0069 HEP

HIGHER EDUCATION PROVISION IN A CROWDED MARKETPLACE

We are entering uncharted waters within the world of higher education (HE) in the UK. Recent changes to the way that HE is funded and students are recruited have been brought in through the Government White Paper *Students at the Heart of the System* (BIS, 2011). These changes will significantly affect the way higher education is marketed and delivered.

This research aimed to investigate how HE providers market to their prospective student base and identify whether there are variations in approach by different types of institution; traditional universities, post-1992 universities or colleges of further education delivering HE courses.

Methodology

Sample

Five region were chosen for their differing qualities; urban, rural, metropolitan and coastal, within each region three institutions that deliver higher education courses were chosen; an old civic or redbrick university, a new post-1992 university and a college that offers HE courses in partnership with one of these universities.

Stimuli

As a means of establishing what message the institution intended to communicate to their prospective students, the welcome message from either the Principal (in the case of FE colleges) or Vice Chancellor (in the case of universities) as was published either in the 2012 Undergraduate Prospectus, or if unavailable, from their website.

Data analysis

An inductive approach utilising thematic analysis was conducted on all the texts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Six themes emerged:

- *Reputation* – This refers to any item that promoted the good name of the institution, be it documentable by awards, league tables or associations, or simply unsubstantiated claims

- *Local economic links* – This refers to aspects that tied the institution to its community by consideration of the economic climate of its businesses or residents

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- *Educational ethos* – This refers to the intangible attributes of the study environment with a focus on the academic strands; such as student experience and dynamic and innovative atmospheres

- *Student life* – This was concerned with extra curricula activities students may expect from social to sporting events

- *Teaching and learning* – This represented all the tangible services, through curriculum, staffing and resources, available to students in order for learning to take place

- *Graduate potential* – This theme included employment opportunities, postgraduate study or achieving personal goals

These were then divided between the three different types of instruction for comparison; old universities, new universities and colleges.

Results

The most frequently emphasised factor by old universities was that of reputation where there was a concerted focus on research and their standing in the academic world using unqualified phrases such as 'reputation for academic excellence'. The new universities were more likely to ground their references to reputation in data, such as National Student Survey results, whereas the colleges were least likely to make reference to reputation, and where this was used it tended to be by association with their partner university.

For the new universities the emphasis was on the graduate potential, highlighting the tangible postgraduate opportunities as a result of the programmes offered being 'developed in collaboration with employers' and enhancing entrepreneurial skills. The Colleges also saw student prospects as important but were more focused on the achievement of success and aspirations. The traditional universities made comparatively little reference to the earning potential of graduating students.

The main focus for the FE colleges were issues surrounding teaching and learning, either promoting the range of course types, levels and modes of delivery and the extra support available due to smaller class sizes. The new universities referred to the quality of teaching offered by 'expert' and 'professional' staff whereas the old universities emphasised the investments in 'rising academic stars' at the 'cutting edge of their disciplines'.

An area that was only really considered by the FE colleges was that of community links. They suggest that they serve the local economy by reducing the skills gap through relevant training opportunities and offer local students a financially viable

alternative to university by studying locally. This is in contrast to the universities making references to the student life by emphasising their extra-curricula activities, not a feature that the FECs promoted.

Discussion

An important factor that seems to have impacted on the marketing strategy is perception of the potential market. The concentration of old universities on the international aspects of their research and their global appeal may indicate the importance of this area for recruitment. This contrasted with the further education colleges who made minimal reference to international aspects, focusing instead on issues that may appeal to local students. The further education colleges actively encouraged local enrolment as this type of approach might appeal to non-traditional learners and mature students (Connor, Burton, Pearson, Pollard & Regan, 1999), and may explain why the frequent reference to the range of courses and flexibility of delivery was made, as a possible strategy to encourage these individuals back into higher education.

In contrast, the universities are appealing to those who have already made the decision to participate in higher education and are simply selecting a place to study. These strategies may be driven by economic factors. The White Paper (BIS, 2011) also notes that additional student numbers will be available to institutions that consider widening participation and community focus, an aspect not mentioned by the old universities. Traditional universities may, however, be tapping into additional student numbers through alternative an international income streams, with fourteen percent of first degree students being classified as international in the academic year 2010-11 (UKCISA, 2012), hence the focus on this element in their marketing. Alternatively their emphasis on reputation may be a means of attracting the students who achieve AAB grades in their A Levels, and under the new system are not included in the student number restriction (BIS, 2011).

There does appear to be some contrast between the institutions regarding their marketing strategy, the future intention is to replicate this research to track the changes in approach during these times of change.

References

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