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A Preliminary Investigation of the Marketing Strategies Used to Recruit International Students

Mitchell Ross, Joo-Gim Heaney, Maxine Cooper, Griffith University

Abstract

Despite the importance placed on recruiting international students, investigations into recruitment marketing strategies used by educational institutions are lacking. This paper presents preliminary findings of a qualitative study which addresses this research gap by investigating marketing strategies used by universities and schools in the recruitment of international students. Six propositions are developed for future testing.

Keywords: marketing strategies, international student recruitment, services marketing

Introduction

In the year 2004, 2.5 million international students were attending educational institutions (UNESCO, 2006) and this figure is forecast to exceed 7 million students by 2025 (Bohm, et al., 2003). Despite this anticipated growth of the international education market, the majority of international education marketing research focuses on globalisation and internationalisation (Altbach, 2004, Crowther, et al., 2000, Harman, 2004, Marginson, 2004, Sanderson, 2004), student choice (AEI, 2003, Joseph and Joseph, 2000, Lawley, 1998, Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002, Phipa, 2003), and student perception (AEI, 2002, Gatfield, Barker and Graham, 1999, Ham and Hayduk, 2003). There exists a lack of empirical research in the area of international student recruitment, particularly in the area of marketing strategies utilised by educational institutions in the recruitment of international students. This paper presents preliminary qualitative findings from an ongoing mixed-methods study that addresses the identified research gap in marketing education.

Services Marketing

The development of services marketing is traced by Brown, Fisk and Bitner (1994) who find that investigation of education marketing is largely absent from the genre. Based on Lovelock’s (1983) classification scheme, education is principally intangible; focused on developing long-term relationships; constrained in terms of customisation and judgement; experiences narrow demand fluctuations over time; and traditionally involves students travelling to attend an educational institution. Education may be further explored through its relationship with the constructs of intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, heterogeneity and perishability as proposed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985). Intangibility presents international education marketers with difficulties in communicating the nature of the educational service to a potential consumer (Rathmell, 1966).

Theoretical Paradigm

The Structure-Conduct-Performance paradigm (Mason, 1939, Bain, 1956) is employed in this study. Underlying this paradigm is that when potential sources of competitive advantage are applied to the characteristics of the service industry (and firm), long term performance and
sustainable competitive advantage is achieved. This paradigm has previously been directly employed in the development of generic strategies (Porter, 1980, 1985, White, 1986).

Marketing Strategies

Much marketing strategy research has focussed on physical goods rather than services (Gronroos, 1980, Overland, 1989). This study will add to the body of services marketing literature through investigating marketing strategies within a service industry; specifically, marketing strategies used by educational institutions in the recruitment of international students. No recruitment marketing strategies have been identified in the literature in USA, UK or Australia. Considering the construct of sales growth, Ansoff (1958) develops market penetration, market development, product development and diversification as product-market strategies. Strategy, as an action to achieve competitive advantage, and therefore growth, is proposed by Porter (1980, 1985) who offers cost leadership, differentiation and focus. Contending that cost leadership is a form of differentiation, Mintzberg (1991) refines Porter’s strategies to differentiation and scope. Growth through value is proposed by Treacy and Wiersema (1993) with the value discipline strategies of operational excellence, customer intimacy and product leadership. Most marketing strategy research focuses on the construct of growth, however, Breindel (1988) focuses on non-growth strategies identifying nine non-growth strategies.

Educational Institution Marketing

There exists a paucity of empirical marketing literature pertaining to international student recruitment in educational institutions with extant literature displaying almost exclusively a university focus. No empirical studies with solely a school focus are identified. Despite concluding that the Australian higher education international student market is approaching maturity (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996), Pokarier and Ridings (1998) find that strategic planning regarding international student recruitment is of a low standard in most universities. The investigation of factors considered critical by Australian educational institutions in the development of competitive advantage in international educational markets is largely under-developed and is represented by a small number of studies (Mazzarol, 1998, Mazzarol, Hosie and Jacobs, 1998, Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999, 2002). The origin of these studies can largely be traced to a single dissertation (Mazzarol, 1997) in which a series of variables considered critical in the recruitment of international students are identified. Whereas Mazzarol (1998) measured ‘critical success factors’, this present study intends to identify and describe marketing strategies utilised by educational institutions in the recruitment of international students, using an Australian sample.

Methodology

This paper presents some preliminary findings from the first phase of a two-phase research design. The first phase seeks to qualitatively identify recruitment variables and to investigate recruitment marketing strategies utilised by Australian universities and schools. The selection of only the university and school sectors is based on two reasons. Firstly the size and complexity of the international education market makes a study of all Australian education sectors (university, TAFE/VET, school and ELICOS) too complicated and may be more appropriate for future studies. Secondly while the tertiary sector is the largest of the Australian international education sectors (AEI, 2006) the school sector has been described as
immature and largely undeveloped (Kenyon and Koshy, 2003). Marketing research on schools is also largely undeveloped. It is anticipated that a comparison of an established market with an immature sector of the market will reveal useful insights.

Participants who are current international education marketing practitioners in either the secondary school or the university sector were invited to participate in an in-depth interview. Educational institutions were deliberately selected based on the type of institution and their degree of experience in the international education market. The interviews included institutions ranging from limited to considerable experience in recruiting international students. Distinct advantages in the use of in-depth interviews include greater control over respondent selection resulting in potentially greater context and flexibility in the process of inquiry (Cassell and Symon, 2004). Five interviews were conducted with three universities and two independent schools. Institutions interviewed all currently have international students enrolled and are all actively involved in recruiting international students. In each case the person interviewed was responsible for international student recruitment at the specific institution. Each interview lasted 30 to 60 minutes, was tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Ethics approval was obtained prior to the commencement of data collection and signed consent was received from each participant prior to the interview.

Results

Data collected during the five interviews has been analysed by means of content analysis. NVivo was used to code and categorise emerging themes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>A Single sex, independent</th>
<th>B Co-educational, independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>C Research</td>
<td>D Teaching</td>
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Table 1. Summary of Preliminary Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>A, B</th>
<th>C, D, E</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Total student population</td>
<td>&lt;2000</td>
<td>&gt;10 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. International students as % of total population</td>
<td>&lt;10%</td>
<td>&gt;15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Institution’s international student recruiting experience</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Existence of marketing strategies for recruiting international students</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Frequency of marketing strategy review</td>
<td>None</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Marketing strategy development process</td>
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<td>Formal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Marketing department size (number of staff)</td>
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Findings

Apart from the consistency presented within the first two themes there exists considerable variation of responses across both education sectors as well as within education sectors. Compared to universities, schools have a smaller percentage of international students as part of the total student population (<10% compared to >15%). Institutional experience in recruiting international students varies from 5 to 20 years with no clear division between universities and schools. Institutions A, B and E have actively recruited international students for 10 years while institutions C and D have actively recruited international students for 5 years and 20 years respectively.

Institutions B and E have formally developed marketing strategies for recruiting international students while Institution C has informally developed marketing strategies. Institutions B and E review their strategies each six or twelve months while Institution C does not review its marketing strategies. Institution A has not developed marketing strategies for recruiting international students while Institution D is developing strategies. The strategy development process in both of these institutions is informal and marketing strategy review does not occur. Differences are apparent in the size of marketing departments at the institutions included in the sample. Institutions A, B and D have between none and ten marketing staff while institutions C and E have more than ten marketing staff. From the sample a majority of interviewees possessed marketing qualifications (Institutions A, C and E) while interviewees at institutions B and D did not have marketing qualifications.

Discussion and Propositions

From the findings and results a number of propositions can be put forward for future research. It is unknown whether the marketing strategies employed by institutions in the sample are successful in that the factors and measurement of recruitment success need to be determined. Both schools in the sample reported a smaller proportion of international students than the universities. It may be that these schools have achieved their recruitment objectives and do not seek to increase the proportion of international students enrolled. The construct of recruitment marketing strategy success may differ for each institution. The challenge in this study is to develop a subjectively defined measurement of success that can be objectively measured. This leads to Proposition 1 which is contrary to the findings of Mazzarol (1998).

Proposition 1: “Recruitment success” of international students should be more objectively defined and operationalised.

The following propositions are new findings that have been uncovered by this qualitative study. They make a significant contribution towards the study of recruitment strategies and will now be discussed. Institutions A and B (schools) display marked differences on most themes yet the proportion of international students is less than 10% for both institutions. Significant differences are apparent in nearly all themes for Institutions C, D and E (universities) yet the percentage of international students is greater than 15% for each institution. Institutions A and B (schools) may recruit international students to ensure diversity within the student body whereas Institutions C, D and E (universities) may have more financial imperatives in the recruitment of international students. The differences between university and school recruitment goals are highlighted in Proposition 2.
**Proposition 2:** Goals and objectives of recruiting international students differ between schools and universities. The majority of institutions in the sample have marketing strategies and processes but these are not articulated as a specific marketing strategy as identified in the literature. The marketing strategies differ in that school marketing strategies for recruiting international students appear more customer focussed while university marketing strategies appear more product and brand based. As educational institutions have difficulties articulating their marketing strategies multiple techniques including observation and document analysis as well as questioning attitudes and actions will be required to build an understanding of the types of strategies employed. This leads to the development of Proposition 3.

**Proposition 3:** Marketing strategies for recruiting international students differ between universities and schools. Institutions C and E have more of a market focus than other institutions in the sample. These institutions both started recruiting later (less recruiting experience) and have developed marketing strategies (formally for E and informally for C). This will be further investigated through Proposition 4. Both Institutions C and E have larger marketing departments (>10 marketing staff) and interviewees with formal marketing qualifications suggesting a greater institutional commitment to marketing. Proposition 5, therefore, is that for universities in the sample, years of recruiting experience is inversely related to marketing department size and possession of formal marketing qualifications. This is not the case for schools in the sample and will be further investigated through Proposition 6.

**Proposition 4:** The extent of whether an institution is market focused is related to the institution’s years of recruiting experience.

**Proposition 5:** The size of an institution’s marketing department is related to the institution’s years of recruiting experience.

**Proposition 6:** The possession of marketing qualifications by staff in an institution’s marketing department is related to the institution’s years of recruiting experience.

**Summary and Future Research Implications**

This paper presents preliminary findings from a qualitative study investigating marketing strategies used by educational institutions in the recruitment of international students. Education marketing is placed within the services marketing genre and a research gap within the field of recruitment marketing strategies is highlighted. Despite the importance educational institutions place on the recruitment of international students as well as the forecasted growth of the international education market (Bohm, et al., 2003) there is a lack of empirical marketing literature regarding international student recruitment. In this paper, in-depth interviews of five educational institutions were conducted. Within this sample considerable variation of response is evident both across and within education sectors. Six propositions are developed for further investigation. Future research directions include testing the findings of this study in a larger quantitative study to investigate the degree of variation between education sectors and within education sectors regarding the nature and use of marketing strategies used by educational institutions to recruit international students.
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