

Marketing bursaries and scholarships: Imperatives for marketers

The marketing agenda for higher education has just become much more complicated.

Marketing higher education to potential students is already a highly complex matter. Differing approaches are needed to reach out to differing stakeholder groups, different techniques and communications channels are required to ensure effective engagement with prospective students. Increasingly, marketing needs to be "motivation-led", an approach that demands an implicit understanding of potential students' reasons for study or learning.

With the advent of tuition fees, many institutions have needed to address branding and market positioning issues in an effort to ensure that their corporate proposition gives students real "reasons to choose" between one organisation and another. The activity within the market has been hectic, but a new challenge is preoccupying marketers as the position on tuition fees becomes clearer.

MARKETING THE SUPPORT OFFER

Sir Martin Harris, reported in the THES (07.01.05), has made it clear that the majority of institutions lodging plans with OFFA for 2006 will charge the full £3,000. Essentially, this means that, as well as the usual plethora of "points of competition" for universities and colleges, they will now also need to compete effectively on the differentials of their bursary or scholarship offers: not an easy task.

A number of marketing-oriented institutions have already put action plans in place to make this happen. They have considered radical approaches to how they "package" their support offers and how to make them stand out in what will be a frenetically busy (and, for prospective students, potentially confusing) marketing environment. The problems, though, are many.

The bursaries and scholarships market place will be anything but a level playing field. Dependent on the type of organisation, the support offer may be substantially different, in any case. Sir Martin Harris suggests that there are some obvious differences emerging from the approaches of pre and post-1992 organisations. He indicates that the institutions with the toughest widening access challenges will offer support that broadens the socio-economic mix, while universities and colleges that will receive less fee income will aim to support the students that are hardest up.

MANAGING INFORMATION AND RESPONSE

How will prospective students be able to compare the types and levels of support on offer and just who will take the brunt of the voracious information quest that will besiege institutions?

There are some key factors to consider:

There will be no **"standard"** support offer: students will not have the opportunity to compare like with like, and in the early stages at least, it will not be easy to measure one offer against another (although, I can sense the advent of a sparkling new league table, even as I write..).

Those organisations ahead of the game and that are organised to deliver a **"packaged"** and understandable support offer to the market will make gains (even if not permanently), in terms of profile and positive perceptions.

Organisations that have lagged in their preparations and that deliver messages about support that are too complex or confusing, will find their information **"vacuum"** invaded by institutions that can clearly articulate and differentiate their support offer.

Some organisations have yet to commit themselves publicly, through their prospectuses or information materials, to tuition fee levels, so the requests for information about bursaries and scholarships will be swelled by demands for basic updates on the fees situation.

Where will accredited colleges stand in terms of tuition fees and bursaries or scholarship support? Presenting a united approach to the market could be very difficult.

Those at the sharp end of information delivery will be hardest hit: expect information demand to hit outreach officers on the road, central information and admissions departments plus web services.

THE THREE IMPERATIVES

It will not be an easy time for institutions that do not have a clear support offer or a robust plan to communicate it to the market. The imperatives for all organisations are threefold:

- **Know what the offer is.**
- **Communicate it effectively and clearly through all available channels.**
- **Educate staff so that they feel confident in responding to the new information challenge.**

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