

## RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND ITS ROLE IN THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of the RM approach in the experience of international students in business schools within the UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The Relationship Marketing (RM) strategy has gained recognition over the years, especially within the last decade, which can be seen in the Higher Education (HE) sector. The HE sector has in recent times been highly competitive, especially in the global market. Despite this growth in competition, there has been little or no effort in the application of RM strategy by HE Institutions competing in the global marketplace for international students. The growing competition has been driven by the goal HEI's have to internationalise and attract, recruit and retain the best international students. Higher Education Institutions have become aware of the contributions that international students bring to these institutions. Hence, efforts are geared towards retaining international students. This study considers the role of using RM with international students. The relevant data was collected from face-to-face semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which were conducted with university managers and international students across four universities in the UK. The study identifies several impacts of using RM on international students' overall experience. It further highlights aspects of the RM approach that are more significant to international students' experience. The study concluded that the RM approach positively affects international student experience if effectively developed and implemented.

**Key words:** Relationship Marketing, Higher Education, international student, student experience retention

**JEL codes:** M31, I23

### INTRODUCTION

Recent decades have witnessed a growing acceptance of several marketing concepts as a means of gaining and maintaining competitive advantage in the global marketplace [Plewa et al. 2016]. Internationalisation has driven the move to ensure the adoption of marketing concepts, and Higher Education Institutions

(HEIs), like every other organization in the service sector, have been swift to adopt marketing models in order to remain competitive in the global market. Increasingly, HEIs have made firm progress in adopting marketing concepts to Higher Education [Helgesen 2008]. This article stems from a large study con-

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ducted with four business schools in the North West area in the United Kingdom. This article investigates the impact of the Relationship Marketing (RM) approach on international students' experience in UK HEIs. In addressing this, the study highlights key literature review of the relevant concepts within the subject area. It provides the methodological process adhered to in the course of the research. Key findings were highlighted, analysed and interpreted. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations provided for relevant stakeholders.

The marketisation of HE began in the USA and institutions within the sector are recognizing their gains. The HE sector in the UK has not been exempt from striving to internationalise, especially as they strive to sustain and gain competitive advantage in the global market [Altbach 2015]. The UK Higher Education Institutions are recognised as the second largest destination for international students after the USA.

It is very important to understand the overall contribution of international students, which goes beyond their contribution to the host university and to the country's economy [Omoruyi 2016]. The UK Higher Education as a national asset is a major contributor to the economic success and social well-being of the country. It is also a huge sector in bringing in foreign currency and contributing to the good of the world through its scientific publications and citations [O'Leary et al. 2009]. The recent immigration policy of the UK government has affected enrolment and retention of prospective non-EU students by 83% [Wiriycosol and Lertjanyakit 2013].

The UK Government now has as a top priority the concern of trying to maximise education opportunities for genuine international students using retention as a medium [Inside Government 2012]. Consideration of the findings of this research by HEI's could improve international student retention rates, thereby contributing to the UK economy growth. This can be achieved by establishing, maintaining and enhancing relationships with stakeholders of HE. The application of this research could be beneficial to HEI's, government and the community in general as it might help them in developing their marketing strategy towards internationalisation. The outcome of this research could help HEIs, and the Government, achieve their

objectives in relation to international student retention; improving the quality of education in HEIs; and increasing HEI development in the UK.

## **RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION INTERNATIONALISATION**

Relationship Marketing has become a popular marketing strategy following the acknowledgement of the transactional marketing strategy as an insufficient tool. It evolved in the 1970s [Grönroos 1996, Pine and Gilmore 1999, Baron et al. 2010] and has been widely used in several sectors since its development. Relationship Marketing strategies are to produce customer value throughout the life span of the relationship. They are perceived to be relevant to service markets, as aspects of RM are present in all organisations including institutions of Higher Education [Grönroos 1996, Ang and Buttle 2006, Helgesen, 2008]. "Relationship Marketing is a set of marketing activities or actions that attract, motivate, and enhance existing and potential students' relationships as well as relationships with and between students' parents, relatives, friends and reference groups for the benefit of all sides concerned. Here emphasis is placed on retaining existing students until their graduation and attracting further students" [Al-Alak 2006].

Rowley [2003] suggests that relationship-building strategies should be applicable to all students and not only those with the tendency to withdraw. Gibbs [2001] stated that those involved in HE should work towards creating educational relationships rather than transactional deals between traders. Arnett et al. [2003], and Binsardi and Ekwulugo [2003] suggested the implementation of RM strategy in the marketing of HE. Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown [2004], who concluded that RM strategy is crucial for HE services since the idea promotes student involvement in the image building and marketing of the organisation, further supported the implementation of RM in the marketing of HE. Helgesen [2008] states that colleges and universities in the HE sector should consider RM if their focus is on enrollment and retention of students, stressing that RM creates value for the student and it should treat such as important throughout the lifetime of the relationship.

The RM approach has been utilised by universities for a number of reasons, which include: student retention; positive student experience; institutional image; value exchange and customer loyalty [Rojas-Méndez et al. 2009, Hemsley-Brown 2012, Sultan and Wong 2012, Sheth et al. 2015]. For the purpose of this study, retention and student experience will be a focal point of discussion. Institutions seek to retain students and increase their rates of institutional retention [Tinto 2010, 2012]. Student retention and progression linger as fundamental policy issues for the British HE system [Longden 2006].

One of the biggest challenges that HE faces is to improve student retention [Kahu and Nelson 2018, Seidman 2019]. This is becoming significant in the context of international students. Higher Education Institutions focus in recent times on enhancing the international student retention rate while ensuring that the international student experience is also very positive. The emphasis of the above statement spurs from the intense global competition of HEIs, especially as a majority of HEIs tend to be focus on internationalisation.

British universities make deliberate efforts to attract and retain international students to UK universities, especially as their contributions to the university and the UK economy in general tend to be immense [Omoruyi et al. 2014]. As a result, the use of several mechanisms, as aspects of RM, is utilized to retain and provide a positive student experience for international students. Examples of these mechanisms include student support and academic support [Tinto 2010, Bejou and Bejou 2012, Moore and Bowden-Everson 2012]. Other aspects of RM developed by universities to enhance international student experience include provision of up-to-date technologies; up-to-date facilities; effective and efficient communication; and one-to-one marketing [Ng and Forbes 2009, Asaad et al. 2014]. It is increasingly important to contribute to knowledge by addressing the vacuum in literature, which does not currently address the impact of RM on international students.

## METHOD

The methodological procedure chosen for this study was a qualitative review method. The research was exploratory at the very start, with the aim of investi-

gating a phenomenon that is under-researched [Collins and Hussey 2013]. The study was also explanatory and analytical, aiming to answer the “why” and “how” questions, as they apply to the implementation of the RM approach on international students. The study, after its preliminary investigations, selected four universities which cut across all classifications of universities in the UK. The selected universities are all located in the Northwest region of the UK. The selection of participants was from three stakeholder groups: university managers; academic staff; and international students. The participants from these stakeholder groups were selected using convenience, purposive and snowball sample selection technique methods. International students in the UK HEIs number over 450,000, with the Greater Manchester identified as the city with the largest number of international students in Europe. University of Manchester, for example, has the second-largest number of students in the UK.

There were three phases of research. The first phase was a preliminary study carried out by the authors to identify the universities which would be the focus of this study. The second phase was carried out through using semi-structured face-to-face interview data collection techniques to collect data from university managers (nine) and academic staff (thirteen) from the four universities reviewed. Interview protocol was developed and used as a guide whilst conducting the interviews. Key questions such as: definition of international students, international student retention, development and implementation of aspects of RM towards sustaining international student patronage and impact of RM application on student experience, were asked. The academic staff were interviewed, since they are the front-line personnel responsible for delivering most aspects of the RM approach determining student experience. The third phase of the research consisted of the use of focus groups as a data collection technique. The focus groups were conducted with international students (thirty) from the four universities reviewed, to establish how several aspects of the RM approach influence their student experience. Being an inductive inference study, an unrepresentative sample was used for this research.

The international students represented students from eighteen countries and four continents. The re-

search analysed the data collected after carefully transcribing the recorded interviews, using the coding technique [Miles et al. 2013]. A thematic analysis, using framework suggested by Clarke and Braun [2013], was conducted on the results and themes emerged, which were used as a part of the discussion of this study. Other data collected from documentation review were analysed using content analysis, as additional information to validate the data collected.

## RESULTS

Several findings emerged from the analysed data. Some unique findings that emerged after analysis of the results were as follows: marketing concepts were embedded in the international student management process by the university managers; aspects of RM were implemented for several reasons, especially to retain and enhance international student experience positively; RM implementation positively influenced positive student experience; and academic staff are identified as the main determinant of the international student experience.

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Results of this study clearly reflect that RM is the marketing approach universities utilise as a strategy to attract and retain international students. This finding builds on the conclusions of Helgesen [2008], who stated that universities should consider the implementation of RM approach towards the improvement of student retention. The unique aspect of this finding is that the current literature does not cover the RM approach on international students. The implication of this is that marketing HE is now essential for the growth of HEIs, and adopting an RM approach shows how much HEIs have understood that marketing HE across the globe, like every other service firm, is of great significance to them in achieving their goals. For example, universities are now more interested in establishing a long-term relationship with overseas students as compared to a one-off transaction, as in the past. This also reflects in the increasing importance for universities to engage with alumni for accreditation purposes.

The empirical study of this research found that the rationale for universities to utilize the RM approach includes: student retention; positive student experience; value exchange and customer loyalty. All of these were consistent with Sultan and Wong [2010], and Sheth et al. [2015]. The implication is that the rationale for universities to implement an RM approach with their international students, and other students, is to enable value exchange. Examples of this include universities getting funds, international market access, and a broader reputation. The value for universities to increase international student numbers includes an international student presence, where value for international students is gained by providing them with adequate support to enable them to graduate successfully within the stipulated time.

The empirical study of this research found that an RM approach affects positively on international student retention. Examples include international students completing their degrees on time; international students converting to a higher degree after completion of a lower degree; international students acting as ambassadors for their universities; and international students participating as committed members of the alumni community. This finding is unique and not currently addressed by any literature. It also builds on existing literature conclusions proposed by Ackerman and Schibrowsky [2007], Vander Schee [2010], and Powell and Rey [2015], who suggest that students who complete their degree after enrollment are classified as retained students. These literature definitions of student retention referred, however, to students in general and not necessarily to the international students.

This study also found that there are several definitions of international student retention and this tends to vary across categories of participants. The definitions of international student retention include completion; conversion; performance; attendance; employment; and alumni. These empirical findings fill the gap in the literature, which does not address the impact of RM approach on international students. Completion means international students who complete their programme of study after enrolling, within the stipulated time. Conversion means international students who convert to a higher degree in the same university after completion of a lower degree. Performance means international stu-

dents with excellent performance in their programme of study in the university. Attendance means international students having to be punctual at classes. Employment means having to employ the international students in the university after completion of their studies. Alumni in this context means international students who are committed to the alumni community of the university.

Considering all of these definitions by participants of this study, it is possible that none of the existing literatures addresses the definition of international student retention. It also helps to contribute to existing knowledge in terms of what international student retention means to several stakeholders of the university, as existing literature does not address international retention using university stakeholder perspectives. This study has adequately provided a definition of international student retention from these three different stakeholder perspectives: university managers; academic staff; and international students. This implies that there may be a need for universities to understand what retention means to all stakeholders, especially international students, and to develop policies that will help the universities improve international student retention more readily from all stakeholders' perspectives. A second implication of this finding is that operational strategies will need to be designed and developed by universities in a manner that will enhance positive international student experience in order to continue to promote international student retention across all stakeholder definitions.

In identifying those aspects of RM approach that international students deem as most significant to their retention, the empirical study of this research found that academic support and student support were significant in influencing international student retention as they assist in student integration and socialisation. These findings are consistent with those proposed by Moore and Bowden-Everson [2012]. Extra academic and student support in terms of integrating and socialising international students into the UK environment and its educational background is a unique finding that developed from the empirical studies. No literature has addressed specific academic and student support as an aspect of using an RM approach to enhance international student retention. Examples include free English language writing sessions; UK academic writing and referencing

sessions; avoiding plagiarism; visa support/guidance; and international societies and offices, which constitute typical examples of specific student support provided to international students by the university.

Other significant aspects of the RM approach include provision of up-to-date technologies; up-to-date facilities; effective and efficient communication; and one-to-one marketing. These findings build on conclusions proposed by Assad et al. [2014]. Universities can improve their RM approach to enhance the international student experience by giving academic staff the opportunity to be part of the policy development and implementation process, from international student recruitment to every other part of the process. The empirical study also found that establishing an effective point of contact, which will be manned by academic staff that has experience working with international students, will help improve the international student experience.

## CONCLUSIONS

In light of this study, it can be concluded that universities use RM approach as a marketing tool. Universities utilise RM strategy with students. The implications of this conclusion are that the universities, like other service companies, utilise RM with their students and should therefore invest resources in developing a holistic RM approach with their international students. Universities mainly implement RM strategies to enable them to retain international students, while enhancing international student experience. The implication of this is that the participating business schools now understand that not every aspect of RM strategy will help retain international students and enhance international student experience; hence, they are now to develop unique aspects targeted at international students. Definitions of international student retention go beyond the conventional definition of student retention and its definition is dependent on stakeholder roles within the universities. This conclusion implies that international student retention means more than the traditional definition of retention, which concerns mainly a student staying from the start of a course to the finish.

This study found that retention of international students covers other aspects including conversion;



alumni; completion; employment; attendance, etc. The implication of this conclusion is that universities need to devote resources and have key performance indicators relating to each of the pinch points identified as affecting retention. RM approach influences positively on international student retention in the participating universities.

### LIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The use of qualitative methods to collect data might have limited the outcome of the research. The use of mixed methods to gather data could improve the validity of the research. The results would likely be different if a survey was conducted with a larger number of international students. Conducting the research within one school in the university could impact the outcome of the research, since it can be argued that the application of aspects of RM on international students might bring about different student experience in other schools/faculties within the same university. A point-time study could have also impacted the outcome of the study, knowing that such studies if conducted across different points in time could lead to completely different outcomes.

### AREA FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The findings of the four universities reviewed in this regard may be seen as a snapshot which represents the current situation surrounding marketing HEIs to international students. One or more longitudinal studies could add value to understanding marketing to the international students. Additionally, different universities from different countries could be included in further research to conduct a comparative study that may assist in the development of a better understanding of the studied phenomenon.

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## **PODEJŚCIE MARKETINGU RELACJI I JEGO ROLA W DOŚWIADCZENIACH MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH STUDENTÓW W WYBRANYCH UCZELNIACH WYŻSZYCH W WIELKIEJ BRYTANII**

### **STRESZCZENIE**

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest zbadanie roli marketingu relacji w przypadku studentów zagranicznych studiujących w wybranych brytyjskich szkołach biznesu. Marketing relacji zyskał uznanie na przestrzeni ubiegłych lat, szczególnie w ciągu ostatniej dekady, o czym świadczy przykład szkolnictwa wyższego. Ostatnio zaobserwowano sporą konkurencyjność tego sektora, głównie w przypadku rynku globalnego. Pomimo zaobserwowanego wzrostu konkurencji na rynku globalnym uczelnie podejmowały niewiele wysiłku lub wcale we wdrażaniu strategii marketingu relacji w odniesieniu do studentów zagranicznych. Zjawisko rosnącej konkurencji wynika z tego, że uczelnie muszą iść w stronę umiędzynarodowienia i aby to osiągnąć, potrzebują przyciągnąć, zrekrutować i zatrzymać najlepszych studentów z zagranicy. Uczelnie uświadomiły sobie, jak duży jest wkład studentów zagranicznych w ich istnienie, stąd też ich wysiłki mają na celu zatrzymanie studentów z zagranicy. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano rolę, jaką odgrywa marketing relacji w przypadku studentów zagranicznych. Zebrano odpowiednie dane z częściowo ustrukturyzowanych pogłębionych wywiadów indywidualnych i z grup fokusowych. Badania te przeprowadzono wśród kierowników uniwersytetów i zagranicznych studentów z wybranych czterech uniwersytetów w Wielkiej Brytanii. Wyniki badań identyfikują kilka czynników zastosowania marketingu relacji, które wpłynęły na doświadczenia studentów zagranicznych. We wnioskach z badań podkreślono aspekty podejścia marketingu relacji, które są bardziej znaczące dla samego doświadczenia tychże studentów zagranicznych. W badaniu stwierdzono, że podejście marketingu relacji pozytywnie wpływa na doświadczenie studentów zagranicznych, pod warunkiem, że zostanie ono skutecznie przygotowane i wdrożone.

**Słowa kluczowe:** marketing relacji, szkolnictwo wyższe, student zagraniczny, doświadczenie studenta, retencja studentów