



Marketing framework in higher education

Addressing aspirations of students beyond conventional tenets of selling products

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Abstract

Purpose – In recent years, the higher education (HE) sector has been influenced by a marketised approach. Such an approach has enabled higher education institutions (HEIs) to increase their international presence and also to enhance their student profile. Nevertheless, marketing theories applied to commercial sector may not be relevant to the HE sector. The purpose of this paper is to examine how marketing framework has influenced various aspects of HE management and its implication to dealing with student issues.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper presents a conceptual discussion of the issues.

Findings – The paper takes a critical view of customer metaphor for students and argues that such attempts restrict the rights and privileges that students and the HE sector traditionally enjoyed. Differences between commercial organisations and HE sector in terms of products developed and the underlying process of development are explored. How the uniqueness of the HE sector relies more on a sector-wide agreement than on legal framework is analysed. The role of marketing units in developing a mature market which is strong enough to demand quality HE products is emphasised. Several aspects that need to be coordinated among quality assurance departments, academic staff, and the marketing departments are discussed.

Research limitations/implications – Indiscriminate use of marketing metaphors in the HE sector has introduced new dimensions to the relationship that exists between the HEIs and students.

Practical implications – Marketing in the HE sector is not similar to what exists in the commercial sector as “higher education products” are different from “commercial products” and students are different from “customers” who buy commercial products. Moreover, the roles of marketing departments in the HE sector are different from those in a commercial organisation.

Originality/value – Marketing frameworks cannot be transplanted into a HE environment. The sector is unique and is characterised more by the principles of self-governance and academic freedom. Application of marketing techniques will restrict students’ rights and destroy the relationship that exists between the HEI and the students. Marketing departments should focus on creating mature markets.

Keywords Higher education, Marketing strategy, Students, Legal systems

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

In the past, marketing was a jargon of the business world, alien to higher education institutions (HEIs). The role of HEIs was to serve the community, engage in research activities, teach students, and equip them with knowledge and skills that are useful in their places of work. In a larger context, HEIs were considered as a source to develop a knowledge society.

This situation continued as long as HEIs were flush with funds, demands outstripped supply, and job options were available to students. However, increasing competition, domination by undifferentiated universities and colleges offering similar programmes,



and the need to offer programmes in emerging opportunity areas necessitated HEIs to develop strategies balancing institutional economies and opportunities for growth. Demographic shifts in the environment, alternative forms of academic systems, life-long learning, and internationalization introduced new perspectives to teaching and learning in the higher education (HE) environment. Along with all these shifts and changes, the HE sector began to align itself with a marketised framework. Educators were often forced to take a hard look at marketing to see what this discipline might offer to keep their institutions viable and relevant (Kotler and Fox, 1995, p. 5).

Government and funding agencies were also influenced by market-like approaches. They found such mechanisms easier and less problematic, especially with increasing number of institutions, varying nature of operations and functions, and dwindling state funding. Bureaucracy and regulatory bodies found self-regulatory mechanisms induced by marketing frameworks helpful to achieve larger state goals than traditional control mechanisms. Consequently, market-based practices and conventions with a focus on selling products and meeting customer needs found their way in some form in several areas including those related to funding and development plans. In fact, to HEIs, approaches developed along marketing lines provided several options to build a rich profile of students from various geographical locations and also to increase their international presence. Professional bodies, academic groups, quality assurance agencies, and the corporate sector also supported government initiatives to reach prospective students and their parents, in order to help them make informed decisions about various programmes and institutions.

Today, marketing departments occupy unique positions in the organisational structure of any HEI. Integrating institution's communication and marketing goals with its strategic and academic goals has become important with implications to institutional visibility and reputation (Sands and Smith, 2000). HE managers perceive marketing activities to be as important as (in some situations more important than) finance, human resources, quality assurance, and other units within the HEI. In addition to providing information to prospective students, organising career-fairs and exhibition, marketing departments are expected to bring back information on a range of subjects that are intended to help institutional progression. Usually being the first point of contact, marketing departments gain easy access to information from students in general and freshmen in particular. Thus, they also help in containing drop-out rates. From an institutional perspective, marketing departments help in the construction of strategies to uniquely position the institution by providing valuable insights to international collaboration and branding, trends in the HE sector, new opportunity areas for academic offerings, and possible risks and risk covers.

Studies relating to marketing in the context of HE have invited the attention of many researchers. Green (2003) discusses the efforts to reengineer HE into closer alignment with marketing principles and management approaches. Emergence of research in the marketing of HE in the new global marketplace has been studied by Brown and Oplatka (2006). Bruce (2006, p. 150) argues that the narrow economic model of education is flawed, as the education system exists not just to prepare students for work in today's market, but also to inform them about the market and to encourage critical thinking about the marketplace. Clayson and Haley (2005) examine how marketing models might apply to students and HEIs. Bunzel (2007) discusses the trends of universities to engage in marketing and branding programmes. Umashankar (2001) emphasises the need

to effectively manage various points-of-marketing in marketing HE programmes. Cautioning managers and marketers of HE not to use the tools of marketing carelessly, Gibbs (2008) analyses the changes in the essence of educational provisions that marketing has contributed. Moore (1989) explores the development of marketing strategies within a strategic planning structure in HE. Hebron (1989), highlighting the dangers of market myths as applied to HE, explains how HE can be marketed to the satisfaction of all concerned. The possible impact of marketisation of education on academic staff and students has been explored by Newman and Jahdi (2009).

All these studies, debates, and discussions highlight the increasing reliance on marketing concepts in HE and its implication to stakeholders. Marketisation has opened several opportunities to the HE sector to build strong relationship with the students and the community as partners in their endeavour to provide quality education. Along with the opportunities are the challenges that marketisation and consumerism have introduced for academics, policy makers, and the HEIs. It remains to be seen whether HEIs will observe good educational management practices, draw strengths from the government and other regulatory bodies, develop market intelligence and adopt strategic marketing techniques and respond to challenges that confront them, or merely succumb to the pressure of market forces.

Customer metaphor and lost identity of the student in HE

One is stunned by the similarities, variations, and uniqueness that prevail in the HE sector – its operations, institutional goals, philosophies of the academic staff, institutional response to demands from the industry and the community, and the belief system that governs the existence of HEIs. Often researchers are puzzled by the success of the sector in spite of diversities in their philosophies on education and approach to teaching, learning, and research. Differences among the HEIs in their academic, financial, and governance models have never prevented the sector from isolating and eliminating unscrupulous players. The common thread that weaves around all institutions within the sector is the concern that the institution has for the student and the consequent relationships that have emerged between the student and the institution.

Using marketing metaphors to define the relationship between students and the institution has been in sharp focus with arguments advanced for and against such propositions. Svensson and Wood (2007, p. 18) suggest that marketing metaphors are inappropriate to describe the student-university relationship. Bay and Daniel (2001) examine how a customer paradigm for students may necessitate institutions to focus short-term and narrow student satisfaction. Interestingly, critics to addressing students as customers underscore the importance of building strong linkages with students at various levels. The debate about students as customers can be reframed as a set of questions about multiple relationships, social contracts, and how these are related (Sharrock, 2000, p. 153). Many academic staffs reject the universal view of the student as a customer on the grounds that HE is not like other forms of service provision (Lomas, 2007, p. 42). Based on empirical studies, Obermiller *et al.* (2005) find that faculty generally prefer recognising students as products and students on the other hand prefer to be recognised as customers. Cooper (2007) highlights the significance of quality issues in the development of new markets in the HE sector. Marketing based on customer wants and needs has been emphasized by Scott (2005). The notion of the market as the centerpiece of economic prosperity and democratic freedom is flawed

if it is not built on informed relationships (Gibbs, 2001, p. 93). Maringe (2006) describes the increasing consumerist approach among students in their choice of programmes and institutions.

From a HE manager's perspective, it is important to analyse and address issues that support the demands to recognise student as a customer instead of getting polarised in debates on correctness of applying marketing metaphors to student-HEI relationship. Factors that usually cause hardships to students and parents include lack of transparency in entry criteria, hidden costs, insufficient information about the programme and possible career opportunities, and limited or misleading details on accreditation, validation and recognition by other universities and prospective employers. Frequent changes to academic policies, curriculum, and assessment strategies also have implications to student progression. Furthermore, lack of basic infrastructure, inadequate learning resources, and unqualified and inexperienced staff often de-motivate students.

Fortunately, only a few institutions adopt devious methods and create these situations to unwary students. Though they do not stay unchecked for long, the reality is that there is no mechanism to redeem students who become victims of such institutions. In most cases, it is only the effects that are set right, and the cause remains undetected for long, increasing the possibility of recurrence. Eventually students lose precious time, money, and youth. It is in this context, it becomes necessary to examine whether a customer-like approach will protect the legitimate rights and interests of the student. Associated with this is the need to consider whether the HE sector will be justified to approach student issues similar to customer suggestions, complaints, and feedback.

A marketing environment for the HE sector, along with customer analogy for students, demands fair play, level playing field, and a free market. But, such an approach introduces several issues to HE managers: will state interest to develop a knowledge society and desire to provide education for all conflict with academic requirements? Even if there is an unlimited state funding, is the number of HEIs sufficient to address the academic and other needs of students, without compromising the quality of graduates produced? Is the private HE sector, in the eyes of the public, differently placed from the government-funded public institutions? What are the state initiatives to bring about equality across the sector? With regulations governing every aspect relating to the HE sector, what are the areas open for innovation? Are the regulations, rules of the game, or barriers to play?

Thorough knowledge of the customer is fundamental to successful marketing. In the first place, the HE sector has dilemmas in defining its customer. If students are the customers, should the industry that employs them be considered as end-user? In such a case, with marketing metaphors, should students be considered as products manufactured by HEIs? With this re-definition of relationship among HEI, student, and industry, as manufacturer-product-end user who has the right to determine the characteristics of the product – is it the society which is presumably the ultimate beneficiary or the families that are usually immediate beneficiaries or the student who studies with a purpose? Is it therefore appropriate to declare that there are players other than the HEIs and its constituents who have the rights and responsibilities to determine expected attributes of students? If this is the case, should academic staff be likened to machines in a production environment, producing products called students under the supervision of and instructions from their floor managers called academic administrators?

In all these attempts to support and oppose market metaphors, the core issue of student aspirations is lost. After all, students did not ask the HEIs to treat them as customers, neither did their parents. What they seek is a consistent support for their smooth progression. An attempt to camouflage the weakness and inability to deal with the goals and ambitions of students has resulted in individualising students and alienating them from the HEIs, using marketing jargons adding complexity and confusion instead of addressing their needs. Even if HEIs willingly come forward to apply consumer protection acts and the like to student issues, it should not be accepted. In as much as HEIs are unique and are heartland of societal development, so too is the community of students. It is a partnership that prevails in the relationship between the student and the HEI where there is a two-way learning process.

Developments worldwide have demonstrated how a partnership model between the HEIs and students can work for mutual benefit. Examples of discoveries and inventions made by groups of students and academic staff working together exist even today. Academic staffs are sensitive and uncompromising when it comes to academic performance of students. Yet, that does not prevent them from using well-drawn procedures within the academic systems to deal with students who are on border-lines. HEIs do not attempt to apply intellectual property laws and other laws on patents to deal with plagiarism. Instead, their approach while dealing with such issues, usually, is to make the student understand, accept, and respond. Academic staff continue debates on the appropriateness of additional time, for weaker students to work on their assignments. Yet, they never refuse to apply clauses relating to extenuating circumstances when there are strong reasons. Finance departments are tight on their timelines for fee payment. But, one rarely hears instances where students are asked to leave the next day for non-payment of financial dues. What works in most of these situations is a careful understanding of the student issue rather than blind application of regulations and rules driven by the legal departments.

Endowments in the HEIs created by alumni and their associates, involvement of alumni in activities of their almatemat, and generations that pursue education from the same family in a HEI stand testimony to strong links that exist between HEIs and students. Institutions develop their brand and increase student loyalty by providing quality education which is not necessarily a consequence of treating them as customers or considering them as raw materials for products developed for industry. A supportive learning environment, passionate academic staff, and a student who is willing to learn make a difference to the world of HE. Rather than indiscriminately applying marketing approaches and surrendering to corporate jargons, the sector along with the students must make a case for partnership model in which each stakeholder contributes, engages, and recognises a purpose for participation.

Products in a marketing environment: HE products vs commercial products

HEIs differ from commercial houses in terms of the nature and types of their products, characteristics of their customers, and the underlying product development process. Customers who reach HEIs not only seek gains in the form of academic certificates but also look for experiences that enable them to address challenges in real life situations. Unlike in a commercial transaction where the operation is completed when the product is transferred to the end-user, a two-way interaction (beyond product delivery) continues between the HEI and the students even after the study period. HEIs do not provide

options to awards and certificates to suit the purse of the student, in contrast with the commercial houses that have models targeted for every market segment. HEIs, usually, encourage academic staff to develop their network across the HE sector, share resources and best practices, and focus on innovation, unlike the commercial sector where several players usually imply a competitive and closed environment. Commercial houses offer attractive schemes to dispose of unsold stocks and outdated model, and also to exchange new models for old, whereas HEIs do not look for options to carry out amendments to attract students when seats fall vacant.

Products offered by HEIs are not as complex and varied as those developed by different commercial enterprises in the industry. In addition to regular academic programmes for full- and part-time students, HEIs offer other products also. Short-term courses for professional development, tailor-made courses for work-based learning, courses on emerging areas of opportunities, and executive education form part of the product range available from HEIs. In some HEIs, centres for professional development, schools for continuing education, and other professional bodies join academic departments to offer programmes. Collaboration and cooperation with international universities and professional bodies also enable HEIs to offer academic and professional programmes of international standards.

It is interesting to analyse the factors that influence HEIs to develop new products and modify existing products. Feedback from students and academic staff teaching the programme, inputs from marketing units, and guidance from the industry usually form a rich resource for academic boards to modify existing programmes and academic policies. State priorities and long-term development strategy, institutional mission and goals, priority with which infrastructure, expertise, learning resources, and support systems can be made available, determine the path for developing new products. Authentic surveys, statistical data, and academic groups with strong interest and expertise also, sometimes, support in developing new programmes.

HE is probably the only sector where one organisation participates in the product development of another organisation. Academic staff from one HEI do not consider it as a mark of weakness to seek expertise from another HEI to develop new programmes. Moreover, when such advice is sought, academic staff from other institutions neither attribute negative motives nor hold back information. They volunteer to engage themselves and also consider it as a mark of prestige and recognition to participate in an academic activity of a different HEI. Interestingly, quality assurance process governing the development of HE products also emphasise participation of academic staff from other HEIs, members from the industry, as well as alumni at various stages. Though every academic programme is developed with certain general guidelines that cover factors such as total number of credits, duration of the programme, intended learning outcomes, assessment methods, grading policies, and so on, the final form of the programme may vary in specific details as a result of changes that happen in different phases. Thus, in a HEI, new products are usually evolved in continuum, with participation from academic staff at every stage of product evolution, unlike in a commercial product where the product may be an assembly of several parts, which may have been manufactured internally or outsourced.

Pricing for HE products is not commercially driven. Stilwell (2003) describes how and why commercial criteria are inappropriate for HE. Academic staffs are actively engaged along with financial experts and marketing units to analyse economic viability

and sustainability of prospective HE products. Such an effort is important to ensure that profit motives, compulsions to break even in a short-time period, and investment needs do not determine the price of products. In the HEI context, economic considerations cannot override quality and standards. Ability to pay for the product alone cannot qualify one to become a student, unlike in the sale of commercial products. On the other hand, unexpected increase in the fee in order to sustain a programme is not a practice in the HE sector as this may affect students already on programme and prospective students who cannot make additional financial commitments.

HE products are under continuous review not only during the development phase, but even after students exit. HEIs and the academic staff do not relax even if all the students meet their expectations and there is an increasing demand for the programme. Even if all the graduates get suitable jobs in the industry, "how long will the demand exist for students with a similar profile?" is a question that confronts placement divisions in campuses. Furthermore, HEIs cannot continuously increase the number of students on a programme simply because more students want to join a programme unlike in the commercial sector where increase in production may be a consequence of increase in demand. HEIs have a larger commitment to the community and hence they have the responsibility to counsel students not to join programmes which are likely to be obsolete by the time they graduate.

While commercial products usually focus on addressing the needs of the customer, HE products and those involved in its development aim to provide what is good for the student. Such an approach is required because not all students know what is good for them in the long run. Often influenced by their peers, marketing jargons, and their limited social set-up and exposure, they tend to make a choice. In many situations by the time students discover that their choice is inappropriate, there are limited options unlike in the commercial sector where customers can resell the product for lower price and get a new product that suits their needs.

Addressing student needs: market-induced legal system vs sector-wide arrangements

In the past, academic institutions enjoyed special status on account of their uniqueness and purpose. Decision makers also recognised the complexities in developing legal systems for HE similar to those existing for other sectors. Moreover, it was not always possible to wear legal glasses and look at fine print in a HE environment. With several first-generation students seeking HE, the HEI as well as the student found the need to adapt and adjust rather than follow or insist on rules for every situation. Academic staffs were sympathetic and concerned about the internal and external pressure on students and helped them appreciate the importance of HE and the demand it places on every student. They were firm, but flexible to ensure that students' anxieties were addressed through counselling, education, and support, and seldom used regulations to threaten students. Most of the tensions on campus were resolved through discussions, orientation, dealing firmly with inappropriate and unacceptable demands, and showing utmost concern for every student on campus.

In recent years, managing legal issues has become a concern for universities as they are confronted with different types of challenges from within and outside. Academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and uniqueness of the HE sector do not provide protection for HEIs from legal liabilities. Furthermore, key stakeholders prefer

legitimacy to immunity and government support for their actions. Embargos, restricted trade practices, consumer rights, and protections have also introduced new dimensions to litigations that universities normally address. Acts and regulations applicable to HEIs and its constituents are being developed to protect the safety, rights, and identity of students, academic staff, investors, administrators, and other stakeholders, though exemptions on various issues have been considered. Marketing frameworks and regulatory environment have forced institutions to be formal and self-protective, with disclaimers and documentations for possible legal defence. With increase in the number of private HE providers, corporate laws and tax laws have gained entry into the HE environment. Since the nature of activities that HEIs engage range from renting campus space to transnational education, it has become important to develop legal systems that are acceptable from a national and international perspective. Moreover, legal units in the HEIs insist on operations in line with the acts and laws rather than seeking exemptions.

Though the number of legal disputes for the HEIs has increased in recent years and there are instances in which institutions were found to be at fault, it is often difficult to consistently and uniformly apply legislations and regulations in matters that arise in the HE sector as can be done in the industrial sector. A market-like approach has also increased the pressure on the HE sector to build a robust legal system to deal with issues. In some instances, HEIs themselves found it convenient to resort to legal system to settle even simple issues, which possibly could have been discussed and resolved on campus. When legal considerations prevail, autonomy is restricted paving way for weak accountability mechanisms. Alternatively, if one were to accept the strong dependence of HEIs on legal system, it becomes important to decide the underlying approach in the construction of appeals and response – should it be moral, legal, or financial? Moreover, it may be observed that the legal systems, introduced in the context of HEIs, worldwide, are sometimes unable and often slow to absorb the constant and continuous change to the systems and practice in the HE sector. Varying legal jargons and systems, cultural identity, time required, and resistance to change makes even day-to-day functions difficult for the HEIs.

Interestingly, in addition to the legal system, a sector-wide approach to collectively deal with various issues is gaining momentum. In this approach, HEIs contribute to arriving at policy decisions and agree on general principles though institution-specific procedures may continue to vary. Sector-wide agreement on the approach to be considered while dealing with matters such as recognition of awards, transfer of credits, advance standing to students with alternative achievements, credits and exemptions from studying certain modules, and issues such as student discipline, plagiarism, and attendance are important and will provide useful guidelines to the institutions, students, parents, and prospective employers. Sensitive institutional matters such as those relating to finance, governance, and transparency and data protection can be discussed collectively within the sector with participation from government and other appropriate members in order to arrive at policy decisions or to introduce necessary laws as may be necessary in the larger interest of HE without much delays, complexities, and dissent.

Sector-wide agreement to engage with quality assurance agencies, accreditation councils, and other arms of the government and the HE sector has enabled the government to see progress in the HE sector. The sector also recognises such participation as a protection to the entire sector. In most situations, stakeholders from

the sector, especially academic staffs, administrators, investors, students, parents, and the community work together along with the quality agencies in their endeavour to develop national qualification framework. In the process, thoughts of the sector on various matters are made available to the quality agencies. Moreover, the sector also gets opportunities to understand the details of and rationale behind various strategies considered for improvement of the quality of HE. This two-way process helps the sector as a whole. What possibly may have been misunderstood as interference when the government does it alone, to set standards for the programmes and HEIs, becomes acceptable and is considered as a matter of self-discipline when the sector does it as a network.

Developing mature HE markets: an agenda for marketing units in the HE sector

Student centric and proactive marketing units in HEIs usually focus more on addressing students' needs than on identifying strategies to sell their own products. Considering their larger commitment to the community, marketing managers also involve themselves in developing a market that is strong to understand and accept or reject HE products that are made available to them. Interestingly, other than groups of interested academic staff, marketing unit is the only team that has easy and early access to internal and external information on various developments in the HE sector, especially with regard to new HE products and expected changes in various HEIs. Marketing teams also do the necessary checks to ensure that HE products are quality assured. They interact with the academic staff in the HEIs to understand the structure of various programmes, its main objectives, and job opportunities, and analyse how they are positioned in comparison with similar programmes offered by other institutions. In the same way, academic staff also join marketing teams to provide details that may be useful to prospective students.

HE markets, unlike other commercial markets, has still a long way to go. In spite of availability of information at the click of a button, there are still students and parents who have limited information about the HE sector. Some of them do not know what is meant by recognition of academic awards and the difference it makes to be in a programme and institution that is accredited. Strangely, many students have no clarity on the programme they want to study, the demand it is likely to place on them, and the options available upon completion. Attraction to "fancy degrees," peer-pressure, fear that analyses and enquiry may lead to loss of time and money, convincing marketing instruments, and talks by front desk personnel often mislead unprepared students.

Marketing units must step into the life of prospective students from their early stages of planning for HE. They must share elements which prospective students may use in order to identify an appropriate programme to study and an institution that offers it. Importance of using authentic resources and the benefits of obtaining information from current students, alumni, and counsellors available in institutions must be emphasised. Prospective students must be informed how and why personal aptitude, interest, ability, and resource should be evaluated before choosing the programme, regardless of its popularity and prospectus. Details of how the programme has been received by the industry, government, and other institutions must also be shared. Students must be informed how to analyse the prospects of a programme in terms of job opportunities, further studies, and also its entrepreneurial and professional fabric. All such analyses

should also factor in the time around which the student is expected to complete the programme. Above all, the programme's strength to support alternate avenues, if an unexpected situation closes all the opportunities when the student graduates, must be examined. It might also be useful to share details of similar programmes offered by other institutions. In a nutshell, students must be provided all the tools that are required for them to explore, analyse, and make an informed decision. Wherever necessary, marketing departments may involve academics staff, students, alumni, and members from the industry as well as career counsellors and academic advisers. All these efforts will minimise the problems that HE managers and students face in their campus on account of insufficient information, delayed counselling, and career guidance.

Institutions with long years of history, focused on enhancing student experiences, and committed to quality never force their marketing units to be market hungry. They neither provide cheap alternatives to increase their student numbers nor burden the students with heavy tuition fee to meet all their resource requirements. Instead, they insist that their marketing units educate the market, help them recognise their own needs and deficiencies, and prepare them to seek HE products that will suit their needs rather than accepting products marketed by the sector. On the other hand, institutions that lack maturity, usually driven by unacceptable business models, insist marketing units to achieve unrealistic targets. They attempt to sell their products indiscriminately, making tall claims, through impressive brochures and other marketing materials. Nevertheless, the market is always quick to recognise the gap between performance and promises. Eventually, as tactics become visible, the market will engage in a sustained campaign to reject the products as well as the institutions.

It is interesting to analyse the relationship between the market and HEIs in terms of their levels of maturity, as shown in Figure 1. When both entities have high maturity levels, each complements and values comments and suggestions from the other, and

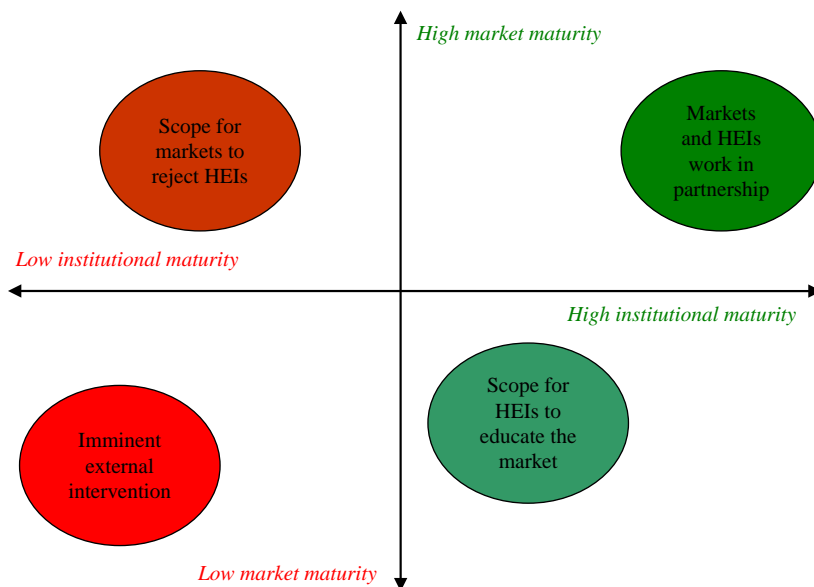


Figure 1. Relationship between markets and institutions

functions responsibly. New products are developed in joint consultation with specific market segments. Programmes developed by HEIs for specific companies and short-term courses for employees when new machinery is purchased are examples of this nature. The other extreme is where the HEI is new and the market is also naïve. In this relationship institutions may have elements of insecurity as markets look at them with suspicion. This mutual lack of trust leads to functional problems on a daily basis.

The situation is different when one of the entities is mature, quick to understand and respond, while the other is way behind. Mature markets are likely to reject institutions, which fail to respond. It is more a matter of convenience than quality that attracts students to these institutions. In contrast, when institutions are mature they take customers with them, help them understand, and walk with them through the process. In either case when HEIs have high levels of maturity, linkages between the HE sector and the market become stronger.

Institutional maturity fosters healthy relationships among different market segments. It helps to identify the needs of different segments, builds strategies to promote awareness of the product and enables customers make informed choices. High institutional maturity builds mature markets. High market maturity drives institutions to move from low to high maturity levels. When both the entities are at low levels of maturity, external agencies, and regulatory bodies are bound to intervene.

Conclusion

The need to provide value for money to the students and to be responsive to their needs has necessitated HEIs in general and marketing units in particular to look beyond marketing paradigms and customer approach in the HE sector. Declaring how their products are positioned against benchmarks and other ratings has already begun in many HEIs. In countries where quality assurance agencies are emerging, accreditation is gaining momentum in addition to validation initiatives by professional bodies. Thus, there is more emphasis on creating a robust HE product, providing a supportive learning environment, and creating a student-friendly campus than looking at marketing frameworks for options.

Academic administrators are keen on developing dynamic marketing units that provide inputs to strengthen management functions and bridge the gap between the market and the HEIs. The role of marketing units has shifted from selling products of and for their institutions to seeking HE products for students. In this effort, marketing units are also involved in educating the markets in order to help them understand the HE sector and the demands that students must place on them. Interestingly, quality assurance units and academic departments in the HEIs interact with marketing units to protect the interests of the students and the standard of the products. Regardless of the results of market surveys, student feedback, and perceived industrial trends, their joint efforts are important to developing products that are future-proofed in the market. As they work together, they identify the right mix of students, limitations and strengths of prospective students, and the impact students can have on the teaching and learning process.

Marketing in the HE sector is quite different from marketing in the commercial sector. HE products are both highly intangible and have characteristics that restrict applications of marketing framework. Moreover, the relationship between the student and the HEI is very different from what exists between a customer and a commercial

organisation. Unfortunately, customer syndrome has gone too far, depriving students of their legitimate and long existing rights and privileges. Not only does it create confusions and destroys the academic fabric in the HEIs but it also sends wrong signals to students who have dreams and desires while joining universities and colleges. After all, absorbing good practices, willingness to learn and share, and being creative and entrepreneurial is a feature of the HE sector. Nurturing such attributes will strengthen institutional management, academic programmes, and also enhance students' experience. Achieving this is a collective responsibility of all the stakeholders.

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