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## THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING POINTS-OF-MARKETING IN MARKETING HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAMMES – SOME CONCLUSIONS

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*The paper establishes the need to consider programmes of higher education as services that require to be marketed as per the tenets of service marketing. Debates conceptually, based on extant literature, the relevance of various semantic issues related to such terms as Service Encounter, Points-of-Marketing and Moments-of-Truth, which have been used by various authors, as there are certain overlaps needing clarification. It delineates the evolution of managing and marketing of higher education programmes in India, setting the agenda for discussion. The paper specially focuses on the service encounters occurring the choice making phase on part of the consumer, before deciding to join a programme of study. Certain observations have been put forth in the form of specific conclusions facilitating the effective management of these encounters, under such heads as – responsibility, attitude, physical setting and process and communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

Where does one start while researching for causes for loss of clientele in a service organization? For the purpose of this paper a service organization is one, which overtly deals in services. Excluded is the aspect of customer-service, say, provided by product manufacturing-marketing organizations or customer-service as a distinct entity from sales, or the service envelope provided by someone essentially marketing products. Coming back to the question of causal factors, there could be a plethora of such variables that could be identified. Before we start this process of identification let us define the specific focus of this paper. In certain services the need for pre-sales consultation and discussion, mainly between the service provider and the potential client, and within the client organization or influencers, is very deeply felt. Alike in product marketing we can term these as high involvement purchases but with the additional burden of features like intangibility, heterogeneity and inseparability, the dynamics of this involvement takes on a different dimension and intensity, sufficient to say that consumer have greater risk perception while buying services than buying

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products (Murray *et al.*, 1990). Additionally, at another level, the risk-perceptions hence, involvement levels as well as purchase effort varies from service to service (Stell *et al.*, 1996). For instance, we cannot compare the selection of a hair-stylist by a consumer to that of selecting a school for her child by the same consumer. One can say that it is obvious, at least for this example, that the involvement level is different in both the case therefore the amount of pre-sale search conducted or support required by the consumer will be of different level and intensity. This kind of consumer behaviour has been attributed to the existence of various categories of services, existing on a continuum wherein services have been described as being high or low on Search, Credence and Experiential qualities (Nelson, 1971; Darby *et al.*, 1973). Research also indicates that a decrease in the amount and/or quality of information usually results in a commensurate increase in perceived risk (Cox *et al.*, 1967; Spence *et al.*, 1970). In this paper the focus is more on the latter kind of services, where the emotional involvement is also high as although the outcome of these services are based on expectations, hearsay, external communication and/or experience (Berry *et al.*, 1990), the consumer is highly unsure still as each “re-purchase” may lead to a completely new experience with a completely new outcome. In the terminology of search, experience and credence continuum, this kind of service would be situated closer to the experience and credence end. The risk perception is also enhanced as usually ‘experts’ provide these services, and the consumer feels relatively more helpless than from any other purchase situation. Price *et al.*, (1995) referred to a certain category of services, which are characterised by encounters that are extended, affectively charged and intimate. These they termed as EAI Encounters. The dimensions of service encounters that are emphasized in EAI encounters is duration, affective content and spatial proximity. Examples of services within this category may be medical services, nursing, childcare, legal advisory services, counseling, coaching etc.

Then, research has also indicated that service brands are particularly different as compared to product brands especially because they rely on employees’ actions and attitudes (de Chernatony *et al.*, 1997). Numerous researchers have indicated that customer satisfaction depends directly and most immediately on the management and monitoring of individual service encounters (Bitner, 1990; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1985; Shostack, 1984; Shostack 1987; Solomon *et al.*, 1985). The proposition of this paper is that

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marketing of higher education programmes need also be seen similarly and that parameters of managing the service encounters need to be researched and evolved, such that customer satisfaction becomes attainable by design rather than as a chance happening.

At this stage it would not be out of place to also describe the Indian market context as it poses certain externalities which are in the first place different from other developed countries and secondly, being externalities, are beyond the control of the service provider but do determine the way they tend to address their clientele. As these factors define and determine customer expectation and perceptions, which in turn are crucial as they are used to assess the quality of the service delivered (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1993), it is important to focus upon them and take appropriate decisions at the design and implementation phases.

For the purposes of this paper the focus is on higher education programmes, which are professionally orientated, and are outside the purview of the public education domain/institutions in India. It needs to be understood that after the independence from colonial rule in 1947, socialist leanings and lack of private participation in education induced the government at that time to take up the task of providing education in general and higher education in particular to the Indian masses. This obviously included the entire gamut of conception, design and delivery of educational programmes, which was the prerogative of the government. Also the selection or choice of programmes to be run as well as the capacity or number of seats in any and every programme was more or less controlled by government at decree. The institutions so developed ranged from a network of primary, secondary and senior secondary schools in the urban and rural areas to universities and colleges of higher learning; and then to research and development establishments at the central and state levels. This edifice largely depended, and still depends, upon government subsidies and grants for financial support and for which consequently again there is a range of governmental organizations that act as fund disbursing and regulating authorities. What this did was to more or less free the institutions from bothering about the financial aspect of their activities. The objective then obviously was to support education and research at all levels completely such that the standard of living of the people improve in the long run. The assumption behind the government support at that time was that the Indian masses would not be able to afford education if they were asked to pay for

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it, even on a cost-to-cost basis.

Generation after generation of Indians have gone through this system and a very common conditioning therefore is that, education should come for free or at nominal costs and that provision of education is the responsibility of the government rather than anyone else. This conditioning was further reinforced by the fact that there was little or no option available, especially for pursuing higher education, in the private domain within the country.

The entry into programmes of higher education thus was and is largely based on rejections rather than selection. For instance, in case of engineering applicants to the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology, the rejection rate is as high as ninety-seven percent. Engineering and medicine have been the traditionally sought after courses and the middle class population in India has always viewed these as priority disciplines for their children to pursue.

It was therefore logical that the first few forays of the private sector into education were in these two areas. But as per the laws of the land they had to be compulsorily affiliated to one or the other state university and therefore were required to follow the syllabi and systems prescribed by the university. It is only of late that with the approval of certain agencies like the All India Council for Technical Education (which has been created as a regulatory body to evolve, implement and monitor quality norms in technical higher education programmes by the Government of India), programmes are being offered in the private domain completely, without any kind of affiliation to any other public institution. But this too is being clamped down upon as individual state authorities have, in many cases already promulgated statutes that compel private institutions of higher education to necessarily affiliate with one or the other universities in their respective states. This again leads back to the reinforcement amongst the citizenry that education necessarily belongs in the public domain and hence must be low priced. The reference to price here is important, as research has shown that services in general, and credence services in particular, invite pricing and performance abuses at the hands of unscrupulous service providers. Customers are aware that they are vulnerable to such abuses, so they are suspicious about being taken advantage of and become resentful and angry when it happens (Berry *et al.*, 1996).

Given this discussion it is easy to understand that the delivery

mechanism, i.e. the education institutions' usual style of interaction and treatment of clientele is one of a "benevolent provider", one of a giver to a beneficiary who is usually not thankful enough towards the provider. The manifest attitude amongst the service provider, whether individual or institutional, is that of doing a chore rather than providing for customer satisfaction. Although, at this point, it must be said that there are numerous institutions of higher learning in the public domain, which are of very high quality and that the objective of this paper is not to draw a comparison between private and public education systems in India; or indicate towards a subjective conclusion that private education institutions are better than the public institutions or vice-versa. The description above just tries to broadly delineate the evolution of the higher education sector in the country in order to form a perspective for the reader, such that the imperatives for the private sector institutions comes to the fore.

The marketing of educational programmes has attracted attention of researchers who have identified research-based planning and programme development, relationship marketing and non-traditional methods for education delivery as key areas for future focus (Hayes, 1996).

Marketing in developed nations like the U.S.A. has come to the fore in higher education because of various reasons. Some of these were identified as – the founding missions being found increasingly ill-suited for the demands of the marketplace; budgets becoming excruciatingly tight while departments and programmes clamoring for more support; the recruiting and fund-raising arenas having become extremely competitive as well as hostile<sup>1</sup>; higher education being more and more dominated by many largely undifferentiated colleges and universities offering similar programmes; demographic shifts in the operating environment marked by diminishing numbers of traditional full-time students, fewer full-pay students and fewer residential students; escalating demand for adult higher-education and continuing and special-focus programmes; and last but not the least, the sharp rise in the cost of higher education (Kanis, 2000). In India too recently as liberalization has progressed, although in fits and starts, governmental support to institutions of higher learning in the form of grants and subsidies, is drying up. The movement of self-sustenance is gaining force. This also adds up and forces managers of educational institutions, especially in the public domain, to re-think their mission and strategies.

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#### THE 'SERVICE-ENCOUNTER' VERSUS 'MOMENTS-OF-TRUTH' VERSUS 'POINTS-OF-MARKETING' CONCEPTS

Let us now dwell upon certain issues of semantics which needs to be classified, such that distinctions between them, if any, are highlighted and hence facilitate the factoring-in of these aspects in marketing plans.

Service encounter indicates to the second stage in the service purchase process, in which the service delivery takes place through interactions between customers and the service provider (Lovelock *et al.*, 1999).

The celebrated CEO of SAS, Jan Carlson (1987) used the terminology of 'moments-of-truth' to describe the direct contacts between the customer and an employee of the service company. Gummesson (1987) preferred to call these as 'points-of-marketing', saying that in marketing of services - relationships and interactions created by direct contact between the customer and the service provider are key phenomena.

Lovelock's definition of service encounter specifies that this stage is one, which is concerned with the interaction between the customer and the service provider during the actual delivery of the service. If this is to be subscribed to, then shall we exclude all the other occasions when there is interaction between the said two parties barring the actual delivery phase? This question assumes greater importance when we consider the case of services wherein a lot of pre-sales consultation takes place about the pros and cons of a service product, along with the reputation, pedigree and expertise that the service providing company/organisation represents. Examples of such services among a plethora of others would include getting a major surgery done from a choice of hospitals. In this case for instance there is a possibility of exploring whether the procedure is necessary, (wherein second or more opinion may be sought within the hospital or across hospitals) then, if more than one type of procedure is available which one to go for, if there are a number of specialists within a hospital or hospitals then preference for one or the other, the timing, cost involved, success rate, risks involved in going through the procedure, whether it is a speciality hospital for the disease in question or a general hospital (there would be a number of derivative concerns here), what is the historical experience of the specialist and the hospital, what is the time frame of recuperation, the list can go on. All this consultation is before the actual delivery. The focus

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of the current paper is on this phase of the encounter between the customer and the service provider rather than the one where service encounter specifically refers to the actual delivery of the service. Because in the kind of service described above the pre delivery phase is very important for the customer as the actual service maybe and usually is largely dependent upon these pre delivery consultations, and before the actual delivery, whether the consumer is finally going to bring her clientele to that service provider is also going to depend upon this pre-delivery phase.

As a corollary what also then needs to be re-looked is what constitutes the so -called actual service. For instance Bitner (1990) makes a very telling observation when she says that - "...in many cases those discrete encounters are the service from the customer's point of view." If we take the example of imparting education through a structured programme, then obviously the delivery of lectures, seminars, laboratory work etc. could be termed as the phase of actual delivery. But the moment we talk about higher education or custom designed and delivered education and training programmes, this clear demarcation starts getting blurred. Because then, whether the design phase be termed as service delivery or not becomes an issue to ponder. Tailoring or customizing higher education and training programmes requires that there is an analysis and design phase marked by close interaction between the service provider and the client, such that training needs and gaps in knowledge and skills are identified precisely. This is necessary if the delivery has to be relevant and meaningful leading to 'customer satisfaction'. Secondly, clients at times themselves may be unclear about what to look for and what they should look for, given their own circumstances. This also requires that counseling and consultation takes place to decide whether to opt for a course of study at all, and if yes, then (among other things) choice of one programme from a portfolio of programmes.

Another proposition forwarded variously by Shostack (1985) and Czepiel *et al.*, (1985) refers to the service encounter phase as that in which service performances takes place, indicating to that time frame during which consumers directly interact with service providers. If we follow this line of thought then it clearly leads us to the conclusion that direct interaction of the service – provider with the customer is the foundation of service encounter, irrespective of whether it is the 'diagnosis' phase or the 'delivery' phase.



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Another aspect that needs to be looked at is that this pre delivery activity, along with other post sale activities are also termed as a part of the 'customer-service' process or activity. LaLonde et al., (1976) defined customer service as – “activities that occur at the interface between the customer and the corporation which enhance or facilitate the sale and use of the corporation's products or services.” This definition again indicates towards a dichotomy between the 'actual' service delivery and other phases, including the phase, which is the run-up to the delivery. This stems from the fact that customer service, especially in the context of manufacturing industry has categorised customer service in three distinct phases i.e., pre-delivery, delivery and post-delivery.

The discussion in the preceding section was to highlight that, in high-involvement service purchases, there is a great degree of seamless-ness between the pre-delivery and delivery phase and also it is important to realise that the pre-delivery 'encounter' with the customer definitely shapes the purchase decision as well as the purchase process.

Given the extant literature and understanding of the service delivery process, for the purposes of this paper, it would be more appropriate to use the terminology 'points-of-marketing' rather than service encounter, to refer to all those occasions on which there is direct contact of the service provider personnel with the customer. Points-of-marketing as a concept, generically describes the customer contact, somewhat akin to the concept of 'moments-of-truth' and includes any and every occasion wherein there is a possibility of direct customer contact with the service provider personnel.

### THE RESEARCH METHOD

Apart from the extant literature that was surveyed and referred to in the earlier discussion, which set the perspective for the points-of-marketing concept, the conclusions that follow is based on experiential observations of marketing post graduate programmes in business management both in the public as well as the private domain in a personal capacity on part of the author. Secondly, looking at the competition trying to do the same during this period has also given an insight on what's wrong and what's not, as well as strengthening certain aspects on one hand and forcing to have a re-look on certain others.

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

Certain conclusions are being drawn and presented under the heads of responsibility, attitude, physical setting and process and communication.

### Responsibility

The biggest issue in the authors' consideration is the question of responsibility. When we talk of managing points-of-marketing in the marketing of education programmes, there is a tacit understanding and acceptance that this is a 'marketing' exercise and that therefore there has to be designated personnel for managing the marketing effort. This obviously, if we use the classic tenets of marketing, involves - product and process design, delivery, and control; based on the logic of customer satisfaction driven profits. But one look at the management of education programmes that prevails in India will drive home the point that this crucial aspect of managing education as a whole is left to a bunch of 'administrators', which is a clear legacy of the public system of education, wherein the key decisions pertaining to type and quantity of programmes were decided by mandarins in the ministry of education, which were then passed on to the minions in the universities and colleges to implement.

The above description is a broad one, so let's focus on the issue of points-of-marketing. The question is, who is suitable to provide for the customer interface, on part of the service provider? Let's take an analogy – if we approach a hospital with an ailment (which obviously is serious enough for the patient concerned, howsoever trivial it might be to the onlooker or more importantly – to the hospital staff), would we be satisfied more by being met and treated by a senior consultant or would we be indifferent and be equally happy with being met by a junior consultant or worse, by some paramedical staff? This has nothing to do with the knowledge, skill and ability of the lower level staff to handle such cases, which may be more than adequate to 'deal' with this patient, it is the perspective from which the patient approaches this situation that is more important.

The usual 'arrangement' that is put in place to handle such a situation in education is the maximum of - a counselor – being available to meet potential students and their parents. And this too is somewhat restricted to the private sector institutions.

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In the public domain, this responsibility is firstly not even considered relevant, as the system 'deals' with the 'applicants' through a series of 'notifications' or 'notices' rather than 'communications'. And when it is provided for, it is usually a clerk or office assistant, at times speaking from behind a barred counter, who usually has the function of selling application material and at the most gives perfunctory replies to questions regarding time schedules and such other logistical queries.

These functionaries are characterised by - being lowly paid (hence lowly qualified), categorised as ministerial staff, and usually have little knowledge about the courses on offer. Neither they are provided training nor have they the motivation to acquire, 'product-knowledge' on their own.

Even if this system has to work, the above features are bound to be detrimental and therefore at the minimum level these will have to be rectified.

What is more important is, to (say) refer to the hospital analogy provided in this section, and make faculty members responsible for this interface. In the experience of the author, this suggestion will not go down well with faculty members, who see this as encroachment upon their valuable time and downright menial work. But, wiser counsel must prevail and this realization has to come or if not then induced, that faculty members are best suited to talk about the finer aspects of a programme rather than anyone else, and that someone else talking about these programmes may actually mislead the clients and make them draw wrong conclusions about the programme as well as the institution. One way out may be to rotate the responsibility among either individual faculty co-respondents or groups. This scheduling could be done on a weekly, fortnightly basis with care being taken that everyone is covered, and also that it conforms to their work schedules.

The logic is based on the inverted organization (structure) pyramid. Wherein in traditional style of functioning the customer interface was at the base of the pyramid constituted by the lower level staff of the organization in service organization like institutions of higher learning this pyramid needs to be inverted and the interface cannot be left with the lower level functionaries but will have to be the responsibility of people at the apex of the pyramid, which now points downwards, towards the customer.

It stems from logic that a faculty member would always be more knowledgeable while handling such queries as - the future viability of various education programmes on offer; the pros and cons of each; deciding on the

best-fit between the programmes available and the background of a student; the problems that a particular candidate may or may not face in the programme, the industry and its demands and a myriad of such other issues. When all this comes from a counselor or an administrative staff it is looked upon as marketing or more detrimentally, 'sales' talk, when the same comes from a faculty member, there is immense source credibility that can be and is derived by such an interaction and this cannot be usually replicated by any other substitute. This aspect of source credibility has been endorsed by Weiner (1985) who after a long series of research on consumer attribution, concluded that people do engage in spontaneous causal thinking particularly in cases of unexpected and negative events. He has clearly revealed that most causes of consumer attributions fall within one of the three dimensions of – locus, control and stability. Here 'Locus' refers to the question of who is responsible for the dis/satisfaction, which includes both the customer as well as the service provider. "Control" indicates to the question of whether the responsible party have control over the cause. This clearly indicates the crucial importance of suitably qualified personnel handling the counseling/ introductory sessions. This not only has its impact on the immediate issue of 'conversion' of the prospect to a customer but also the long-term impact of perceived quality of services delivered.

### **Attitude**

The second major, issue which is very closely linked to the aspect of responsibility is that of the attitude of the encounter personnel with which they approach the point-of-marketing. In earlier parts of this paper attention has been focused on this issue as well wherein it was stated that because of demand exceeding supply and (therefore) conditioning of providers being that of unconcerned suppliers, the whole attitude is that of doing a chore.

What needs to be done is to inculcate the sense of empathy. The attitude should never be to 'sell' the program. The encounter personnel have to look at these interactions as counseling sessions wherein they need to disseminate factual information on one hand and diagnose and prescribe 'interventions' in the best interest of the customer, whether the prescribed intervention falls within the available portfolio of the organization in question or not being immaterial. This, one would agree, is a slightly difficult value system to inculcate especially in the private sector, where there is frequently

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an overt sales orientation. Again there can be a debate here that why should the encounter personnel spend time and then send away the potential customer to some other provider. But that's where the difference lies between a genuine service provider in the field of education who really is interested in the emancipation of its customers rather than one who behaves like a salesperson and looks at each such interaction as an opportunity to land a customer alone. The driving value behind this proposition is very simple – were this customer to be my own son or daughter, what would have been my response if I were the encounter personnel? A certain degree of conservativeness in approaching the encounter is always advisable.

### Physical Setting and Process

The admissions office needs to be designed in such a way that it is easily accessible and can give a certain amount of privacy to individual clients who approach with queries. Apart from the aspect of proper location, signage and comfortable waiting areas, one needs to provide for such comforts as toilets and drinking water.

Where a major difference is being proposed is that some of the clients who are looking for more than preliminary admission information need to be referred to a faculty member at the soonest. It is also preferable to speak to the candidate alone, as this, in the experience of the author, definitely makes the candidate open up and talk about her expectations, fears and experiences. This is a very important phase as this clarifies and facilitates, more than a test or an interview can, the process of adjudging the candidates suitability for the program as well as assessing her strengths and weaknesses.

A case record needs to be also kept and this is easily done on a pre-decided format, which is fed on the computer wherein the admission office can fill up the preliminary details before referring the candidate to the faculty member for further discussion. This needs to be done on an online database management system, which is accessible on the institutional network but with security feature such that only authorized personnel can have access. It needs to be emphasized that security at this level is extremely crucial for various reasons. The faculty member can update the same database for further usage.

To further facilitate this process such that there is no logjam because

of overloading of a single faculty or unavailability of another, it is advisable to have a daily schedule of availability of faculty members (on rotation duty for such meetings) displayed prominently at the admission office.

Secondly a preliminary form may also be devised that can be handed over to the potential client such that the customary data regarding demographics, address and contact numbers etc. can be filled-in by the candidate.

The summary record of the discussions with the faculty members if kept will also help in understanding the customer psyche and behaviour leading to more effective handling of such sessions as well as for training counseling personnel in the future.

The objective is to make this one encounter an experience for the client that she remembers with a sense of fulfillment and guidance, whether she takes admission or is/not granted admission being immaterial. For this, cues have to be provided that affirm the nature of the experience (Pine *et al.*, 1998) in no uncertain terms to the client. For instance would it be different if we designate the Admissions Office as the “Student Information and Counseling Center”? Designate the Admission’s Officer as the “Career Counselor or Consultant”. This aspect needs to be given careful thought, planning and execution as unplanned or inconsistent visual and aural cues can and does leave a client confused.

### Communication

Finally, when we come to the aspect of communication, the discussion on attitude, responsibility as well as physical setting, does extend certain pointers towards what needs to be communicated and more importantly in what manner.

The value-driver for communication needs to be one which focuses on the academic and technical merits of the institution and programme in question. One must focus on the training that one receives and the logic of the programme content and structure. For instance at times there is an over-emphasis on one aspect while ignoring others, a case in point may be the ‘sales’ pitch based on placement record and possibilities. The discussion needs to be guided away from such parochial perspectives and it must be reiterated that the institution is involved in imparting education and training in a specialization area and that placements are derived from performance

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on part of the client as well as the institution. Therefore the clients needs to be made aware that the attribution of success/failure should not be assigned only to the institution and that education is not a one sided process and that 'experiencing' on parts of students could range from active to passive experiencing on one dimension and from absorption to immersion on the other (Pine *op cit.*, 1998). It depends equally on the consumer to 'extract' the best from the provider.

The underpinning philosophy is to under-promise and over-deliver. The most valuable and crucial advertisement for the institution is positive word of mouth. Word of mouth has been long identified as one of the key drivers of consumer expectations in services, along with such other variables as past experience, personal needs and external communications.

In the experience of the author data regarding composition of past cohorts of students, their success indicators in the form of (say) median salary in various placement seasons or percent student placed etc. form a very convincing evidence for supporting any claims of effectiveness of the programme. These should be readily available with the counselors/faculty members for easy reference and sharing the same with the clients. Apart from this they need to be prominently displayed in the admissions office as well as in brochures that can be handed out to enquirers.

### Final Word

The above discussion and conclusion has tried to put into perspective the usual practices of managing higher education marketing. Whether in the private or the public domain, careful thought and planning is required as we move away from education as per supply to education as per demand. This would mean, among other things like proper research and product design, the need to effectively manage the various points-of-marketing and especially those occasions that lead to the selection or rejection of a course of study by a candidate. In any case we have to move away from being program-centric to student-centric.

### NOTES

- 1 For instance in the case of education institutions in the private sector in India, this phenomenon of increased levels of competition is already

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evident. Especially if one looks at Information Technology, Business Management, Fashion Design and Technology and such other programmes with professional/vocational tenor and aspirations, this heightened sense of competition and hence aggressive sales techniques are clearly manifest.

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