

MARKETING FOR STUDENT RECRUITMENT IN YOUR FACULTY: THE BIG PICTURE

This HECG Paper argues that university Faculties should and can take a lead role in recruiting their students rather than abdicating the responsibility and leaving it entirely in the hands of centralized recruitment offices. It contends that recruiting students ought to be a process that begins and ends within the Faculty, utilising Recruitment and Marketing departments for their specialized expertise and recruitment facilitation processes when necessary. The Paper provides expert advice on how Faculties can market themselves to potential students and their families and offers solutions on how to overcome the inevitable challenges and obstacles.

For a country with a relatively small population Australia has a considerable number of universities: 40 with 130 other higher education providers of various kinds. Taken together, they comprise more than one million students, and employ more than 100,000 staff. Commonwealth Government funding arrangements since 2012 mandate a “demand-driven” system meaning that enrolments in each public university, along with the system as a whole, can now move up and down in line with student demand.

A significant outcome of this system – and its size – is that universities compete with one another to attract students, both domestic and international. This means that university managements put significant resources into marketing and public relations in an effort to boost the profile and public awareness of their institutions. To a large extent this is a centralised effort – for example, each university has a director responsible for managing the university’s public affairs and external communication.

In some universities this role also oversees the institution’s marketing, government relations, advancement and/or alumni activities.

However, this does not automatically mean that all marketing and recruitment activities must emanate from the central operations.

In fact, great opportunities for marketing exist within individual Faculties (in Australia meaning the primary academic divisions in which teaching and research are conducted). Indeed, it is the contention of this paper that the impetus for student recruitment must begin and end in individual Faculties.

It is true that Faculties do engage in marketing and recruitment activities, however what frequently occurs is that they tend to duplicate the efforts of centralized expert departments rather than utilise their own knowledge of the needs of their students and why students want their specific courses. Thus because centralised marketers, recruitment and PR professionals cannot be everywhere and see everything, many outstanding opportunities for promoting the brilliant work of Faculties and their staff and students go begging.

The consequences of this are deeper than just missing out on publicity or innovative marketing campaigns. Failure of Faculties effectively to articulate why their courses are more beneficial for students or different from their competitors can have disastrous consequences: if enough students are not interested in pursuing a particular module/program of study then university managers may have no choice but to terminate it. Thus future generations face missing out on valuable learning experiences as an important branch of knowledge passes away.

Ultimately it is up to individual Faculties to build their student recruitment capabilities. As this paper will show this is entirely feasible and practical.

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING: THE PRAGMATIC CONTEXT

It may be thought by many academics that marketing and public relations has nothing to do with learning, teaching and research. In this view, it is a job for specific professionals who possess the necessary skills – professional educators and their colleagues are there to teach, not preach.

HECG believes this position belongs in a previous era.

HECG AND YOUR FACULTY: OUR EXPERT PROFESSIONALS ARE HERE TO HELP

If in doubt about how to implement any of the above suggestions contact HECG direct: go to our [website](#) or contact us [here](#) or simply email us at admin@he-cg.com or phone +61 403 302 710

The communications revolution – the advent of the Internet and a vast array of social networking and media platforms – has been a truly disruptive event the impact of which is seen most obviously in the precipitous decline in the popularity of print media and the linear menu model of viewing that exists in the television industry. Today, people can watch what they want, when and where they want. They can read what they want at their convenience on their device of choice – from mobile phone to tablet to laptop.

Conversely, they can communicate when they want in the manner that suits them best: think Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and the like, and the ubiquitous email. While potentially everyone is a media consumer they can also be content creators, be it on their own blog or YouTube channel. They are open to communication to anyone with a message they are interested in: In fact, there is evidence they prefer to receive information from “real” people as opposed to professional communicators.

Think of your Faculty and drill down to the various schools and departments (or whatever nomenclature is used in your university) and consider all the great work that is being carried out, but which does not make the headlines.

If you don't tell their stories, who will?

This does not mean you are alone. Recruitment and marketing departments are there to provide specialist expertise when required and to facilitate the recruitment process. They are there to help you, so make use of them.

However, it does require a degree of focus and application and perhaps, we might suggest, a shift in attitude towards Faculty staff taking on the responsibility for recruitment – but fired by the knowledge that in effect you are motivated by the same things which drew you into higher education in the first place: a desire to champion the cause of learning and teaching and to uncover new knowledge and discoveries through research.

Essentially most students want to follow their interests as part of a community in which they feel they belong. People want to be with those who share the same interests and passions. Faculty are best placed to address both of these needs: they can engage on the “something of interest” and establish the community before the new students arrive. Importantly from a recruitment perspective such communities can last a lifetime. Students are not making a decision to go on a holiday for a few weeks—they are making a decision about their life, what they want to do and where to live—for a least the next few years.

It is essential that you ensure these responsibilities are not “farmed out” to a Faculty marketing officer but are shared among academic and professional support staff so that everyone “owns” student recruitment.

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING: THE ESSENTIAL PRACTICALITIES

In this crowded and busy landscape of competing institutions and Faculties one question immediately springs to mind. Marketers call it “the buying proposition”, which is another way of saying – why you? The answers to the following questions are crucial:

- Why should students want to study with your Faculty as opposed to one of another university?
- What is special about you?
- What do you offer that no-one else does?
- What stands out about your courses that make them distinctive?
- What are you best at?
- Who are your innovative teachers and researchers and what is it that makes them special?
- What do your existing students say about you—are they satisfied with their learning experience?
- How do graduate employment outcomes measure against Faculties from other universities?

These are gateway questions – seeking the answers to them enables you to build a composite picture of your Faculty as it is. You can look at this picture and then ask another key question: what are we and what do we want to be?

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING: SENDING THE RIGHT MESSAGES

This is where you need to be very clear about your Faculty, about who you are and what you stand for. Signals such as “We are a 100-year old institution” can be important but the same message applies to many institutions. Such a slogan on its own will not determine a student's choice.

However, carefully crafted messages that can help to create a relationship with students talk about what you stand for, eg: “At this faculty we believe in the need to meet new health challenges with different approaches as our world's populations and environments evolve. We will meet these challenges by educating the most talented individuals to be innovators armed with the best possible knowledge of the current practice. We are world leaders in X, Y and Z and have over 30 courses that you can choose from to meet your interests.”

Our experience is that getting to this type of message is not hard—ask the question of your Faculty: “Why are you here? What is it about what this faculty does that you love?” Such questions draw out passionate and strong messages from Faculty members.

Further, you need to have a clear understanding of your flagship programs, those that are unique and/or world leading. Put aside any residual distaste for the various ranking measures (eg, QS, Times Higher, Times Best Under 50, ARWU Shanghai, US News, Global Nature, ERA etc) – whether you like them or not students and their families do pay attention to them. Also, be aware of new rankings that are emerging that are likely to be extraordinarily significant in the future – these rankings address both industry views (e.g. Financial Times) or quality and student outcomes (e.g. QILT.gov.au). Having the highest employment outcomes will be increasingly significant as students find out how or are helped to use the data.

If any of your programs rank No1, or in the Top 10, or stand out in any way, be prepared to say it loud and proud. Be aware that a high ranking in one area can produce what marketers call the “halo effect” – it makes everything else that you do also look good. Be prepared to exploit that through publicity in appropriate channels (more about those later).

It is also perfectly legitimate in a competitive market to use ranking information to differentiate yourself by pointing out, for example, that you are ahead of X, Y and Z universities in certain fields and that you are “better” – or simply different in an innovative and distinctive way – than rival university Faculties. “Best” or “Better” can be validly achieved in many different ways – but what is most important is whether there is an understanding and belief in the faculty that this course is best for a set of target students – not necessarily best for research or academic awards. Take the time to marshal the data to find out what they say about you and your competitors. Where do you have the leading edge?

Traditional rankings’ value comes from the absence of reliable relevant information students can use. But Faculties can change this. Armed with the knowledge Faculties possess, institutions are also able to move towards personalized marketing – where messages are tailored to what the students care about and which are differentiated from competitors—such as: “the best program for students interested in tropical reefs with one complete semester spent living at our reef based campus”.

If it is the case that you don’t have a stand-out flagship program, that for whatever reason your courses are not making an impression, then see this as a valuable opportunity to devise one, or to make changes and improvements that will elevate existing courses. And this process will give you the information needed to achieve that aim. We have not seen an Australian University that does not have existing opportunities to create new stand-out offerings.

It is possible through judicious use of publicity and marketing to turn a negative into a positive. For example, if you teach a program that is not particularly popular with students but it is the only one of its kind in the country, and if you feel there is potential for developing increased student recruitment, use that rarity as its unique selling point.

Information from rankings and existing success in student recruitment for particular programs is vital for the next step—developing key messages.

Workshop these with Faculty colleagues and professionals from Marketing, PR and Recruitment. Ensure they match what your community says about you – check appropriate student and education-related blogs, Facebook and other social networking sites as well as mainstream media.

Ensure, too, that your messages are different from your competitors: eg, “Our Bachelor of Pharmacy has 100% employment outcomes for our students”, “Come and study in the world’s biggest classroom – Marine Science”, “Study with us and spend a semester working on real architecture projects in Chicago”.

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING: HOW TO BUILD A SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

Successful marketing and high impact publicity leading to increased student recruitment does not necessarily derive solely from outputs: in other words, devising and communicating key messages is essential but is not an end in itself.

It is also necessary to cultivate advocates and receptive audiences. This can be achieved by developing communities of interest – individuals and groups who are engaged with your Faculty because they share your values and goals and are intellectually drawn to your offerings.

An example might be in say, Ancient History, where there is a pre-existing interest and fascination with the ancient world by people spanning all age groups – not all your students have to be young!

Such communities can be drawn in by you and have their interests piqued through the use of messaging and conversations around the subject in social media, special-event lectures, academic and student blogs, articles in newspapers (including local and regional as well as metropolitan), magazines, radio broadcasts and bespoke videos on channels such as YouTube, your Faculty website and, of course, your university’s website news and events pages.

But too often—in the pressure to recruit students—the cart is put a long way in front of the horse in these engagements: contrast “Come to us to talk about our Bachelor of Engineering in Aviation” to “Let’s talk about the new F35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter—is it the best plane or a flop?” If your interest is in aircraft you will always be drawn by the second.

To understand who is interested in your programs and why, utilise blogs (by academics, researchers and students) and put regular updates on Faculty activities on platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram (ideal for Media/Design departments).

Invite former students and their guests to interesting events such as guest lectures. In disciplines such as applied finance or engineering, then staging professional conferences and offering professional development opportunities also help to create a network of advocates.

There is solid evidence that “communities of interest” are today a primary channel for student recruitment because members are so enthused they wish to pursue more formal study.

Take the time to create specialist content. Encourage students to produce videos, photographs focused on fun or extraordinary activities that might include expeditions, field trips, research activities, guest lectures, debates, theatrical events, concerts and exhibitions. Share them with marketing teams for wider distribution their on social media platforms. Monitor responses and use information garnered from these to find out what people are saying about you (even negative comments can provide insights on how you may improve your offerings). Focus on communication is a way that is both engaging and simple. “We are revolutionising the field of Human Plasma Proteomics” might be interesting to one audience but more general statements like “our team are committed to helping to design drugs that will identify cancers with simple blood tests and enable drug companies to create special drugs to destroy that cancer and only that cancer”.

Consider using the Google Glasses – the latest Virtual Reality breakthrough devised by HECG – at local and overseas recruitment fairs to give potential future students a totally immersive experience of your Faculty, its people and its facilities. See the HECG paper [Innovation, creativity, absolute customer focus, maximum results at minimum cost: how to be a real international marketing success.](#)

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING: ENGAGE YOUR ALUMNI

Opportunities for increased recruitment and development of advocates and communities of interest can flow from thoughtful and continuing engagement with your former students.

Many alumni possess great knowledge in particular subject areas, gained not just from study but also from working in specific areas, for example, business administration or

advanced digital technologies. They have that vital attribute – “practical wisdom” – and should be invited to share that with faculty advisory boards, on developing curricula, and serving to inspire students to reach their potential.

Prominent alumni in key markets (eg Media in China) can be encouraged to take part in special events and/or in the process of marketing to specific regions. For more information on how to engage alumni to the best advantage of your Faculty see our HECG paper [How your university will flourish if you nourish your alumni.](#)

RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING: THE ESSENTIAL FOLLOW UP

It is also vital that your Faculty assists in following up on applications and offers. Engage Faculty academics and current and past students to talk directly to applicants and you will see your conversion rates rise. Pick out three or four activities that your Faculty can do to recruit students more efficiently. Workshop these with colleagues so that everyone involved has “buy in” with the process. Again, social media is key in transmitting your messages so look at best practice in this area and adapt it to your needs. Of course, nothing beats human contact so work out a timetable to establish regular contact between Faculty advocates and potential students.

RECRUITING AND MARKETING: SUMMARY FOR FACULTIES

- The work done by faculties is essential to marketing and recruitment success. Most institutions squander the immense value of this asset.
- Faculty activities and central activities in marketing and recruitment are very different. When well coordinated they create the greatest sustainable success
- Faculty staff know more about what their target students want-no central department can know this about every program
- Students are increasingly attracted to being part of something more specific and meaningful than just a university brand
- When we effectively communicate what we are passionate about, we attract others who share that passion”

HECG’s team of expert marketers and media professionals has compiled this easy to follow “how to” guide on presenting the work of your Faculty in the best light. It focuses on achievable, workable and proven practicalities.