paper but more relevant to the Institutes' marketing personnel, were questions about why the participants had chosen to come to MIT in the first place, what they thought in hindsight about the facilities and the teaching and the salary band of their current position.

3. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

At the stage of writing this paper we have only just completed the collection of the data and it would be premature to identify trends or make conclusions at this stage.

We were able to identify 169 students who fitted the profile of our first survey and to date we have successfully contacted and received responses from 37 of those.

While this was a much lower rate than we had initially anticipated it will still be sufficient to draw some useful conclusions.

Over the next month we will collate and summarize the responses and will present our final conclusions at conference in July.

4. FURTHER STUDY PHASES

The next phase of the study will be to survey those students who for one reason or another did not graduate from the Degree or NDBC programs. There is a larger identifiable base number of these students and the initial process will be to conduct another telephone survey with a refined set of questions and possibly to enhance that with a supplementary Email questionnaire.

In the final phase we will be extending the process to look at graduates from the Diploma levels

five and six and also the students who failed to complete either of these programmes.

REFERENCES

- Hoinville,G. and Jowell, R., *Survey Research Practice*, (Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1978.)
- Collis, J. and Hussey, R., *Business Research*, (Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 1997)

