Higher Education Marketing:
Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital Era

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Abstract

The higher educational institutions (HEIs), including universities and colleges are increasingly seeking new resources, competences and capabilities to improve their corporate reputation. Therefore, this paper has relied on a generic approach to critically analyze the marketing environment of HEIs. A SWOT analysis was used to examine the micro and the macro environmental factors that can have an effect on their delivery of student-centered education and on their capacity to produce high-impact and influential research publications that will ultimately add value to society. The findings of this research suggest that several HEIs are diversifying their portfolios as they are increasingly recruiting domestic and international students. Hence, this contribution deliberates on traditional and contemporary marketing communications that are being used in different contexts to attract students and prolific faculty employees to HEIs. Moreover, it explains that successful HEIs are capable of forging fruitful and collaborative relationships with different stakeholders, including business, industry, as well as with research institutions in order to improve their academic branding. These issues imply that tomorrow's HEIs ought to leverage themselves through effective marketing communications amid intensifying competition.

Keywords

Marketing Communications; Higher Education; Higher Education Marketing; Higher Education Institutions; Internationalization; Stakeholders; University.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are influenced by political and socio-economic changes in their marketing environment (Beine, Noël and Ragot, 2014; Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Mazzarol, 1998). Currently, they are witnessing reduced student mobility figures and facing intensifying competition from education service providers that are operating from different markets (Schofield, Cotton, Gresty, Kneale and Winter, 2013; Banks and Bhandari, 2012). For example, global HEIs are currently affected by adverse demographic trends as the annual growth in outbound student numbers is expected to decline from 6% to 1.7% per year till 2027 (British Council, 2018). Hence, HEIs need to articulate well laid-out policies and plans that will enable them to remain competitive for their economic growth (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016; Kotler and Fox, 1995). Their strategies may possibly consider the diversification of their student base; by recruiting international students for their home campuses (Lee, 2014). Alternatively, they may decide to deliver their educational services through satellite campuses (Friga, Bettis and Sullivan, 2003) in new markets. Thus, it may appear that the internationalization of many HEIs has become an imperative for their long-term prospects (Schofield et al., 2013), particularly for those that are operating in quasi-market environments (Bowl and Hughes, 2016).

Various HEIs are behaving like for-profit organizations as they often seek to increase their funds and resources to prioritize revenue creation (Budde-Sung, 2011; Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley, 2019). Very often, they internationalize and become global HEIs, in terms of faculty and students as they customize their curricula in different contexts. Global HEIs may decide to target international students because they are willing to pay higher tuition fees than their domestic counterparts (Chen, 2008; Altbach, 2004; Lee, 2014). Moreover, such institutions offer their

higher education services to a large number of students as they can provide alternate modes of delivery for their courses. For instance, many British and North American HEIs are increasingly providing distance and online learning modules in different developing countries (British Council, 2018; Schofield, Cotton, Gresty, Kneale and Winter, 2013). Therefore, there is scope for the international as well as for local HEIs to promote their higher educational services through traditional and contemporary marketing communications in order to attract domestic and international students, as well as competent faculty staff to deliver their courses (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016; Friga et al., 2003).

1.1 Research Question

This contribution uses a generic approach to assess the HEIs' internal strengths and weaknesses, as it considered the opportunities and threats coming from their external environment. Following a critical review of the current situation, this review paper presents a non-exhaustive list of contemporary marketing communications tactics that can be used by HEI marketing practitioners to promote their educational services. It explains how HEIs can make use of traditional and digital media to attract prospective students and prolific members of staff.

2. Background

HEIs are facing intensifying competition in different markets, as they operate in a global scenario. Therefore, they are encouraged to attract international students to increase their revenues (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Russell, 2005). The universities may diversify their student populations by expanding the recruitment of students within their home campuses

and/or by entering foreign countries with satellite campuses ((Lee, 2014; Harman, 2004; Friga et al., 2003). Thus, the universities need to adopt a consumerist approach whilst taking into account the environmental factors (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016). Relevant literature suggests that the HEIs' performance is shaped by many entities at both supranational and national levels (Estermann, Nokkala and Steinel, 2011; Maton, 2005). Estermann (2017) contended that the universities' political autonomy and academic freedom is a fundamental pre-requisite to be able to develop their strategic profiles. Similarly, the European University Association has also called on the national governments to refrain from interfering with the universities' autonomy and accountability (EUA, 2017), as public authorities can exert their political influence through their funding mechanisms, and processes, that can have an effect on their management.

Altbach (2004) argued that educational institutions ought to organize fundraising activities that target companies and alumni. The author contended that HEIs could promote their continuous professional development opportunities as they can deliver courses to executives (Wuestewald, 2016). Notwithstanding, the challenging economic context can also have an impact on the HEI's financial management, staffing matters and organizational aspects (Estermann, 2017) The universities increased autonomy, self-organization, and accountability (Hoecht, 2006) has brought some level of privatization within the higher education sector. These developments have facilitated the entrance of new players in the higher education (Altbach et al., 2019).

However, universities may not always be market oriented. Like businesses and for-profit organizations, they are expected to differentiate themselves, by delivering high quality, educational services (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016). Russell (2005) argued that the universities' infrastructures, including their classrooms and resources are also an important determinant for the students' perceptions about higher education and service quality. She made reference to

specific aspects such as the HEIs' campuses, their physical assets, their surrounding environment, as well as other things that can influence customer perceptions, including; course prospectuses, web sites, exhibition stands, stationery and business cards, among other issues. These are very important elements for prospective students, particularly for those who are not able to visit the university campus prior to committing themselves to enroll in a specific institution.

Kotler and Fox (1995) argued that the general public may usually form images of HEIs that can inevitably affect the likelihood of students attending or recommending specific institutions to others. In a similar vein, Paramewaran and Glowacka (1995) held that higher educational institutions need to portray a distinct image to create a competitive advantage. HEIs need to enhance their corporate reputation if they want to improve their brand equity in the minds of their students. Mazzarol's (1998) research reported that the institutions in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and US enjoyed a good image and reputation in terms of fostering a culture of innovation, while Bharadwaj, Varadarajan and Fahy (1993) had emphasized the importance of organizational learning and expertise as a source of competitive advantage among higher education service providers. These studies suggested that students' decisions when selecting courses were based on positive word of mouth publicity and from past experiences of successful alumni. The universities' service quality relies on "human actors" who are entrusted to deliver credible statements of their real-life experiences (Quyen, 2009).

The universities' classes are usually be composed of diverse students hailing from different cultures, beliefs and geographical backgrounds. This is becoming a global phenomenon that has led to drastic shifts in the students' expectations regarding their classroom experience (Budde-Sung, 2011; Altbach et al., 2019; Friga et al., 2003). The international students will add value to

their host institutions, as local students embrace cultural diversity and social inclusion (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). Kotler and Fox (1995) contended that the HEIs' main focus of attention should be on increasing their service quality whilst delivering "perceived excellence". Customer satisfaction correlates with perceived quality (or attitude towards the HEIs' services) which will ultimately affect their profitability (Duque, 2014; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Cronin and Taylor, 1992). For this reason, the HEIs need to enhance their prestige and status (Collins and Park, 2016). If they do so, international students should be willing to pay higher prices. In a similar vein, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) held that the product and pricing variables ought to be considered when HEIs formulate their market penetration strategies. HEIs need to expand their interactions with key stakeholders whilst co-creating value with them (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016). Like other for-profit businesses, HEIs ought to nurture relationships with a range of stakeholders, including; students and their parents, policy makers, employers as well as with other universities and colleges (Matlay and Rae, 2007).

Previous literature reported that successful HEIs attract international students by lowering tuition fees; through the provision of scholarships, and by improving their service quality to their students (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013; Chen, 2008; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002). HEIs may also benefit of marketing communications, including broadcast, digital and outdoor advertising, sales promotions, personal selling, direct marketing, interactive marketing, public relations and publicity, to raise awareness of their educational services. They may use positive word of mouth publicity from their very own students and alumni (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Mazzarol, 1998). The advances in technology can provide significant opportunities for HEIs to leverage themselves through the Internet and web technologies (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016; Henrie,

Halverson and Graham, 2015). Many universities are already addressing the increased demand for distance learning education that cannot be fully met through offline channels (Schofield et al., 2013). Therefore, the utilization of interactive media can also result in significant cost savings, as the transition from physical to digital solutions improves the student learning experience (Moore and Kearsley, 2011). Notwithstanding, today's students are becoming very acquainted with the use of ubiquitous, mobile technologies in different educational levels (Camilleri and Camilleri, 2017; 2009). Therefore, it is in the interest of HEIs to keep up to date with the latest innovations. The advances in technologies are also having a significant effect on the HEIs' marketing environment, along with other factors.

3. The HEIs' Marketing Environment

This section presents a SWOT analysis of the marketing environment in higher education. A generic approach is being used to examine the strengths and weaknesses of different educational institutions without identifying specific universities and/or colleges (Helms and Nixon, 2010; Marginson, 2006). This critical analysis sheds light on possible opportunities and threats that may arise for HEIs from the political, regulatory, socio-economic and technological factors, as they can affect their performance and long-term prospects.

3.1 Strengths

- HEIs raise their financial capital requirements by charging tuition fees to full time, part time and distance learning students; Government-funded HEIs may provide free or reduced tuition fees (Pennell and West, 2005).;

- Many international courses are taught in English; The English language has become an important lever for international student mobility (ICEF, 2017; Jon, Lee and Byun, 2014);

- Several HEIs provide work-integrated education as they deliver pragmatic, application-oriented programs (Powell, Graf, Bernhard, Coutrot, and Kieffer, 2012; Eames and Cates, 2011; Cooper, Orrell and Bowden, 2010). Work-integrated education supports students to become all-round professionals with an appropriate level of operational experience (Eames and Cates, 2011). It equips students with a thorough understanding of the business and industry's operations (Cooper et al., 2010; Matlay and Rae, 2007). At the same time, the students obtain communicative and transferable skills that will be valuable for their development (Crebert, Bates, Bell, Patrick and Cragnolini, 2004). The focus is to help them acquire a range of valuable generic abilities, including people-skills through interactions with peers, subordinates and supervisors (Blackwell, Bowes, Harvey, Hesketh and Knight, 2001). After their working period, the students will be in a position to apply the theories that they have learnt in real-life settings (Cooper et al., 2010). Hence, students develop their knowledge and skills in a professional environment, whilst increasing the chances of their employability prospects (Kolb and Kolb, 2005);

- HEIs are increasingly establishing international collaboration agreements with other educational institutions, across borders (Hughes, 2012; Harman, 2004). These agreements enable student exchange programs and field trips (Beine et al., 2014);

- HEIs are building their alumni networks over the years (Gallo, 2013). Many of their students have become business and industry professionals after graduating from their universities and colleges.

- HEIs are often engaging with business and industry as they provide their consultancy and research services (O'Leary, 2015; Matlay and Addis, 2003);

- HEIs offer executive development programs to industry practitioners, allowing them to update their skills, and to broaden their knowledge (Wuestewald, 2016; Ballou, Bowers, Boyatzis and Kolb, 1999).

3.2 Weaknesses

- Many HEIs are not managed as profitable organizations (Marginson, 2013; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006.);

- The unionization of academic employees in trade associations. This issue can have (positive as well as) negative effects on the competitiveness of HEIs (Strike, 2005). The unions may use their bargaining power on the universities' administration departments to reduce the productivity of their human resources;

- HEIs can be slow to respond to the ongoing changes in the business and industry. They may need to adapt their curricula and courses to better meet the prospective employers' requirements (Matlay and Rae, 2007);

- The academic employees' work overload. The academics may be allocated more teaching duties and responsibilities (e.g. longer contact hours with students) than their counterparts hailing from other institutions (Quyen, 2009);

- The academic members' poor publishing productivity. The HEIs' faculty staff may not publish adequate and sufficient research (when compared to other institutions) (Shahbazi-Moghadam, Salehi., Ale Ebrahim, Mohammadjafari and Gholizadeh, 2015);

- The HEIs' expensive tuition fees. Prospective students may be attracted to competitive institutions who are offering cheaper tuition fees (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Pennell and West, 2005). The international prospects will consider the HEIs' locations and their living expenses (Chen, 2008);

- The HEIs' international marketing efforts may be focusing on limited catchment areas. They may be overlooking promising markets (Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011).

3.3 Opportunities

- HEIs may use educational technologies to improve their students' learning experiences (Camilleri and Camilleri, 2017; 2019). Educational technologies could enhance the quality of online courses, particularly those that are offered to part-time, or distance learning students (Henrie et al., 2015);

- HEIs can utilize blogs, RSS feeds, podcasts, wikis, electronic fora, webinars, et cetera to reach their target audiences (Hsu, 2007). They may use social media and word of mouth marketing by communicating student testimonials, online reviews and ratings, in order to attract students from different markets (Dumpit and Fernandez, 2017; Kuzma and Wright, 2013);

- HEIs could incentivize their educators and researchers to participate in academic conferences and to publish their work in highly indexed journals (Shahbazi-Moghadam et al., 2015);
- The setting up of research (or special interest) groups could improve collaboration and teamwork among the HEIs' members of staff (Hughes, 2012);
- HEIs' academics should be encouraged to become members in editorial boards of leading journals;
- HEIs can offer high-level consultancy and professional advisory services to private and public organizations (Matlay and Addis, 2003);
- HEIs may organize international conferences and fora that can be used as a platform for insightful exchange amongst academics, industry practitioners and policy makers;
- HEIs can engage with alumni by involving them in social events, webinars and continuous professional development programs (Gallo, 2013);
- Industry professionals can be invited to speak to students in specific lectures. These experts may help students gain a deeper understanding of the industry;
- HEIs' academia should be encouraged to share their research expertise with business and industry to pioneer developments. They should promote their research outputs (Duque, 2014; Parameswaran and Glowacka, 1995). Relevant research can enhance industry performance and influence policy making (Bozeman and Youtie, 2017);
- HEIs can extend collaborative agreements with reputable education institutions in many disciplines (Hughes, 2012);

- HEIs can obtain quality assurance and accreditations from international awarding bodies. The recognition of their courses would require a thorough assessment of their leadership, curriculum programs and skills, assessment methods, project work, student placements, student support, feedback, resources, et cetera (Crebert et al., 2004; Blackwell et al., 2001);

- The HEIs' international admissions pages should evidence their 'global perspective' and could highlight their extensive range of services that are offered to international students (Shah, Bennett and Southgate, 2015; Banks and Bhandari, 2012). For example, their course prospectuses should be made available in different languages;

- HEIs can target mature students. The concept of life-long learning is increasingly being promoted in developing as well as in advanced economies (Mallman and Lee, 2016);

- There are still untapped markets in parts of Asia and Africa, where students can't access quality education at home. The youth population is rising in the African continent (British Council, 2018);

- The HEIs' international students can be featured as brand ambassadors in marketing communications (Choudaha, 2016; Bélanger, Bali and Longden, 2014);

- HEIs may be supported by student scholarships (from governments, foundations or NGOs) and sponsorships that may be donated by industry partners (Callender and Wilkinson, 2013).

3.4 Threats

- Many HEIs' national governments have already decreased (or cut) their public funding to HEIs (Estermann, 2017; Estermann, Nokkala and Steinel, 2011; Hoecht, 2006; Maton, 2005). Therefore, HEIs may have to raise their capital requirements through tuition fees and fund-raising activities (Pennell and West, 2005);

- The provision of higher education is very competitive (in the global market). HEIs are increasingly targeting international students from various markets (Choudaha, 2016; Chen, 2008; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006);

- Many countries (including developing economies) have improved (or are improving) their higher educational systems. However, there may still be students who decide to go abroad because they believe that there is neither capacity nor high-quality education at their home country (ICEF, 2017);

- The demographic changes in the world can have an effect on the HEIs. Many countries have aging populations with greater life expectancies. At the same time, these countries may usually have lower fertility rates. Therefore, the 15-to-24-year-old cohorts are shrinking. For instance, the college-aged demographic will shortly peak in Asia somewhere around 2020. Then it will start a gradual decline from 2021 (British Council, 2018);

- There may be political, socio-cultural and legal factors that can have an effect on HEIs. International students may face travel restrictions. Rigorous travel formalities including the issuance of national visas and immigration policies can affect the students' choice of their prospective HEI (Harman, 2014);

- Reduced scholarships and student exchange programs from foreign governments can have an impact on the number of students who can afford international mobility (Callender, and Wilkinson, 2013; Mok, 2012; Beine, et al., 2014);

- A growing number of Asian students are choosing to stay within their own region to study (Mok, 2012): and students from other countries – including those hailing from African nations are considering Asian destinations to their list of attractive options. Asian countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore and Malaysia, among others, are increasing their capacity to absorb international students. Students and families are placing more emphasis on value, and on the return on investment from overseas education. Therefore, students may opt to study close to their home (Banks and Bhandari, 2012);

- There are growing indications that major employers are placing less emphasis on reputable HEIs and their brand identities (ICEF, 2017).

4. The HEIs' Integrated Marketing Communications

The HEIs may use different promotional tools to help them achieve their marketing communication goals and objectives (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Of course, they have to allocate adequate financial resources to carry out their marketing activities, so that all touch points will convey consistent messages to their desired target audience (Hemsley-Brown, Lowrie and Chapleo, 2010). Hence, HEIs ought to consider their (i) market, (ii) mission, (iii) message, (iv) media, (v) money and (vi) measurement, whenever they use their marketing communications tools (Camilleri, 2017):

4.1 The Market

The market comprises competitors and customers. The competitors are other HEIs who are targeting prospective students. The customers include domestic and international college students, as well as employees who pursue life-long learning opportunities and continuous professional training and development (Mallman and Lee, 2016; Ballou et al., 1999).

4.2 The Mission

The marketing objectives may include increased sales volumes, market share, return on investment, and profitability. The communication objectives may include raising awareness of the courses that offered on campus, or via distance learning; increasing the prospective students' knowledge about the universities' key features and attributes, et cetera (Camilleri, 2017). The latter objectives are related to the hierarchy of effects model, which map out the response process of prospective students before choosing their host university or college. One premise of this process is that the marketing communications take time to yield results. Another aspect of this model is that different elements of IMC can be very effective and specifically targeted at integral steps in the response process. For example, advertising is an excellent tool to communicate information about educational services. Public relations may be used to generate interest and desire. Personal selling through open-day events at the HEIs' premises (which would necessitate face-to-face interactions) may be used to convert preference and conviction into purchase (Camilleri, 2017).

4.3 The Message

The HEIs ought to adapt their promotional content to specific markets. Educational institutions would better use the local language of their prospective students. They should consider their prospects' socio-cultural norms, beliefs and expectations before formulating their marketing messages. Hence, HEIs may decide to test their promotional content with various groups of students in order to ensure that their message is clear and effective for their target market; before launching their marketing campaigns (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2010). Afterwards, the HEIs will be in a position to promote their quality higher educational services, for example: (i) student-centered teaching culture (Quyen, 2009); (ii) work-integrated education for full time students, as part of their academic work (Crebert et al., 2004); (iii) family friendly measures to attract and retain academic employees; (iv) ongoing training opportunities and continuous professional development of executives and human resources from business and industry (v) the proliferation of high impact research, particularly in the fields of critical importance for the benefit of society and the environment (Bozeman and Youtie, 2017; Shahbazi-Moghadam et al., 2015; Callender and Wilkinson, 2013); (vi) the development of collaborative relationships with other reputable HEIs, organizations and institutions to enhance the quality and stature of academic disciplines or fields (Hughes, 2012); (vii) the engagement with key stakeholders, including the government and its policy makers, as well as with business and industry; (viii) encouraging undergraduate students to pursue post-graduate studies; (ix) fostering a diverse workplace, student body, and staff in terms of gender, race and ethnicity; (x) recruiting new PhDs and "rising stars".

4.4 The Media

The higher education marketers who possess a generous budget may have access to an arsenal of communication options, including electronic media (TV and radio): print media (newspapers and magazines): direct-mail solicitations, telemarketing, personal selling, public relations and the web, among others. One medium is seldom enough to reach segments. The choice of media depends on a number of factors, including: (i) the markets which are being targeted; (ii) the combination of media which will be the most effective to the target markets; (iii) the amount of money that is dedicated to the marketing communications budget, which can be affected by the decisions made in (i) and (ii).

4.4.1 Advertising

HEIs can advertise in print media in different countries. Newspapers and magazines can report news releases that promote the HEIs' credentials, in terms of quality educational programs, high impact research, as they may provide relevant information on the institutions' engagement with stakeholders, including business and industry. Moreover, digital advertising can deliver effective results for the marketing of HEIs, for far less of an investment. For example, the Pay-Per-Click (PPC) advertising is often used to target potential markets, as the sponsor only incurs an expense when prospects click on the online banner. However, before launching the PPC campaigns and their related analytics, the HEIs should improve their landing pages to specific sites that would appeal to online prospects; who are seeking information on particular degrees and academic programs.

4.4.2 Direct Marketing via Digital and Mobile Technologies

The HEIs' website should be accessible through different devices; via desktop computers, smart phones, tablets, et cetera. The online content is optimized for mobile-device usage as many international students are mobile-exclusive. Hence, HEIs should communicate relevant details of their selling propositions, in different languages. They can provide information on course admissions; collaborative agreements with stakeholders; student mobility; research opportunities; et cetera (Jon et al., 2014; Mok, 2012; Hughes, 2012). International students will also require factual data, on tuition and bench fees, as well as on study and work permits, among other issues (Pennell and West, 2005).

The HEIs' web sites could offer personalized, interaction facilities in real time, through live chat services. They can use web-conferencing via easily accessible tools like Skype or Google Hangouts to engage with prospective students in their queries, or to address their concerns, share documents or videos, and guide them through relevant webpages, via co-browsing. HEI marketers can organize webinars for prospective students and their parents. Moreover, the HEIs' website could feature student testimonials, including reviews and ratings that may serve as proof that they are providing an adequate level of service to their scholars. The positive experiences from the students themselves, will help them attract new ones.

The HEIs' web sites should be structured and well designed, in terms of clear, legible formats. Their content should be as appealing as possible to online users. They could feature a good selection of high res-images, videos, podcasts, et cetera. They may also incorporate the Google Maps Street View or Oculus Rift virtual reality technology as they allow their prospects to visualize the HEIs' premises. Attractive websites could entice visitors to fill subscriber lists in order to receive electronic newsletters and promotional material, via email. This direct marketing

tactic enables HEIs to communicate directly with prospective students through a variety of media like electronic newsletters, mobile messaging apps, websites, online and offline catalogues and promotional letters, among other options. The HEIs' direct marketing endeavors are intended to create one-to-one personal relationships with prospective students.

In this day and age, the engine behind direct marketing is usually a sophisticated database. The collection of data is growing at an exponential rate as it is continuously stored, in massive amounts, by search engines, including Google and Bing, among others. The advances in technology are increasingly allowing marketers to know more about their audiences. For instance, marketers are benefiting from the growth of geo-location data services like satellites, near-field communication and global positioning systems that track the users' movements that measure traffic and other real-time phenomena. New anonymous cookie-less data-capture methods are connecting the consumers' data with geolocation-based data (Camilleri, 2019). These methods are increasingly empowering marketers as they use Google's and Bing's Business Solutions, to hyper-target online users with real-time mobile ad campaigns to drive conversions. For example, the HEIs' marketers can use Google AdWords to know about the most popular search terms, as they could identify which ads are converting prospects. AdWords identifies the combinations of keywords and messages that are the most effective in particular markets. In addition, Google Analytics enables the HEIs to have an accurate picture of their web activity. As a result, they will be in a position to track and monitor their online marketing effectiveness, whilst customizing their communications.

4.4.3 User-Generated Content, Interactive Marketing and Social Media

HEIs can also use external websites and online portals that feature user-generated content that promote their higher education courses, in different contexts. For example, Wikipedia pages can reach broad audiences, and they enjoy high credibility with search engines.

Moreover, HEIs can engage with prospective students through conversations, informal surveys and informational posts that are intended to improve interactions with online users. Communications on social networks, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter and LinkedIn, among others can be used to filter unqualified prospects (Camilleri, 2019). These networks may reveal interesting insights on their prospects' language proficiencies, interests and on their perceptions about the HEIs' brand image. Social media provides an opportunity to HEIs to improve their brand awareness (Bélanger et al., 2014; Kuzma and Wright, 2013; Constantinides and Zinck Stagno, 2011). Therefore, they need to establish their presence on social media platforms in different markets (Xu, Kang, Song and Clarke, 2015).

HEIs are increasingly relying on the most popular social networks as interested prospects may be intrigued to share and spread promotional content online. Such digital marketing stimuli may result in social contagion by means of e-mails, posts, likes, tweets, mentions, et cetera (Camilleri, 2019). This would lead to a viral dispersion of the HEIs' marketing messages as effective marketing campaigns may trigger a strong emotional response among prospects. Therefore, HEIs may leverage themselves through word-of-mouth (WOM) publicity on social networks (Dumpit and Fernandez, 2017). For instance, they could join WeChat and Sina Weibo to target Chinese prospects (Xu et al., 2015).

4.4.4 Public Relations and Publicity

The testimonials of students or alumni would probably reveal meaningful information on the quality of educational institutions or on the effectiveness of their curriculum programs (Gallo, 2013). These communications may be available in different languages in order to provide peer affirmations to a wide array of local and international students. The videos of the students' referrals that aren't scripted may appear as more authentic than professionally edited marketing material. Such word-of-mouth publicity may prove to be more credible and trust-inspiring than academic awards, accreditations, or past statistical information. HEIs may feature the success stories of their former alumni who are now engaged in key government or corporate positions (Gallo, 2013). They may provide internship programs to their former HEIs' students. At the same time, they may benefit from a talent pool of promising students.

HEIs can improve their brand equity by organizing public relations activities on campus, including summer camps, open day events, et cetera (Bélanger et al., 2014). They can attract international students from different markets to follow academic courses in specific disciplines.

4.4.5 Personal Selling

The positive or negative word-of-mouth publicity could affect the prospective students' perceptions about HEIs. Therefore, front office employees in the HEIs' admissions departments would be in an excellent position to engage in two-way communications with potential students. The HEIs' administrative employees must be aware that they are 'selling' the university when they provide their technical support to prospective applicants and helping them with their queries. They may also need to be proficient on how to handle complaints. Therefore, the HEIs' front office employees ought to be trained about customer services on a regular basis.

5. The Money

How much will be budgeted for each and every marketing tool? Many HEIs that are based in particular regions of the world, including the Middle East, and South East Asia, may still rely on the budget allocation from their national governments. Alternatively, there may be semi-autonomous universities in the advanced economies such as in Europe, who are increasingly raising their capital requirements through fund raising from corporations and foundations, et cetera (Broucker and De Wit, 2015). However, HEIs should continuously seek new and diversified funding methods (Altbach et al., 2019). Their potential sources of income may include tuition fees for courses, national and international research grants from institutions, as well as 'other' income opportunities that could be obtained from consultancy, specialized courses, knowledge exchange / technology transfer, et cetera (Matlay, and Addis, 2003). The HEIs can possibly engage in collaborative agreements with reputable research institutes to benefit from the pooling of institutional resources and expertise (Hughes, 2012).

6. The Measurement

Very often, HEIs claim that their graduates are finding rewarding careers following the completion of their degrees (Matlay and Rae, 2007). These statements need to be substantiated with evidence. As a matter of fact, the students' career outcomes are often considered as one of the most important factors that will influence their decision to choose a university over another. This is particularly true for many disciplines and recruitment markets. Therefore, HEIs should regularly monitor and evaluate their progress against their set priorities, commitments, and aims, by using relevant performance indicators, benchmarks, and targets (Camilleri, 2017).

HEIs should measure the performance and successes of their marketing strategies. Key metrics could analyze and measure student enrolment ratios, graduate rates, student drop-out rates, the students' continuation of studies (at the next academic level), the employability index of graduates, etc. (QS Rankings, 2019). Other metrics may involve the calculation of their costs per credit, costs per degree and student-faculty ratio, among others (THE, 2019).

HEIs may want to find out the students' opinions and perceptions toward their host institutions. This data can be used to identify the HEIs' strengths and identify other areas that may require further improvement. Qualitative research may shed light on the HEIs' progress on planned goals, objectives, and strategic initiatives. These insights could provide valuable data on the students' opinions and perceptions of their learning environments. Conversely, HEIs may explore the students' attitudes through quantitative research that will analyze courses (including undergraduate, graduate, and professional). Survey instruments could measure the students' satisfaction with teaching and with research opportunities. They could reveal the students' attitudes on international and public engagement opportunities and ease of taking courses across boundaries and investigate whether there are any administrative / bureaucratic barriers at their respective HEI.

Other metrics may evaluate the HEIs' strategic priorities and initiatives, including ongoing assessments of academic and administrative staff, and their retention rates. They may track changes in faculty size and outline the age distribution of academic employees and the diversity of students and staff, in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, et cetera. HEIs could examine discipline-specific rankings; and may involve a continuous scrutinization of courses, research output, reviews of expenditures per academic member of staff, et cetera (Hazelkorrn ,2007).

In addition, more and more institutions are keeping a track record of their alumni, although they may not always differentiate between the outcomes for domestic and international students (Choudaha, 2016). However, they will probably report on the cohort of students' career progression following the completion of their education. HEIs often mention specific companies that have employed their graduates (Matlay and Rae, 2007). In addition, HEIs may gather data on the international students' attitudes toward housing and determine if they are happy in their new location.

HEIs may have a good reputation in specific regions or countries. Nevertheless, international students will usually rely on the international rankings to quickly understand the quality of HEI institutions and their educational programs (Hughes, 2012; Hazelkorn, 2007). They may come across "league tables", such as the Academic Ranking of World Universities from Shanghai Jiao Tong rankings; Times Higher Education World University Rankings; "Professional ranking" of world universities from the École des Mines de Paris or QS rankings, among others. These rankings may usually adopt a number of metrics and key performance indicators to classify HEIs (Hazelkorn, 2007).

7. Discussion and Conclusions

Global HEIS are increasingly using marketing strategies and tactics as they compete for domestic and international students in different contexts (Ngok, 2007; Mok, 2001). They do so as they operate like for-profit organizations in a quasi-market environment (Bowl and Hughes, 2016). Generally, the marketisation of higher education is becoming less dependent on state control and government intervention, although there are still a few exceptions in some regions,

around the world. In response to these challenges, HEIs need to understand the marketing environment. In this light, this contribution has addressed its underlying research questions as it puts forward a strategic analysis of the marketing environment in the higher educational context. It has presented a critical appraisal of the HEIs' internal strengths and weaknesses. At the same time, it examined their external opportunities and threats from the external factors. Arguably, not all HEIs, are responding to the political, regulatory, socio-economic and technological changes in the marketing environment, in a timely manner. Some HEIs who are still benefiting of public funding, may not have an urgency to differentiate themselves from their competitors.

This paper's SWOT analysis has suggested that HEIs need to keep investing in resources, competences and capabilities to attract students and academic employees to improve their financial and strategic performance. HEIs' long term sustainability is dependent on the enrolment of domestic and foreign students and the recruitment of prolific academic members of staff who are actively contributing with other scholars in high impact research (Beine et al., 2014; Hughes, 2012). For these reasons, the HEIs ought to be acquainted with the most effective marketing channels if they want to garner a larger share of the international market. Today, there are many HEIs that are relying on big data and analytics to tap into new market segments in different contexts (Camilleri, 2017). Very often they are articulating well laid-out integrated marketing communications plans that are intended to provide them with the right pathways for expansion and growth. This contribution has elaborated how leading HEIs are resorting to various marketing communications tactics, including advertising and promotions through traditional and interactive media to raise awareness of their quality educational services and excellent contributions in reputable academic journals. It clarified that HEIs should utilize

strategic marketing communications channels to promote their educational services in different markets to achieve a sustained competitive advantage over other institutions. This way, they will be in a better position to increase their brand equity among prospective students and faculty employees. However, it is imperative that HEIs ensure that their standards, values and quality claims are substantiated, year after year.

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