

## The new competitive agenda

### Taking marketing beyond the “usual suspects”...

**We are in an era of collaboration.**

**Collaborative enterprises are the stimulus for much corporate activity in the higher education sector.**

Organisations need strategic allies and partners with which to manage and respond to the frequent policy shifts in education. Collaborative bids for funding initiatives can be the route to success in many arenas. There can be **“safety in numbers”** (and great value in **“comparing notes”** on a strategic level) when developing new approaches to difficult issues. Everyone needs friends and allies.

#### YET “COMPETITION” IS ALWAYS ON THE AGENDA.

Competition is, of course, a fact of life. Where similar organisations exist (in terms of objectives, function, audience markets, product or service delivery), there are opportunities (and even a necessity) for comparison. An open market can stimulate intuitions to be alert to the needs of their consumers and their changing demands and is a prerequisite in terms of driving up standards of delivery or service provision and so delivering increased value or benefit to stakeholders.

#### COMPETITION BY STEALTH?

In the UK, the media, particularly, is fascinated by the mechanics of apparent competition in higher education, scrutinising everything from research grants and league table results through to the consulting income of academics and VCs' salaries. While all these issues have a place (somewhere) on the corporate agenda, it is necessary to ensure that the sector is alert to new forms of competition and that marketing functions are braced for proactive response.

New types of competitive threat are, quietly, stalking the higher education sector, and while each may be of varying relevance to differing organisations, none can be ignored.

Anything might be construed as compromising **“competition”** if it provides an opportunity for existing perceptions of an organisation to be altered (possibly detrimentally), or if it provides an additional choice option that may **“distract”** or lure away an institution's established audience or consumers. The difficulty is to make sure that the organisations themselves are not distracted from mapping emerging agendas through a preoccupation with the **“usual suspects”** of competitive threat.

#### THE “WATCHING BRIEF”...

Within the current sector context, the **“watching brief”** will include a great diversity of issues, all of which will demand marketing action or response.

■ **Recognise the impact that current staff “transfer battles” may have on organisational reputation.**

It is simply not possible to engage in such activities without a cascade effect on a wide range of stakeholder perceptions. Studies conducted recently have demonstrated the impact on **“winners and losers”** in such skirmishes. Not only do they compromise the reputation of organisations that lose out, in terms of potential to recruit staff to specific academic disciplines, but they also have a negative effect on perceptions of organisations among those influencing student choice. The winner does not always appear to triumph, either: there is the possibility that such bruising battles can lead to organisations been considered to be too **“predatory”**.

## ■ Resist a preoccupation with peer group activity.

To **"plough a straight furrow,"** a corporate focus on realistic, achievable success and robust future planning is required. Institutions need to understand their competitive markets, but they should guard against the **"me too"** approach at all costs: emulation is not always the best route to success.

## ■ Be aware of the potential impact of private service providers.

Private organisations now have the opportunity to apply for degree awarding powers. If they succeed, the chances are that their functionality, while radically different from the traditional university or college experience, will focus on a **"low bureaucracy, intense delivery"** equation that manages students first and foremost as consumers. While this will not appeal to everyone, private suppliers are investing in identified market segments and will make inroads into some core discipline areas (for example, law programmes).

## ■ Preserve effective student recruitment supply chains as a priority.

Recognise that initiatives such as the National Student Survey, however debatable, will drive changes in perceptions of organisations. This is especially critical when perceptions of organisations held by those influencing student choice are compromised or adjusted in some way. Parents and advisers, particularly, will influence a cohort of potential students: universities and colleges need to ensure that they manage the way in which new policy initiatives might effect or modulate their reputation.

## ■ Recognise that on home turf, the organisation may not be competing solely with UK organisations for staff and students.

Increasingly, Australasian and North American organisations are tapping staff and student recruitment pools from well resourced and established UK bases.

## ■ Acknowledge the change that heightened consumer focus brings to student choice.

While potential applicants will continue to make active comparisons between different offerings (such as programmes and courses) they will increasingly compare and weigh the variable, relative merits of differing modes of style or delivery, both in terms of teaching and learning and within the context of broader experiential issues such as social and cultural factors.

## ■ Above all else, recognise that the greatest competitive battle is for people's time, attention and commitment.

Unless an organisation can communicate in a way that resonates with its audiences; unless it can press the **"start button"** for whatever catalyst it is that motivates them, the battle is over before it has begun. Knowledge of the audience and well researched and developed modes of communication are critical success factors in any competitive situation.

Within any competitive context, knowledge is power, but the biggest challenge may be recognising the new competition before it reaches the gates. For organisational marketing functions, this dictates a new agenda.

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