**MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Emotional connections in higher education marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – Through examination of a case study this paper aims to describe a brand re-positioning exercise and explore how an emotionally driven approach to branding can help create meaningful connections with potential undergraduate students and can positively influence choice.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper’s approach is a case study description with quantitative analysis in support.

Findings – The use of an emotionally driven branding concept has positively impacted business development and brand likeability within a UK university.

Research limitations/implications – The paper is specific to one case study and evaluation of success remains relatively early. Initial implications relate to the potential use of emotion in higher education marketing communications and how the use of emotion acted as an enabler of more rational decision-making processes within the case university context.

Originality/value – An exploration of issues related to the marketing of higher education services is of great importance at this time. The case study described offers value and learning for readers of the journal from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

Keywords Marketing, Branding, Advertising, Higher education, Emotion, Decision making, Students, United Kingdom

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The UK Higher Education sector is an important part of the economy both in terms of its contribution to knowledge through graduate employability, international research and interaction with industry. The sector comprises 166 higher education institutions of which 116 are universities. These institutions accommodate approximately 2.4 million students and employ nearly 375,000 staff (Universities UK, 2010). As part of its austerity programme the UK’s new coalition government have taken a new approach to University funding, essentially cutting central government funding for university activities and creating a framework where such funding will largely be a function of market demand.

At a general level, the concept of marketing has grown in importance for universities across the world from the 1980s onwards (Kotler and Fox, 1995) and particularly in the UK since the re-designation of polytechnics to universities in 1992. The resulting increase in sectoral competition highlighted a need to create more distinct brand identities and has compelled universities to more fully consider marketing principles as they improve their efforts to attract and retain students both in the domestic and international markets (Brookes, 2003; Domino et al., 2006; Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009).
As a concept, the marketing of education remains relatively new and it is a discipline area that has stimulated much debate within the higher education sector in particular. At an academic level it has been argued that the level of analysis being applied to higher education marketing is inadequate as “the literature lacks theoretical models that reflect on the particular HE context” (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). At a more practical level there is a lack of clarity regarding to what extent, if any, a business-oriented marketing approach which places the “student customer” at the centre of all activity is appropriate within the higher education proposition. This lack of clarity is evidenced through the often polarized views expressed among commentators as to whether students are in fact “customers” in the conventional sense (see Brookes, 2003; Svensson and Wood, 2007; Eagle and Brennan, 2007). Barrett (1996) goes so far as to propose that it is “regrettable and ominous that the marketing focus, explicitly borrowed from business, should be accepted and even welcomed” in a higher education context. That said, political changes have impacted the funding model to such an extent that a more professional market-driven approach will be a necessity within the UK university sector.

**Marketing in the higher education context**

The elements of globalisation in higher education are widespread and multi-faceted and the HE market is now well established as a global phenomenon especially in major English speaking nations (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003).

In parallel, as a response to these global change dynamics the value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts which have been effective in the business world, are gradually now being applied to many universities with a view to gaining a competitive edge (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006).

Accordingly, UK universities have increased the investment made in their marketing departments and broadened the scope of their marketing activity in recent years (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Almost two-thirds of UK universities have increased their investment in marketing by 10-20 per cent over the past three years (Stamp, 2007). However, research into the new area of education marketing is limited and largely “incoherent” (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) and has its origins in the US and UK in the 1980s. Such thinking and approaches were largely based on models developed for use in the business sector (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006) and were implemented without any significant contextual adaptation.

Government funding pressures apart, the greatest change dynamic within the sector currently is that of demographics and the ongoing decline in the number of 18 year olds in the UK. The analysis of demographic data by Universities UK (2010) finds that the percentage change in the Northern Ireland population of 18-20 year olds shows an −11 per cent decline taken from a base line of 2006, which drops to −15 per cent if taken from 2009-2020. This is similar across the UK and Ireland.

As this undergraduate segment of the market is the core of most universities business such a decline is of critical strategic importance and has created the impetus for increased marketing efforts by universities as they try to maintain and grow their share of a declining market (Stamp, 2007) and better develop new income streams from other markets and segments.

The confluence of these forces can be regarded as a “perfect storm” for Higher Education players in the UK through the coming decade and points up the need for
universities to develop stronger connections and relationships with potential customers from an early age.

The student “customer” in higher education

There is much debate both in the academic literature and in the sector’s marketing departments regarding the perceived positive and negative aspects of the “student as customer” concept. The advent of deferred fees in UK higher education has led to some commentators taking the position that students must be regarded as customers in the same way as would other purchasers of goods or services (Bejou, 2005).

An alternative school of thought (Emery et al., 2003) proposes that while students contribute to the cost of their education the contract is not one of “purchase”. The risks attached to the “purchase” model are argued to centre on the resulting perception by students that in adopting a consumerist perspective they should expect good grades irrespective of effort or quality of outcome (Clayson and Haley, 2005).

Linked to issues of outcome quality is the possible risk for academic delivery staff who, in maintaining academic standards and not automatically supplying good grades without merit, may themselves be “marked down” by students through university teaching satisfaction questionnaire exercises (Yunker and Yunker, 2003).

Sharrock (2000) and Halbesleben et al. (2003) propose that expectations management of students is therefore critical and that “there needs to be a clear understanding that tuition facilitates education but does not ‘cause it’” (Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

Rather than students being considered “customers” of their higher education experience it is argued that it is more useful to consider them consumers of that experience (Conway et al., 1994) given that there appears to be no other service encounter where the quality of outcome depends as much on the efforts of the consumer. Related to this customer concept is the nature of the product being sold and this too has been widely debated. Students are argued not to be “buying degrees” but are instead buying the benefits that a degree can provide in terms of employment, status and lifestyle (Naude and Ivy, 1999).

That said, whether classified formally as customers or not, the significant increase of UK tuition fees in 2006 highlighted that students are paying for a service and that universities are therefore regarded to be providing an appropriate value proposition in return for that payment. There is ongoing debate about the nature of the education “product/service” and the responsibility of the student customer in the exchange transaction but despite this students increasingly perceive universities as service providers from which they are making a purchase (Bok, 2003). At a sectoral level this more commercial perspective has also been strengthened by the introduction of various customer-oriented benchmarks, for example the UK’s National Student Survey of student satisfaction which helps facilitate more informed decision-making by potential applicants while at the level of individual universities the perception of a “customer orientation” is strengthened through the issue of in-semester teaching quality/satisfaction surveys to students through which they are asked to evaluate the value of their learning experience. Influential too are the plethora of on-line fora where existing students, as well as potential applicants, share their perspectives about institutions and where more traditional institutional “push” communications have more limited influence. Recent changes to the funding model announced by the UK
coalition government only accentuate the competitive pressures within the sector moving forward and provide a greater sense of customer empowerment to the future student.

While there has been a recognition that marketing, however understood and practised in HE, is generally important the practical outcome of this perceived importance has gravitated towards promotion and recruitment activity (e.g. open days, advertising campaigns, alumni events) rather than on more holistic or strategic aspects of marketing such as orientation, market fit and the currency and relevance of the courses being offered.

The case university
This research describes a marketing context that existed within Ireland’s largest university. University of Ulster physically operates across four campuses in Northern Ireland and has over 24,000 students registered and has undergraduate applications approaching 34,000 each year. The university prides itself on its economic, social and cultural engagement across the Northern Ireland region and is widely respected for its highly successful widening access and participation approaches which have provided a breadth of opportunity for aspiring students from across Northern Ireland to engage in HE. Ulster is respected for the delivery of teaching and research excellence that is relevant to the local economy in this context. With an international profile, the university also attracts a significant number of international students.

In recognition of changes in the local and national market the university established a dedicated division responsible for marketing to students in 2007. Atypically, the traditional bureaucratic culture often found in universities was relatively absent and this new division was given a creative mandate to challenge existing “student facing” approaches and was tasked to develop new ideas that would serve to positively differentiate the University in the local and national market. It is from this new Student Marketing Division that the branding exercise described here emanated and was implemented between 2008-2010.

Connecting and engaging potential customers
Within the HE sector, traditional “University – customer” marketing communications have often focused on attempting to influence rational decision-making processes and as such were often targeted to parents and other key influencers (e.g. school teachers, family members) rather than to the potential end-customer (the future university student).

Traditionally, such rational messaging approaches focused on emphasising quality-assured teaching processes (UK’s QAA is often cited), research assessment exercise results (RAE), levels of industry engagement and the quality of the student experience (e.g. issues of location, facilities, student community and support structures).

The extent to which such messages and messaging strategies directly reached and influenced the younger potential customer is unclear. By moving away from this what might be termed, rational persuasion model, towards one more focused on creating an emotionally driven decision-making process at the level of the end customer, University of Ulster adopted a new approach within the sector. That is not to say that any attempts to influence rational decision-making were eliminated but rather that a
more emotionally oriented approach would be used in an attempt to act as a bridge between awareness and understanding for younger potential customers with respect to evaluating Ulster’s value proposition.

**Branding objectives**
To better connect with and engage potential undergraduate customers the specific brand repositioning and campaign objectives were to:

- create a branding device through which the university could make an emotional connection with school pupils of all ages in the post-primary market and in so doing to position Ulster as the ‘University of Choice’ for sixth form students across Northern Ireland;
- increase applications for Ulster in 2009-2010 and beyond; and
- increase choice commitment (level of CF choices in UCAS) by applicants.

**Research of concepts**
Several branding and advertising concepts were initially explored and tested through both qualitative and quantitative methods. An animated character-driven treatment was shortlisted by the university and agency as having the greatest potential (see Figure 1).

**Origins of the animated branding concept**
Due to the increasing appeal of animation globally, the marketing team believed there was a real opportunity to both convey a message and connect with an audience through an animated solution for Ulster. This was felt to be particularly the case given that the audience being targeted is exposed and receptive to sophisticated animation daily from many media. Animation is no longer limited to the young but embraced both by teens and adults. The central character concept was informed by the styling of Japanese manga animation and specifically designed to appeal to prospective school-leavers. Efforts were made to make the character as androgynous as possible for the widest appeal, although internally the character was perceived as “male”.

![Animated character on outdoor poster](image1.jpg)
“He” was specifically clad in colours reflecting the palette of the university, potentially becoming an effective “icon” for the university at undergraduate level. Indeed the character and his entire environment is uniquely tailored (as is only possible with animation), to represent the university at a visual and fundamental level.

In so doing the Ulster brand was re-positioned in a more contemporary and innovative way, which was highly differentiated from the brand positions of key competitors.

Additionally, and from a business perspective, the animated branding device of Eddie became an emotionally-connected “carrier” for the consumption of more rational selling messages that would be less likely to reach the target market in other less direct ways.

The “Eddie” TV advertisement
Regarding the scenario the animated character is thrust into, it is a visual allegory for the dilemma posed to most school leavers. “Eddie” tentatively takes his first steps into the post-school environment and is presented with many options and hence decisions to make. This “confusion state” (Drummond, 2004) was represented by a signpost on which all the elements of the sign rotated independently and in a different direction, adding to the perceived confusion. Each directional sign identified a key motivator for studying at the university. By their gradual realignment into a single direction the signpost motivators point the way to Ulster as the university of choice. The character then sets off on the revealed route and discovers another portal through which he steps into his new life as a university of Ulster student. The “door” of this portal then closes to reveal the University of Ulster logo, indicative of the ultimate destination.

All elements of the commercial and broader campaign were carefully designed to speak and appeal to the audience. The TV campaign ran for three weeks from mid-September at the time when sixth formers are preparing to make their initial UCAS choices. Supporting the TV campaign were:

1. Outdoor activity.
   - billboard posters (48 sheets) across sites in NI; and
   - ad shell (bus shelters) across NI.
2. Radio advertising.

Post-campaign research
A quantitative research study was conducted each autumn of the following years (i.e. 2008 and 2009), to explore the extent to which the “Eddie” branding device was recalled by the general public and target market in particular and what influence “he” brought to relevant decision-makers.

The university’s marketing team was keen to know in what ways, if any, the campaign had influenced customer perceptions of the university and in particular choice decision-making processes.

A representative sample of the Northern Ireland population was identified and 1,000 face-to-face interviews conducted across the region each year.

The 2009 results are outlined in the following and compared to the 2008 findings:

- Unprompted recall of Ulster advertising over the previous year increased from 40 per cent in 2008 to 51 per cent in 2009 suggesting repetition of the campaign in
year 2 had consolidated and grown awareness. For 16-34 year olds it increased from 46 to 57 per cent.

- When shown an image from the campaign, recall increased from 46 per cent in 2008 to 60 per cent in 2009. Recall of the advertising being seen on television increased from 66 per cent in 2008 to 81 per cent in 2009.
- Those indicating they liked the character increased from 63 to 69 per cent. For females this was up from 68 to 76 per cent and for 16-34 year olds up from 59 to 70 per cent.
- The campaign was perceived by all respondents to be aimed at 16-19 year olds (86 per cent in 2009 as against 77 per cent in 2008).
- Of those who remembered seeing the ad 87 per cent believed it would be effective in encouraging the target audience to apply to Ulster.

The emotional connection that was strived for by the marketing team was measured through the construct of “likeability”. With respect to “likeability” of the Eddie branding device more than two out of three respondents (69 per cent) stated they “liked” the character. This was further explored at the level of gender and age and it was found that 76 per cent of females liked Eddie as compared to 70 per cent of males. In follow-up qualitative sessions dedicated to this issue females indicated they felt a “caring” instinct in relation to the “confused” Eddie and could relate very directly to his plight. This issue of “caring” and “empathy” which emerged was largely peculiar to females and was unexpected by the marketing team. Respondents were able to identify that the campaign was targeted to 16-19 year olds (86 per cent) and indicated that from their perspective the campaign would be effective in encouraging 16-19 year olds to study at the University (87 per cent – effective/very effective categories).

In terms of core business impact the campaign resulted in a higher than average level of choice commitment being evidenced through UCAS applicants wishing to come to Ulster. Following the campaign applications had risen by 7 per cent and all things being equal the level of firm choice applicants for Ulster had risen by 4 per cent above the UK average.

**Conclusion**

Dynamic change within the UK higher education sector has many components. At the level of the customer, the fee-paying environment has brought changes in customer expectations and a consequent change to the search-buy behaviour processes employed by customers in terms of how a degree offering and institution is chosen. A new UK funding model and increasingly deregulated fee environment will come into being from 2012 and will impact further both customer behavior and potentially market structure itself.

Accordingly, there has never been a more important time for marketing investment within higher education institutions. In the absence of universities engaging with potential customers and clearly defining and communicating differentiated value propositions, potential customers will begin to identify “value” on their own terms. This approach will likely be driven by a need to better understand not just what their course will do for them in terms of utility/employability but also in terms of the differential advantage conveyed by the institutional brand from which their degree comes. Such customer evaluation processes need to be understood by managers and then positively influenced and managed.
This paper outlined how University of Ulster has responded creatively to this growing marketing challenge early, created a department focused exclusively on student marketing activity and engaged an emotionally-driven marketing approach through which to connect and engage prospective undergraduate customers.

Early research findings over the past two years indicate that aiming to influence a decision in the mind of the potential young customer can be helped through the use of a branding a marketing strategy which uses emotion as a way of bridging the gap between institutional awareness, understanding and desire for affiliation.

Note
1. The TV advertisement can be viewed at this site.

References
Further reading


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MARKETING APPROACH IN THE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to present relevant aspects of the marketing approach of the universities’ activities in the current market conditions of higher education institutions. Universities are placed in the position to find solutions to the problems of stakeholder characteristics and to the competition on the educational market. Marketing approach of educational services involves the orientation to internal and external customer needs, adapting the educational and scientific research approach to create a brand image of the institution as a guarantee of its sustainability in a competitive market. The conclusion that emerges is that there is a rich specialized literature appeared especially after the ‘80s that presents the marketing tools that allow the construction of viable competitive strategies as components of university management performance.

Keywords: university marketing, relational marketing, stakeholders, brand image

JEL Classification Codes: A23, I21, M31.

1. THE NEED OF MARKETING APPROACH IN THE MANAGEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Higher education goes worldwide through a process characterized by significant changes both in educational demand and in the educational offer. Higher education institutions are put in a position to find solutions to problems arising from internal and external customer characteristics. The changes in higher education from public and private sectors where presented by authors like Kirp (2004), Maringe and Gibbs (2009), Levy (2002, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2008), Kinser and Levy (2005).

The need for universities in the public and private sectors to address this market of higher education in terms of marketing was due to the expansion of the private sector and the emergence of performant universities, which led to increased competition in the educational market. Maringe and Gibbs (2009) found that in Europe, higher education specific to knowledge - based society has become a good and therefore it recourse to the use of marketing tools. Levy (2006) believes that competition features differ from region to region and from country to country as marketing tools implementation is different compared with the acquired market experience. Marketing application in the field of educational services is known as educational marketing, component of social marketing. On the general, the higher education market is characterized by exchanges, transactions between units providing educational services and organizations within the national economy that benefits of human resource prepared in a specific area based on a curriculum and between schools and consumers of educational services to acquire
knowledge, form their skills and abilities to fill a job. Today, this concept of change has generated a broader concept that educational institutions have begun to develop, the concept of relationship (Campbell 2002). Considering the importance that goes to the educational market, it is making it necessary to adopt the concept of market-oriented strategic change defined by Piercy (2002) as the organization's effort to pursue more customer requirements, to identify those factors that determine the customer neglect, to adapt the functional structure so that the employees know very well the requirements of customers that they try to satisfy at the highest level, better than the competition, creating a competitive advantage. Market orientation has been one of the most interesting research fields in the recent 20 years. The whole specialized literature has grown from two major works published in the Journal of Marketing by Narver and Slater, Kohli and Jaworski. Recently, some authors (Pandelica A. s.a, 2010) believe that marketing orientation should be developed as a business model. In higher education institutions, the ultimate goal of business should be external customer satisfaction (students, employers, society, etc.) and internal customers (teaching and non-teaching staff) as a guarantee of sustainability of a market institution constantly changing.

The approach of marketing educational services envisages the orientation to satisfying the customers’ needs and using the marketing strategies to the level of university institutions which the education consumers will identify, who are interested in the educational offer for which they have capabilities and will allow adaptation to make it more attractive. The aim of higher education institutions must be the determination of needs, wishes, the education consumers’ interests, the adaptation of educational and research approach to offer programmes that maintain or improve long-term satisfaction of their and the society’s interests.

The process of education, the special needs of supplier services and those of the consumers should be carefully explored as fundamental elements of the education system. The supplier services is directly represented in the relationship with the students by the teachers who are responsible for the generation and transmission of knowledge. The educational process is also maintained by the necessary infrastructure, by the cultural organization, by management that does not always accept quickly a change and for this reason the expectations of educational service consumers are secondary. (Sirvanci MB 2004).

2. THE SPECIFIC ACADEMIC MARKETING

Contemporary marketing can be defined as: “...a social and managerial process by which the groups and individuals obtain what they need and want by creating and exchanging products, services, ideas or rights with other groups or individuals.” (Kotler, Ph., Dubois, B., 2000, p.35).

The care for customer and the guidance given by him to the service organization give shape to marketing orientation in the higher education institutions. The essential elements of marketing orientation have been outlined by Kotler, Armstrong (1998) and are the following:
- the customer segments for which the institution is able to satisfy the needs in much better conditions than the competition
- various, complex and dynamic consumer needs
- the coordinated marketing which refers to systemic treatment of activities from the institution starting from the market requirements and the need for awareness that customer satisfaction is achieved only by involving every employee
- expressed profitability for higher education institutions through their sustainability education market.

University marketing has certain specific features determined by the fact that educational services are characterized by increased intangibility customization ability, abstract character, high cost and heavy impact on consumer. The factors that influence the university activities are numerous (Marzo, Pedraja, Rivera, 2007): some can be controlled by them (the quality of education, university curricula, university management), others are part of the external factors (changes in age structure, labour market trends, educational market globalization, the emergence of more attractive education alternatives, lack of motivation for learning among young people, etc).

The creation and delivery process of the educational services is based on tangible elements (buildings, equipment, staff) that consumers can partly directly contact before consumption and also intangible elements that can be evaluated only at the end of the consumption (intensity and effectiveness of student–teacher collaboration, the quality of internal communication etc.). The main functions assigned to the high education institutions are those of learning, training and shaping the personality of each student with the help of the teachers who are dedicated to their job and to the modern teaching and communicating systems. Added to this is the scientific research function with the role of generating, interpreting and applying new knowledge to technological and scientific progress. In the view of Bologna Process, the university will become an innovative creativity centre and constructive thinking able to determine the social development of human personality in the European social and cultural area, to create the preconditions necessary for the integration in labour market and the professional insertion of trained specialists.

The application of marketing in higher education institutions facilitates obtaining certain categories of benefits, respectively a better resource capacity to fulfill the mission of the institution as a result of using marketing tools, increase customer satisfaction with the impact on attracting customers for the upper stages of study and on the attraction of financial resources.

The university marketing strategy is in a relationship with the higher education institution strategy as directing the efforts and resources to accomplish the mission and the strategical goals, it facilitates making decisions on marketing mix components.

It is considered a successful strategy that approach by which are identified the target groups and their needs by using marketing research, followed by designing and implementing a balanced marketing mix. The strategies by which is analysed the achievement of competitive advantage are those that take into account variables: quality, material and human support used in teaching and research, price level and facilities in price policy.

Obtaining an attractive reaction from the target market is conditioned by building the vision on the education market from the perspective of university using the marketing mix, namely the five P (product, price, placement, promotion, personal), tactical marketing tools higher education institution can combine and control them. To create a marketing mix closer to the identified customer needs is useful to consider the marketing mix in terms of customer needs and desires, the costs incurred by the consumer (student), comfort, the purchase convenience and communication activity, meaning for the four C (Kotler, 2003).

**Educational product or service** is a transfer of knowledge, attitudes and behaviours from one person to another and the process by which a person is helped to acquire new capacity (1995 Alves). According to Kotler and Fox (1995), most educational
services are a combination of tangible and intangible components, therefore, insusceptible to be considered pure services.

The global product offered by a higher education institution consists of basic educational services plus additional services for scientific research, professional practice training activities and social and cultural services designed to meet needs of accommodation, leisure. Educational services must be addressed on three levels: central (university mission, the main reason for a student to opt for a particular university) peripheral (services that focus around the central service value and improve the central or basic service) and additional or complementary defined by additional benefits given to the target market.

The price of educational services includes the taxes paid by the student for his education, the scholarship received from the state. Since the amounts received by higher education institutions from the state budget covers a relatively small part of operating costs, in order to ensure institutional continuity, increasingly depend more and more on school fees and, therefore, the price becomes a very important issue.

According to Kotler and Fox (1995) price should take into account costs, demand and competition. Little (1997) suggests that universities should opt for a variable pricing strategy, taking into account the demand, the domain of university training. This strategy is not agreed because there is no experience in this regard. It is important to note the fact that besides the monetary component, students also supports so-called non-monetary, psychological and effort costs (the proximity or remoteness of his residence, number of years of study). Kotler and Fox (1995) believe that in the selection phase of the university is difficult to assess the price actually paid for educational benefits since the price will be determined only after the consumption of educational services and when the graduate is looking for a job or advances in his career. According to Heller (1997), the price increase will determine the decrease of the probabilities for a student to apply to a particular university. Eiglier and Langeard (1991) believe that price is an instrument for measuring the quality of services that students will get and the only clear information item that holds before consumption. According to Eiglier and Langeard (1991) the immateriality service determines the need of a good promotional communication using besides traditional means also direct marketing. Kotler and Fox (1995) propose as main forms of communication used by these: the institutions, public relations, marketing communications and advertising that will strengthen the institutional image, to shape the feeling of confidence of future students and the loyalty of former students to provide information about institutional services, to complete information about the institution, to encourage the initiative of prospective students to apply for the promoted study programmes. A very important aspect related to communication about schools is the direct communication promoted by parents in the circles of friends, students, teachers, which is considered to be the most used channel of communication in connection with the university. That’s why this channel of information should not be ignored, because in case the negative information is transmitted, the institution may have serious problems and this can lead to a real aversion to the institution that will be difficult to change (Edmiston-Strasser 2009).

Placement or distribution in education are important aspects that university success depends on. According to Kotler and Fox (1995) the size distribution system of educational service may include:

- location, physical environment including accessibility, ambience, facilities
- study programs and their ability to attract students
- technology, schedule.
Physical environment, ambience is considered by experts as having strategic importance because it facilitates a better interaction of the institution with the external customers, but also with its own employees, it can serve as a differentiation element between competence and positioning among current consumers and the potential ones.

*Staff educational institution* is considered another strategic element because it enters in direct relationship with the external customers, it represents the institution, is a positioning and differentiation element in terms of competition. It is an essential component of quality educational service, being embodied in professionalism, courtesy, empathy with the significant role in the achievement of the organization’s objectives, in the increasing of the institution’s contribution to the smooth running of the entire society. The educational process should be understood as all the interactions required by the service providing, respectively the planning of conducted activities within each program of study, their properly structuring, the efficient management of services by identifying the operational procedures to apply and customizing the services.

3. CUSTOMERS OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND RELATIONAL MARKETING

Applying the concept of marketing in the activities of the higher education institutions determines the need to define the customers and identify the needs and desires to satisfy them properly. Generally the client is the individual or legal entity that acquires a product or service from a supplier. For the university education, the client can be an individual or an organization that makes a payment directly or indirectly for an educational service (direct clients of university institutions, economic agents that benefit of qualified human resource, the society that benefits from knowledge, technological innovation for business development). From this statement, in the specialized literature it is used the concept of stakeholders or the parties interested in the services provided by the universities, which are represented by: students, their families, local communities, society as a whole, staff from institutions, authorities and public administrations, employers organizations (Rowley, 1997; Macfarlane and Lomas, 1999; Marcet, 2001; Cooper, 2002; Ernawati, 2003; Sahney, Banwet and Karuners, 2004).

The specialized literature provides generally a wide list of authors who have defined the customers of educational services (Winch, 1996; Galloway, 1998; Johnson and Golomski, 1999), and also the customers of higher educationa, especially Madu and Kuei, 1993; Conway, Mackay and Presor, 1994; Fram and Camp, 1995; Hebert, Della and Bass, 1995; Cuthbert,1996).

In the education process, students occupy several positions (Veres, Hetesi, Vilmányi, 2009):
- products of the educational process resulted from the processing as raw materials in the early stage of university training into finished products at graduation
- domestic service consumers that contribute to the delivery of basic service (library, receiving services in student dormitories)
- workers in the learning process, a role identified for the first time by Sirvanci (1996)
- domestic consumers of courses, of study materials, considered as the main role of the students (Sirvanci, 1996). Starting from these considerations, it is useful to identify students with the concept of final user of the educational services (Veress 1999; Miskolcíné Mikáczó 2006).

Educational services are interesting for the direct and indirect consumers of educational services (students, parents, employers, society) because they satisfy a complex category of needs. Students are interested in obtaining a balance in terms of investment of
Mihaela Diaconu, Amalia Pandelica

time, energy and effort in learning and the result at the end of the training process as specialists. Prospective employers are interested graduates to be able to solve problems commonly faced by the organization that will work in. The society has its own expectations regarding the proper functioning of the economy also in the social plan due to the effort of the graduates of higher education both during the initial training and continuous training.

In a world where information resources represent more and more the key of progress, it becomes more necessary the concern of higher education institutions as providers of services for a good relationship with the economic agents to which they have to offer viable solutions for a sustainable development, both in terms of training of specialists and in terms of scientific production.

An important role in this regard goes to the critical analysis of the relationship between graduates as consumers of the educational and university services, essentially rendered by the image of the university among the graduates, their satisfaction, the interaction between the professor and the student, respectively the graduate.

Recent studies made in the field of university marketing (María Walesska Schlesinger Díaz, 2010) have shown that the competitiveness of the university is built on the relationship graduate – university played by its image among stakeholders. The quality of student- teacher interaction is reflected in the satisfaction of the graduate and in the content of the university image perceived as concept with cognitive, affective dimensions. The favourable image of the university among the graduates help in maintaining the relations with the graduates also after graduation and it must constitute into a strategic goal of marketing and university management.

Attracting, maintaining and strengthening the relations with the customers represents relational marketing (Berry, 2003). It is very important to strengthen the relationships with the existing customers for a long term success. Graduates can become further clients as master students, PhD students and then economic agents interested in the knowledge and the innovations created by the universities and employers of graduates of higher education or master degree.

Relational marketing is more useful in the field of education services as it exist alternatives for the client in choosing a service provider. It should be understood as a philosophy, as an integrated way of thinking based on the placing on the market of a service that creates value for both client and organization. The service providing must be accompanied by an adequate promotion and a flexible organizational structure. Transforming the indifferent customers into loyal customers means the real marketing activity (Berry, 1983). In the outlining of the relational marketing strategies, Berry suggests to consider five aspects: basic service, costumizing the relationship with the client, service development, incentive price, internal marketing. Berry also believes that the most important aspect in implementing the relational marketing is the service provision that meets the need identified in terms of quality and giving confidence to the customer.

The quality of educational service is given by the degree of materialization, professionalism, honesty, trust, rigor and empathy of the service. Because the result of service consumption is the benefit that can not be known by the client before consumption, the clients will remain loyal to those suppliers that give them confidence.

Relational marketing, viewed as whole activities by which are developed and maintained long term relationships with customers and with other interested parts made the subject of the concerns of many specialists. (Berry1983,2003, Payne şi Ballantyne 1991, Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Grönroos1997, 2000).

Gummerson (2002) extends this concept considering relational marketing as a total marketing based on relations, networking, interaction between customers, organization,
Marketing Approach in the Management of Higher Education Institutions

market and society, the obtained value being created jointly by all concerned parties. Gummerson added three important theories to the classic marketing fundamentals that contribute to the shaping of relational marketing concept: total quality management, corporate network, considering the human capital as an asset creator of value. TQM is considered not only a revolutionary of quality management, but also a consolidation of marketing orientation to the client, to the quality perceived by the client and by his satisfaction.

The fundamental principles of quality management: orientation to the client, leadership, staff involvement, process approach, the correlation of the processes that consider the relation with the clients and with other actors from the organization arena, mutually beneficial relationships with customers are related to the marketing approach of customer relationship.

Rust, Zeithaml and Lemon (2000) and Heskett, Sasser and Schlesinger (1997) have proposed a new concept, the equity for the customer which implies satisfaction, loyalty, profitability as elements that contribute to obtain the profit chain for each service. Following the implementation of marketing practices, Kaplan and Norton (1996) describe the organization capital as also being constituted from the capital given by the customers value. To this is added the notion of intellectual capital, consisting of people holding qualities and skills. The university should build also a structural capital represented by the connections, relations between functional departments, organizational culture.

Hunt and Morgan (1994) have proposed building the relational marketing as network competition, including all marketing activities by which is established, developed and maintained the success on the market place by integrating all the value chain links (buyer, supplier, employees).

A modern relational marketing should not be restricted only to the final customer, the external customer. Berry believes that is useful also the consolidation of the relationships with the internal customers (service providers), respectively the marketing approach of this category of customers because only by attracting, retaining and motivating a quality staff it is improved the organization ability to provide quality services, an important condition in building a solid relationship with the clients. Strong relationships with employees of the organization lead to a sustainable relationships with customers.

4. BRAND IMAGE – THE CENTRAL ELEMENT OF SUCCESS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

In a market that has become competitive, higher education institutions must increasingly consider the problem to build a successful image both among prospective students and among employers to maintain an advantageous position on the market. The image must be accompanied by the correct information, a good promotional communication, performant university management based on marketing principles. So far, most universities were not concerned enough to know the size of their own images in the minds of stakeholders. It is important to build a brand image because the intangible component of the product offered by the university has a considerable weight and reduces the risks posed to the future student placed in a position to choose a higher education institution.

For the universities, the value is given by the favourable image that will benefit on the educational market. The image of the university is a strategic component as the university marketing operates especially with intangible aspects whose mental representation is essential. University’s mission, the pursued purposes, organizational structure functionality represent aspects that contribute to shaping the
concept of the desired image, image that the university would like to have among the stakeholders. It is useful to determine this by positioning the university in relationship with other competing institutions.

Building a positive image is useful to start with an accurate communication, complete about the capabilities, resources and strengths of the university, which in terms of image it means the image most often transmitted or broadcast through stakeholders. Depending on the ability to understand and value system of each person belonging to the target group, it must be reached the image transmitted to the incoming image that has a strong subjective character. The most important aspect in terms of marketing approach is to study the actual image that represents the synthesis of the subjective images received at an individual level and considered at a social level.

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as a "name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies a good or service as distinct from those of other sellers". It is an abstract concept associated with a company, product, service, and that is reflected in a certain manner by the clients, staff, partners, investors. This abstract concept is associated with thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, attitudes resulting from stakeholders experience with the brand and which is materialized in information and expectations associated with a company, product or service. A strong brand is one of the most valuable intangible goods for any company (Clark, 2002; Keller, 2008; Keller and Lehmann, 2003).

Berry (2000) introduces the term “brand equity service” which is determined by the brand’s company, external communication and the service consumption experience. Since the introduction of the concept in the specialized literature in the 1980s, it appeared more points of view on the importance of brand equity as a marketing tool available for the enterprise : Aaker(1991,1996), Franzen (1999), Ambler (2000), (Keller,2003). Rust, Zeithaml and Lemon (2000) created a model for this concept of brand equity consisting of three components: customer brand perception, emotional value that is produced to the customer, customer loyalty to brand.

Vargo and Lusch (2004) refer to the brand as part of the intangible asset of the enterprise services with the value given to the customers who are considered by the two authors and also by Prahalad (2004), co-producers of value to the enterprise services. While Prahalad (2004) and Webster (2000) consider brands to have a role just in the relationships of the company with the final customers, (Brodie,Glynn, Little,2006) suggest that the brand should be examined as being part of the marketing system taken as a whole. Little (2004), who investigated the value creating process for the clients at an organization level suggested that the notion of customer value is closely related to the service brand and together lead to the increasing of the organization value. The service brand should be understood and approached as a relational asset. The brands are in the middle of the marketing activities as of the business strategy (Doyle, 2003), and building a brand equity is considered as one of the key success factors of the organization (Prasad şi Dev, 2000). Martensen and Grønholdt, (2003b, 2004) developed a brand equity model for the customer based on the relationship client-brand treated from the rational and emotional point of view. In their opinion, brand equity is a mental brand that includes the mental associations of the consumers and clients and are influenced by six determining factors: the quality of the product, the service quality for clients, the brand differentiation, the fulfillment of promises contained by the brand, brand trust and credibility. (Martensen and Grønholdt,2010, p.301)

Also the employees can contribute to the creating of the organization brand by the behaviour based on courtesy, responsibility, empathy, support. Such behaviour has been
shown to help shaping the perception of service quality by the consumers with impact on customer loyalty.

The task of providing customers service experience in accordance with their expectations and create a desired brand image rests primarily with the employees. That’s why a challenge for any organization, especially for service provider organizations would be training the employees to be able to reflect the favourable image of the organization. The employee or human resource brand was conceptualized in several ways. (Estell, 2002; Farrell, 2002; Frook, 2001; McKenzie, 2001, Mitchell, 2002).

A global model for the understanding of the human resource branding process was designed by Miles and Mangold in 2008. For its designing, they started from defining the human resource brand, the source of messages received by employees, factors that affect employees perceptions acquired positive consequences determined by the employee as a result of branding efforts.

Miles and Mangold (2008) appreciate that human resource branding can be understood as a process by which employees internalize the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational components. The internalisation of the brand image of human resource is possible when employees receive coherent and credible messages from the internal systems of organization. The internalization process allows employees to accomplish better the explicit and implicit promises necessary in the process of creating the image and brand of the organization. (Greene, Walls, Schrest, 1994).

The organization image projected by its employees and by the stakeholders represents the central element of the success of human resource brand. To build a brand of a successful human resource, it is necessary the organizations to create a favourable image of the organization in the employees minds before they interact with customers, meaning to build a strong relationship between employer and employee. Human resources branding process can be considered as a source of competitive advantage (Miles and Mangold, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

The following remarks can be derived from the paper:

- the marketing approach is a necessity for the success of the management of higher education institutions determined by changes both in terms of the demand of global product offered by the university and the educational supply existent on the market of higher education institutions
- the university marketing strategy is in relationship with the strategy of higher education institution and forms that step by which are identified the target groups and their needs, followed by designing and implementing a balanced marketing mix
- a competitive advantage can be obtained by considering the variables: quality, material and human support used in teaching and research process, price level and facilities in price policy
- identifying direct and indirect customer needs and desires determines the need to implement all actions seen as relational marketing which develop and maintain long term relationships with customers and other interested parts as a guarantee of competitiveness of the university; there is a rich specialized literature on this subject since the early ’80s
- so far, most universities were not concerned enough about knowing the dimensions of their own images in the minds of their stakeholders. It is important to build a brand image because the intangible component of the product offered by the university has a considerable weight and reduces the risks posed to a future student placed in a position
to choose higher education institution. The brand image of the university is built successfully if the university raises the questions of developing also a brand of human resource in developing and maintaining a sustainable and effective relationship with stakeholders.

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INFORMING THE MARKETING OF HIGHER EDUCATION TO YOUNGER PEOPLE

Mark Durkin & Seamas McKenna

Over recent years the once stable higher education market in the UK has become increasingly competitive and dynamic. As a professional service industry the UK university sector has increased investment in marketing and there exists an increasingly prevalent view that students are ‘customers’ and university systems, processes and delivery approaches should conform to a traditional customer-centric business model. In this more market sensitive context this paper reports how the case university used an emotionally driven branding device to better connect with potential undergraduate customers in the UK and Ireland. Research tracked the effectiveness of this branding initiative from an awareness and recruitment perspective, and findings from focus group research are reported here.

Introduction

The concept of marketing has grown in importance for universities across the world from the 1990s onwards (Kotler and Fox, 1993) and particularly in the UK since the re-designation of polytechnics to universities in 1992. The resulting increase in sectoral competition highlighted a need to create more distinct brand identities and has compelled universities to consider marketing principles more fully as they improve their efforts to attract and retain students in both the domestic and international markets (Brookes, 2003; Domino et al., 2006; Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009).

The UK higher education sector is an important part of the economy both in terms of its contribution to the knowledge base through graduate employability and also in terms of international research and knowledge creation. The sector comprises 166 higher education institutions of which 116 are universities. These institutions accommodate approximately 2.4 million students and employ nearly 375,000 staff (Universities UK, 2010).

As a discipline area, education marketing, particularly as this relates to the value/service proposition, has stimulated much debate within the higher education sector and popular press. Research into the ‘new’ area of education marketing is limited and often incoherent due to a lack of academic focus (Durkin et al., 2011). A characteristic of this neglect is demonstrated in ‘a literature which lacks theoretical models that reflect upon the particular HE context’ (Hemsley-Brown and Oplataka, 2006). Such thinking and approaches that do exist have been largely based on models developed for use in the business sector (Durkin et al., 2011) which were implemented without any significant contextual adaptation. At a practical level there is a lack of clarity regarding to what extent, if any, a business-oriented marketing approach which places the ‘student customer’ at the centre of all activity is appropriate within the higher education proposition. This lack of clarity is evidenced through the often polarized views expressed among commentators as to whether students are in fact ‘customers’ in the conventional sense (see Brookes, 2003; Svensson and Wood, 2007; Eagle and Brennan, 2007).

The Student as ‘Customer’

While the advent of deferred fees in UK higher education has led to commentators taking the position that students must be regarded as customers in the same way as would other purchasers of goods or services, there remains much debate both in the academic literature and at the level of HE marketing practitioners regarding the perceived positive and negative aspects of the ‘student as customer’ concept (Bejou, 2005; Durkin et al., 2011). Emery et al. (2009) argue that the university—student ‘contract’ is not one of ‘purchase’. The risks attached to the ‘purchase’ model are argued to centre on the possible perception by students that in adopting a consumerist perspective they should expect good grades irrespective of effort and commitment (Clayson and Haley, 2005). Sharrock (2000) and Becker and Buckley (2003) propose that expectations management of students is therefore critical and that ‘there needs to be a clear understanding that tuition facilitates education but does not cause it’ (Eagle and
Brennan, 2007). This interpretation brings with it a perspective that students can be more helpfully regarded as ‘consumers’ of the education service rather than ‘customers’ in the traditional sense (Conway et al., 1994; Naude and Ivy, 1999). This is a useful perspective in that there appears to be no other service encounter where the quality of outcome of the service delivered depends as much on the efforts of the consumer.

That said, whether classified formally as customers or not, the changes to the UK funding model highlight that students will now be paying to a greater extent for a service and that universities will be increasingly regarded as service providers in a commercial sense. At a sectoral level this more commercial perspective has also been strengthened by the introduction of various student-oriented benchmarks, for example, the National Student Survey (NSS) of student satisfaction, which facilitates more informed student decision-making when applying to universities. The plethora of online fora, which involves existing university students and applicants sharing their views about institutions, has similarly had an impact on the commercial awareness of students. The implementation of the Brown report (2010) and the increase in student fees in 2012 will undoubtedly serve to prolong the debate and accentuate competitive pressures within the sector.

As a consequence, there has been a recognition that more professional engagement with markets, however that marketing process is understood and practised in the HE context, is generally important. However, the practical emphasis of this perceived importance has gravitated towards promotion and recruitment-oriented activity (for example, open days, advertising campaigns, alumni events) rather than on more holistic or strategic aspects of marketing such as orientation, market fit and the currency and relevance of the courses being offered. It is argued that such a bias of emphasis towards more tactical responses in terms of marketing implementation is partly a function of the very specific culture that pervades universities.

**University Culture**

Higher education has a culture that is built on centuries of history where, according to Roy (1977), ‘context impacts more than on other more modern organizations’. This cultural context is often characterised by tradition: a resistance to change, critical reflection and debate. Large group decision-making is typical through committee structures as well as occasional top-down decision-making taken by senior management teams with the latter often informed through various staff consultancy-oriented models.

Such organisational characteristics are typical of Mintzberg’s (1981) ‘machine’ and ‘professional’ bureaucracy classifications. Such bureaucracies are at their most effective and efficient in stable market environments (Butler and Durkin, 1999). Until relatively recently such stability would have been commonly found in higher education markets. Henry (2001, p. 35) identifies that bureaucracies like universities can create an environment where creativity can be stifled by systems and processes that are slow to respond and where innovation can get stifled. Additionally Perrin (2002) argues that a further reason for limited creativity may be a blame culture which can arise when new ideas are brought forward and fail – a culture that can stifle further experimentation, innovation and creativity and responsiveness at an institutional level where such innovations and ideas are brought through bureaucratic and time-consuming committee structures.

At present, the HE environment is becoming much less stable and less predictable at the level of customer behaviour (especially as related to customer search–buy processes), and also competitive dynamics and market positioning. Such changes point up the need for traditional bureaucratic cultures, typically found within universities, to change and for levels of market attunement and responsiveness to be more in evidence at a strategic and operational level.

**Managing Marketing in Context**

As a response to global changes within the higher education marketplace the value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts which have been effective in the business world are gradually now being applied to many universities with a view to gaining a competitive edge (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Accordingly, UK universities have increased the investment made in their marketing departments and broadened the scope of their marketing activ-

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ity in recent years (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Almost two-thirds of UK universities have increased their investment in marketing by 10–20 per cent over the past three years (Stamp, 2007).

Arguably, the greatest change dynamic at play within the UK sector at present is that of demographics and the decline in the number of 18 year olds in the UK of almost 18 per cent in the next decade. As this undergraduate segment of the market is the core of most universities' business, such a decline is of critical strategic importance and has created the impetus for increased marketing efforts by universities as they try to maintain and grow their share of a declining market (Stamp, 2007) and better develop new income streams from other markets and segments.

The confluence of these demographic, political and consumer behaviour forces can be regarded as a 'perfect storm' for Higher Education players in the UK through the coming decade and their interaction points up the need for Universities to develop stronger connections and relationships with potential customers from an early age.

**Northern Ireland Market Context**

The analysis of demographic data by Universities UK (2010) in its report *The Future Size and Shape of the Higher Education System in the United Kingdom: Demographic Projections* finds that the Northern Ireland population of 18–20 year olds shows an 11 per cent decline taken from a base line of 2006, which increases to 15 per cent if taken from 2009 to 2020. This is similar across the UK.

In summary, the core market for the NI university sector is in demographic decline, competition is intensifying and customer behaviour is increasingly difficult to predict given changes to the funding model introduced by the UK's new Coalition government and the local interpretation of this funding pressure by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

**The Case University**

The paper describes a marketing context that existed within Ireland’s largest university. University of Ulster physically operates across four campuses in Northern Ireland and has over 24,000 students registered, with undergraduate applications approaching 34,000 each year. The University prides itself on its economic, social and cultural engagement across the Northern Ireland region and is widely respected for its highly successful widening access and participation approaches which have provided a breadth of opportunity for aspiring students from across Northern Ireland to engage in HE. Ulster is respected for the delivery of teaching and research excellence that is relevant to the local economy and further afield. With an international profile the University also attracts a significant number of international students.

In recognition of changes in the local and national market the University established a dedicated division responsible for marketing to students in 2007. Atypical, the traditional bureaucratic culture often found in universities was relatively absent and this new division was given a creative mandate to challenge existing 'student-facing' approaches and was tasked to develop new ideas that would serve to differentiate the University positively in the local and national market. It is from this new Student Marketing Division that the branding exercise described here emanated and was implemented between 2008 and 2010.

**Connecting and Engaging Potential Customers**

Within the HE sector, traditional 'university-customer' marketing communications have often focused on attempting to influence rational decision-making processes and as such were often targeted to parents and other key influencers (e.g. school teachers, family members) rather than to the potential end-customer (the future university student).

Traditionally, such rational messaging approaches focused on emphasising quality-assured teaching processes (UK’s QAA is often cited), research assessment exercise results (RAE, REF), levels of industry engagement and the quality of the student experience (e.g. issues of location, facilities, student community and support structures).

The extent to which such messages and messaging strategies directly reached and influenced the younger potential customer is unclear. By moving away from what might be termed a rational persuasion model towards one more focused on creating an emotionally driven
decision-making process at the level of the end-customer. University of Ulster adopted a new approach within the sector. That is not to say that any attempts to influence rational decision-making were eliminated but rather that a more emotionally oriented approach would be used in an attempt to act as a bridge between awareness and understanding for younger potential customers with respect to evaluating Ulster’s value proposition.

Objective
To better connect with and engage potential undergraduate customers.

In order to achieve the objective the specific brand repositioning exercise focused on the creation of a device through which the University could make an emotional connection with school pupils of all ages in the post-primary market. In so doing there was an aspiration to position Ulster as the ‘University of Choice’ for sixth form students across Northern Ireland.

Research of Branding Concepts
Several branding and advertising concepts were initially explored and tested, with two concepts shortlisted by the agency and University marketing team for further consideration. One concept presented an animated solution while the second option was not animated and relied more on conventional career-oriented messaging. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate early concept drawings by the agency addressing the brief.

Both concepts were tested through focus groups with both 4th and 5th year pupils (Stream 1) and 6th and Upper 6th school pupils (Stream 2). More developed visuals and storyboards were created for the sessions in order to better represent what the final advertisement might look like in each case and to stimulate more informed discussion.

Accordingly, six independently facilitated focus groups took place across Northern Ireland, each running for 90 minutes in the evening, immediately after school was finished. There were eight pupils in each group. Refreshments were provided. All sessions were video-recorded and representatives from the University’s marketing department observed all of the pupil sessions through one-way glass. These dedicated focus group sessions supplemented more anecdotal feedback from University recruitment staff who were responsible for visiting most Northern Ireland schools and meeting pupils regularly as part of their job.

At a general level, irrespective of focus group stream, all pupils showed relatively low awareness of any university advertising and relied heavily on friends and family for information on potential higher education offerings.

Interestingly, while there was generally greater positivity surrounding the animated character solution in both streams, the pupils from Stream 2 (6th form and Upper 6th) also showed an enthusiasm for the non-animated solution. Sample comments from these Stream 2 sessions included:

It is an effective advert as it reflects a real outcome — getting a job!

(Upper 6th, Belfast)
Figure 2  Concept Drawing

choice

Funky animated characters (think Flintstones or Belfast advert animation) that are propelled out of school doors / drop in from the air and are presented with a bewildering array of options represented by twisting paths / touchables trying to entice them / corridor of doors etc. These would then resolve themselves into one choice ultimately leading to the Ulster logo symbol, indicating the dilemma most students face on leaving school and the ultimate solution.

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Showing the career opportunities in this advert are a great idea. (Upper 6th, Magherafelt)

Conversely, some younger pupils from Stream 1 felt that the career-oriented advertisement concept was not sufficiently different and seemed run of the mill:

A typical university advert - boring and not exciting - like stuff you've seen before. (4th year, Belfast)

I would never remember this ad. There is nothing different about it. (5th Year, Derry)

This disparity in views regarding the ads was interesting given the relatively small age difference in the pupils from Streams 1 and 2, although in terms of progression the 6th formers were naturally more focused on their university decision and career-oriented thinking.

As indicated above there was no doubt that the animated character and overall campaign approach proved very appealing to 4th-6th years. With very few exceptions, the concept was overwhelmingly popular among the target audience and tested extremely strongly among the vast majority of this target age group who found it relevant, memorable, innovative and very appealing.

No other university I know advertises like this. (4th/5th Year Belfast)

'I think the character's cool. You'll remember him and you can relate to it. (5th Year, Derry)

The overwhelming feeling was that the animated character was right for this younger audience and represented the University positively. Responses from the six focus groups highlighted the following aspects:

- Connected with the animated character of Eddie
- Related to his situation and the confusion presented
- Liked the character and felt he was expressive and cool
- Felt he was appealing to people their age and so could empathise with him
- Felt he was different and stood out from other advertising, especially university advertising.¹

The signpost imagery and general confusion conveyed in the advertisement (see Figure 3) was also very effective in that many pupils in these groups could strongly relate to it and felt they were in exactly the same situation themselves and facing the same dizzying array of choices.

The message is very relevant. All of us are faced with so many choices. (4th Year, Belfast)

There were some minor issues around the most effective words to be used on the signage and also the feeling that the colours might be developed and refined further. These were mostly stylistic rather than concept-based.

It's a great idea. It's a unique idea. (5th Year, Belfast)

¹ Drawn from focus group comments
While it was reassuring to know that the animated concept was appealing to the target market in question, it was also important to know that the animated representation of the University’s brand would not alienate older, more mature students. Recognising this concern, additional focus groups were conducted in Belfast and Derry to explore the impact of the animated concept on the potential mature student market. Common findings from these groups were that most people, irrespective of whether or not they liked the concept themselves, believed it would appeal effectively to the 4th–6th form pupil market. In addition, it emerged that even if the concept was not perceived as attractive to the more mature student it would not harm or damage the University’s brand image or reputation.

An essential difference between the two possible creative solutions was that the animated solution was designed to connect with potential students using an emotional thrust while the non-animated solution was career-oriented and addressed a more rational perspective. Given the research findings, the marketing team took the view that connecting emotionally with potential students was the more powerful approach and indeed that the emotional connection could act effectively as a bridge upon which to carry more rational messages to audiences into the future.

**Developing the Animated Concept**

Due to the increasing appeal of animation globally, the marketing team believed there was a real opportunity to convey a message and connect with an audience through an animated solution. This was felt to be particularly the case given that the audience being targeted is exposed and receptive to sophisticated animation daily from many media. Animation is no longer limited to the young but is embraced by teens and adults. The central character concept was informed by the styling of Japanese manga animation and specifically designed to appeal to prospective school-leavers. Efforts were made to make the character as androgynous as possible for the widest appeal, although internally the character was perceived as ‘male’.

‘He’ was specifically clad in colours reflecting the palette of the University, potentially becoming an effective ‘icon’ for the University at undergraduate level. Indeed the character and his entire environment is uniquely tailored (as is only possible with animation) to represent the university at a visual and fundamental level.

In so doing the Ulster brand was repositioned in a more contemporary and innovative way which was highly differentiated from the brand positions of key competitors.

**TV Advertisement**

Regarding the scenario the animated character is thrust into, it is a visual allegory for the dilemma posed to most school leavers. ‘Eddie’, as he became known, tentatively takes his first steps into the post-school environment and is presented with many options and hence decisions to make. This ‘confusion state’ (Drummond, 2004) was represented by a signpost on which all the elements of the sign rotated independently and in different directions, adding to the perceived confusion. Each directional sign identified a key
motivator for studying at the University. By their gradual realignment into a single direction the signpost motivators point the way to Ulster as the university of choice. The character then sets off on the revealed route and discovers another portal through which he steps into his new life as a University of Ulster student. The ‘door’ of this portal then closes to reveal the University of Ulster logo, indicative of the ultimate destination.

All elements of the commercial and broader campaign were carefully designed to speak and appeal to the audience. The TV campaign ran for three weeks from mid-September at the time when sixth formers are preparing to make their initial UCAS choices. Supporting the TV campaign were:

- Outdoor Activity: Billboard posters (48 sheets) across sites in N.I, Ad shell (bus shelters) across N.I

- Radio advertising: Dedicated web presence² – www.ulster.ac.uk/ gofar

**Conclusion**
Dynamic change within the UK higher education sector has many components. At the level of the customer, the fee-paying environment has brought changes in customer expectations and a consequent change to the search–buy behaviour processes employed by customers in terms of how a degree offering and institution are chosen. A new UK funding model and increasingly deregulated fee environment will come into being from 2012 and will impact further both customer behavior and potentially the market structure itself.

Accordingly, there has never been a more important time for marketing investment within higher education institutions. In the absence of universities engaging with potential customers, and clearly defining and communicating differentiated value propositions, potential customers will begin to identify ‘value’ on their own terms. This approach will likely be driven by a need to better understand what their chosen course will do for them not just in terms of utility/employability but also in terms of the differential advantage conveyed by the institutional brand from which their degree comes. Such customer evaluation processes need to be understood by managers and then positively influenced and managed.

This paper outlined how University of Ulster has responded creatively to this growing marketing challenge early, created a department focused exclusively on student marketing activity and engaged an emotionally driven marketing approach through which to connect and engage with prospective undergraduate customers.

The focus group research undertaken, in combination with findings from the visits to local schools, informed and enriched the marketing approach undertaken. The early research findings reported indicate that aiming to influence a decision in the mind of the young potential customer, by using a more emotionally driven approach, is useful in influencing positive consumer interest in the market.

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² The TV advertisement can be viewed at this site.

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Marketing strategy implementation in higher education: A mixed approach for model development and testing

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Abstract This study seeks to extend our knowledge of marketing strategy implementation in the context of international student recruitment. Strategy implementation remains an area of limited focus in the marketisation of higher education literature. Employing a mixed-design methodology on universities in the UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand, a conceptual model is presented and tested on 570 mid-level international marketing managers. Four overall constructs are found to be significant strategy implementation factors: implementation related outcome variables, dimensions of commitment, strategy, and role factors. In light of these findings, several implications are advanced for university management. The study also makes important theoretical contributions: it contributes to a growing body of literature on marketing of higher education; it adds a more nuanced theoretical foundation of marketing strategy implementation by focusing on academic institutions rather than business firms; and it enriches the theory of marketing strategy implementation by taking a cross-national analytical approach.

Keywords international marketing strategy; strategy implementation; education services; services trade; international students

Introduction

Trade in education services is a fast-growing global business following the trend of other service sectors. Estimated at US$65 billion and representing roughly 3% of global services exports (Chadee & Naidoo, 2009), trade in education services is a multidimensional phenomenon (e.g., the import and export of textbooks, international examinations such as the Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT), etc.), although the cross-border migration of international students remains to date the most visible aspect of this trade (OECD, 2009).

Growth in international student mobility is both demand- and supply-motivated (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). On the demand side, students increasingly view
international qualifications as a differentiating asset that tends to command a premium in today’s competitive job market. On the supply side, higher-education institutions (HEIs) faced with a decline in public funding are increasingly compelled to offer their courses to full-fee paying overseas students (Hayes, 2007). These demand and supply dynamics for education services have led to an increasing marketisation of higher education, not just at the domestic level but also globally as HEIs compete to attract overseas students (Allen & Shen, 1999; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Kwong, 2000).

This increasing global marketisation of higher education has led many HEIs to develop international marketing strategies for international student recruitment (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001, 2008). While previously the focus of education marketing was largely domestically focused, in recent years, there has been an exponential growth in the interest of HEIs in international marketing as they reach out to potential students across their national boundaries. This interest in international marketing has not been limited at an individual institutional level but has also been adopted at a national level in many countries where national governments, realising the export earnings potential of education services, are promoting the benefits of studying in their respective countries. The UK, Australia, and New Zealand are some common examples of countries that have adopted a national–international marketing approach to the promotion of education services offshore, and increasingly, others are following suit.

At the institutional level, while some HEIs have been very successful at recruiting international students, others are still struggling to see a significant return from their international marketing efforts (Naude & Ivy, 1999; Ross, Heaney, & Cooper, 2007). While there are some uncontrollable factors that determine how successful a particular institution is in terms of its international student recruitment efforts (e.g., reputation pull factors), the model developed in this article suggests that there are also controllable factors that influence the success of international marketing strategies. In particular, grounded in pervious strategy research, we postulate that the successes of these international marketing strategies are often contingent on their implementation (Chebat, 1999; Noble, 1999; Noble & Mokwa 1999; Thorpe & Morgan, 2007a).

This study, using universities as the unit of analysis, seeks to investigate the influence of strategic implementation in the marketing of education services to international students. In the marketisation of higher-education literature, hardly any studies, at least to our knowledge, have focused on strategy implementation as opposed to strategy formulation (although there are a number of strategy related studies that have investigated education services, their focus are on strategy formulation – e.g., Mazzarol & Soutar, 2001, 2008 – see Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006 for a recent literature review). While this gap in the research literature is quite surprising, given that strategy failures are often attributed to poor implementation factors, it is not completely unexpected, as strategy implementation has also been an under-researched area in other aspects of marketing (Thorpe & Morgan, 2007a).

Grounded in this gap in the literature, the focus of this study is, thus, to examine the implementation of marketing strategies for recruiting international students. Particularly, using insights from a literature review and based on qualitative data from 10 universities in four countries (UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand), a research model is proposed through a qualitative data analysis (QDA). The model is then empirically tested on 570 mid-level international marketing managers in the four sampled countries. We conclude with a discussion of the observed findings.
Past research

Opposing the traditional positivist view that a literature review should lead to hypothesis development, in this study, we employ a constructivist approach using QDA (Glaser, 1978, 2006, 2009). Our choice of the methodology is influenced by the fact, as mentioned above, that business research to date has not addressed strategic implementation in the education services sector. This lack of relevant previous research suits QDA as a methodology, as it allows for inductive model development (Patton, 2002). Accordingly, it is worth mentioning at the outset that with respect to the structure of this article, a literature search is postponed until the main insights have emerged from the empirical data. This approach, although still subject to debate (e.g., Suddaby, 2006), follows the convention among qualitative researchers to avoid using preconceived categories in model development but rather to allow for an inductive model development that emerges from the data (Mayring, 2000; Patton, 2002). Consequently, contrary to articles grounded in deductive positivist methodologies, we will reserve presenting a comprehensive review of the literature at this stage, but would weave previous literature in the area of strategy implementation (e.g., Bourgeois & Brodwin, 1984; Noble, 1999; Parsa 1999) as part of the presentation of our findings. In the remaining paragraphs of this section, we thus only provide an introductory commentary of the state of the literature to set the tone for this study.

Since the 1980s, there has been a great deal of research on strategy in the literature. In the marketisation of higher education literature, studies on strategic marketing have largely focused on four themes (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006): segmentation (e.g., Soutar & Turner, 2002), targeting (e.g., Farr, 2003), positioning (e.g., Ivy, 2001), and branding (e.g., Gray, Fam, & Llanes, 2003). These thematic studies focus on the formulation of strategies (i.e. the planning and decision making to establish goals) as opposed to strategic implementation (i.e. the operational-level actions to achieve goals). Similarly, in the broader marketing strategy literature, many studies focus on the formulation of strategies (Kaplan & Beinhocker, 2003; Walker & Ruekert, 1987; Wind & Robertson, 1983), while others examine the relationship between strategies and performance (Chebat, 1999; Floyd & Wooldridge, 1997; Hooley, Greenley, Cadogan, & Fahy, 2005; Nordqvist & Melin, 2008; Wong & Merrilees, 2007). A review of the literature reveals that there is an undue bias towards formulation, almost to the neglect of implementation (Chimhanzi, 2004), although there is a good foundation of research on strategy implementation (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Qi, 2005; Thorpe & Morgan, 2007a). For example, a number of factors have been found to influence strategic implementation: organisational structure (Drazin & Howard, 1984; Miles & Snow, 1978), control mechanism (Daft & Mackintosh, 1984; Jaworski et al., 1993), strategic consensus (Floyd & Wooldridge, 1992; Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989), leadership (Gupta & Govindarajan, 1984; Nutt, 1983), and communication (Hambrick & Cannella, 1989; Workman, 1993).

However, given that strategy implementation is a multifaceted and fairly complex organisational process (Thorpe & Morgan, 2007a), such general conclusions do not fully address our needs for a deeper understanding of strategy implementation. In particular, considering that firms do not implement their strategies in the same way, there is a growing need to investigate how strategic implementation differs by industry. The objective of this study is to examine the implementation of marketing strategies for recruiting international students.
Qualitative data analysis

We undertook a multi-firm qualitative field study conducting interviews with universities currently marketing their courses offshore over an eight-month period. The end of data collection came about at the point of theoretical saturation when we perceived further data gathering and analysis to cease producing new insights (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Through these exploratory interviews, we investigated the strategic implementation processes of universities with respect to marketing to international students. The aim was to become familiar with their relevant perspectives and to broadly explore issues pertinent to strategic implementation that universities consider to be important.

The interviews lasting about one hour each, adopted an in-depth and semi-structured approach through the use of open-ended questions, in the hope of gaining a better understanding of the subject matter at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Applying QDA practice, we iteratively collected and analysed data for building a substantive conceptual model of the phenomenon under investigation (Glaser, 1978, 2009). In that respect, the early stages of data collection were quite open-ended, while the later stages were guided by emerging concepts and benefited from more structured interview protocols such as the development of an interview guide. That said, the guide was however, not static in nature, but rather developed as the series of interview proceeded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thus, emerging questions were also asked as judged appropriate by the interviewer. This semi-structured, open-ended interview format allowed key dimensions of the strategy implementation process to emerge naturally through a conversational manner (Thompson, Locander, & Polio, 1989).

Furthermore, a purposeful and maximum variation sampling approach was used to identify interviewees that were likely to contribute to the current study. This sampling strategy follows Eisenhardt (1989) and Miles and Huberman (1994), who argue that random sampling in qualitative research is neither necessary nor generally desirable, since a purposeful sampling approach can help to focus the study and contribute more effectively to the research objectives. Similarly, a maximum variation sampling strategy was used to obtain access to a diverse set of opinions and perspectives. In particular, the sample included universities involved across a wide range of international marketing activities (e.g., overseas recruiting trips; attendance at international education fairs; university pathway programme development such as foundation and English as a Second Language (ESL) programmes, etc.). The interviews were conducted with mid-level managers responsible for international marketing activities. The managers were asked to respond to a series of questions with respect to the implementation phase of their respective university’s latest international marketing strategy. With the framing of the interviews being with respect to the implementation of the university’s latest strategy, all the interviewed universities were purposefully selected to have roughly the same amount of active international recruitment/marketing experience (≈15 years) to ensure that the length of such experience did not influence the obtained responses. For example, we were concerned that a more experienced university might have had a more streamlined international marketing process, which could result in a better strategy implementation, thereby influencing any generalisation from our derived conceptual model. Table 1 outlines the universities interviewed and provides some of their key demographic information.
Table 1 Demographic information of universities interviewed as of 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>US institution 1 (US1)</th>
<th>US institution 2 (US2)</th>
<th>US institution 3 (US3)</th>
<th>UK institution 1 (UK1)</th>
<th>UK institution 2 (UK2)</th>
<th>Australia institution 1 (AU1)</th>
<th>Australia institution 2 (AU2)</th>
<th>Australia institution 3 (AU3)</th>
<th>New Zealand institution 1 (NZ1)</th>
<th>New Zealand institution 2 (NZ2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (years)</strong></td>
<td>100–150</td>
<td>0–50</td>
<td>50–100</td>
<td>50–100</td>
<td>150–200</td>
<td>50–100</td>
<td>150–200</td>
<td>50–100</td>
<td>100–150</td>
<td>50–100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Domestic enrolment</strong></td>
<td>25,000–30,000</td>
<td>25,000–30,000</td>
<td>40,000–45,000</td>
<td>2000–5000</td>
<td>20,000–25,000</td>
<td>35,000–40,000</td>
<td>35,000–40,000</td>
<td>35,000–40,000</td>
<td>20,000–25,000</td>
<td>15,000–20,000</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>International enrolment</strong></td>
<td>1000–5000</td>
<td>1000–5000</td>
<td>5000–10,000</td>
<td>1000–5000</td>
<td>1000–5000</td>
<td>5000–10,000</td>
<td>0–5000</td>
<td>15,000–20,000</td>
<td>0–5000</td>
<td>0–5000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public/private university</strong></td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Public</td>
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<td>Public</td>
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<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic ranking</strong></td>
<td>50–100</td>
<td>50–100</td>
<td>Top 50</td>
<td>Not ranked</td>
<td>1–200</td>
<td>Not ranked</td>
<td>150–200</td>
<td>Top 50</td>
<td>1–100</td>
<td>Not ranked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Endowment (US$)</strong></td>
<td>500–600 million</td>
<td>500–600 million</td>
<td>1–1.5 billion</td>
<td>45–50 million</td>
<td>500–600 million</td>
<td>500–600 million</td>
<td>600–700 million</td>
<td>1–1.5 billion</td>
<td>800–900 million</td>
<td>400–500 million</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aThe 2010 Times Higher Education ranking is used in this table. Although there are a number of ranking methodologies, the information provided in this table is indicative only and is not meant to be a scientific examination of these individual ranking systems.

*The categorisation of universities in terms of research intensive or applied institutions is derived from the institutions’ own descriptions through their websites or strategic documents (e.g., annual reports).

cRanking ranges of 50 are used for most of the universities. However, broader ranges are used for one UK and one New Zealand university. These two institutions are the only universities in their respective countries in their ranges of 50, making them easy to identify. The use of the broader range for these two institutions ensures that confidentiality is maintained.
Because the interviews were conducted on the basis of confidentiality, the names of the interviewees and their respective universities are not disclosed. Instead, the universities are categorised by their country of origin and the demographic information disclosed about them is categorised into ranges. A conscious decision was made to target universities across countries which are primarily active in the recruitment of international students (i.e. United Kingdom, United States, Australia, New Zealand). These four countries account for approximately 45% of the total international student population in the world (OECD, 2009).

The qualitative data gathered from each individual interview session were transcribed verbatim from the detailed notes taken by the researchers. The data were analysed by coding the transcribed interviews using an inductive approach, allowing patterns and themes to emerge. These data were then subjected to content analysis using N6 (previously QSR*NUDIST), allowing for the exploration and explanation of the inter-relationships among the generated constructs. Using the inter-judge test (Wagner, Lukassen, & Mahlendorf, 2010), two independent researchers conducted the data collection, analysis, and interpretation to allow for adequate triangulation and validation (Stöttinger, 2001).

**Conceptual framework**

Theoretical sampling was used in the data-collection process for gradually building concepts of interest. Using insights from the literature review and the QDA process, we derived the proposed conceptual model shown in Figure 1. Four overall constructs emerged from the data: implementation related outcome variables, dimensions of commitment, strategy factors and role factors. These are discussed below.

**Outcome variables**

Building on previous scholars who have conceptualised strategy implementation (e.g., Giles, 1991; Mintzberg, 1978), the dependent variable of our phenomenon under investigation is *strategy implementation success*. Using the latter concept as the

![Figure 1 Conceptual model.](image-url)
starting-point of our research, we delved into identifying the factors that influence implementation success. The first concept that our research revealed was that the interviewed international marketing managers considered their own implementation roles, particularly the performance of these roles to be crucial to the successful implementation of a marketing strategy. For example, the interviewee from AU1 indicated:

The success of our marketing strategy implementation all comes down to my staff’s and my performance. – AU1

Another manager commented:

My team and I determine our success with our marketing strategy implementation. By team, I don’t mean only those staff directly involved with marketing but the whole team, including our administrative support group. How our people perform their duties is thus critical in strategy implementation. – NZ1

Similar views resonated with the other eight interviewed university representatives. Implicit in these comments is that strategy implementation is operational in nature and grounded in the performance of daily activities carried out by employees at all levels of the organisation. This latter view is shared by previous studies such as Chimhanzi (2004), Hrebiniak and Joyce (1984), and Webster (1997). Thus, similar to these previous studies, our data suggest a direct relationship between the success of strategy implementation and role performance.

H1: In the education services sector, the success of the strategy implementation is positively influenced by the role performance of the international marketing managers.

Dimensions of commitment

Developing commitment to an organisational purpose is a key element for achieving integration and coordination, both essential components of effective strategy implementation (Vila & Canales, 2008). Thus, top management must first develop a clear purpose and convey that purpose to organisational members with an objective of inspiring commitment around it. A dimension of commitment which has been identified in the literature is strategy commitment, which refers to the level of managerial support and commitment to a particular marketing strategy (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1989). This commitment may be due to identification with the values or goals of the strategy (Ford, Weissbein, & Plamondon, 2003). It is argued that a commitment to a particular strategic course takes places at an early point in the evolution of an autonomous strategic initiative (Hutt, Reingen, & Ronchetto, 1988). The strategy commitment is expected to result in strategy-related behaviour. When there is a strong commitment to the strategy among marketing managers, it is likely that the strategy can be implemented more effectively (Noble & Mokwa, 1999). Consistent with the literature, supportive evidence was observed during the interviews to suggest a positive relationship between strategy commitment and role performance. As the following managers noted:
Commitment to a particular strategy results in me improving my performance as
I have a sense of ownership. – US3

When a strategy makes sense and I believe in it, it is easier for me to do my job.
Personally committing to a particular strategy allows me to adequately sell it to
my staff who, ultimately, are responsible for effectively implementing the said
strategy. – US2

With similar comments obtained from all the other interviewees, the collected data
would indicate that, generally, international marketing managers in the university
sector, perceived their commitment in a strategy as critical to how they delivered on
their professional responsibilities.

H2: In the education services sector, the higher the level of strategy commitment, the
better is the role performance by the international marketing managers.

Another dimension of commitment which emerged from the data is role commitment.
It relates to the level of dedication an employee demonstrates in performing his/her
the importance of role commitment in organisations and argues that a lack of role
commitment is likely to result in higher employee turnover, growing dissatisfaction,
and poorer performance. Noble and Mokwa (1999) suggest that there is a positive
relationship between role commitment and role performance. The collected data
seems to indicate a similar positive relationship as demonstrated by the following
excerpts captured during the interviews.

My commitment to my role is what drives me to succeed and perform. – NZ2

My job and my particular professional responsibilities are a large part of who I
am as a person. Being true to myself and being committed to what I do [i.e. role
commitment], I strive to always do the best I can given the resources I have to
operate with. – UK2

While the above comments and others similar to them express an explicit link
between role commitment and role performance, the representative from UK1
expressed how s/he performs in his/her role because of commitment to his/her
individual career path rather than the role itself.

I am here to do a good job because of my commitment to my own career path. –
UK 1

Since, in many ways career commitment is similar to the notion of role commitment
(Darden et al., 1989), one can suggest from UK1’s comments that all the interviewees
consistently indicated a direct relationship between role commitment and role
performance. Thus, is it proposed that:

H3: In the education services sector, the higher the level of role commitment, the
better is the role performance by the international marketing managers.
**Strategy factors**

Furthermore, from the collected qualitative data, we found that three strategy factors are likely to influence how committed international marketing managers are to strategy implementation. First, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Dvir, Kass, & Shamir, 2004; Parish, Cadwallader, & Busch, 2008), we identified vision fit as an important strategic factor. Vision fit is the situation where a strategy is perceived to fit in with an organisation’s strategic goals. Morris (1987) argues that a vision allows managers to build long-term problem-solving linkages from the present state of the business to its future direction. In most cases, a vision represents innovative ways designed to meet the changing needs of the business. In the context of this study, vision fit, therefore, relates to whether a given marketing strategy for recruiting international students fits in with the university’s overall strategic plan. The data suggest that the level of strategy commitment is influenced by the level of perceived fit with the university’s strategic direction. As one manager noted:

> A strategy makes sense when it fits with the broad scheme of things, particularly with the direction that the university is heading towards. – US1

Similarly, another interviewee highlighted how s/he is always questioning how a new strategy fits with the existing ones.

> Does it [i.e. the strategy] make sense? Does it align with our current operation? Is it going to be value added to the overall direction of the institution? There is no point implementing a new strategy if it is not aligned with the broader vision of the university. Doing so will lead to poor buy in and commitment from senior management. Not only will this [i.e. implementing a misaligned strategy] be a hard sell, but would be a complete waste of time and resources. – AU3

These comments were similarly shared among the other interviewees. These comments, thus lead us to propose that:

> **H4**: In the education services sector, the higher the level of perceived fit with the university’s strategic direction, the higher is the level of strategic commitment among the international marketing managers.

Another strategic factor emerging from the data is the perceived significance of a strategy, which appears to affect an international marketing manager’s commitment to implementation. This is consistent with the observations made by Floyd and Wooldridge (1992) that managers’ affective consensus depends on how a proposed strategy fits with the best interests of an organisation. In this study, the collected data lend support to this perspective and the following representative excerpts are indicative of this support:

> The more I perceive a strategy to be significant, the more I’m likely to be committed to it. – AU2

> An important strategy is likely to be one that leads to greater outcomes. Since these outcomes are in turn more likely to assist me achieve my professional KPIs [key performance indicators], I tend to be more committed to strategies that I perceive as important. – US1

Thus, consistent with previous strategic implementation studies (e.g., Kiesler & Sproull, 1982; Noble & Mokwa, 1999; Sproull & Hofmeister, 1986), we
postulate from the collected data that the perceived significance of a strategy is likely to influence international marketing managers’ commitment to strategy implementation. In other words, when international marketing managers perceive a marketing strategy to be significant, they are likely to be more committed to that particular strategy.

**H5:** In the education services sector, the higher the level of perceived significance of a marketing strategy, the higher is the level of strategy commitment among the international marketing managers.

The last strategy factor identified from the interviews is institutional *buy-in*. Buy-in reflects the depth of commitment from those individuals in the implementation process (Hrebiniak & Snow, 1982; Hutt & Speh, 1984). Merely communicating a strategy to organisational members has serious limitations in aligning people with expected behaviour (Vila & Canales, 2008). In order to accomplish its strategic goals, an organisation must bring key people on board so that they are committed to the project. The data indicated that if there is a university-wide buy-in for the marketing strategy, it is likely that the international marketing managers will be more committed to the strategy. The following excerpts are indicative of this proposition.

The successful implementation of a strategy depends on its acceptance by the rest of the university. – UK2

The international office can only be partly responsible for successfully implementing our marketing strategy. We depend on other areas of the university to ensure that the strategy is adequately implemented. For example, we rely on the finance office to set tuition fees, on the housing office for finding accommodation options for our international students, on the faculties for developing programmes that are relevant and attractive to the international student market. Without buy-in from these other stakeholders, the international office will not be successful in our marketing strategy implementation. – UK1

Thus, from the interviews conducted, we propose that:

**H6:** In the education services sector, the higher the level of institutional buy-in for the marketing strategy, the higher is the level of strategy commitment among the international marketing managers.

**Role factors**

Last but not least, the interviewees highlighted a number of comments which we categorised under the theme of *role significance*. Role significance refers to a manager’s perceived level of importance in performing a role. This implies that a manager is enacting an identity of his particular role, which s/he feels to be important, meaningful and crucial to the implementation success (Reich, 1997). The data indicate that the greater the perceived role significance, the higher the role commitment of the marketing managers. For example,

The more I perceive my particular position to be significant in the implementation process, the more I tend to be committed to it. This is because with significance comes the ability to make decisions. Without significance, I find it very hard to have a say in how a strategy is going to be implemented. This is especially
so in the university sector where the organisational structure is extremely hierarchical. – US2

The significance of my role in the strategy formulation and implementation dictates how committed I am to the strategy. Otherwise, being a busy manager, I tend to not get heavily involved and thus exemplify low commitment to a particular strategy. – AU3

Thus, based on the data, and similar to previous studies (e.g., Noble & Mokwa, 1999), we propose that when international marketing managers feel they are being empowered to carry out an important task, they should be much more committed to their role in implementing the strategy.

H7: In the education services sector, the higher the level of perceived role significance, the higher is the role commitment among international marketing managers.

Empirical methodology

The second stage of our research consisted of empirically testing the research model developed from our qualitative findings (see Figure 1). Based on the proposed conceptual model, a series of 5-point Likert scale measures were developed grounded in previous literature. Responses to each item in the survey ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strong disagree). To ensure face validity, the measures were pre-tested with a number of international marketing academics and managers. Based on their feedback, any ambiguities and unclear questions were modified or eliminated. In order to collect comparable data on marketing strategies for recruiting international students across countries, we specifically designed a survey that was applicable to all universities. The finalised survey was then randomly distributed to universities picked from a purposefully identified sampling frame (see section ‘Qualitative data analysis’) of HEIs in our four sampled countries (UK, US, Australia, and New Zealand). (Through purposeful sampling, we controlled for international recruitment/marketing experience of the universities in our sampling frame.) The data were collected over a 10-month period through a confidential questionnaire distributed to international marketing managers (the target respondent). To maximise the response rate, the authors personally hand-delivered the questionnaires to the targeted international marketing managers at trade conferences and expos where they congregated to ‘sell’ their respective universities to prospective international students.

A total of 2562 questionnaires were distributed, and 570 completed, usable questionnaires were returned, representing an overall response rate of 22%. We obtained 143 completed responses from UK, 120 from the US, 167 from Australia, and 140 from New Zealand. All respondents who participated in this research were international marketing managers or directors with at least three years of experience in international student recruitment. This means that these respondents are not only experienced in the international student recruitment process but also very familiar with their university mission and strategies. To test for non-response bias, the extrapolation method recommended by Armstrong and Overton (1977) was applied and revealed no significant differences between early and late respondents.
Data analysis and results

The conceptual model was tested using LISREL to assess the validity of the proposed constructs. The data analysis was conducted in multiple stages.

Measures

First, following previous studies such as Mullen (1995) and Steenkamp and Baumgartner (1998), we conducted a Multiple Group LISREL to investigate the use of our measures across different cultural settings. This involved conducting separate analysis of a confirmatory factory analysis (CFA) measurement model for each sampled country, followed by a formal assessment of how the parameter estimates of $\lambda_i$ (the factor loading) and $\delta_i$ (the error variance) compared for each sampled country. In particular, factorial similarity, factorial equivalence, and measurement equivalence were tested. Following Mullen (1995), our first step in assessing factorial similarity was to set the construct variance to one and specifying the factor loadings and error variances as free. Chi-square ($df$) statistics (NZ $= 3.39(8)$, AU $= 5.43(8)$, UK $= 6.31(8)$, US $= 3.21(8)$), comparative fit index (CFI) (NZ $= 0.99$, AU $= 0.95$, UK $= 1.00$, US $= 0.94$), Tucker and Lewis index (TLI) (NZ $= 0.98$, AU $= 0.93$, UK $= 0.101$, US $= 0.92$), and root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) (NZ $= 0.04$, AU $= 0.03$, UK $= 0.00$, US $= 0.02$) all indicate that an acceptable measurement model was produced across the sampled countries. Next, similar to Mullen (1995), to assess factorial equivalence, we assumed factor loadings to be equal across samples, but allowed error variances to differ. The chi-square statistic was computed against a four-group model in which both $\lambda_i$ and $\delta_i$ were set free for each country sample and was found to be non-significant ($p = 0.73$, $\chi^2 = 12.96$, $df = 17$). This non-significant result corroborates the earlier support for factorial similarity and provides a benchmark model for a Chi-square difference test ($\chi^2_{diff}$), which was also found to be non-significant ($p > 0.10$). This finding lends support for factorial equivalence in the sense that the factor loadings across the four country samples are, within the statistical bounds set, the same. Finally, to assess measurement equivalence, we used a more constrained model where both $\lambda_i$ and $\delta_i$ were assumed to be equal across the four samples. The resulting chi-square of 16.73 (20 df) was insignificant, as was the $\chi^2_{diff}$ when comparing this model with the previous equal factor model ($p > 0.10$). These findings suggest that the obtained response patterns across the countries investigated were similar and exhibited scalar equivalence. Such results were to be expected given the pre-testing that took place and the fact that all sampled countries are English-speaking.

Next, we followed up by randomly picking the New Zealand sample and using it for measure and model purification purposes. An initial confirmatory factor analysis was first performed on the New Zealand sample and the final item set used are shown in Table 2. In the New Zealand sample, 11 items were deleted to arrive at a final 32 used in this study. As indicated in Table 3, most coefficient alpha values are greater than 0.7, which is a generally accepted level. There are three values that are less than the standard of 0.7, suggesting the need for further measure refinement and some caution in the interpretation of results. The chi-square was 284.26 on 108 d.f. ($p < 0.001$), the CFI was 0.946, and the RMSEA was 0.059. All the standardised factor loadings are statistically significant for all variables. Once the standardised factor loadings were obtained, we then combined the scale items to produce a summed score.
Table 2 Alpha coefficients, factor loadings, and $t$-values for scale items [NZ/AU/UK/US].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Coefficient alpha</th>
<th>Itema</th>
<th>Standardised factor loading</th>
<th>$t$-valueb</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vision Fit</td>
<td>Wilson and Wong (2003)</td>
<td>0.633/</td>
<td>This initiative was part of an overall strategic plan within the university</td>
<td>0.719/</td>
<td>6.18/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parish et al. (2008)</td>
<td>0.758/</td>
<td>This strategy wasn’t consistent with other things going on in the university at the time (R)</td>
<td>0.842/</td>
<td>5.46/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.673/</td>
<td>I understood how this strategy fit within the strategic version of the university</td>
<td>0.649/</td>
<td>6.48/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.842/</td>
<td>The strategy was extremely important</td>
<td>0.764/</td>
<td>6.31/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The success of the strategy was expected to significantly affect the future of the university</td>
<td>0.799/</td>
<td>6.83/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance</td>
<td>Noble and Mokwa (1999)</td>
<td>0.500/</td>
<td>The strategy will influence the university for years to come</td>
<td>0.590/</td>
<td>5.62/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fogliatto, Da Silveira, and Royer (2003)</td>
<td>0.642/</td>
<td>Across the university, there was high level of 'buy-in' for this strategy</td>
<td>0.683/</td>
<td>5.94/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.831/</td>
<td>The strategy was pretty minor in the overall mission of the university (R)</td>
<td>0.843/</td>
<td>5.83/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.812/</td>
<td>The success of the strategy was expected to significantly affect the future of the university</td>
<td>0.534/</td>
<td>5.47/</td>
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(Continued)
Table 2 (Continued).

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<th>Scale</th>
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<th>Item*</th>
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<th>t-valueb</th>
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<td></td>
<td>The student recruiting team</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>felt like it was on its own</td>
<td>0.743/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in trying to make the</td>
<td>0.638/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>strategy a success (R)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There was a general lack</td>
<td>0.901/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>of support of this strategy</td>
<td>0.894/</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>across the university (R)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>There was a tremendous</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ground swell of support in</td>
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<td>the university for the</td>
<td>0.857</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>strategy</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I played a relatively</td>
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<td></td>
<td>minor role in the</td>
<td>0.896/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>development of this strategy</td>
<td>0.746/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was one of the key</td>
<td>0.692/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>members of the implementation</td>
<td>0.645/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I didn’t think this strategy</td>
<td>0.812/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>was in the best interest</td>
<td>0.842/</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>of the university (R)</td>
<td>0.536</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I thought the strategy was</td>
<td>0.749</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>a great idea</td>
<td>0.845/</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I can’t say that I supported</td>
<td>0.746/</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>the strategy (R)</td>
<td>0.861/</td>
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<td>0.743</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.800/</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.741/</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.689/</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>0.897</td>
</tr>
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(Continued)
Table 2 (Continued).

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<th>Scale</th>
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<th>Item</th>
<th>Standardised factor loading</th>
<th>t-valueb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role Commitment</td>
<td>Ganesan and Weitz (1996)</td>
<td>0.732/ 0.956/ 0.843/ 0.786</td>
<td>I personally felt that the goals of the strategy were appropriate</td>
<td>0.623/ 0.529/ 0.683/ 0.637</td>
<td>5.19/ 6.48/ 6.01/ 5.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Herscovitch and Meyer (2002)</td>
<td></td>
<td>In implementing this strategy, I tried to work as hard as possible</td>
<td>0.805/ 0.746/ 0.638/ 0.764</td>
<td>8.69/ 7.04/ 7.52/ 7.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I took tremendous pride in my responsibilities in this strategy</td>
<td>0.529/ 0.536/ 0.687/ 0.762</td>
<td>6.17/ 6.54/ 6.89/ 7.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was committed to my role in implementing the strategy</td>
<td>0.722/ 0.742/ 0.623/ 0.641</td>
<td>7.24/ 7.06/ 6.51/ 5.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I understood my personal objectives clearly in this initiative and was determined to meet them</td>
<td>0.757/ 0.687/ 0.602/ 0.598</td>
<td>7.43/ 6.45/ 7.86/ 7.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance</td>
<td>Homburg, Hoyer, and Fassnacht (2002)</td>
<td>0.601/ 0.642/ 0.765/ 0.804</td>
<td>My superiors would say I performed extremely well on implementing the strategy</td>
<td>0.605/ 0.587/ 0.865/ 0.984</td>
<td>5.29/ 6.04/ 5.98/ 6.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parish et al. (2008)</td>
<td></td>
<td>This was not one of my better implementation efforts [R]</td>
<td>0.526/ 0.645/ 0.842/ 0.965</td>
<td>4.73/ 5.76/ 5.86/ 6.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Table 2 (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Coefficient alpha</th>
<th>Itema</th>
<th>Standardised factor loading</th>
<th>t-valueb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My overall performance in implementing the strategy was outstanding</td>
<td>Miller (1997) Chimhanzi (2004)</td>
<td>0.799/0.896/0.847/0.687</td>
<td>I personally think the implementation of the strategy was a success</td>
<td>0.780/0.648/0.598/0.638</td>
<td>6.43/5.41/5.69/6.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The strategy was effectively implemented</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.850/0.637/0.786/0.861</td>
<td>7.92/7.41/6.48/8.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The implementation of the strategy was considered a success at the university</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.820/0.741/0.689/0.565</td>
<td>7.69/7.42/7.06/6.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The implementation of the strategy was considered a success in my team</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.583/0.866/0.745/0.652</td>
<td>4.97/5.41/6.03/5.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The university’s implementation effort on this initiative was disappointing (R)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.635/0.704/0.745/0.652</td>
<td>5.29/5.04/5.63/5.94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: (R) = reverse-coded variables.

aAll on a 5-point scale where 1 = ‘strongly agree’ and 5 = ‘strongly disagree’.

bIndividual factor loadings all had t-values exceeding p < 0.001 significance level.

Table 3 Correlation matrix, means, and standard deviations [NZ sample].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M*</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Vision Fit</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Importance</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Buy-in</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Role Significance</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Strategy Commitment</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Role Commitment</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Role Performance</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>2.11</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Implementation Success</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>5.32</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

a Negatively worded items were reverse-coded for the calculation of means.
for each factor variable. Based on all fit indices, the model fitted the data well. The results of confirmatory factor analysis showed that the measures used in this study were acceptable. Table 3 shows the correlations, means, and standard deviations for these variables.

We then tested the UK, US, and Australian model, and found that the same number of factors (constructs) loaded across the national samples. This methodology of using the parameters from the New Zealand sample to investigate the effectiveness of prediction on the other country samples allows for robustness testing and stringent ‘validity generalisation’ (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

**Structural equation model**

Finally, we used a structural equation model (SEM) to test the proposed hypotheses which were depicted in Figure 1. We conducted a sensitivity analysis and compared alternative models using respecification techniques such as the Lagrange multiplier and Wald tests. However, given our use of a constructivist approach to model development and the fact that our qualitative data did not support these re-specified models, we stayed true to the original model rather than data-mine for model-improvement purposes (e.g., using Bagozzi’s partial disaggregated approach). This approach builds on the argument that SEM is a model-testing procedure, not a model-building one (see Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2005). Overall, the tested model appear to provide a good fit to the data as indicated by the goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and the comparative fit index (CFI). Other relevant fit statistics such as adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI), normed fit index (NFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and chi-square ($\chi^2$), were also examined and suggested an adequate fit to the data. Residual terms and modification indices were also reviewed and revealed no problematic issues. Lastly, the model was run on the UK, US, and Australian samples for confirming the findings obtained from the New Zealand sample. The results from the four samples indicated that the overall fit of the proposed model to the observed data was adequate and favourable. Figure 2 shows the path coefficients for all the samples. Overall, the findings are consistent across all the models run. As shown in Figure 2, the examined hypotheses are all supported in the samples analysed. The first hypothesis (H1), which postulates the success of the strategy implementation is positively influenced by the role performance, is supported. The effect of role performance on implementation success was positive and significant ($p < 0.01$) in all four samples. This suggests that international marketing managers clearly attribute their role performance to the success of implementation effort.

The findings also support commitment factors as critical to strategy implementation, with both strategy commitment (H2) and role commitment (H3) found to be positive and significant in influencing role performance. This confirms that international marketing managers’ performance is dependent on their commitment to the strategy and role commitment. The three strategy factors examined, namely fit with vision (H4), perceived importance of a marketing strategy (H5), and buy-in (H6), are also found to be positive and significant in influencing strategy commitment among international marketing managers. Similarly, the perceived role significance (H7) is shown to be positive and significant in influencing role commitment.
In light of the above findings, this study has several implications for university management. First, it would appear that, in order to be successful, universities marketing themselves to international students need to have an international marketing strategy that emphasises strategy (H2) and role commitment (H3) as antecedents to role performance (H1) and ultimately implementation success. In turn, vision fit (H4) as a significant driver of strategy commitment suggests that for managers to fully support a strategic initiative, they need to understand how the said strategy aligns with the university’s overall strategic direction. Our qualitative data indicated that international marketing managers often failed to understand how the strategy they were tasked to implement fitted with the overall vision and strategic direction of the university. As one mid-level manager from the UK communicated: ‘I fail to understand why we keep being told to increase our recruitment activities in China, when the University’s strategic documents talk of international student diversification and we already have a big cohort of Chinese students. . . . I’m sure senior management knows what they are doing, but they haven’t quite informed us of their reasoning.’ Consequently, this finding highlights the critical role that communication needs to play between the university’s senior management and the mid-level marketing managers. Our findings also emphasise the perceived significance of a strategy (H5) as an antecedent to strategy commitment. This finding, similar to the findings for H4 also accentuates the need for ongoing communication between senior and mid-level management, as there is a perceived need to highlight the importance of specific strategies to the overall university. Likewise, the importance of role significance (H7) on role commitment suggests that mid-level managers are more
likely to be committed to their role if they possess a comprehensive understanding of how their roles contribute to the university’s overall strategic direction, in turn highlighting the importance of communication. This communication need cannot be emphasised enough, especially in very hierarchical organisations such as universities where bureaucracy can impede on the communication flow.

The qualitative interviews also highlighted that the empirical evidence with respect to buy-in (H₆) might not necessarily be attributable to buy-in at the marketing manager level, but would also involve buy-in among the university’s senior management group, as well as shared among critical academic leaders such as deans and department heads. The qualitative data highlighted that only when buy-in is garnered at all these three levels of operations is an international marketing strategy bound to be implemented successfully. For example, the interviews emphasised that academic staff members play an important role in marketing institutions since they bring credibility when marketing the intangible benefits of education services. Consequently, the interviewees underscored that marketing teams are encouraging of academics getting involved in marketing activities to assist in the recruitment of international students. In other words, cross-functional support and buy-in for a strategy appears to be critical to improve strategic commitment and ultimately implementation success. However, most academics are reluctant to get involved in the marketing of international education which requires tremendous efforts and extensive time commitments. In most research-intensive universities, there are virtually no incentives for academics to engage in marketing of international education because the current academic reward system focuses mostly on teaching and research. In that respect, university senior management need to address this disconnect if they are to maximise the likelihood of their international marketing strategy being implemented successfully. For example, involvement in international recruitment activities can be formerly recognised as part of the ‘service’ responsibilities of academics.

Furthermore, the observed findings enhance our understanding of marketing international education to overseas students. For most universities, the ability to successfully implement a marketing strategy is directly linked to performance of their international marketing managers (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In particular, international marketing managers are the ones who market academic programmes to international students on a daily basis. Our research confirms that international marketing managers’ performance is influenced by both their commitment to the strategy and their commitment to their job (Herscovitch & Meyer, 2002; Parish et al., 2008). This is especially relevant in dealing with the highly competitive international education market which requires a high level of commitment and dedication on the part of international marketing managers. Such commitment is, however, at risk in an increasingly commercial environment where international students are treated almost as ‘cash cows’. As one manager from Australia indicated:

I don’t want to be part of the team that is responsible for recruiting students that the university does not fully support once they are enrolled. Because of the increasingly commercial approach the university is taking to international recruitment, I fear that in the years ahead, it will be overpromising and under-delivering when it comes to providing international student services. I don’t want to be part of that environment.
Another manager from the UK highlighted how the international recruiting ethos of his university is slowly shifting to an aggressive commercial model that does not necessarily align well with his personal values:

The university is not in a position to cater for a substantial increase in international students and yet, we are increasingly being pushed to recruit more international students. I feel that the university will increasingly struggle to deliver on what it promises to deliver in its marketing collaterals. That does not sit well with me.

Indeed, the priorities of many institutions have shifted from international/cultural exchanges to revenue generation when they recruit students from overseas. To many academic institutions, international students represent a major source of revenues for their operating budgets in the face of continuous financial pressure and cutbacks. While we do not aim to take a stance on whether a revenue driven approach to international student recruitment is appropriate, our findings indicate that universities that do choose a revenue driven approach to recruitment need to be cautious not to take that business model too far. If they do, they run the risk of losing their international marketing managers’ dual commitments to the strategy and to the job and in turn decrease the likelihood of marketing strategy implementation success.

Our study also makes three contributions to the literature. First, this study contributes to a growing body of literature in marketing of higher education. This study uses a mixed-design methodology to examine the role of marketing strategy in recruiting international students from the perspective of middle management. Second, much of prior research has focused on strategy formulation in business firms rather than academic institutions. There have been no empirical studies on the marketing strategy implementation for recruiting international students. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first empirical study to integrate marketing strategy implementation and higher education. Third, this study focuses on marketing strategy implementation in higher education in four major international student recipient countries. This is the first cross-national study to test a strategy implementation model of international marketing in higher education.

Limitations and future research

The marketing strategy implementation in education services is an important topic in international marketing that to date has received little attention. This study has aimed to lay a foundation for a better understanding of the implementation process of marketing strategies for recruiting international students. It is hoped that this study will lead to further research in this area. However, as with any research, this study has several limitations which provide opportunities for future research in this area.

First, the caveats concerning self-reported data collection apply to this study. Using a cross-sectional self-report methodology, asking international marketing managers about their own jobs, raises concerns of appropriate inferences being drawn from the obtained results. Consequently, the findings of this study ought to be only exploratory in nature. Additional methodologies will be needed to fully test the proposed hypotheses (e.g., ethnography). Therefore, the obtained results only provide a first step in studying marketing strategy implementation in the higher education context. That said, the fact that the interviewed marketing managers gave a critical account
of their concerns and perception of international students being treated as cash cows (see ‘Discussion and conclusion: Managerial relevance and theoretical contribution’) adds to the likelihood of the obtained results being derived from an accurate self-reported account.

Second, our samples came from international marketing managers who chose to attend international trade conferences and expos to ‘sell’ their respective universities. Hence, there could be some sampling and response biases when a self-selected group of international marketing managers gave their perceptual responses of implementation success. In this study, we were unable to capture the responses of those universities that did not attend international trade conferences and expos. Future research needs to collect sample data from multiple sources.

Third, this study explores the marketing strategy implementation from the perspective of middle international marketing managers or directors. Hence, we have neglected the other side of the equation, namely the perspective of senior management. For example, factors such as leadership of senior management could influence strategy implementation of the international marketing manager. Future research should thus focus on variables specific to senior university administration and evaluate their influence on our theoretical model.

Fourth, given the constructivist research design we have adopted in this study, we have been limited to empirically investigate only variables that were derived from the qualitative data analysis. Consequently, we have not considered other potential variables which have been documented in the extant literature as particularly relevant to strategy implementation. For example, these include variables such as institutional priorities, cultural differences, and university size in our model (e.g., see Bharadwaj, Varadarajan, & Fahy, 1993). Future additional research adopting a deductive positivist methodology could, therefore, consider these other relevant variables to enhance our understanding of the strategy implementation process in the education services context.

Last but not least, it must be acknowledged that the derived empirical findings do not show much difference in strategy implementation success across countries. This result is not surprising because all the universities in the sample are from English speaking countries with roughly the same amount of active international recruitment/marketing experience (i.e. 15 years – see section ‘Qualitative data analysis’ regarding the use of a purposefully identified sampling frame). Accordingly, future research needs to use a broader sampling frame (e.g., universities from non-English-speaking countries which are also becoming increasingly active in international student recruitment) in order to further advance our understanding of strategy implementation in the education services context.

References


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