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International marketing in higher education – a comparison study between students' choices in Poland and the UK

Abstract: *The purpose of this article was to explore the nature of the marketing of higher education (HE) and universities in an international context. There is a substantial literature on the marketing of Higher Education and consumer behavior. Scholars provide evidence of the marketing strategies that have been implemented by HE institutions. However the literature comparing the choices of Polish and British students remains very limited, and this is relatively uncharted territory. This paper compares the decision-making processes made by British and Polish students while choosing a university.*

Keywords: *higher education; marketing; choice; consumer behaviour; internationalisation; globalisation*

Introduction

International marketing has become quite a popular subject in management sciences, which is reflected in the burgeoning number of publications in this area. In the light of increasing globalization, global marketing is a necessity for the survival of all organizations, rather than a luxury traditionally reserved for the multinational corporations (MNCs) [Grandys, Grandys 2011]. As consumers and citizens, we live in an era when almost everything can be made and sold anywhere, one of this thing being education.

From an international perspective, the growing demand for higher education can roughly be distinguished into two main trends. On the one hand the rapidly growing need for the widening of access to higher education. In a global perspective the numbers of degree students are estimated to rise from 42 million in 1990 to 97 million in 2010 and 159 million by 2025 (West, 1997). This trend can be observed in certain developing countries and in particular in transition countries (e.g. in Southeast Asia, Latin America and southern

Africa), which are quickly integrating into world production and international trade and which often have a rapidly growing young population. On the other hand, there is the increasing need for more diversified and flexible types of higher education, including lifelong learning, corporate training, etc., This is typical for countries that are changing from post-industrial into knowledge economies. In Western countries this trend is often combined with an ageing population, which makes the need for lifelong learning even more important.¹

Education is now a global product. Institutions worldwide are competing for students and finding ever more creative ways to satisfy student needs and preferences. They adjust their organizational cultures to become more flexible [Sułkowski 2002].

The fast competition which is taking place in the current global market has affected the educational sector. For example in Australia, international students have made education Australia's third largest service export, earning \$5.8 billion. This results in a situation in which student populations have moved from being homogenous and captive to domestic constraints and expectations, to being multi-cultural, dispersed and subject to a plethora of constraints and expectations.

However, the marketing of education is still a controversial issue. The elements of globalization in higher education (HE) are multifaceted and the HE market is now quite well established as a global phenomenon, especially in the major-English speaking nations: Canada, the US, Australia and the UK. In the context of increasing competition for home-based and overseas students higher educational institutions now recognise that they need to market themselves in a climate of international competition [Hemsley-Brown, Oplatka, 2006, pp 316-338].

Internationalisation of HE markets

In recent years, there have been many changes in the governance of the higher education (HE) systems throughout the world.

Part of that transformation is due to changing technology, which has helped to foster the growth of cross-border academic programs both by conventional universities as well as by internet-based distance learning providers. Part of the change has been initiated by national governments themselves through the deregulation of their higher education sectors as well as the adoption of new market-based policies designed to make universities more efficient and effective.

Market-type mechanisms have been introduced in countries previously which were previously characterised by a high degree of government control

¹ It is worth stressing that these trends are not mutually exclusive. For instance the state of California is facing a growing demand in both areas at the same time. This is the result of demographic growth and a strongly developed knowledge-economy (Sillicon Valley).

(Jongbloed, 2003). In many countries, these changes have been viewed as a “compromise between privatisation, academic autonomy and state control” (Young, 2002, p.79).

As stated earlier in this article, the literature indicates that the higher education market is now well established as a global phenomenon, especially in the major-English speaking nations: Canada, the US, Australia and the UK. However, governments have also turned to deregulatory policies in Russia (Hare & Lugachev, 1999), the Eastern Bloc (Czarniawska & Genell, 2002), Holland (Jongbloed, 2003), Spain (Mora, 1997), Japan (Arimoto, 1997), China (Williams et al., 1997; Mok, 1999; Mok, 2000), Asia (Gray et al., 2003) and Africa (Maringe & Foskett, 2002; Maringe, 2004).

There are a number of rationales for public policies that introduce competitive markets or market-like structures to higher education systems. Firstly it is a desire for economic efficiency understood as “value for money,” particularly given the growing costs of meeting social demands for universal access to higher education (Williams, 1996). Secondly, important is a desire to use market competition as an incentive for greater innovation and adaptation in higher education than is thought to be possible through traditional forms of coordination relying on state control or professional norms. Competitive research grants systems, greater student access to information about university quality, university ownership of patent rights, and contracting-out of university services are examples of the application of market competition to academic reform.

It was expected that in response to these changes, HE institutions would apply marketing theories and concepts, which have been effective in the business world.

Research into higher education choice, or consumer behaviour in higher education markets, has principally been stimulated by an individual institution's need to anticipate the long term implications of choice and to understand the key factors involved in student choice (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). The attempts by governments to enhance the quality of higher education through the encouragement of market forces is based on an assumption that students are, or will become, informed consumers making rational choices of higher education courses and institutions (Baldwin & James, 2000). In the context of increasing competition universities were forced to equip themselves with the necessary marketing intelligence and information that would enable them to face the challenge of such an international market for higher education (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003).

The emergence of marketing in HE

Most educational institutions now realize that they need to market themselves in a climate of competition that for many universities is often a global one. The substantial literature on the transfer of the practices and concepts of marketing from other sectors to higher education has been developed (Gibbs, 2002). Literature on education marketing which originated in the UK and US in the 1980s was theoretical-normative in nature and was based on models developed for use by the business sector (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004). The literature included books and manuals on how to market institutions (E.g. Gibbs & Knapp, 2001) and how to apply well-established above-the-line (advertising) and below-the-line practices (e.g. public relations) used in the business sector, to higher education.

Papers published in the 1990's started interpreting marketing within the narrower definition of marketing communications. Research was based on the assumption that in order for any HE institution to market itself successfully management would need to examine the decision-making process and potential students' search for information. There was also an ongoing debate about who the customers of higher education were: "students can be either considered as customers (with courses as the higher education products) or as products with the employers being the customers" (Conway et al., 1994 p.31).

Students seeking higher education outside their home country

Studies of international marketing focusing on students who sought higher education outside their home country, has been a key topic for empirical research for many scholars (Mazzarol, 1998; Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003; Gray et al., 2003, Mazzarol & Soutar, 1999; Czarniawska & Genell, 2002). Much of this interest has been stimulated by increasing competition for overseas students (example Gomes & Murphy's 2003).

Research and findings

An empirical illustration of the problem described in the article was based on a quantitative study conducted in 2012. The research was conducted among students from Polish and the UK. The research sample is as follows: 198 students from Poland and 148 students from the UK fill in the questionnaire. It should be noted that the survey was a pilot study, and the results cannot be generalized. The presented results serve as a starting point for further in-depth research in this area.

Table 1. Factors supporting school choice decision-making process

Type of factor	Student in Poland		Student in Great Britain	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Good faculty	43	22%	31	21%
Good position in the rankings	61	31%	56	38%
Good reputation among students	47	24%	27	18%
Wide range of courses	11	6%	11	7%
Level of the fees at the university	26	13%	8	5%
Localization	7	4%	13	9%
Other	3	2%	2	1%

Source: own study based on conducted research.

The results show that there are similar factors supporting the decision-making process by the student's choice both in Poland and the United Kingdom. The key factors determining the choice of university include:

- a good position in the rankings of universities
- good teaching staff
- a good reputation among students

Table 2. Impact of the quality of customer service during the admissions

The degree of impact	Student in Poland		Student in Great Britain	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Very high	51	26%	32	22%
High	63	32%	41	28%
Moderate	33	17%	37	25%
Low	24	12%	26	18%
No influence at all	27	14%	12	8%

Source: own study based on conducted research.

Research have shown that Polish students attach importance to the quality of service in the university recruitment offices with a greater degree. However, the results indicate that the difference between students from Poland and UK in this area of the recruitment process is not large.

Table 3. Student's identification with university

Identification level	Student in Poland		Student in Great Britain	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Yes	84	42%	103	70%
No	114	58%	45	30%

Source: own study based on conducted research.

Students from the UK to a greater extent (70%) identify themselves with the home university for example through student associations or clubs of graduates. In Poland, the degree of identification with the university student oscillates between 42%.

Table 4. Methods for gathering information about universities

Type of factor	Student in Poland		Student in Great Britain	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Information from current students	30	15%	21	14%
Brochures	47	24%	17	11%
Telephone inquiry	76	38%	28	19%
University open days	13	7%	45	30%
Internet	29	15%	35	24%
Other	3	2%	2	1%

Source: own study based on conducted research.

The results of the study showed differences between the way of gathering information about the university. Students from the UK prefer the formula of open days, and the information available in the websites. Students from Poland prefer phone inquiries and brochures as the primary source of collecting information about the university.

Table 5. Choice of the same university

Answers	Student in Poland		Student in Great Britain	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
I would choose the same university	85	43%	97	66%
I would choose different university	47	24%	14	9%
I would choose another course of study at the same university	35	18%	29	20%
I would choose another course of study at the different university	31	16%	8	5%

Source: own study based on conducted research.

Students from the UK (66%) would choose once again the same university, in Poland every 5th respondent would chose a different university and 18% of the students would choose the same university but different field of study.

Limitations

The research field of HE marketing is still at the early stage with much research still to be carried out both from a problem identification and strategic perspective. This paper was just an initial step in comparing factors supporting university choice decision-making process between British and Polish students.

It should be stressed once again that the survey was a pilot study, and the results cannot be generalized. The presented results serve as a starting point for further in-depth research in this area.

Summary

Today, higher education has become a commodity marketed across national borders. The rapid growth of the global market in higher education indicates how things have changed. National concerns and social expectations are being replaced by profit considerations, and market forces now decide the purpose and priorities of higher education.

International marketing is expansive, extensive, and complex. It can be seen as both a business strategy and an operation, as a force for good or a 'new imperialism'. It can be embodied in organizations or perceived as a phenomenon.

To compete successfully in today's global marketplace, companies and their management must master certain areas, such as: environmental competence to understand the global marketing environment, analytic competence to analyze global marketing opportunities, strategic competence to develop global marketing strategies, functional competence to design global marketing programs and managerial competence to manage the global marketing effort. The same must be done by HE institutions.

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