Students recruitment strategies at higher educational institutes: A new world perspective – A review of the literature on higher education marketing

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author has tried to review the literature available towards the enrollment of the students at Higher Education Institutes. It is a prime task of universities to attract retain and nurture the students. Universities spend a lot of time identifying and living up to the Expectations of the students. Here we are trying to understand the parameters which are influential institute in the decision-making process, through the available literature. Findings: The research field of higher education marketing is still at a relative pioneer stage with much research still to be carried out both from problem identification and strategic perspective. For those with a passion for research, and a belief in the power of markets and marketing, there is still much to be done in the context of HE markets.

Keywords— *Students, Higher education, Universities, Recruitment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout the world are facing multiple expectations as to how they should respond to a rapidly changing environment. Deregulation and increased competition within the public sector and between public and private providers are creating a more market-like environment, which influences how universities and colleges profile themselves and compete for students. For HEIs in this situation, excellence and diversity are key issues for consideration when developing their institutional profile (Frølich, N., and Stensaker, B. (2010)).

Marketing and communications are not the central purposes of an organization; but they are critical functions and, as such, cannot be, as is done in many colleges today, relegated to the lowest rung of the organizational ladder (Sands, G. C., and Smith, R. J. (2005)).

2. DEMANDS OF THE MARKETPLACE

As mentioned earlier, organizations cannot live on even the most honorable mission or values alone. They must make intentional connections between that mission and key targeted markets that wish to support it.

As such, success in an institution's marketing communications effort is determined by measurable improvements in the institution's revenues, student profile, personnel resources, programs and services. As a means to those ends, integrated marketing communications must become a truly cross-functional activity that seamlessly, but forcefully and visibly, moves the organization's identity and presence into a variety of markets. Real improvement, particularly of the cross-functional variety, often also requires changes in the organizational structures that motivate and reinforce the behaviors that are desired. Improvements will not occur from making exhortations or commitments to goals alone, however.

Real improvements require changes in structure and behavior as well as rhetoric. Knowing this, private sector corporations structure their marketing communications to support their profit centers. Higher education should learn from this example and structure communications and marketing functions to support its primary profit center: student recruitment and retention (Sands, G. C., and Smith, R. J. (2005)).

3. MARKETING HIGHER EDUCATION

Marketing in the higher education sector is not new. Many authors have recognised the increasingly important role that marketing plays in student recruitment. When universities offer qualifications that satisfy student needs, distribute the tuition using methods that match student expectations, provide the data on which they can make informed decisions about qualification choices and price those programmes at a level that students see as providing value, courses are more likely to be filled. The tools alluded to here are the most basic elements of the marketing mix, that of product, price, place and promotion, which are used by institutions to increase, not only enquiries regarding programmes, but also applications, and indeed enrolment (Ivy, J. (2008)).

3.1 The marketing mix

The marketing mix is a set of controllable marketing tools that an institution uses to produce the response it wants from its various target markets. It consists of everything that the university can do to influence the demand for the services that

it offers. Tangible products have traditionally used a 4Ps model, the services sector, on the other hand, uses a 7P approach in order to satisfy the needs of the service provider's customers: product, price, place, promotion, people, physical facilities and processes.

The product is what is being sold. It is more than a simple set of tangible features, it is a complex bundle of benefits that satisfy customer needs. In the case of a university, what is being sold is widely debated. Some argue that students registering for a degree are the raw materials of education and that the graduates are the products, with employers being the customers. While there is merit in this argument, employers seldom pay universities for their graduates, it is far more common to have students pay universities for the services that they receive and ultimately the degrees that they are awarded. For this reason, students will be seen as the customers and the degree is the product. Design of the degree is central to the product element of the marketing mix. The curriculum must be appropriately developed and adapted to meet the needs of the students. Programme duration is also expected to influence business school choice (Ivy, J. (2008)).

The price element of the services marketing mix is dominated by what is being charged for the degree or tuition fees that are required to enroll at the university. The pricing element not only affects the revenues that a university derives from its enrolment but also affects student perceptions of the quality. With most universities charging tuition fees for post graduate education, tuition fees can have an impact on student's ability to afford to register for an MBA, with some researchers finding a direct link between the demand for the MBA degree and tuition fees (Little et al., 1997; Ratshinga, 1998). Some universities have established their business schools as separate cost centres and are expected to be entirely self-funding without support from the university's central budget. Many business schools established this way are also expected to make a contribution to the university's central funds and cross subsidise other areas of business school activities, such as research. Hence, the pricing element is critical to the day to day operation of many a business school.

The place is the distribution method that the university adopts to provide the tuition to its market in a manner that meets if not exceeds, student expectations. The development of alternative modes of tuition has grown significantly; no longer are students confined to the classroom and their lecturer to get the input they need to meet the requirements of the course. Access to lecture and support materials are increasing becoming available through virtual learning media, like Blackboard and Moodle. Distance learning opportunities have also developed through the post, email, the web, video and teleconferencing, block release options and more recently pod-casts.

Promotion encompasses all the tools that universities can use to provide the market with information on its offerings: advertising, publicity, public relations and sales promotional efforts. When one considers the wide variety of publics with which a university needs to communicate, the use of just the prospectus or the university's website is unlikely to be effective. Different elements are used for different publics. Indeed some publics, like prospective students, are so important that a number of promotional tools will be targeted at them for recruitment purposes. Open days, international higher education exhibitions, conventions, direct mail and advertising are but a few of the tools the universities employ to inform, remind and persuade prospective students to select their institution.

The intangible nature of services resulted in the addition of a further element – people. The people element of the marketing mix includes all the staff of the university that interacts with prospective students and indeed once they are enrolled as students of the university. These could be both academic, administrative and support staff. The role of the image and status of academic staff in recruitment of undergraduate students is open for debate; however at a graduate level student perceptions of teaching staff reputations can play an important role in the choice process (Cubillo et al., 2006; Ivy, 2001). Some students, for example, may be influenced by the number of academic staff who are PhD holders or have a Professorial title, others by academics' public profiles (as experts for television interviews or other publicity). On the administrative and academic support front, significant input to the provision of higher education services both at the front line and what might be considered behind the scenes is provided, which does impact on student perceptions of service quality. Lin (1999, p. 190) argues that "there is no more important element than selecting people for positions at a college or university". The simple process of how a telephone enquiry is handled may have a greater impact on whether or not a prospective student is going to keep that university in their range of options than an eminent Professor's publications or research record.

Physical evidence and processes are the newest additions to the services mix. Physical evidence is a tangible component of the service offering. A variety of tangible aspects are evaluated by a university's target markets, ranging from the teaching materials to the appearance of the buildings and lecture facilities at the university.

While processes are all the administrative and bureaucratic functions of the university: from the handling of enquiries to registration, from course evaluation to examinations, from result dissemination to graduation, to name but a few. Unlike tangible products that a customer purchases, take ownership of and then take home to consume, university education requires payment prior to "consumption", an ownership exchange does not take place and a long and closer face-to-face the relationship often results. Students attend classes for at least a year (on post-graduate programmes) and much longer for undergraduate degrees. During the period that the student is registered, processes need to be set in motion to ensure that the student registers for the correct courses, has marks or grades correctly calculated and entered against the student's name and is ultimately awarded the correct qualification. While this might seem quite straight forward, there are numerous other processes that need to be implemented concurrently (with the finance system, accommodation, timetabling and the library) to ensure the highest level of student satisfaction.

4. STRATEGIZING RECRUITMENTS

It has been evidently seen, that many universities are using various methods for promoting the academic programs and various streams they have. Excellence is not a key component of their recruitment strategies, some universities underlines its profile as the leading national institution for professional studies, and they feel that the students have to be motivated. Many of the university colleges place much greater weight on attracting more students. When excellence is addressed, it is mainly in conjunction with a description of the institution as the best in its region. (Frølich, N., and Stensaker, B. (2010))

The student recruitment strategies of the universities and university colleges are very similar with regard to diversity, as they all address two aspects of diversity. Ensuring adequate

gender diversity is a priority, and several institutions have launched special initiatives to recruit female students to studies in science and technology, e.g. NTNU's "Girls and computers" initiative. The institutions aim to improve ethnic diversity as well. Attracting students from a variety of ethnic backgrounds is a prominent component of some recruitment strategies. None of the strategies addresses the socio-economic aspect (i.e. students' socio-economic background). The recruitment strategies of the University of Oslo and NTNU emphasise the importance of the geographical distribution of students, but this is primarily related to excellence, not diversity (Frølich, N., and Stensaker, B. (2010)).

4.1 Important factors, elements and processes in the strategic process

Institutions with a national profile mainly adopt strategies aimed at supporting and maintaining their position. Institutions with other organisational identities find ways to link their profile to excellence and quality, by, for example, highlighting their distinctiveness or international ambitions (Frølich, N., and Stensaker, B. (2010)).

In their recruitment strategies, the international student market is identified as the main target group, although this is not highly evident in the ways the strategies are employed. The universities generally have consistent practices and focus in their recruitment activities, using, for example, standardised routines for identifying key student characteristics, mapping the geographical areas where students come from and analysing students' motives. Whereas, the institutions located in more remote areas view internationalisation as essential to recruiting a sufficient number of students (Frølich, N., and Stensaker, B. (2010)).

University colleges that experience problems attracting a sufficient number of students have been attempting to avoid competition by entering into agreements with neighbouring colleges.

5. SOCIAL MEDIA: TODAY'S BUZZWORD IN MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

The importance of social media as platforms of social interaction, communication and marketing is growing. Increasing numbers of businesses in various industries have already integrated or plan to integrate social media applications into their marketing programs. Higher education institutions show increased interest in the potential of social media as a marketing tool. Particularly important is the potential of these tools to reach and attract future students. An important issue for research is to understand how potential students use social media and what their role is in the decision-making process of choosing a program of study, a University, or College (Constantinides, E., and Stagno, M. C. Z. (2011)).

5.1 Impact of social media on decision making

Social media is a relatively new but fast-growing category of online interactive applications. These applications are based on user-generated content rather than supplier-generated content allowing peer-to-peer communication and userparticipation. Constantinides identified the social media applications (blogs, online communities, social networks, online bulletin boards and content aggregators) as one of the three components of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005) alongside the Social Effects and the Enabling Technologies. Web 2.0 is broadly seen as the current stage of the Internet evolution. Social media has been widely adopted by the public and has become an important factor of influence in buying behavior.

User-generated content and peer-to-peer communication have empowered contemporary consumers and reduced their trust in push marketing and traditional forms of marketing communication, a trend that began emerging during the 90s. Trust in experts as purchasing influencers is also diminishing and people increasingly base their purchasing choices on peer opinion. According to a study by Opinion Research Corporation, 84% of Americans are influenced by online product reviews written by other customers in their shopping decisions (Constantinides, E., and Stagno, M. C. Z. (2011)).

6. UNIVERSITIES: MISSION-DRIVEN OR MARKET-DRIVEN

A long-standing debate in higher education marketing surrounds the issue of whether colleges and universities should be mission-driven or market-driven. Most often stated as an either-or proposition, this debate immediately pits the faculty and its leadership, who have responsibility for the curriculum and academic program of an institution, against the administrative staff charged with marketing (most often housed in the development, institutional advancement and enrollment management areas of the administrative structure).

Similarly, the resource priorities flowing from the values and traditions of the institution are often put at odds with investments which respond to the market opportunities that may exist. The failure to acknowledge the need both for the mission and value-driven strategies as well as those which are attentive and responsive to maximizing market potential leaves most colleges dependent on the "Field of Dreams" philosophy of marketing "If we build it (or offer it) they will come". Perhaps they will, but as educators across the country are finding out, all too often the hard way, frequently they will not come in the numbers or with the resources necessary to keep a college or university prosperous, vital and thriving.

Higher education marketers routinely reflect on and attempt to overcome these fundamental dynamics yet, most often, abdicate significant portions of their responsibility in the face of the significant power and influence faculty and academic leaders wield in most colleges and universities. Further abdication often occurs because of the second most influential force on most college and university campuses that of the finance officer and the institutional budget make pricing and budgetary issues also difficult if not impossible to address.

Abdications of this kind limit higher education marketers to significant influence only in the area of promotion because product and price issues are seen as best left to the realms of the faculty and business office respectively. We argue that such abdication whether full or partial severely compromises not just the marketing prowess of an institution but, because it fails to maximize resources from available markets, the institution's commitment to excellence as well (Sands, G. C., and Smith, R. J. (2005)).

6.1 Need for marketing communication strategies for universities

Organizations cannot survive merely by having an excellent product or service to offer or even right and honorable purposes and missions. Communicating to the organization's constituents those purposes or, more importantly, the benefits of their products and services is a critical function of the modern organization. This is particularly true if the marketing and communications functions are embedded in and integrated with the organization's strategic planning process (Sands, G. C., and Smith, R. J. (2005)).

● Marketing communications planning and strategic planning, properly executed, are nearly identical and, most certainly, complementary processes. Both begin with extensive scans of the environment to determine the demands being placed on the organization. Both also are driven by the mission, values and traditions of the organization as well as an understanding of its aspirations for the future.

● Marketing planning, properly conceived, as we argued in our earlier paper, must include each of the fundamental ''4-P's''--place, price, promotion and program. As such marketing planning overlaps and fully complements the purpose and content of both academic and strategic planning if properly done.

● Marketing, academic and strategic planning differ only in what is emphasized and detailed in the reports and communications tools summarizing their results. Each begins with the mission of the organization and an elaboration on the internal and external factors impinging on the organization. The strategic plan for the organization emphasizes how and why those resources will be reallocated to updated program and service priorities while the marketing communications plan, as its name suggests, elaborates less on how the program and service priorities of the organization will change and more on how these new and updated benefits will be conveyed to key constituencies in order to enhance the image, reputation and resources available to the organization.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In general, student recruitment strategies are seldom abstract or visionary. They are mostly rooted in the organisational identity of the institution, or heavily influenced by geographical location (Frølich et al., 2008).

One may, however, interpret the strong link between the research ambitions of a number of the institutions and their study programme portfolio as an attempt to break this pattern. These institutions have only enjoyed moderate success with this strategy, which is perhaps a sign that changing an educational profile is a challenging, long-term task (Frølich, N., and Stensaker, B. (2010)).

There are still many issues that remain unexplored, for example: how to market an institution which relies on the profile of existing students for its image in the market-place; and how to widen participation to attract government funding when this is contrary to the mission and strategic direction of the institution. There was also some evidence of negative feelings towards the need for marketing activities, and in some cases, there was concern about the application of business or industry sector models to the HE sector. Clearly, much research is needed to examine the notions of ethical perceptions, personal and moral philosophy, ethical values and social responsibilities of those involved managing the marketing of universities, particularly the internal marketing issues. University managers and academics need to consider the marketing not as an alien concept imported from the business world, but as both a viable philosophy and strategy for developing a HE sector which meets the needs of home-based and international customers (Maringe, 2004). The research field of higher education marketing is still at a relative pioneer stage with much research still to be carried out both from problem identification and strategic perspective. For those with a passion for research, and a belief in the power of markets and marketing, there is still much to be done in the context of HE markets.

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