

11 Enrolment management

Enrolment is a broad concept that lies at the heart of the marketing effort and orientation of the university. We have developed in previous chapters the notion that marketing is about delivering value to those with whom the university has established or intends to establish a relationship. Without students, universities serve a limited purpose to society. Students are the *raison d'être* of universities, the most important reason for their existence. The need for a strategic management approach to student enrolment is thus paramount to the very existence and mission of universities.

This chapter is centrally concerned with exploring the concept of enrolment management and uses an expanded definition encompassing four broad activities. These relate to seeking the students; retaining them; graduating them; and utilizing their power of 'word of mouth' marketing to influence future enrolment of new students. It thus adopts a student life cycle approach to developing an effective strategy to managing the enrolment function of the university.

Defining the concepts

A plethora of terms are often used interchangeably with student enrolment. Among these, recruitment and admission are the expressions most closely related to enrolment and enrolment management. Research on enrolment and enrolment management suggests that the view people tend to have about enrolment and the conceptualization of the role of enrolment management in the academy is often tinted by their understanding of the concepts of recruitment and admission. We adopt a definition of enrolment which seeks to shift the focus from dealing with numbers and money to one that emphasizes the provision of a quality experience to students which helps them achieve their fullest potential in the course of their entire life cycle. It conveys this to students before joining, during the course and after they leave the university. In this definition, we consider recruitment and

admission as primarily dealing with bringing students to the campus and ensuring that they register on programmes which the institution offers. We thus see them as two elements in a four-stage strategy for delivering value to students in their life course. The key elements which make up an enrolment strategy aimed at delivering this value thus include:

- recruitment;
- admissions;
- retention and graduation;
- post-qualifying relations.

Before we examine these elements, it is important to deal with the broader issues of institutional competitiveness which, to a very large extent, determine the place of the institution or department in the recruitment market.

Departmental/institutional competitiveness

Many universities today operate in a recruitment market where prospective students have to be actively sought and sometimes even prepared for courses on offer before they enrol as full-time students. Few, apart from Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, and Harvard, Yale and Princeton in the USA, have the luxury of being oversubscribed by well-qualified students and can therefore direct the bulk of their recruitment budgets towards selecting the best candidates for their programmes. A key requirement for developing successful recruitment strategies is for the institution to have a full grasp of its position in the competitive environment. We shall use Porter's five forces analysis, particularly because of its relevance to university environments in which the importance of gaining a competitive advantage is paramount. Porter (1990, 1998) has argued that organizations which seek to gain a competitive advantage over others should be adept at controlling and manipulating five significant forces or threats in their environments: the degree of rivalry; the threat of entry; threat of substitutes; buyer power; and supplier power. We shall briefly define and review the nature of these forces within the higher education context.

Curran (2001) has provided a framework which allows us to examine Porter's model within the context of higher education. He suggests that, in higher education, Porter's model could be utilized as an analytic tool to evaluate the competitive advantage of university departments in four critical areas.

First is what he terms 'factor conditions', involving the research orientation and accumulated wealth of the institution. He argues that

departments with a competitive advantage demonstrate an ability to provide those factors of research production that enable departments to compete. Such factors include, among others, location desirability, physical resources, human resources, knowledge resources, access to influential networks and financial capital. In economic terms, these are the factors of production. A strategy used by many universities, especially when approaching research assessment exercises, is the recruitment of 'star academics' to bolster their research profiles and therefore gain a competitive advantage in terms of attracting further funding for studentships, IT provision and the establishment and development of new research centres.

Second are the demand conditions. The customers of higher education are varied and include students, society, the public and private sector organizations, funding agencies and government. Demand can broadly be measured both quantitatively and qualitatively. In quantitative terms, we can model recruitment patterns using tools such as recruitment forecasting as an estimate of demand. Using complex statistical formulae, some higher education institutions have ten-year projections of their recruitment requirements and annual projections based on demographic, geo-demographic and psychographic characteristics of the customer bases in both the domestic and international markets. In qualitative terms, demand can be measured on the basis of perceptions held by different segments of the customers about the usefulness of the institutional offering and the nature of benefits they seek from the organization.

Third are factors related to institutional brand influence. The chances of finding a successful department in a successful university are high. Likewise are the chances of finding a failing department in a failing university. Rarely do you find a successful department in a failing university. Institutional brand strength or eminence, measured on the basis of the global competitiveness of the university, is the key element that contributes to the success of departments. Through brand association, departments performing averagely in globally eminent universities tend to gain a competitive advantage over similar departments in less globally competitive institutions.

Fourth are factors which relate to the strength of departmental rivalry measured on the basis of pressure to compete exerted by other departments within the university and outside the university. The pressure could be exerted in one of two main ways; through direct competition or through collaboration. Both tend to result in what Pinch et al. (2003) have described as knowledge communities that harbour all kinds of knowledge from gossip, comment on forthcoming funding opportunities, advice on how to create a viable research strategy and experience with a particular methodology or idea. Proximity and easy access to current wisdom are important factors in the development of institutional competitiveness.

Curran has argued that these four factors act in concert rather than independently to drive institutional or departmental competitiveness and that, as in Porter's diamond system, 'departments that get all four corners of the diamond to reinforce each other are likely to be innovative and therefore maximize and sustain their competitive advantage' (Curran 2001: 402).

Exploring institutional/departmental recruitment context

Once the elements which drive departmental or institutional competitiveness have been identified and determined, the next important aspect to explore is the broad environment in which the department exists. The SWOT analysis model is probably the most widely used framework for analysing institutional contextual circumstances. The model first identifies current Strengths and Weaknesses and leading on from there, Opportunities to be maximized and Threats to be minimized or avoided. It is a flexible tool which can be applied both to organizations and individuals and provides an objective analytical framework for decision-making and planning. More recently, however, the PESTLE model has been developed to enable people to consider *broader external factors impinging upon an organization*. The factors involved are Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal and Environmental which both influence and determine change and development within an organization. Some scholars have tried to bring the two models together to provide a hybrid analytical framework that enables both decision making and planning on the one hand and environmental scanning and forecasting on the other hand. In Table 11.1 we briefly illustrate how the PESTLE and SWOT frameworks could be used to analyse the broad context of recruitment in UK higher education in general. It has to be emphasized that this framework provides a merely generic and generalized analysis of the higher education environment and some key issues and factors which impinge upon debate and decisions in the area of student recruitment. However, even though the impact of these issues on specific institutions cannot be broadly determined, it is safe to suggest that they provide a platform and framework within which institutions could begin to develop strategic recruitment plans.

A brief discussion of the political context of recruitment will be given here to illustrate how the various elements potentially hit institutional recruitment decisions and plans. In terms of strengths, it could be considered that the UK government's target of achieving 50 per cent enrolment of its adult population in higher education provides an external drive and stimulus for institutions to achieve higher recruitment targets. However, the

Table 11.1 Broad contextual analysis for recruitment planning

<i>Contextual elements</i>	<i>Strengths</i>	<i>Weaknesses</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>	<i>Threats</i>
Political	Political will to increase/widen participation in higher education	Political opposition from opposition parties	Funding increases with increased recruitment	Is higher education suited to the needs of the majority?
Economic	Strong national economy and willingness to support widening participation	The strength of the £ against other EU currencies	The introduction of the new fees regimes for higher education	Impact on post-graduate recruitment market
Social	Overall, positive societal values and opinions towards expanding access and increasing participation	Vulnerable societal groups continue to have lowest rates of participation in higher education	School values strongly supportive of progression to higher education	Potential marginalization of the vocational aspects of the curriculum
Technological	Higher education institutions generally well endowed technologically	Lack of home-grown expertise in the utilization of technology	Availability of business models in human resources management	Rapid technological advances
Legal	Office for Fair Access to ensure parity in access across social groups	Sanctions for breach of access agreements not effective	Greater financial support available for widening participation initiatives	Established institutions
Environmental	University expansion has generally been associated with city and local development	Increased carbon emissions in local areas	Locally available cheap labour reserves for local economy	Impact on housing and social services especially for small local authorities

uncertainties of the political climate, with the Conservatives seeming likely to take over from Labour in the next few years and their party continuing to prevaricate on policy issues, provide an environment which could negatively affect long-term recruitment planning by universities. However, the government's promise to increase funding to institutions that successfully implement Widening Participation programmes provides useful opportunities for achieving recruitment targets on the back of increased revenue. Conversely, the continued internal debates in higher education institutions about whether higher education is suited to the needs of the majority of people, as envisaged by government, could become a source of internal inertia in the recruitment process in general.

Developing an institutional enrolment strategy

We see enrolment as an overarching concept that encompasses recruitment, admissions, financial decisions and retention of the students that the institution most wants to serve. Developing an institutional enrolment strategy thus includes:

- analysis of factors that influence enrolment including what attracts students and what causes them to leave before graduation;
- development and establishment of a compatible student–institution match in recruiting and admission;
- development of strategies aimed at facilitating student transition into the university;
- development of strategies that help retain students through adequate advice, counselling and mentoring;
- development of a customer services approach which places students at the top of the institutional priorities;
- development and promotion of a responsive, sensitive and proactive culture in the management and services delivery system.

Clearly the overall goal of an enrolment management strategy is the recruitment and retention of satisfied alumni-to-be. The institution needs to have a clear idea of the pull and push factors related to attracting and retaining students on campus. This aspect entails setting up an enrolment research team which periodically examines the factors that attract students to the institution and those that lead to non-completion and even rejection by potential students. What is critically important is to note that these factors do not remain fixed over time. Indeed, a key factor of attraction could be a deterrent a few years down the line. For example, we found that in one institution a strong attractive force at the inception of the university was its

narrowly focused curriculum in the field of science education. However, a few years later the university suffered from a lack of international appeal and diversity emanating from this narrow focus with many potential students viewing the institution as a glorified teachers' college for science teachers (Maringe 2004).

Matching institution and student values is the key to successful recruitment and retention in the higher education sector. On one hand, this requires the institution to periodically audit and understand its own values. Our experience is that many universities and departments consider this as, at best, time-consuming and, at worst, a time-wasting exercise. Undoubtedly, the identification of a shared value system is a difficult and time-consuming process, yet without a system of shared and commonly understood values, the institution or department has little to guide its vision and mission. Organizations that do not have a system of values can indeed behave much like loose cannons, firing with reckless abandon and taking no notice of their impact in the same way as a tornado destroys a previously calm village.

Despite this, all the universities with which we have undertaken research in both the developed and less developed world (Maringe and Foskett 2002) have provided evidence of institutional strategy documents. However, what also seemed clear in our research is that, despite the existence of these value statements in public documents in these universities, many academic staff did not know the values of their organizations, and did not recall being a part of the identification of those values. It can therefore be argued that the mere existence of a values statement in a strategic document does not automatically translate into a shared system of values within the institution. This is why it is important for institutions to periodically revisit their values and assess whether existing values need to be retained, given the changes and new circumstances surrounding higher education in general and the specific institution in particular.

On the other hand, it is vitally important to have a sense of the personal values of staff and students as key customer groups within the university. Staff and students could be asked periodically to complete web-based questionnaires which help the institution to identify the overall value flows within the organization. There are statistical modelling tools which can be used to measure the level of integration between institutional and staff and student values. Theory suggests that the closer the integration, the more purposeful and energetic the organization becomes in tackling its goals and attaining its outcomes.

The provision of adequate social and academic support is at the heart of student retention and progression. This requires properly trained and skilled personnel to handle the complex demands of an increasingly diverse student population on UK higher education campuses. Three broad strategies have been identified as underpinning the support that students need during

the course of their studies. These include student advice, guidance and mentoring. Advice and guidance in many universities are offered at two levels. There is often a students' advice centre based in the student union. At the academic level, students receive support through a system of personal tutors and international students' advisers.

Mentoring, more frequently referred to as the student buddy system, is a more recent development in UK higher education and is designed to allocate new students to returnees who provide a personal advice and guidance role over a range of issues such as where and how to get books in the library, where to go for fun and games after lectures, and how to survive the first year of the course. In one university we have studied the buddy system is reported to have directly resulted in a four-fold increase in the retention rate within the first two years of its introduction (Bennett 2006). Essentially the system involves training selected groups of returning students to provide a range of support to new students and being rewarded in a variety of ways for doing so over the academic year. Rewards for student buddies, or 'ambassadors' as they are called in some institutions, are made in the form of refunds or subsidies for accommodation and subsidized access to other services within the university and its partners, among others.

A key aspect of the enrolment strategy aimed specifically at achieving the maximum customer satisfaction is the development of a customer service culture and plan for the institution. Basically, a customer services culture is one that is underpinned by an institution-wide belief in the supremacy of the customer. This should be reflected in the key messages and symbols of the institution and portrayed in the mission and vision of the organization. Students as customers should not only be considered important: they should be made to feel important. High customer satisfaction – the extent to which customer expectations are met or surpassed (Gerson 1993) – should be a key goal of the institution. Getting staff to adopt a customer orientation is not always easy, especially in the university sector. As illustrated earlier, there still exists a considerable resistance within the higher education fraternity to the use of what is perceived as retail business language in the context of 'the serious business of educating people'. However, institutions that have actively embraced a customer services culture have tended to incorporate the following key elements into their plans and services:

- *A total organizational commitment to customer service:* This commitment must begin at the top and must be spelt out clearly in the mission and vision statement of the institution.
- *A commitment to knowing your customers completely:* Systems for knowing customers before they come to us, when they are with us, before they leave us and after they have left the institution should be put in place. A fundamental principle in settling up these systems is that the process should be ongoing.

- *A clear statement of the standards of service quality performance:* Having identified on an ongoing basis the likes and dislikes of customers, it is important to set the standards that customers will expect in the service encounters. For example, potential applicants want to know how long they need to wait for a response from the university following an enquiry for a place to study; how much support they will have from tutors in developing their assignments; the criteria for assessment for the various pieces of work they will be producing; and what support there is in developing their personal statements, among other things.
- *On-going management:* Enrolment management involves both academic and administrative staff in various capacities and roles. It is vitally important for all who come in contact with customers to have the requisite skills and understanding of the needs, likes and dislikes of customers as the basis for providing superior service.
- *Working towards continuous improvement:* Customers become accustomed to quality service and may begin to take it for granted. Strategies have thus to be found and developed which seek continuous improvement in order to enhance service quality and exceed customer expectations.

Techniques for implementing superior service quality

Some techniques have been found to be useful in implementing superior service quality: 'the key to satisfied customers is having them perceive that you met or exceeded their expectations in a specific situation' (Gerson 1993: 28). Among the many strategies described in the literature, three appear to have direct relevance to the higher education service delivery system:

- *Adding value.* Service encounters should endeavour to give more than the customers ordinarily expect. An email or telephone call to a prospective student just to find out how they are getting on with their application goes a long way to instilling confidence in the applicant about the important decision they are just about to make.
- *Understanding where quality problems exist in the service delivery process.* This requires staff training and continuous monitoring and reflection on the part of those at the front line of service delivery, and swift action in areas of potential difficulties.
- *Involving the customers in the quality monitoring process.* This can be achieved through a variety of mechanisms such as regular feedback questionnaires, suggestion boxes for innovative ideas, clear complaints procedures, and through incorporating the students' voice

by inviting them to have representation on key policy and operational committees within the university.

A strategy which provides vital information to assist with policy and implementation in all these areas is segmentation, to which we shall briefly turn in the next few sections.

Segmentation research: the basis for informed decisions in enrolment management

Recruitment markets are not homogenous entities. They comprise individuals and groups who differ in many ways and who may have even conflicting needs and requirements. Segmentation is basically the process of splitting a broadly heterogeneous recruitment group into smaller and more manageable homogeneous groups, towards which we can develop more targeted marketing messages, services and communication. The overarching purpose of segmentation is to enhance the chances of providing a 'customized service' which contributes towards greater customer satisfaction and retention.

The literature identifies five broad bases for segmentation of the recruitment market (see Chapter 6). The application of segmentation models yields useful data for a variety of decision-making at marketing, planning, teaching, curriculum and even assessment levels of the experience of students in higher education. It enables planners to know the markets in a more realistic way and the data produced can be used as a valid base for developing and planning the total experience of the students, including the service and service quality.

Towards a strategic enrolment management plan

Investing time and effort in developing a strategic enrolment management plan should be a key goal for institutions seeking to be effective in the volatile recruitment market. Most institutions will differentiate between home and international student recruitment markets. Each requires a different set of considerations and strategies and yet together they contribute towards bringing, keeping and delivering value to students, the most vital customers in universities. The development of a strategic enrolment management plan is thus at the heart of this concerted effort.

Like all other planning activities, there will be myriad models at the disposal of institutions. A review of such models from a variety of institutions suggests that, at a minimum, strategic enrolment management plans should include:

- *An institution's definition of enrolment management:* This enables the scope and extent of enrolment to be determined, which in turn determine the nature of activities and services to be provided through this strategy.
- *Action teams and enrolment champions:* Committee structures cannot be prescribed as much depends on local politics and organization. However, a clearly defined system of action groups should be identified which should work under and report to an institutional/departmental committee under the chairmanship of a very senior member of staff or head of the department or institution. Many successful institutions have recruitment, retention and service action (managing expectations) working groups that organize the working of their groups and report to the institutional committee. The recruitment group would focus on recruitment, admissions, financial aid, orientation and related areas. The retention group would focus on advising, counselling, academic support and co-curricular activities. The service action group might look after issues such as identifying and developing service initiatives, promoting the service culture, articulating the institutional mission internally and monitoring changing dynamics in the recruitment market.
- *An enrolment management plan:* The plan should identify, beyond the issues above, a SWOT and PESTLE analysis, the enrolment goals and objectives within a stipulated time frame, clear success criteria, the research agenda, strategies for admissions, marketing and recruitment in both the domestic and international markets, strategies for retention in terms of advising and support services and, above all, an assessment plan for measuring success.

A few ideas about the nature of enrolment research would be useful at this point. The American College Testing Programme Post Secondary Survey Series (ACTPS) has developed a wide range of instruments used by a majority of institutions for the research aspects of the enrolment management of their institutions. A review of the enrolment management plans of some universities and departments has revealed that the focus of research in the enrolment area is around four main aspects, and most of the instruments tend to be adaptations of the ACTPS (visit www.act.org for further details):

- *School-leaver learner needs:* This is often administered as a survey exploring the perceived educational and personal needs of young post-school learners.
- *Adult or mature learner needs:* This is also administered as a survey exploring the perceived educational needs of adults who have been away from school for periods of time.

- *Student opinion survey*: This explores enrolled students' satisfaction with programmes, services and aspects of their university experience.
- *Entering students' survey*: This provides a variety of demographic, background and educational information about entering students.
- *Withdrawing/non-returning student survey*: This helps determine why students leave university before completing a degree.
- *Survey of academic advising*: This is used to determine the experience of students and their levels of satisfaction with the advisory roles of the institution.
- *Survey of post-secondary plans*: Used largely as an enrolment forecast-ing tool, it gives an indication of students' course and programme preferences.

Summary

Enrolment management is an overarching process within university systems that is at the heart of the development of a customer orientation. It utilizes a student life cycle approach to ensure the delivery of value to customers at every stage of their experience. Students' needs and expectations are determined on an ongoing basis, beginning before they actually arrive and continuing until they leave the institution. The information is used to inform service quality decisions at critical points of the life cycle. The ultimate goal of enrolment management is to provide an experience to students that matches or exceeds their expectations, so that when they eventually leave the institution they can become part of the most effective network of word-of-mouth marketers for the university. Delivering customer satisfaction is at the heart of enrolment management. Its planning thus cannot be left to chance and requires a strategic approach which utilizes research as its fundamental basis for decision-making.