

How deep is your brand?

Why organisations must cherish their support services

Tuition fees, scholarships and bursaries issues have dominated the headlines for (what seems to be) many months. Universities and colleges have responded with a plethora of campaigns, statements and branding exercises.

Some organisations are jostling for position in the inevitably irritable race to ensure that external stakeholders understand the complex and changing situation.

There just might be an unforeseen problem on the horizon, though: it would seem that key component players in the corporate proposition are suffering from serious neglect. In a tuition fees-driven and bursaries-fuelled market, the depth and scope of the "total" proposition for individual organisations will be critical.

A THREE DIMENSIONAL PROPOSITION?

News of corporate re-branding and brand refinement exercises have been centre stage, with the press taking much pleasure in debating the idiosyncrasies of high profile visual identity projects (the mere tip of the iceberg, of course, in true branding terms). What is indisputable is that the increasingly consumer-centric higher education market will demand more customer focused corporate approaches to stakeholder management. What is debateable is whether organisations have marshalled the component elements of their total corporate offering to develop a robustly three-dimensional proposition to meet the heightened expectations of an increasingly demanding target market.

The National Student Survey will play a major role in highlighting any gaps between organisational delivery upon corporate promise. Just how many organisations, though, in preparing for the demands of the consumercentric market, have approached, strategically, the potential role of "internal" stakeholder services.

At present:

- Recruitment, admissions and external marketing issues are increasingly at the top of the corporate agenda in discussions about developing organisational consumer focus.
- For market-responsive institutions, student experience is now valued as integral to a competitive proposition.

What part, though, should internal services, such as careers advisory services, IT and IS and library/knowledge provision for example, play in the total organisational proposition?

SERVICES AND THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE EQUATION

The answer is simple: such services are critical to a competitive, differentiated and successful corporate proposition. However, their potential role in the development, management and sustainability of organisational competitive is often overlooked.

A number of market-driven UK universities have recognised the importance of support infrastructure to the total organisational proposition and the last two years has seen the launch of student focused (often 24/7) student or stakeholder focused services to deliver exemplary IT or library/knowledge management support.

Despite such initiatives, for many organisations library, careers or IT facilities are not actively embraced as part of the corporate competitive proposition. **At present:**

- The marketing of internal services can be patchy, with profile resigned to the usual bleak prospectus entries.
- The relative quality of services infrequently plays a strategic role in corporate marketing.
- Relatively few services have been consulted or briefed about their potential to play a role in developing corporate brand proposition of organisational competitive edge in a tuition-fees driven market.
- Services have the critical potential to be marketed as major contributors to the style and quality of the total student experience.
- Services have a major role to play in the differentiation of the organisations within the sector.

With greater transparency in all aspects of the measurement of quality and student experience (and the added pressure for organisations to be seen to **"perform"** publicly, via the of the National Student Survey, for example), the age of the strategic marketing of internal services has arrived. Just how many organisations are ready?

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