Chapter 13
Marketing and Reputation in the Services Sector: Higher Education in South Africa and Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades the tertiary sector has developed from a predominantly inward focussed industry serving public interest to an internationalised and commercially competitive industry. Resulting from this fundamental change is a drive to better understand the most prominent dimensions that impact on internationalisation, more particularly, the expectations and experiences of students. Although some of these can be argued to be country specific, and thus differentiate between markets, others are universal and impact on the overall industry. One of the latter is a pressure to consider and treat students as clients introducing all the dynamics of service delivery and management. The primary objective of this paper is to identify the most important variables related to marketing and reputation issues when selecting a university in South-Africa and compare the same for Singapore students. This study revealed that the most important consideration for the South African sample, regarding marketing and reputation related variables when choosing an institution of higher education, is the academic reputation of the institution, while the marketing activities were regarded as priority by the Singaporean sample.

INTRODUCTION

Various studies emphasize the tendency of universities referring to their students as customers (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Comm & Mathaisel, 2005; Ho & Hung, 2008) and the increasing importance of comparing educational systems (Wang et al., 2009) and the impact on service providers. Michael (2004) emphasises the vital role of higher education management based on a solid understanding of its fundamental impact on management thoughts and practices currently prevalent in higher education systems. The increased level
of competition in the education environment has led to institutions of higher education employing managerial techniques to improve the efficiency and quality of their provisions (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Palihawadana, 1999) and a switch from a passive to a more active market approach (Ivy, 2008). Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006, p. 316) emphasizes that in the context of increasing competition for home-based and overseas students, higher educational institutions now recognize the need to market themselves in a climate of international competitiveness.

If universities are to satisfy student’s requirements they should be aware of their own offerings and how these are perceived in the market place. It is important for institutional policy makers to be aware of the influential factors and the associated impact on potential students (Eagle & Brennan, 2007; Moogan & Baron, 2001, p. 197). This impact also refers to the influence of the product offerings on the overall reputation that an institution of higher education builds over a period of time (Gotsi & Wilson, 2001).

In order to maintain students as loyal customers a marketing orientation approach should be followed, implying that various aspects should be taken into consideration. This includes the satisfaction of consumers’ needs, the wellbeing of the society and achieving objects over the long term, including profit. This study will mainly investigate the level of importance of some elements of the product offering of two universities, one in South Africa and one in Singapore, to their students. The influence of these elements on the overall reputation of the universities will also be investigated.

MARKETING PRACTICES AND REPUTATION IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR

Flavian, Torres, and Guinaliu (2004) argue that large numbers of competitors in a global environ-
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