

# Market Orientation in the Education Sector: An Exploratory Testing in Spain

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## Abstract

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is twofold. From a conceptual viewpoint, it tries to better understand, operationalize and measure the university market orientation (UMO) from a resource based theory. From an empirical perspective, it attempts to identify the capabilities needed to become market-oriented and it confirms the competitive performance accruing to universities possessing these capabilities.

### Methodology/approach

Our study uses a structural equation analysis to validate the research hypotheses. The public/private character of universities is used as control variable.

### Findings

The results confirm our definition of UMO as a multidimensional construct underlying three associated components: organizational antecedents, strategic routines and organizational performance.

### Research limitations/implications

This study is further limited by the use of single-source data for both independent and dependent measures. The evaluation of UMO routines and outcomes should come from all stakeholders rather than the university professors alone. This prevents biases associated with self-assessment. Another limitation is that the findings reported here are limited to the Spanish context.

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**Originality/value of paper**

To our knowledge no study has ever conceptualized, operationalized and measured a UMO construct from a dynamic capabilities perspective. Thus, our research contribute both the not for profit and mainstream marketing literature by providing an explicit and measurable definition of market orientation construct applied to educational context. Additionally, it offers original and validated scales for evaluating the UMO and the potential competitiveness levels of universities.

**Practical implications**

Our results provide some guides to allocated resources and perform organizational actions to support UMO. Our model allows more precise detection of areas in which universities distinguish themselves or need improvements, consequently the UMO model could be useful as an agenda to set performance objectives for individuals and groups.

**Keywords:** Universities, market orientation, dynamic capabilities, non-profit sector

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## **Introduction**

Since university education is crucial to national competitiveness particularly in a globalized knowledge-based economy (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002), universities are now facing external and internal pressures that drive them to find strategies to help them to address new challenges (Welsh, and Metcalf, 2003). Despite these pressures, the literature indicates that, at present, there are no reliable models available to universities to help them increase their competitiveness in education (Srikanthan and Dalrymple, 2003).

In the last decades, academics and managers have advocated for market orientation (MO) as a pivotal factor in securing and maintaining market leadership in for-profit firms (Cravens, Greenley, Piercy and Slater 1998). Likewise in the non profit context, MO works as an organizational strategy when pressures and environmental changes appear (Balabanis et al). Moreover, several studies highlight the positive impact of MO on organizational performance in both these sectors, but few attempt to develop and test models relevant for the educational context (for exceptions see Caruana et al., 1998; Siu and Wilson, 1998).

To fill this gap, this paper draws upon in-depth empirical research of competitive strategies in a sample of Spanish universities. Using the MO perspective from a resource-based theory, we draw up a conceptual framework to explore the capabilities a university must have to become market-oriented, and to determine how competitive performance becomes an integral part of those universities possessing these capabilities. The procedure we used to answer these questions is reflected in the structure of this paper. First, we reviewed the theoretical background and proposed an integrated research framework to better

understand, operationalize and measure MO as a dynamic capability concept. This was followed by a discussion of the methodology used, the main features of the sample, and a detailed analysis of the results. The final sections discuss the implications and possible areas for future research on MO within the educational context.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

### **Current perspectives on the market orientation construct**

The marketing literature presents a large body of research on the concept of market orientation based mostly on studies of for-profit firms (For a summary, see e.g. Lafferty and Hult, 2001). One branch of research maintains that MO is an adoption of the marketing concept, which integrates different perspectives. MO can be interpreted as the implementation of marketing activities (Martin and Grbac, 2003); the implementation of the marketing concept through organizational behaviors (Kohli and Jaworski 1990); the implementation of the marketing concept reflected in values, beliefs, activities, and behaviors in the organization (Hult, Cravens, and Sheth, 2001). Another current links MO with company culture. For example, Liu et al (2002) suggest that MO is an organizational culture focused on customer satisfaction. Gray and Hooley (2002) affirm that MO is the implementation of a corporate culture or philosophy. Other authors see MO as a business culture (Narver and Slater, 1990; Hurley and Hult, 1998).

All of these perspectives are subject to debate, and several authors warn that marketing does not have a universally accepted definition (Thomas 1994; Webster 1994), nor is it clear which of the several existing conceptions of marketing can be trusted. The key criticism to the cultural perspective of MO involves the conceptual complexity of “culture” as a construct (Deshpande and Webster, 1989). Another conceptual and empirical problem of this perspective is that it takes for granted that there are basic organizational values in place that will support market orientation behaviors (Deshpandé and Webster, 1989). Although Lafferty, B. and Hul, T. (2001) present five major attempts to conceptualize the MO construct (decision-making, market intelligence, cultural, strategic and customer perspective), they conclude that the construct is not simple to define, and that researchers should begin to look further into what constitutes market orientation. To fill this gap, we

propose a resources-based theory approach that redefines the MO construct as a dynamic capability.

#### *Our perspective of market orientation as dynamic capability*

To our knowledge, no study has ever conceptualized, operationalized and measured a Educational Marketing Orientation (EMO) construct from a dynamic capabilities perspective. Our EMO definition takes into account the perspectives of several authors (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Lorenzoni and Lipparini 1999) in that the *dynamic capability* concept is the organizational antecedent and strategic routines by which managers acquire, integrate and recombine resources to generate a firm's market oriented capabilities. By developing a multidimensional model of EMO as dynamic capability, we combine the outside-in and inside-out perspectives (Day, 1994), and recognize EMO as dynamic capability that governs functional capabilities and can be understood as a higher-order construct (Winter, 2003) or a latent construct underlying three components: organizational antecedents, strategic routines and organizational performance. Moreover, we suggest that a EMO exists only if there is association among these three components. In this paper, MO is regarded as a dynamic capability that supports the creation of sustainable competitive advantages via their organizational antecedents and strategic routines, and outcomes. Following the Day and Wensley (1988) competitive advantage perspective, we argue that according to our definition, organizational antecedents are a wellspring of advantages that embody the capabilities and resources associated with implementing EMO. Strategic routines are the drivers of differentiation that help create advantage, while the drivers themselves are the decisions and activities that are mobilized in an effective marketing strategy. The organizational performance outcomes are both future assets and barriers against offensives launched by competitors and help organizations to obtain higher benefits in their markets. Thus, our definition of EMO as dynamic capability is multidimensional variable composed of organizational antecedents, strategic routines, and organizational performance outcomes.

#### *Organizational antecedents (OA)*

Organizational antecedents describe the patterns of administrative practices that support firms' strategic actions. The marketing literature affirms that strategies implementation is related to organizational variables or administrative routines (Frankwick et al. 1994;

Noble and Mokwa 1999). Empirical research shows that the degree of centralization in such structures, systems and processes influences a company's ability to utilize information from the market (see Deshpande and Zaltman, 1982). Thus, insights from organizational and marketing literature tend to agree that the management of organizational structure, systems and process variables is effective in implementing strategies.

#### *Organizational structure as antecedent of EMO strategic routines*

Earlier organizational and marketing literature suggests that structural variables are necessary precursors to the successful implementation of business strategies. Moreover, a number of recent studies on strategy implementation (Dobni, 2003; Freedman, 2003; Linton, 2002) also identify organizational structure as an implementation factor. The review of MO literature likewise reveals significant evidence that structural variables like centralization and formalization, affect firms' level of MO (see Matsuno, Mentzer, and Ozsomer 2002; with Jaworski and Kohli's (1993);). From a Dynamic Capability perspective, structure is defined as the learned and stable pattern of collective activity. The stable patterns support the organization in systematically generating and modifying its operative routines (Zollo and Winter, 2002), and influence the way strategic decisions and resource commitments are made (Bower and Gilbert, 2005; Mintzberg, 1983). On these grounds we suggest that:

H1) The higher the level of organizational structure, the greater the level of EMO strategic routines.

#### *Organizational systems as antecedent of EMO strategic routines*

Previous literature suggests that organizational systems are administrative implementation procedures, such as training and control, and operationalize and maintain strategies by assigning and redistributing the firm's resources (Hambrick and Schecter 1983). The marketing literature also states that organizational systems are necessary for successful strategy implementation (Jaworski and MacInnis 1989; Jaworski et al. 1993). From a Dynamic Capability perspective, organizational systems are capabilities, since they promote the kind of learning within the firm that is needed for implementation (Popper, M. and Lipshitz, R. (2000) Jones et al. (2005). Thus,

H2) The higher the level of organizational systems, the greater the level of EMO strategic routines

*Organizational processes as an antecedent of EMO*

The organizational processes refer to the actions or events determined by the participation and interaction of individuals, and not by the systematic actions of the organization (Skivington and Daft 1991). Marketing literature affirms that high levels of organizational processes can help create shared understanding and acceptance of marketing strategies among workers (McDonald, 1989). From a Dynamic Capability perspective, organizational processes are capabilities, because they include formal and informal communications for sharing information over functional boundaries and converting knowledge into the actions (Zahra and George, 2002; Brown and Eisenhardt, 1997). Therefore,

H3) The higher the level of organizational processes, the greater the level of EMO strategic routines

*Specifying university market orientation routines*

Our definition of EMO routines rests upon the seminal model of Rivera-Camino (1994), which has been verified in many sectors and countries (see Lambin 1996; Lado et al, 1998; Lado and Maydeu-Olivares, 2001 Rivera-Camino et al, 2006). This model considers MO as a competitive strategy or an organizational behavior pattern that emerges from employees' recurrent behavior (for further information see Rivera-Camino et al, 2006). The definition also assumes that routines are "repetitive, recognizable patterns of interdependent actions, carried out by multiple actors" (Feldman and Pentland, 2003:95). We developed our operationalization of EMO by integrating the two stages of the market orientation process (analysis and strategic actions) in five higher-order factors plus an additional component: (1) students-driven, (2) university employees driven, (3) competitors driven, (4) donors-driven, (5) environment-monitoring, and (6) inter-functional coordination. These EMO routines expand the focus of traditional MO for customers (EJM 2001), incorporate a simultaneous multiple stakeholder orientation

approach (Gordon et al., 2005; Polonsky et al., 2002) and include the definition of customers from an educational perspective.

### **The effect of EMO on university performance**

Traditional MO produces high performance because it incorporates several organizational tools related to firms' success, and this can also be applied to universities. Some of these tools include the use of strategic planning (Urban and Star, 1991), staff commitment to certain organizational actions, emphasis on innovation, product/service quality, and client satisfaction (Varadarajan and Ramanujam, 1990).

For our research, we agreed that market orientation routines generate Day's (1994) outside capabilities or the capability of a firm to sense and respond to changes taking place in its markets. These capabilities include: service quality, the compliance of services to customers' changing expectations, corporate reputation and image, and other beneficial influences of a firm's activities in favor of the local environment (Clark and Wheelwright, 1992; Verdin and Williamson, 1994). Since universities' performance will be evaluated on the basis of its contribution to the local environment, we chose two types of performance for our model: the educational service quality (learning results) and the firm's reputation and image outputs (competitive results) as outputs of EMO strategic routines.

#### *Student learning results of EMO strategic routines*

According to the literature, universities' main challenge is to prepare students for the new business environments and real job markets (Rowley and Rowley, 2000). Universities must help their students to develop not only the capacity to apply this knowledge to real situations (Canzer (1997) but also the aptitude to handle problem solving and exercise managerial judgment. These literature-based concepts formed the basis of our evaluation of EMO outputs regarding their adaptation to the needs of companies, their contribution to solving national problems, and the students' ability to solve real problems, work in teams, and develop innovative solutions and leadership behavior. Thus

H4) The higher the level of EMO strategic routines, the greater the level of student learning results

#### *Positioning results of EMO strategic routines*

The growing pressure of competition among universities is forcing them to seek reputational positioning to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Brewer et al., 2002). This positioning allows universities to respond to the market-place of public opinion, optimize their market position in the educational system, and increase resources (Lombardi et al., 2001). It also provides strong market participation by facilitating name brand recognition, and supports universities' promotional campaigns (Bok, 2003). From several kinds of universities stakeholders we chose students, donors, market competitors, and employees in evaluating university prestige or reputational positioning. Thus:

H5) The higher the level of EMO strategic routines, the greater the level of university positioning results

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS**

### **Sampling Distribution**

The sample included 124 teachers from Spanish universities. The total response rate from the listed professors was 14 %<sup>2</sup> overall.

### **Questionnaires**

#### *Organizational structure*

We reviewed previous research in organizational, marketing and strategy implementation literature (Dobni, 2003; Jaworski and Kohli, 1993) to generate 6 items. After qualitative and quantitative refinement, we chose 4 items. The responses were

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<sup>2</sup> Five respondents were considered non valid for missing cases

ranked from 1-5, where 1= No performance, 3= Medium performance, 5= High performance. The factorial analysis was applied to 4 items, which were loaded on the one factor accounting for 71.5 % of the variance (Eigenvalue = 2.85927). The Cronbach's alpha of 0.8639 showed an acceptable reliability level of the scale.

#### *Organizational systems*

We repeated the process for the preceding scale to generate 8 items. After qualitative and quantitative refinement, 5 items were chosen for our research. The responses were graded from 1-5, where 1= No performance, 3= Medium performance, 5= High performance. The five items were loaded on the one factor accounting for 70.8 % of the variance (Eigenvalue = 3.53797). The Cronbach's alpha of 0.8955 showed an acceptable reliability of the scale.

#### *Organizational process*

This phase also started with a literature review which generated 4 items. Following qualitative and quantitative refinement, 2 items were used to measure organizational process. The responses were ranked from 1-5, where 1= No performance, 3= Medium performance, 5= High performance. The items were loaded on the one factor accounting for 77 % of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.54068). The Cronbach's alpha of 0.7005 showed an acceptable reliability of the scale.

#### *EMO strategic routines (USR)*

A review of the literature (Caruana et al., 1998) helped to adapt these items to our study, and 25 items were developed to measure 6 USR higher-order factors. The respondents were asked if the proposed USR coincided with actions carried out by their universities. All the responses were graded from 1 to 7, with 1 = 'No coincidence' and 4 = 'Medium', and 7 = High coincidence. The global scale showed a degree of reliability of 0.9128. After factorial analysis (88.5, 82.6, 80.0, 72.4, 74.8, 80.4 of the variance, respectively), test reliabilities across the 6 groups were 0.955, 9253, 9140, 8269, 9130, 9182, respectively.

**“Learning outcomes”** was evaluated in terms of 6 items that measure the learning outputs of EMO strategic routines. These items include: results that adapt to business needs; are instrumental in addressing country needs; assist students' problem solving

skills; develop student team work; foster innovative solutions; and provide students with leadership skills. The responses were graded from 1-5, with 1 = Strongly disagree, 3 = Agree somewhat, and 5 = Strongly agree. The factorial analysis grouped all variables into one factor (Eigenvalue= 3.55246). The Alpha Cronbach index of 0.8584 shows a high degree of reliability for this scale.

**“Positioning outcomes”** was defined by 4 items that measure reputational or positioning outputs of EMO strategic routines (in relation to students, donors, market competitors, and employees). The responses were graded from 1-5, with 1 =Bad positioning, 3 =, Confusing positioning and 5 = Good positioning. The factorial analysis grouped all variables into one factor (Eigenvalue= 2.58161). The Alpha Cronbach index of 0.8098 shows a high degree of reliability of this scale.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND RESULTS**

### **Statistical Analysis**

The data was analyzed with LISREL structural equation modeling software. The analysis follows the two-step procedure suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). First, we tested a measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis to develop a model with acceptable fit to the data, and then we tested how well the structural model fit the data. To evaluate the measurement and structural models, we examined the conventional asymptotic chi-square goodness-of-fit test and the goodness-of-fit index (GFI; Jöreskog and Sörbom 1993). Likewise, we followed Hu and Bentler’s (1999) 2-index presentation strategy to select the fit of the appropriate statistics for a maximum likelihood solution generated from a relatively small sample size. Once this was accomplished, the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) and the comparative fit index (CFI) were chosen as the two indexes. Cutoffs of .08 for the SRMR and .95 for the CFI were taken to indicate good fit of the model to the data. The authors also recommended using combinations of these fit indices as follows: a CFI index greater than .95 with an SRMR index less than .06; or a RMSEA index less than .06 with a SRMR index less than .09.

A parceling procedure was used in the interest of parsimony, given the relatively small study sample. For this reason the factor score weights from each measurement model were added together to create weighted composites. This procedure enabled us to represent the latent factors as observed variables. The use of weighted composites reduces the number of parameters estimated in a model (Bagozzi and Edwards, 1998; Bandalos, 2002). The weighted composites for structure, systems, process and the 6 components of USR were used in the following model.

## Results

*Hypothesis testing.* A two-step process was used to evaluate the model. First, overall fit was assessed. The initial model appeared to be a good fit to the data yielding fit indices (GFI=0.92; CFI= 0.94) that exceeded the preferred 0.90 threshold (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996). The results also showed that the relationships we proposed fit the data moderately well given that the residuals are small (RMSEA = 0.065; SRMR =0.087). Second, we evaluated the fit hypothesis using t-values, and found that all estimated parameters are significantly different from 0, since t values were  $\geq 2$ . Table IV provides the completely standardized parameters and t values for the hypothesized relationships in the final structural model.

Table **Results of the Final EMO Model**

Variables	Coefficients	T	Error var.	R <sup>2</sup>
<b>Students Learning Results</b>				0.47
EMO Strategic Routines	0.65	3.93	0.62	
<b>Positioning Outputs</b>				0.69
EMO Strategic Routines	0.83	4.91	0.31	
<b>EMO Strategic Routines</b>				0.59
OV (Organizational Variable)	0.76	4.70	0.42	
Control Variable (public/private university)	0.57	2.95	0.71	

Hypotheses 1-3 predict that the level of organizational structure, systems and process – in this order - positively influences the level of EMO strategic routines. Exploratory support for the three hypotheses was confirmed with a statistically significant path parameter (t-value: 4.70;  $p < .01$ ) for the relationship between organizational variable (OV) and EMO strategic routines.

Hypothesis 4 measures the organizational performance impact of EMO strategic routines. It suggests that a high level of EMO strategic routines will also mean a high level of student learning results. Evidence of a statistically significant association (0.65; t-value: 3.93;  $p < .05$ ) confirmed the hypothesis. The statistically significant association 0.83; t-value: 4.91;  $p < .01$ , confirmed Hypothesis 5 which predicts the positive impact of EMO strategic routines on the level of university positioning outcomes.

## **DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The results confirm our definition of EMO as a multidimensional construct underlying three associated components: organizational antecedents, strategic routines and organizational performance. The definition responds to the question posed by literature: What are the relationships between dynamic capabilities and other organizational variables, particularly firm strategy and firm performance? (Wang and Ahmed 2007).

Since literature affirms that universities must find strategies to assist them in addressing new challenges (Welsh, and Metcalf, 2003), the present study highlights university activities that must be promoted in order to satisfy their client base and achieve social criteria of performance. From a competitive perspective, we have identified key drivers of university performance that the market-oriented manager can control, influence and convert to market advantage. Our findings also suggest that organizational antecedents and EMO routines are cross-functional in character, thus, managers are faced with the challenge of devising how to communicate the importance of market orientation to all functional areas or to different university departments. Relevant literature stresses the importance of this task and warns that the lack of faculty commitment (Nichols (1995); Palomba and Banta, 1999) and the tension between faculty and administrators

(Campbell and Slaughter, 1999) can create barriers to institutional effectiveness in universities.

### **Limitations and future research**

The findings of this exploratory study are bound by several limitations. In terms of methodology, it could be argued that the sample size was small, so only a limited number of parameters could be estimated in the model. In this case, a larger sample would have provided a more founded validation of EMO routines measure and their relationship with organizational outcomes. Future studies should include subjective variables (perceptions and values) that affect antecedents and the performance of EMO routines, because they help to clarify whether some university departments are more market oriented than others and which individual factors (age, training, value) and organizational factors (area of discipline) can explain these differences.

One other drawback is that the findings are limited to the Spanish context. To obtain more universal results, future research must replicate this study in other national contexts and in other nonprofit sectors. The development of EMO is subject to the influence of the educational politics of a particular country or by technical the characteristics of a sector. Identifying these characteristics would better assist universities in pursuing a market oriented approach.

Finally, our results constitute an initial step in testing a model that improves our understanding of the multidimensional nature of the EMO construct. Although the empirical results support the hypotheses endorsed by the literature, the study raises a number of issues that will improve research on MO in the nonprofit sector. The relative lack of literature may encourage future research to more deeply examine the complex relationship between organizational tools and the strategic routines that produce successful results for universities.

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