Student reviews as an applicant decision factor: what can business schools learn?

Jordi Robert-Ribes, discusses the growth of student reviews, their impact on business school rankings and the importance of school alumni

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Many factors go into a student's decision to study, including the cost and location of the programme, university prestige and job prospects. However, a relatively recent development is the increased dependence on student reviews to obtain information about universities and programmes before applying.

In 2019, one industry report found that student reviews were now a key contributing factor to students' university decisions. Consequently, students were less likely to consider factors such as rankings. This may be because student reviews can offer insights into the student experience that rankings, university brochures and other contact points can't.

There are many reasons why students are turning to online student reviews. For a start, the trend follows broader changes in how young people make purchasing decisions. For example, young people trust online reviews as much as, and sometimes more than, personal recommendations from acquaintances. Additionally, there has been a backlash in the business education space against traditional rankings, with some of the most prestigious business schools dropping out of popular rankings such as *The Economist*'s. Whatever the reason, websites like EDUopinions are growing as more and more students honestly document their experiences at university and business school, and as other students welcome these reviews into their decision-making process.

However, as student reviews become more important, many business schools will be wondering what this means for both their application processes and their alumni. The growth of student reviews will inevitably impact rankings, the importance of alumni, and how business schools interact with their students.

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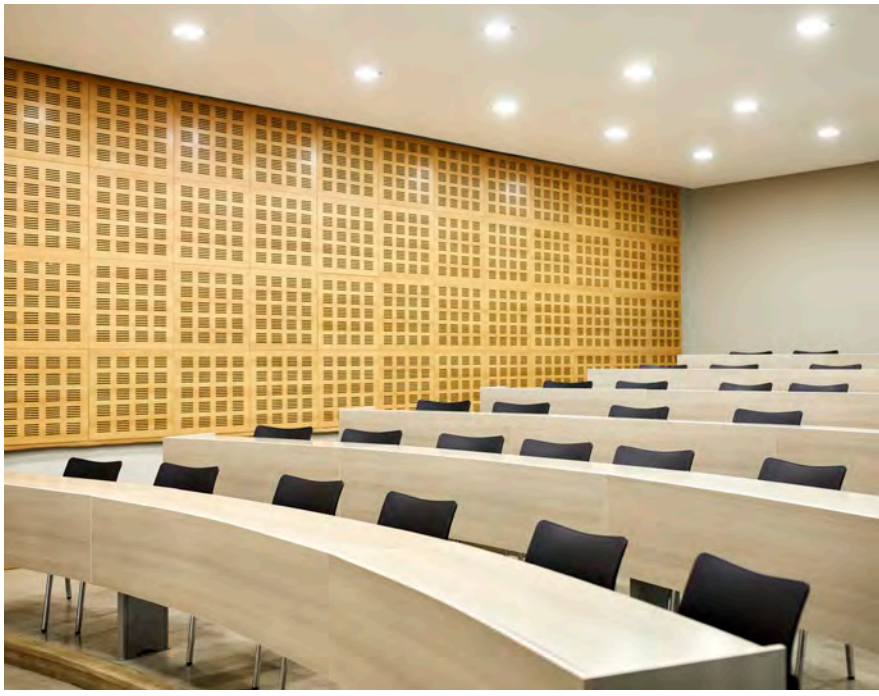
The student as customer

While there are differing views on whether students can and should be considered customers within higher education, the truth is that some of their behaviour is that of a consumer. Students are recipients of learning and knowledge at business schools and often pay substantial tuition fees to be accepted into the community and receive that knowledge.

In some ways, interpreting students as customers has benefits for business schools and their student body. By considering their communication with students and alumni as 'customer service', business schools can improve student satisfaction. Embracing open communication channels and fostering a culture where the customer – the student in this case – comes first, can also help retain students and create a better experience.

However, students inevitably have certain expectations of universities when they see themselves as customers – that is, as people who have paid for a service. If they don't believe that they are getting the level of care and education that they deserve, the chance of a bad review increases. This could have consequences for business schools, as a spate of bad reviews may result in reduced applications to programmes.



Declining trust in rankings

The increased dependence on student reviews comes at the expense of rankings. While rankings may evaluate student employment after graduation, the student experience, and staff experiences, they also take into account reputation and brand name strength. Rankings might tell you the relative prestige of a school, but they won't necessarily convey the personal experience of attending.

Business school rankings have had a difficult time in recent years. In October 2020, many top-ranking business schools like Harvard Business School and Wharton confirmed that they would not participate in *The Economist*'s annual business school ranking. This had a knock-on effect for the business schools who did choose to participate – for example, IESE Business School rose nine places in the rankings compared to 2019.

Rankings are changing in other ways, too, in part because of the growing popularity of student reviews. Some rankings, like the *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings, are actively considering incorporating student or alumni perspectives in their evaluations. As rankings decline in popularity, ranking creators may begin to see the value in student perspectives and student reviews.

Improving interactions with students

Disappointing experiences at university inevitably increase the likelihood that students will leave a bad review on student review websites. As these sites become more popular in the decision-making process, it's more important than ever for universities to communicate effectively with their current students and alumni.

This doesn't just mean that universities should do everything they can to make their students' experiences positive – this is a given. However, it does mean that universities should encourage students to write reviews in the first place. Considering the wide variety of student review websites out there, universities may need to make a coordinated effort to encourage student reviews. To do this, universities and business schools may take advantage of their student ambassadors, who can encourage students to write reviews on a given website and collate reviews to help inform the university of student opinions.

Universities have always communicated with students after they have left their institution, through an alumni newsletter or invitations to alumni events. However, as word-of-mouth reviews become crucial to prospective students, alumni are even more important in determining an institution's reputation.

Our statistics from EDUopinions show that, compared to current students, alumni tend to leave reviews that are either positive or very positive. By communicating effectively with alumni, and positively influencing their experience even after their graduation, business schools can increase the chances that former students leave positive reviews.

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The value in student reviews

As well as helping students make a more well-informed decision about which business schools to apply to, student reviews can also provide value to institutions. Universities already use some form of student evaluations to analyse their courses, but student reviews from alumni can reveal additional areas of improvement that students may not think to talk about when they are a student.

Authentic student reviews can also offer students peace of mind about what to expect at university. Better-prepared students may exert less of a strain on student services, as they will have gathered a more accurate idea about what to expect of the learning environment from former students on review websites.

If business schools embrace student reviews, they must also know how to respond to negative ones. While they may seem damaging, negative reviews can also serve to highlight to prospective students the positives of a particular institution. Responding to negative reviews can show prospective students that you value your students' feedback and opinions and actively consider them. On the other hand, ignoring negative reviews risks alienating both the alumnus who wrote the review and prospective students who want to see that their chosen business school cares about responding to their students.

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Lessons learnt

For business schools, the growth of online student reviews marks a turning point. With their popularity only set to increase, universities need to embrace student reviews and the opportunities these offer for nurturing stronger relationships between students and their business schools.

For one, universities should be proactively responding to online reviews, whether these are positive or negative. For applicants who use student reviews as the main factor in their decision-making process, negative reviews could be a massive influence on the schools they choose to apply to. Responding to negative reviews won't make them disappear, but it will build better relationships with alumni and give prospective students a more positive view of institutions and their commitment to improvement.

We also know that students increasingly see themselves as customers at university – they want to know they are getting their money's worth from their programme. Universities that hesitate to see the value in student reviews ignore a valuable source of feedback, and thus a way of making their institution and programmes better suited to their students.

For business schools who are used to using rankings as a marker of their success, placing more importance on student reviews may be difficult to adjust to. It will take coordination between the marketing team, student ambassadors and students to encourage the posting of student reviews and create responses to negative ones. However, the payoff for business schools will undoubtedly be huge. Student reviews offer a way to keep in contact with alumni, encourage honest feedback and better prepare incoming students for life at your institution. It's an opportunity not to be wasted.

About the Author

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