The marketing strategies of universities in the United Kingdom

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Abstract
Universities in the UK are facing huge changes to their environment, in terms of both supply of funding and level of demand for their courses. One of the most dramatic recent changes has been the alteration in status of the former polytechnics to fully fledged universities. In order to find out how both old and new universities are responding to this rapidly changing environment, we sent questionnaires to a number of senior staff. Based on 131 responses (81 from old universities, 50 from new), we have been able to paint a picture of how marketing is undertaken in these two segments. We report on how these institutions perceive their markets, segments market themselves very differently, and the extent to which these two traditionally different sectors agree on the role marketing plays in their sector.

Introduction
In the past many institutions of higher education within the UK have taken a somewhat passive approach to student recruitment. Universities have relied to a large extent on selecting students from those applications that came through their student admissions department or the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). As long as demand for places at universities was greater than the universities’ ability to satisfy that demand, “marketing” the institution to attract better students or increase student enrolments was an unnecessary expense.

Times have changed. The tertiary education system in the UK is undergoing a fundamental metamorphosis. While the system used to operate as a cartel (Shattock et al., 1989), this is no longer the case, due largely to three changes to the traditional university environment. First, changes in government funding have meant that total undergraduate student numbers in any institution are effectively capped, and in addition students have to live on ever decreasing grant awards. Second, in 1992 the former polytechnics were given university status, and a wide variety of colleges and educational institutes now offer accredited or franchised university degree courses, thereby dramatically expanding the number and variety of degree courses on offer. Finally, changes in technology have lowered the cost of entering the marketplace, and which other stakeholders are important? Second, what does
“marketing orientation” mean in this environment?

At the simplest level, institutions can regard the students as their customers. After all, it is they who enter into the relationship with us. It is this paradigm of consumer sovereignty, where the focus is on the needs of the recipient of the service, that underlies the recent attempts to apply TQM methodologies to teaching practices (Hall, 1996; Lomas, 1996). This, though, raises two obvious additional problems. First, if one of the goals of marketing is to retain current customers rather than continually seek to get new ones, how does this apply to tertiary education?

The percentage of students that remain loyal to an institution and stay on to pursue postgraduate courses is certainly too small to be the focus of any institution’s marketing strategy at the undergraduate level. So there are certainly compelling reasons to regard the students as consumers, but not as customers, a fact that has been recognized by others (e.g. Moore, 1989; Conway et al., 1994; Nicholls et al., 1995). Robinson and Long (1988) distinguished between the different interested parties by categorizing them into three groups: primary (students), secondary (the “paymasters” such as government agencies and donors), and tertiary (other publics that have an interest, such as alumni, accreditation organizations, and parents). Kotler and Fox expanded upon this model by suggesting up to 16 different publics who have an “actual or potential interest in or effect on the institution” (Kotler and Fox, 1985, p. 20). These different stakeholders are shown in Figure 1.

The second problem concerns market orientation. The traditional view of marketing orientation is that “the key to achieving organizational goals consists in determining the needs and wants of ... (customers)” (Kotler, 1991, p. 16). As noted above, identifying just whom the customer is remains problematic. At the simplest perspective, if we were to assume that it is the student, then this raises the unacceptable corollary of universities teaching students what they say they want to learn. While this might appear anathema to many in the university sector, it does tend to be more widely accepted in the broader area of adult education (see, for example, Brookfield, 1986). The extent to which educational institutions must trade off matching the needs of the marketplace (Coldstream, 1989) with preserving their own perceived academic integrity and freedom is a debate familiar to any academic who has been exposed to course design.

Within the university sector, the nature of the product being “sold” has been widely debated. Kotler and Fox (1995), for example, argue that students are raw materials, graduates the product, and prospective employers the customer. Based on the earlier work of Levitt (1980), they see the universities’ offerings as being made up of different products that can be regarded as existing on three separate and distinct levels – the core, tangible, and augmented product. The most basic level is the core benefit being sought – students are not buying degrees; they are buying the benefits that a degree can provide in terms of employment, status, lifestyle, etc. At the second level, tangible attributes might include the physical layout of the campus, the library, laboratories and sporting facilities. Finally, the augmented level is made up of intangible attributes such as library membership for graduates, student loans and finance, an employment or placement service, etc.

### The marketing approach of universities

Given the changing environment within which universities operate, how is the marketing task executed? We do not wish to delve into the difference between strategic planning and marketing planning activities, but note our agreement with the approach that it is only with ... (a strategic) plan that an institution can co-ordinate and focus its various activities including its marketing (Moore, 1989, p. 118).

In a study carried out in the USA over a decade ago, the question “What is marketing?” was asked of 300 educational institution administrators, whose institutions were facing declining student enrolments, increasing costs and rising tuition fees. The results indicated that

Sixty-one percent viewed marketing as a combination of selling, advertising, and public relations. Another 21 percent said it was only one of these three activities. Only a few percent knew that marketing had something to do with needs assessment, market research, product development, pricing, and distribution (Murphy et al., as cited by Kotler and Fox, 1985, p. 6).

It appears that the same is true within the UK. There was little to no marketing activity prior to 1945, with the sector only growing significantly as a result of the Robbins report in 1963 (Moore, 1989). While various Government White Papers and Audit Commission reports called for Colleges and Local Education Authorities to become more marketing oriented (Robinson and Long, 1988; Ardley, 1994), in 1985 the Jarratt Report found that few universities were involved in systematic
marketing or strategic planning. The need to do so, however, was recognised, with Port and Burke (1989) arguing that those universities “which do not already have a ... strategy will find they have to develop one in order to succeed in the new funding competition” (1989, p. 125). The extent to which the marketing activities of universities within the UK have been undergoing fundamental changes recently has been well documented by Smith et al. (1995) who identified five phases in the development of marketing activity, culminating with the current phase of what they term “the marketing institution.” Such institutions have an integrated marketing function, increased interdepartmental co-ordination, and appropriate organizational structures. Marketing typically moves from selling the institution to a more proactive role of determining future strategies. These ideas link directly to the next section: it was our goal to see to what extent this description was true across all academic institutions in the UK.

Objectives and methodology of the study

The main objective of our investigation was to determine how universities within the UK currently market themselves. To what extent is there evidence of what Smith et al. (1995) called an “integrated marketing function”, or is the norm a more rudimentary approach to marketing? Within this overall objective, we had a number of areas of interest. These included:

- to investigate the use of strategic marketing plans in higher education;
- to establish the degree to which each of the elements of the marketing mix is used;
- to determine which elements of the marketing mix offer opportunities for marketing of higher education.

The primary research was executed through an anonymous self-completion postal survey. Based on our own insights developed during teaching marketing, and also from managerial experience in our own institutions, a questionnaire was developed and tested on a judgemental sample of our colleagues, resulting in some changes being made to clarify certain issues. Thereafter the admissions officers, public relations and marketing officers in both old and new universities in the UK were mailed a copy, with 104 universities and 44 graduate schools of business being included in the study. Three questionnaires were sent to each university, and one was sent to the marketing officer of the graduate school of business (it would therefore be possible for one university, including its graduate school of business, to return up to four questionnaires).

Out of a total of 356 questionnaires sent to 148 institutions, 131 usable responses (36.7 per cent) were received by the cut-off date, reflecting responses from 71 different
institutions. Table I indicates the make-up of the sample. There were responses from 81 “old” and 50 “new” universities, and as expected the sample was biased heavily towards those universities in England. A range of different people filled in the questionnaire. The fact that the questionnaire was passed on to an academic to complete in only 7 per cent of the cases fits the view proposed by Smith et al. (1995), with most institutions having a non-academic position covering the area of marketing. Finally, the responses were spread relatively evenly among institutions of different sizes.

**Results**

**The planning process**
The analysis showed that 75 per cent of the respondents indicated that their institution had a marketing department, the average size of which was ten people, and very few had more than 15 staff. As shown in Table II, it would appear that the need to have a strategic plan as outlined above by Moore (1989) and also by Port and Burke (1989), has been recognised: 118 of the respondents said that their institution did have a five-year strategic plan covering areas such as situation analysis, mission statement, objectives, strategies to achieve those objectives, and organizational design. A range of different people had been involved in the drawing up of this plan, as outlined in Table III. Shorter term marketing plans were not as common, with 61 per cent of respondents reporting their existence. It would appear, therefore, that the longer-term visions in the strategic plans are not accompanied by short-term plans that focus on what is to be implemented within the forthcoming year. The majority of academic departments appeared to draft their own short-term marketing plans, although there was greater uncertainty surrounding this question (i.e. 30 per cent “don’t knows”).

**Table I**
The spread of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution type</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New university</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old university</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>100</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Geographical region</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>80.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Admissions officer</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing officer</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PR officer</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other admin.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Number of mentions</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-4,999</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5,000-10,000</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,001-15,000</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 15,000</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II</th>
<th>The strategic and marketing plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does a long-term (5 year) strategic plan exist?</td>
<td>118 (90.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does a short-term (1 year) marketing plan exist?</td>
<td>80 (61.1%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do academic departments draft their own short-term marketing plans?</td>
<td>71 (54.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The effectiveness of specific aspects**
The respondents were asked to score the effectiveness of a range of up to 28 different marketing tools or features in attracting new students to their degree/diploma courses. This was done on a 5-point scale, (1 = very ineffective, 5 = very effective), and the results are shown in Figure 2. In this figure the various factors are shown according to the extent to which the old and the new universities differ.

As shown in Figure 2, if the net difference in the scores between the two types of institution was less than 0.3, we have treated them as being of equally perceived effectiveness (although it varies slightly according to the standard deviation of the particular question, it is at about this level of difference that the results are significant at the 1 per cent level). At the top of Figure 2, therefore, are those marketing tools perceived by the new universities to be more effective, while people had been involved in the drawing up of this plan, as outlined in Table III. Shorter term marketing plans were not as common, with 61 per cent of respondents reporting their existence. It would appear, therefore, that the longer-term visions in the strategic plans are not accompanied by short-term plans that focus on what is to be implemented within the forthcoming year. The majority of academic departments appeared to draft their own short-term marketing plans, although there was greater uncertainty surrounding this question (i.e. 30 per cent “don’t knows”).
those at the bottom reflect their perceived relative effectiveness to the old universities. There are seven features that new universities found more effective, ranging from offering part-time tuition through to using direct mail to schools. There were nine aspects (from the image portrayed to the public through to the research output) that were seen as more effective by the old universities. Both sectors have similar views as to the importance of a range of factors. Of these, the most effective were accreditation from professional bodies, offering a broad range of courses, geographical position or location, the use of open days, and maintaining close links with industry.

Figure 2
The effectiveness of various marketing tools

The extent to which the two types of institutions have differing perceptions is more revealing. It is clear to us that the new universities have a strategy that is based on a more aggressive strategy. They clearly see differing modes of delivery (i.e. offering part-time tuition), coupled with proactive selling of their courses (advertising, visiting schools and careers councillors, direct mail, etc.) as the means of achieving market share. The old universities, on the other hand, have a very different approach, based more on passive image management than on aggressive promotion. To them, public image, being perceived to offer top quality teaching, reputation of faculty and the related
dimension of academic reputation as well as their research output, form the cornerstones of their strategy. These conclusions were supported by the results of a discriminant analysis: although the output is not shown here, the 28 variables shown in Figure 2 could correctly classify 87 per cent of the cases as either new or old. However, when just the top and bottom three variables from Figure 2 were used, that figure dropped only marginally to 82 per cent.

Our results suggest that the Government’s move to do away with the barriers between “old” and “new” universities has not worked in that the two groups themselves have very different perspectives on their positions in the market place and how best to capture market share. In that sense, not much has changed. Table II indicates that the old universities are more traditional, trying to extract market value from their image and expertise. The new universities, on the other hand, seem to be more aggressively promoting their products.

The role of marketing

In a similar way to the question analysed above, we also asked the respondents to indicate (again on a five-point scale) the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a range of 32 comments, all of which related to their perception of the role of marketing within their own institution. The comments are shown in full in the Appendix, and the results in Table IV and Figure 3.

When examining the perceived importance of the different aspects, we can see from Table IV that there is little overall difference in perception between the two populations. In this table the scores for the two groups are divided into those that show low (less than 2.5), medium (2.5-3.5), and high (over 3.5) levels of agreement with the statements. The overriding conclusion points to the high level of overlap in perception. In no case does one group have a high level of agreement with a statement and the other a low level of agreement.

In Figure 3 we have applied a similar analytic procedure to that used in Figure 2. Again, the differences in the two sets of average scores have been calculated, and scores with a net difference of more than 0.3 identified. We can see that there are just three statements with which the new universities agree more than the old. These are 11 (“The number of applications from new students is lower this year than last year”), seven (“Marketing in this institution means advertising”) and 18 (“Setting tuition fees is outside the role of marketing at this institution”). The extent to which the new universities have a practical, hands-on approach to marketing, whereas the old universities have a more conservative approach is echoed by the results at the bottom of Figure 3. It may be seen that most of the comments relate to the extent to which older universities agree that marketing is either not relevant (statements 1, 3, 6 and 31), or else not required (given that distance learning is perceived as less of a threat). This is coupled with the fact that they still feel that they get adequate numbers of students of the calibre they want (statements 12 and 16). The extent to which the eight statements at the bottom of Figure 3 discriminate between the two data sets is shown in Table V, which was generated using discriminant analysis. As can be seen, all comments other than No. 3 (“Marketing is an abstract theory...”) had a positive discriminant score, with a resultant 75 per cent being correctly classified (using all 32 variables resulted in 82 per cent of the institutions being correctly classified).

### Conclusion

Within a short period of time conditions in the UK “have moved from a shortage of higher education, where sellers have been able to determine the conditions on which their services are provided, to a position of oversupply in which the terms are dictated by the buyers” (Shattock et al., 1989). How do the two major categories of players appear to be responding to this new environment? Does it still hold true that “many academics in educational establishments seem to feel
uncomfortable with an increasing marketing orientation, regarding marketing as too close to sordid commercialism, and expect students to compete for selection rather than institutions actively to market themselves to suitable customers" (Nicholls et al., 1995, p. 35)? Our results would suggest that this latter quotation is more likely to reflect the perspective of the old universities. As Figures 2 and 3 indicate, they appear to market themselves by doing what they consider they do best ± research and teaching in the classroom. In other words, they try to optimise the learning process once the students are in their classrooms. The new universities, on the other hand, seem to be focusing their attention on trying to influence the students’ perceptions about where to study. Given that they cannot rely on traditions of teaching and research excellence, they are adopting a more aggressive approach by actively

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Discriminant score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31 Involving prospective employers in course content would provide little additional benefit</td>
<td>31 Involve prospective employers in course content would provide little additional benefit</td>
<td>0.401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Marketing is an abstract theory that works better in profit-making industries than in higher education</td>
<td>3 Marketing is an abstract theory that works better in profit-making industries than in higher education</td>
<td>-0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Marketing planning in higher education offers little, if any, benefits to society at large</td>
<td>6 Marketing planning in higher education offers little, if any, benefits to society at large</td>
<td>0.203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Marketing plays little, if any, role in attracting students to this institution</td>
<td>1 Marketing plays little, if any, role in attracting students to this institution</td>
<td>0.209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 Distance learning institutions (like Open University) pose very little threat to our student numbers</td>
<td>22 Distance learning institutions (like Open University) pose very little threat to our student numbers</td>
<td>0.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 On the whole the academics seem satisfied with the quality of students enrolled in our programmes</td>
<td>16 On the whole the academics seem satisfied with the quality of students enrolled in our programmes</td>
<td>0.106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Demand for most of our programmes regularly outstrips the number of places we have available</td>
<td>12 Demand for most of our programmes regularly outstrips the number of places we have available</td>
<td>0.383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 New universities offering tuition in our geographic area will pose very little threat to our student numbers</td>
<td>20 New universities offering tuition in our geographic area will pose very little threat to our student numbers</td>
<td>0.718</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage correctly classified</td>
<td></td>
<td>75.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3

The attitude towards marketing

Table V

Standardised canonical discriminant function scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Discriminant score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
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<td>-0.036</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Marketing planning in higher education offers little, if any, benefits to society at large</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.209</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage correctly classified</td>
<td></td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reaching out to prospective students earlier in the decision-making process. For the new universities this strategy makes sense: the decision surrounding where to study is typically a very complex one, with there being high involvement by the prospective student in the decision, and yet also a high degree of difference between the different “products” on offer (Assael, 1981). The decision maker’s task therefore centres on how to reduce risk, and for the prospective students to hear tangible details about universities early in their decision cycle is clearly to the newer universities’ benefit.

But where does this leave the old universities if they wish to retain/increase their market share in the face of this aggressive competition? One approach is to adopt a passive strategy and hope, based on their historical positioning, that prospective students continue to apply. We consider it more likely, however, that they will need to react more aggressively. A core issues then revolves around who is responsible for the marketing task. As mentioned earlier, 75 per cent of our respondents indicated that marketing was a centralised function. But we would posit that this reflects better the position of the new universities, where marketing is a more clearly defined process (advertising, school visits, etc.). If old universities are to continue to rely on their traditional strengths of faculty, teaching, and research standing, then we would argue that it is not sufficient to rely on professional marketers to sell these very intangible benefits. They are best sold by the people involved in generating and maintaining these standards. This, of course, requires a recognition of the fundamental role played by academic staff in marketing their institutions (Ardley, 1994). We would suggest that this interpretation offers support for what Robinson and Long (1988) a decade ago described as the “Pigeon-hole” and the “Total Marketing” approaches. In the former case, marketing is the responsibility of a clearly defined number of people, while in the latter it is more pervasive throughout the organization. The problem in the latter case, of course, is to manage and control the extent to which marketing is effectively done, with all the contingent implications for staff training (Michael, 1990). Persuading senior academics to be involved in marketing their institutions will not be easy, given the perceptions of marketing in old universities shown at the bottom of Table III. However, we would argue that this is a necessary task, if old universities are to prevent the newer, more aggressive players growing their market share. The old universities can no longer be complacent in their belief that they will continue to attract sufficient students of the desired quality.

References
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The International Journal of Educational Management

13/3 [1999] 126–134


Appendix

The role of marketing

1 Marketing plays little, if any, role in attracting students to this institution.
2 Marketing has been a major factor in raising the quality of education in our institution.
3 Marketing is an abstract theory that works better in profit-making industries than in higher education.
4 Marketing is a philosophy that has been enthusiastically adopted by this institution.
5 Marketing has had little impact on the day to day operations of this institution.
6 Marketing planning in higher education offers few, if any, benefits to society at large.
7 Marketing in this institution means “advertising”.
8 Marketing plans are drafted, but are seldom put into practice.
9 Interest in marketing only occurs prior to new student enrolments, just before the start of the academic year.
10 Academic institutions that are currently not developing marketing plans will be doing so in the not too distant future.
11 The number of applications from new students is lower this year than last year. (UCAS system has changed.)
12 Demand for most of our programmes regularly outstrips the number of places we have available.
13 Research on prospective requirements by universities is unnecessary, as so many young people have few ideas as to what they want to do anyway.
14 Student needs are secondary to those prospective employers.
15 Researching student “drop outs” is being conducted by this situation.
16 On the whole the academics see satisfied with the quality of students enrolled in our programmes.
17 Enrollments (by programme) are an effective measurement of programme performance.
18 Setting tuition fees is outside the role of marketing at this institution.
19 A Department’s financial contribution to the institution is the most effective measure of that Department’s performance.
20 New universities offering tuition in our geographic area will pose very little threat to our student numbers.
21 Students in our geographic area have very little choice as to where they can study.
22 Distance learning institutions (like Open University) pose very little threat to our student numbers.
23 Analysis of competitor institutions is an important component of our marketing planning.
24 Most deans and departmental heads would not know how to write a marketing plan if asked.
25 Academic department heads are there because they are scholars, not managers.
26 Academics have little or no involvement in marketing planning at this institution.
27 Academics only get involved in marketing when it comes to attracting postgraduate and research students.
28 Most deans and departmental heads are already writing marketing plans to attract postgraduate students.
29 Deans and department chairs do not have the time to write formal plans.
30 Academics will only get excited about marketing if it means more research funding.
31 Involving prospective employers in course content would provide little additional benefit.
32 In the event that there is a conflict between satisfying students’ needs and educational objectives, educational objectives should be the overriding consideration.