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Tutoring executives online: what drives perceived quality?

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Tutoring executives online: what drives perceived quality?

Studies of learning and student satisfaction in the context of online university programmes have largely neglected programmes catering specifically to business executives. Such executives have typically been away from higher education for a number of years, and have collected substantial practical experience in the subject matters they are taught. Their expectations in terms of both content and delivery may therefore be different from non-executive students. We explore perceptions of the quality of tutoring in the context of an online executive MBA programme through participant interviews. We find that in addition to some of the tutor behaviours already discussed in the literature, executive students look specifically for practical industry knowledge and experience in tutors, when judging how effective a tutor is. This has implications for both the recruitment and training of online executive MBA tutors.

Keywords: distance learning; service quality; e-learning

1. Introduction

Online business programmes continue to gain in popularity as an alternative to the traditional classroom (Arbaugh 2014). The MBA in particular appears popular as a choice of online programme, possibly because many MBA programmes require students to have prior work experience before enrolling, and such students can more easily combine work and study by taking courses online. Not surprisingly then, research into learning and teaching on the online MBA has appeared over the last 15 years. However, despite the growth in this literature, the instructor's role in facilitating learning and creating satisfaction in the online learning environment is not yet fully understood (Arbaugh *et al.* 2013). Existing studies have mainly considered very broad constructs such as teaching presence (Garrison *et al.* 2001; Ma *et al.* 2015), psychological distance (Lee *et al.* 2017; Oliver and Trigwell 2005), or single dimensions of online teaching activities, like instructor immediacy (Arbaugh 2010). In some cases, scholars have taken measurement instruments of student satisfaction and learning from the literature on the classroom environment, and directly transferred these to the online context, without recognising the uniqueness of both the online mode of teaching, and the executive MBA student. This leads to a gap in our understanding of the determinants of perceived quality of online tutoring in the MBA context.

Studies of online tutoring effectiveness commonly include both student learning and student satisfaction as dependent variables, often to be explained by the same independent variables. Whilst many studies do report positive correlations between satisfaction and learning, some also report low or even negative correlations (Clayson 2009). In view of such inconclusive evidence of any link between learning and satisfaction, it seems necessary in studies of online learning to more clearly differentiate between student learning, as measured through standardised

tests, students' perceived learning, as measured through survey instruments, and student satisfaction with the course they are taking, typically also measured through surveys. The factors driving student satisfaction with their course and tutors, and the factors affecting learning, are most likely different. As studies have typically looked for factors affecting learning, and then assumed these would also drive satisfaction, there is a need to re-explore student's perceptions of teaching quality in the online environment.

Modeling the factors determining the level of student satisfaction on online MBA programmes requires three steps. Firstly a determination of relevant factors, secondly the creation of adequate instruments with which to measure these factors, and thirdly the actual measurement of the factors. The same applies to the measurement of satisfaction. In this paper, we aim to explore only the first step, focusing in particular on the role of the online tutor, in the asynchronous online MBA environment. The question we ask is what factors determine perceived quality of tutoring? We present the results of a qualitative inductive study exploring student's perspectives on quality of tutoring on a British online MBA, catering to a global audience of executives.

2. Dimensions of student satisfaction

Student satisfaction is commonly monitored by universities around the world. This is done for a variety of reasons, including as a way of giving students a voice, and a way of benchmarking, controlling, and rewarding teaching staff. However, the measurement of student satisfaction with their courses and tutors is not without controversy. For example, it has been questioned whether satisfaction is associated with learning, and to what degree. Numerous studies have reported positive correlations between course evaluations and student learning (Beleche *et al.* 2012), but

the evidence is far from unanimous (Clayson 2009). A recent highly publicised study even found a negative correlation between satisfaction and learning, and concluded that student evaluations are very sensitive to conditions at the time of filling them in, even meteorological conditions (Braga *et al.* 2014). Why should we still measure student satisfaction?

One reason such monitoring of satisfaction may be important for MBA programmes, regardless of whether or not learning and satisfaction are actually associated, is that many MBA rankings use student satisfaction questionnaires as a programme performance measure (Collet and Vives 2013). Another reason is that word of mouth recommendations are an important factor influencing the choice of MBA, and such recommendations are more likely when a student is satisfied with teaching staff (Bruce and Edgington 2008).

Unfortunately relevant studies in the literature have tended to amalgamate learning, perceived learning, and satisfaction. It has been recognised that student satisfaction with online courses will be driven by factors different to those in the classroom environment, but not that the factors driving satisfaction may be different than those driving learning. For example, the most popular early conceptualisation, or framework, for organising dimensions of satisfaction and learning has been the community of inquiry (COI) framework (Garrison *et al.* 1999 and 2001). According to this framework, success in online instruction is dependent on the creation of a community of learners, where learning takes place through three interrelated elements, which are referred to as social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is defined as "the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (Garrison *et al.* 1999, p. 89). This way of viewing the online learning environment has clear similarities with sense-making theory (Weick 1995), suggesting that learners, teaching staff, and perhaps even

administrative staff on an online programme engage in collective sense-making processes, that alter the understanding of all involved, creating shared experiences and new meanings. The above has received some empirical support with a number of recent studies linking online collaborative learning with better learning outcomes (see e.g. Tsai 2013; Wu et al. 2017). The second element of the COI framework is social presence, defined as "the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community" (Garrison *et al.* 1999, p. 89). The final element is teaching presence, defined in terms of both the design of the educational experience, and the facilitation, typically carried out by online tutors, or by a mix of tutors and course participants. The assumption, demonstrated empirically by for example Chen et al. (2017), is that a systematic approach to tutoring based on the COI framework can lead to higher perceptions of cognitive, social, and teaching presences, and ultimately to learning benefits.

Whilst this framework focuses on learning in the online community, and clearly is labelled a framework, and not a theory, numerous studies have used it as a theory with which to analyse satisfaction as well (see for example Richardson *et al.* (2017) for a meta-analysis of the statistical correlation between social presence, satisfaction, and learning). The COI framework was not originally intended to explain satisfaction, and the many deductive studies that have based student surveys on this framework, may therefore have missed out on other important dimensions of student satisfaction. Some studies have made assumptions about the influence of cognitive styles (Liu *et al.* 2008), or learning styles (Eom *et al.* 2006) on satisfaction, but again without the existence of prior inductive studies to indicate such a link. In addition, there is a general lack of evidence that information preferences should even impact learning (Pashler *et al.* 2008). A further complication is that many studies have asked respondents to compare online

and offline courses and programmes of study. For example, Swan (2001) asked students to rate the "level of interaction with their instructor" and "level of interaction with classmates" as compared to traditional face-to-face courses, on a 4 point Likert-type scale. Some studies of MBAs have measured satisfaction simply as "medium satisfaction", as compared to face-to-face courses (Arbaugh 2010 and 2014). Such comparisons obviously require knowledge of both offline and online courses, and if we assume that satisfaction online will not be driven by the same factors as satisfaction offline, may not make much sense. Evidence that this assumption is reasonable can be found in recent studies, showing that in blended learning contexts, the relative weight of face-to-face and online activities impacts satisfaction (Diep et al. 2017). Worse, as we know student evaluations are influenced by recent (and even exogenous) conditions, unless a student is simultaneously pursuing online and offline courses, asking them to compare will most likely produce unusable results.

A final consideration is that it has been shown that specific discipline differences on the MBA, such as those related to "soft" vs "hard" disciplines affect perceptions of instructor effectiveness (Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich 2006; Arbaugh 2013). This suggests strongly that not only effect sizes, but possibly also the factors themselves, may not be generalisable across programmes and courses. It points to the need for inductive studies in different programme and course contexts to solicit the factors that may drive student satisfaction online. This paper attempts to fill this gap in the context of the industry-specific, online, asynchronous executive MBA. A summary of the dimensions of online student satisfaction discussed above is presented in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

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3. Method

The principal aim of the data collection and data analysis is to gain an in-depth understanding of the quality of tutor support as perceived by students in an asynchronous online environment. A semi-structured interview format suitable for providing detailed qualitative data was used to gather the data (McCracken 1993; Punch 2005).

3.1. Participants

The participants are 12 MBA students who at the time were undertaking an industry specific online executive MBA. This MBA is one of a suite of industry specific online MBAs offered by a large London based university on a Moodle platform. Students are assigned to a learning group of around 12 students, with a designated tutor for each module (course). As students and tutors are not necessarily located in the same part of the world they are not required to have an online presence on a specific day or at a specific time. However, regular interaction is typically required to keep up with coursework.

We employed convenience sampling to select the participants and considered this sample large enough to reach data saturation, given the stratification in terms of gender, country of origin, and age. The average participant is 42 years of age. Out of 12 participants interviewed, 10 were male and 2 were female. This distribution is representative of their industry as a whole. Participants were from North America, European Union, India, Africa and Australia. All participants are industry professionals ranging in status from junior managers to Directors. Most

had a first degree or professional qualification prior to undertaking their MBA. A summary of participant demographics is presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 here

3.2. Questions and approach

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, or via Skype. Two open questions served to anchor the interviews, but the discussion was left open and exploratory. The questions were (1) "what has been your experience of online tutoring on this programme?" And (2) "think of the discussion board discussions and activities - could you give me some examples of good quality tutoring in this context?"

Supplementary probing questions were:

- Think of a good v/s bad tutoring experience you've had. What made it a good (or bad) experience?
- How did you feel about this?
- What impact did this have on you?
- Did this change your behaviour?
- Was it helpful?
- Why? How?

The transcribed interviews totalled 19,790 words. The interviews with the participants were analysed using a grounded theory approach. The use of grounded theory allowed the two researchers involved to compare and contrast themes and relationships between the topics as

discussed by participants (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Grounded theory requires researchers to submerge themselves in the data. It involves reading the transcripts several times to identify key concepts, then analysing any supplementary data with these concepts. This process has been labeled as 'coding' as it allows researchers to categorise data into the different concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

3.3. Coding

Coding took place in September 2015. The two researchers involved in this project initially met in a 5 hour coding session in September 2015 where they coded three transcripts together. Subsequently, each researcher coded the remaining transcripts independently. Finally, the researchers discussed differences in their coding and eventually reached agreement. The first stage of coding process undertaken was open coding. Open coding is a process of categorisation. It involves categorising data so as to find common themes within the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The process involved reading through the text to find the term "tutor support" or any related terms, such as "experience of tutoring" and "feedback." As per Charmez (2006), notes were made in the form of memos. The next stage in the coding process is known as axial coding. Axial coding identifies relationships between the concepts and how they might be categorised (Strauss and Corbin 1990). In effect, it explains how one concept is related to another thus allowing the researchers to make connections between concepts.

4. Analysis and discussion

The aim of the study was to determine inductively what factors contributed to MBA participants getting a sense of satisfaction with their tutors. Arbaugh (2004) has pointed to the need for students to take at least two online courses before they can draw conclusions about the medium. This condition was satisfied in our study. The participants had all completed either 3 or 6 independent courses on the MBA, and had thus been in contact with a minimum of 3 course leaders, 3 tutors, a programme director, and a course administrator. This allowed the participants to compare and contrast their experience with different tutors, and reflect on good and bad experiences during their programme. The themes that emerged during the coding of the interviews are discussed below. As the objective was to identify factors influencing perceptions of quality of tutoring, not quantify these, we did not attempt to rank factors according to impact. The factors are outlined in figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 here

4.1. Tutor behaviours

Our analysis showed that four behaviours in particular are associated with good tutoring, which we have labeled *motivating*; *challenging*; *helpfulness;* and *vigilance*. Firstly, students expressed appreciation for a tutor who is motivational. By this we mean a tutor who understands how to encourage and can create interest in discussions and activities. As one respondent stated:

In the second module, I was, disenfranchised. Fortunately, I had a tutor that was motivating, and would spur us along sort of thing, get us going...without the tutor getting us to keep going, then it would have been hard...

Secondly, a good online tutor is helpful and is willing to assist students outside the strict boundaries of the course materials. This was not required of tutors, but some adopted this type of behaviour. It involves going above and beyond one's job description. As one respondent reported:

[The tutor would]...*add their interpretation of the unit or any other additional points that they thought would be helpful or of interest... There is more to the unit than just the course notes. There was the additional information that tutor provided.*

This is particularly relevant for industry specific MBAs. Industry specific MBAs typically contain a mix of industry specific subjects and more standard management subjects. However, some subjects are not applicable to all parts of an industry. As such, tutor support can be used as a mechanism to bridge misunderstandings, and fill gaps. As one respondent mentioned:

It was related to marketing... [Industry X] companies aren't known for very big marketing functions. And so, it's a new area for most people who work in [Industry X]. It's an area which I felt could have done with more, say, case studies and more follow-up with the tutor on, you know, how certain marketing initiatives could be applied to the industry that we were in...

A third behaviour that the respondents found useful was the willingness of their tutor to challenge them. Respondents did not mind being challenged, or even provoked, by their tutor or fellow students. In fact, some respondents said they seek out these challenges. As one respondent stated:

> *Well, in this last module... I made a couple of responses, and one thing that I found was interesting was the tutor, when she responded, actually challenged my response more. But it was very thought-provoking. It made me really think hard about what it is I was responding about, and whether or not I truly understood the material.*

The final behaviour that respondents found useful in a tutor was vigilance. The data shows that it is not necessary for the tutor to intervene in every discussion. However, students need to know that there is someone watching. As one respondent reported:

> *So it was just setting the seed for discussion or getting thoughts going. Just coming in every now and again but you knew he was there watching, or reading and participating in the discussions...as a highlight again, it would be that you know the person's there watching and he is dropping seeds of thought and giving some knowledge.*

4.2. Knowledge and expertise

The data shows that quality of tutor support is partly a function of tutor knowledge. Several respondents commented on the perceived expertise of tutors. In particular, we found that a tutor working on an industry specific online executive MBA must ideally have a combination of

subject and industry knowledge, acquired either by working in the industry and/or through higher level studies in that area, or a combination of the two. Students appeared to respect someone they perceive to be their peer or superior. If the tutor is perceived to be knowledgeable then students enjoy interacting with their tutor. As one respondent mentioned:

> *I got into a lot of discussions with the tutor, on certain strategic choices and positions, and how... What the various, what's it called, trade-offs are, when you take a particular position, and how that could influence the tactical choices you make, tactical and operational choices you make in a company, and those are things that I've used a lot in my work, and it is something that has helped me grow at work also, both in terms of responsibilities, and also in terms of the functions that I have been able to move into.*

4.3. Recognition of individual context

For a tutor, providing quality support requires recognition of the student's individual context. The students on the programme are all mature professionals who are time poor but experience rich. Most of them have been away from higher education for years. All continue to work full time during their studies. As such, one of their primary needs is flexibility. They need flexibility in terms completion dates of activities and also assignment handover dates. Failure to provide this leads to dissatisfaction. As one respondent stated:

> *Some tutors haven't been very understanding... We are not like students who had just come out of these bachelor's degree and then you go straight into a master's programme. Your head is still tuned on, it's different when you have been out of formal education for close to 15, 20 years and then all of a sudden you have to do this.*

4.4. Cultural sensitivity

Providing quality support on the MBA also requires an understanding of different nationalities, in terms of language difficulties and differences in cultural backgrounds. This is because the discussions in online forums are dependent on the written word. The respondents mentioned that confusion could occur in online discussions because what was written on the discussion board and what students meant to express is often different. As one respondent reported:

> *Certain students wanted to say something, but they were writing something different...many nationalities, explain things, with their hands... So, you could make out that the person when you talk to him. He's trying to say something, but when he writes down, it's something else.*

4.5. Feedback

Our research questions were targeted at the discussions taking place in the discussion boards. As such, the respondent answers are focused on this. However, the data indicates that the respondents did not differentiate clearly between different types of feedback. The participants discussed feedback on the discussion board but also feedback given on assignments. The discussion here will therefore include a detailed discussion of the effects of feedback on the discussion board and also a small discussion of feedback on assignments.

Most respondents see feedback as a critical issue. In fact, it is arguable that feedback is more important on an online programme than it is in a classroom-based programme. That is because most students are dependent on the discussion board for clarification and understanding.

The respondents mentioned that feedback fulfils two functions: (1) setting the direction of the discussion and then correcting misunderstandings as they occur, and (2) providing reassurance. The respondents mentioned that the discussions had a tendency to drift. Students might engage in discussion not directly related to set activities, or have their own interpretation of what is supposed to be done in an activity. Students can misinterpret what they have read and do not always understand the requirements of an activity. The role of the tutor is to guide the cohort by setting the overall direction and then correcting any such misunderstandings that occur. As one respondent mentioned:

> *… many times we would start with certain, say a topic, which was supposed to be discussed in a way, which was basically not... We did not really start it off well, but we were immediately told that... saying that "I think this is not the correct way, we have to maybe think in another way." He would not pull you down, but he would just guide you and coach you...*

Another respondent stated the following:

> *... it doesn't need to be a lot, it was just getting the conversations going and then saying, "Hey, that's a good point. Well what about thinking about that?" So there's not a lot to write, but it sets direction that gets thought going.*

The opposite is what happens when a tutor does not give any feedback throughout the course. As one respondent reported:

Bad experience had been when there's total silence. There's total silence and we do not get any feedback, and the whole module is completely almost done, and suddenly the tutor comes up, and he says, "Okay, everybody has done good." What good? Basically, we don't know what we did. So complete silence from the tutor is the most irritating, of all these items, I would say.

The other issue mentioned by respondents is minimal or redirected feedback. Minimal feedback is exactly as it sounds. Re-directed feedback occurs when the tutor answers one question with another question. Another respondent mentioned:

....when a question was asked...a direct answer usually wasn't provided. It was more of "What do you think?" was provided. In other words, you can answer this yourself...The actual quote was, "What do you think?" Somebody asked him his opinion, he said, "Well, what do you think?"

However, respondents could also separate feedback from learning. Some students need a lot of feedback to learn but others need very little. Some respondents mentioned that they have their own learning strategies, which sometimes includes bypassing the tutor. Two out of the twelve respondents stated that they had developed their own learning methods. These respondents were either too busy to log in regularly or they were located in inhospitable areas with minimal internet connection. As one respondent reported:

I'm not sure if it really relates to your own way of learning but I generally get more out of self-study so to say, and not so much with what the tutors brought into the discussions... I

wouldn't say that the tutor participation really provided the skills and knowledge that you would otherwise acquire on the starting of the particular module.

4.6. Tutor engagement

Our analysis shows that the perceived frequency of interaction on the syndicate discussion board is related to the perceived quality of tutor support. This indirectly confirms the results of Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2007) who found learner-instructor interaction to be associated with perceived learning, and appears to be a virtuous cycle. The more the tutor engages with students the more the students engage with all aspects of the programme. As one respondent mentioned:

Somebody who's good is somebody who's engaged, who shows an interest, and drops that pool of wisdom, or that food for thought every now and then, rather than just being there and coming along and saying, "Well, that was good work," or "That was bad work," or not saying anything at all. The lectures that I had the most fun working with were the ones that would every now and then pop into a discussion that was going on to whatever extent was and say, "Well, how about this, guys?" And suddenly, the whole thing would be a new idea, and in a whole new direction.

Having said the above it is worth commenting that one respondent did notice a difference between classroom engagement and discussion board engagement. Tutor engagement is lower on the discussion board as when compared to classroom engagement. As one respondent stated:

....you do expect a lot of things, and obviously then we did discuss this, and a lot of students had the same feeling that they really didn't achieve what they could've done maybe in a classroom discussion.

Another issue related to tutor engagement is equity of feedback. This was not a significant issue found within our data but it was raised by one respondent who felt that some tutors appeared to show favouritism when commenting on the work of students on the discussion board. As that respondent mentioned:

Well, on certain things, for the most part, I'd see responses back on certain people's posts, but not on others. And on a couple of occasions, I noticed that the same people were getting responses and others were not. Initially, I felt a little slighted. But, of course, being a grown up, I understand things are what they are, so I let that go, and just started trying to participate a bit more to see if I'd get more interaction.

4.7. Timeliness of feedback

Our analysis shows that timeliness or speed of response is critically important to a student's perception of the quality of tutor support. Students like rapid, but don't need instant, feedback – A finding that downplays Wu *et al.'s* (2017) recent findings on the importance of instant feedback. The students in our study are located in different parts of the world and understand that responses cannot be instantaneous in an asynchronous learning environment. But, they do expect an answer within 48-72 hours. The threshold for dissatisfaction for timeliness appears to be 1

week, which is the length of a unit of study within each course (10-12 weeks/units per subject). As long as students receive feedback within a few days and before the unit has ended they tend to be contended. Tutors should avoid situations where feedback is given on a unit after the unit has been completed as students do not like having to go back to a unit that was completed a week or two ago and then working on it again. As one respondent reported:

> *The tutor, obviously, should not be... Because of the time zone, I would say, okay, you do get... Say within 24 hours, you would start getting comments coming from different students. And obviously, there... I think, even if the tutor on alternate day basis is looking and responding, it's still acceptable [...] Some of the units are very small, they normally get over in two or three days. So if you're already on the third unit, and you start getting comments on the first unit, you start... It's a little bit of extra work. So when the tutor's responding, they're responding within the same unit rather than responding two or three units down the track.*

Interestingly, positive and negative feedback are both positively linked to the perception of quality of tutor support. Some of the respondents were happy to receive positive feedback. They associated positive feedback with being on track. Others were ambivalent about receiving only positive feedback (as they believed that it offered them no way to improve) and as such they took more interest in receiving negative feedback. As one respondent stated:

> *How you learn better is when you get negative feedback, when you get information from, say the tutor, saying that "I think this is not the correct way, we have to maybe think in another way.*

Another respondent mentioned the following:

> *Yeah, because sometimes I think it could be frustrating but it's maybe because it's not like what I want to have or to hear. It's maybe like I feel like I'm right and then finally someone says, "No, you are not."*

4.8. Assignment feedback

Our data also contained passages on assignment feedback. When it comes to receiving feedback on assignments one respondent felt that on occasion the feedforward (formative feedback) given to students on the discussion board was inconsistent with the feedback later given on assignments (summative feedback). Another respondent felt that the feedback given to the students on assignments was not detailed enough considering the amount of effort they placed in completing the assignment. Lastly, yet another respondent thought that the tutor sometimes did not read the assignment properly which caused him/her to be unduly harsh in their comments. The above is inconsistent with quality tutor support. However, these comments are similar to those generally expressed by students on degree programmes, and are not particular to the role of online tutor. As such, they were not investigated further.

5. Conclusion

Our findings indicate a list of antecedents of student satisfaction with tutors in the asynchronous online learning environment. These antecedents could usefully be measured in a deductive, quantitative study to determine what factors influence satisfaction the most. Such a study, using a larger sample of students, and possibly extended to other types of online programmes, such as

undergraduate, PhD, or short courses, should yield interesting insights that would help institutions achieve high levels of satisfaction.

Aside from offering a list of constructs that could usefully be measured in future studies, our findings have some implications for universities and directors of online MBA programmes. Recent evidence suggests firstly that tutors' beliefs about effective tutoring vary across disciplines (Jelfs *et al.* 2009), and secondly that e-learning managers mainly focus the professional development of tutors on technical skills (Wilson 2012). IT self-efficacy has an obvious impact on both a tutor's ability to teach effectively online, and a student's ability to learn online (Diep et al. 2017). Technical skills are therefore a necessary condition for successful tutoring, but is by no means sufficient. Our analysis shows that the perceptions of tutor support on the online executive MBA are affected by the attitudes and behaviours of the tutor, their theoretical and/or industry expertise, contextual understanding, and cultural sensitivity. Such attitudes should be in focus when recruiting and developing tutors. Our respondents appeared to expect similar behaviour from tutors on all modules, and reacted negatively to deviations. Tutors from different disciplines would therefore need to develop the same beliefs and attitudes. Achieving alignment among tutors can be done by developing a community of tutors – in effect by taking inspiration from the very community of inquiry framework presented earlier in this paper.

The aforementioned factors are combined, as illustrated in figure 1, with all of the factors relating to feedback on the discussion board. That is, setting direction, correcting misunderstandings, providing reassurance, timeliness of feedback, and tutor engagement. Again, these behaviours should be the focus of training. When combined, the end result for students is a positive perception of tutor support and higher student satisfaction. A question that university

leaders may want to explore is what these findings mean for the role of programme directors. Such directors typically have no human resource management powers. Providing programme directors with training budgets, with a direct say over who gets hired to tutor on a programme, and perhaps even with the power to reward effective tutors, may help create the necessary alignment among tutors.

Our results are compatible with the findings of, for example, Guldberg and Pilkington (2007), who found that tutors play an important role in structuring and guiding online conversations. They are also compatible with the findings of Harvey et al. (2017), who report that instructor empathy is linked to satisfaction, and those of Eom *et al.* (2006), who found that instructor knowledge, frequency of interaction with tutors, timeliness, and responsiveness for feedback, all had a positive effect on student satisfaction. We extend these earlier findings by demonstrating that tutor knowledge should include not just theoretical knowledge, but also more practical experience. As for responsiveness, we find that this should not be thought of as an absolute time, but is linked to the length and contents of learning units. In terms of tutor behaviour, our results indicate clearly that differentiated teaching is of some importance. Although students on the one hand would like to feel that they are treated equally, they also want to be individually recognized, challenged, and supported in their learning. Such an approach runs contrary to efforts at standardizing tutor interactions with students, and poses a particular challenge when courses are designed with mass communication between tutor and students in mind.

A final point to note is that we did not find evidence for the kinds of national differences in attitudes and expectations reported by Watson (2010), who found differences between Indian-based and Australia-based students. The industry-specific nature of the MBA in our study may

explain this. As all participants were working in the same industry, their attitudes and preferences might well be more homogenous than would be witnessed on a general MBA, or other types of programmes.

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Table 1. Dimensions of online student satisfaction found in the literature

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable [1]	Study
Course structure (Two elements—course objectives/ expectation (what topical areas are to be learned, required workload in competing assignments, expected class participation, group project assignment) and course infrastructure (overall usability of the course web site and organization of the course material into logical and understandable components))	**Student satisfaction** (+) (Three elements — student rating of over-all academic quality; likelihood of recommendation of course to others; likelihood to take future course at same institution)	Eom *et al.* 2006
Instructor feedback (Information a learner receives about his/her learning process and achievement outcomes)		
Student self motivation (Self-generated energy that gives behaviour direction toward a particular goal. It includes self management; self motivation)		
Student learning style (This study uses the physiological dimension of the learning styles also known as VARK (Visual, Aural, Read/write, and Kinaesthetic). Readers should note the controversy surrounding learning styles research (cf. Howard-Jones (2014))		
Interaction (This study adopts Moore's (1989) communication framework which classified engagement in learning through (a) interaction between participants and learning materials, (b) interaction between participants and tutors/experts, and (c) interactions among participants).		
Instructor knowledge and facilitation (With distance learning the instructor does not need to house all necessary knowledge. The instruction becomes communication-oriented and the instructor becomes a discussion leader. Under the model student involvement is critical to learning. Students learn through shared understanding of a group of learners)		
Higher grades (Given by teachers in a particular course)	**Course evaluations** (+)	Braga *et al.* (2014)
Effectiveness of (professor) teacher (Teachers who are more effective in promoting future performance, i.e. teachers who are more demanding of student efforts within current courses).	**Course evaluations** (-)	
Meteorological conditions (On the day that the evaluations were filled out).	**Course evaluations** (+)	
School service quality (Quality of program management; curriculum; career services; student services; faculty admissions; relationships among students)	**Positive word of mouth** (+)	Bruce and Edgington (2008)
Satisfaction with Educational outcomes (Preparation to get a good job in the real world; opportunity to network with other MBA students; the degree developed management knowledge and technical skills; the degree gave the opportunity for personal improvement).	**Positive word of mouth** (+)	
Value of the MBA (Value received v/s costs; student has received a job offer; improvement in skills and abilities)	**Positive word of mouth** (+)	
Student learning (Meta analysis of the literature containing multiple definitions of learning)	**Student evaluation of teaching** (+) (Demonstrates only a weak link between learning and satisfaction)	Clayson (2009)

Student learning (Measured as the grade received on the common, independently graded post-test. Students who perform better on this measure of learning give higher course evaluations)	**Student course evaluation scores** (+)	Beleche *et al.* (2012)
Formal instructor activities - Teaching presence (The design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes)	**Satisfaction with the educational delivery medium** (+)	Arbaugh (2010)
Informal instructor activities - Immediacy behaviors (Communication behaviours that reduce social and psychological distance between people)		
Social presence (The degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment)	**Satisfaction with the internet as the course delivery medium** (-)	Arbaugh (2013)
Academic discipline (The degree to which the discipline studied can be categorized as "hard" or "soft")		
Technological characteristics (Operationalized using variables from the technology acceptance model (perceived usefulness) and media variety)	**Delivery medium satisfaction** (+)	Arbaugh (2014)
Teaching presence (The design, facilitation and direction of cognitive processes to realize meaningful and worthwhile learning outcomes)		
Social presence (Operationalized as: (1) Affective expression, or learners sharing of personal expressions of emotion, feelings, beliefs and values; (2) Open communication, where learners create and sustain a sense of group commitment; and (3) Group cohesion, for learner interaction on common intellectual activities and tasks		
External thinking (cognitive) style (Cognitive thinking styles are the preferred ways in which people think and act. External thinkers are extroverted, people-oriented, socially sensitive styles and preferences for collaborating with others).	**Student satisfaction with their virtual teamwork experience** (+)	Liu *et al.* (2008)
Trust in fellow team members Trust is defined in this study as 'an emergent state comprising team member intentions to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of the members of the team.'		

1) (+) = Positive effect; (-) = Negative effect; (+/-) = No significance

Table 2. Summary of participant demographics.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Occupation	Nationality
1	29	Male	Vendor Performance Manager	India/UAE
2	41	Male	Logistics Supervisor	Nigeria
3	36	Female	Partner in Law Firm	Germany
4	46	Male	Safety Director	USA
5	39	Male	Environmental, Health and Safety Manager	Canada
6	35	Male	Project Officer on Port State Control	Spain
7	51	Male	Senior Marine Development & Project Coordinator	India
8	42	Female	Senior Operator – Vessels Operations	South Africa
9	48	Male	Executive Chairman/Director	Uganda
10	45	Male	Head of Department, Projects & Technology	South Africa
11	42	Male	Head of Legal Department	Denmark/UK
12	52	Male	Contracts Manager	Australia

Figure 1. Variables influencing perceived quality of tutoring.