

Technical Note

Stakeholders in excellence in teaching and learning of
project management

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Abstract

The paper reports differences in how post-graduate and experienced ‘students’, their employers and others appear to value and therefore may judge the excellence of teaching of project management. Stakeholders can see excellence from unexpected value obtained from courses. The teachers and all concerned when promoting and selecting teaching of project management should therefore consider together what should be expected and what could be obtained from what they think is needed and what can be provided.

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1. Values

To be considered excellent depends upon the values by which a thing is judged. Feedback forms and comments during and after indicate that students, employers, human resources staff and the other stakeholders tend to differ in how they value short and more academic courses, personal study, distance-learning and in-company training in project management [1]. The students’ valuations differ between raw graduates and the more mature ‘students’ with some experience of projects. Employers’ valuations also appear to vary with their project management maturity.

Feedback and other comments also indicate that stakeholders may obtain unexpected value from the teaching. Table 1 summarizes their expectations and some unexpected value obtained [2]. Simple definitions are used in this table to illustrate that these stakeholders tend to differ in their valuation of teaching of project management and that value obtained tends to differ from value expected. The table is also simplified in showing only lower and upper

bounds of experience of students and of the maturity of employers.

These examples of the unexpected value which stakeholders may gain compared with expectations are fortunately not necessarily mutually exclusive. For the inexperienced post-graduates the opportunity in an MSc course to concentrate in the dissertation on topics which may be valuable in jobs only adds to the potential value of the degree. For the experienced ‘student’ the value of reflective analysis should help them identify the causes of problems and prepare to apply the principles studied. Every unexpected value to their managers and employers shown in Table 1 is a gain and achievable, as well as the expected value.

2. Approaching excellence

That different stakeholders in project management differ in their perspectives is not rare. A study of the management of large UK capital projects published in 1962 concluded that “...you cannot get large projects carried out without persuading large numbers of extremely different sorts of people to understand the importance of what is being done and to work together” [3]. Managers in the industries

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Table 1
Stakeholders' different perceptions of the value of teaching experienced

Stakeholder		Value expected prior to the course	Most unexpected value gained from the course
The individual student	If inexperienced	Acquire a recognized qualification	Could choose dissertation topic of future value to career Gave time to reflect
	If with experience of projects	Opportunity to study principles and how to apply them	
Manager (or prospective manager)	If the immediate leader/line manager	Team to gain immediately applicable knowledge	Indicated causes of problems of managing projects
	If a higher budget-holding manager	Raise team's competence	Motivated teams to improve project initiation
Employer (company or public organization)	If new to pm concepts	Improve control (of cost, time, contracts)	Indicated actions to anticipate problems of managing projects
	If mature	Benchmark whether up-to-date	Improved potential to manage uncertainty
Employer's training and personnel functions		Meet standards	Indicated actions needed to simplify standards and systems

studied did not then agree with this, nor later with other observers that their greatest problems were organizational and institutional [4]. The reaction to the immediate problems of project delays, quality failures and other causes of over-running budgets was enthusiasm for formalizing what is called time and cost 'control'. Quantitative work planning and monitoring were hoped to be the remedy of flaccid manufacturing management and combative construction management in the UK [5].

That these problems were most acute in engineering and construction may explain an initial determinism. This was broadened by concepts such as Revans' schemes for 'Action Learning' [6] and recognition by the largest and potentially most mechanistic profession employed in the UK on projects that managerially they need much more than techniques [7]. Nevertheless, the tacit objective of early teaching and research was to help advance competence and disseminate lessons [8]. It ran the risk of only improving 'fire-fighting'. Research led to a more developed view that attention to the nature of projects and the causes of problems could not only lead to some fire prevention but also help us understand that project work is inherently combustible. Uncertainty is now the key word. Philosophies of learning, syllabuses, structure and methods are all now questioned [9]. In place of a few lecturers recruited from industry¹ we have inter-disciplinary groups and national research programmes which are moving towards drawing together universities world-wide [10]. With this some companies and government departments have become more what is called project management mature [11] and corporate recognition by some of the needs of project-based businesses [12]. But not by all. There remains the risk of a widening lack of understanding between the industrial stakeholders, the researchers, teachers, consultants and professional associations [13]. Actions to achieve excellence in the minds of all stakeholders may therefore need to take into account that:

- Employers tend to want tailored applications whereas taught courses, professional societies' standards and textbooks tend to give weight to principles, analysis and reflection [14].
- Employers still tend to expect that techniques and procedures are all that is needed to overcome uncertainties in project selection, organization, procurement, etc. [15].
- Employers' use of in-company tailored teaching may fail for lack of agreement on how it should help improve corporate governance of their projects [16].
- Not everyone contributing to a project should be assumed or expected to share a common objective and objectivity [17].
- In many cultures reflection is not yet considered to be a strength in project management [18].
- Managers may be remote from the current problems of their projects as seen by members of project teams [19].
- Managers tend to have inconsistent views that 'management' cannot be taught but that their project teams need to learn how to improve their control of people, cost and time.
- Training and personnel functions tend to be generalists without expertise in project management or a role in planning how potentially valuable learning from courses will be applied in their organizations [20].

3. Conclusions

Every stakeholder in teaching and learning of project management may have a different view of what is excellence, as influenced by employment, professional and government systems all having only limited common interests. Stakeholders' different values expected from and obtained from teaching for project management are not mutually exclusive, but any failure of teaching to deliver something expected or to deliver something potentially valuable to someone who cannot use it can easily disappoint one or more party. Teachers and all concerned with promoting and selecting teaching at any level should therefore con-

¹ First at Bristol, Cranfield, Manchester and Newcastle.

sider what should be expected and what could be obtained from what they think is needed and what can be provided. As in all procurement, the customers tend to seek what they think they can get rather than what they need. Considering that any teaching is itself a project, best practice would be that it is planned by customer and supplier – this is a simple conclusion, and like many things counter to custom more widely agreed than practised.

The problems and needs of project management may be similar in all industries [21]. They are not necessarily the same for every audience, or for ever. This is a clear argument for linking teaching, research and communities of practice [22]. But nobody should expect that teaching and learning will remedy all the needs perceived by every project management stakeholder.

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