# Universities in a competitive global marketplace

## A systematic review of the literature on higher education marketing

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**Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this systematic review was to explore the nature of the marketing of higher education (HE) and universities in an international context. The objectives of the review were to: systematically collect, document, scrutinise and critically analyse the current research literature on supply-side higher education marketing; establish the scope of higher education marketing; identify gaps in the research literature; and make recommendations for further research in this field.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The approach for this study entailed extensive searches of relevant business management and education databases. The intention was to ensure that, as far as possible, all literature in the field was identified – while keeping the focus on literature of greatest pertinence to the research questions.

**Findings** – The paper finds that potential benefits of applying marketing theories and concepts that have been effective in the business world are gradually being recognised by researchers in the field of HE marketing. However, the literature on HE marketing is incoherent, even inchoate, and lacks theoretical models that reflect upon the particular context of HE and the nature of their services.

**Research limitations/implications** – The research field of HE marketing is still at a relatively pioneer stage with much research still to be carried out both from a problem identification and strategic perspective.

**Originality/value** – Despite the substantial literature on the marketisation of HE and consumer behaviour, scholarship to provide evidence of the marketing strategies that have been implemented by HE institutions on the supply-side remains limited, and this is relatively uncharted territory. This paper reviews the literature in the field, focusing on marketing strategies in the rapidly developing HE international market.

**Keywords** Higher education, International marketing, Universities

**Paper type** Literature review

## Introduction

The elements of globalization in higher education (HE) are widespread and multifaceted and the HE market is now well established as a global phenomenon, especially in the major-English speaking nations: Canada, the USA, Australia and the UK. In the context of increasing competition for home-based and overseas students higher educational institutions now recognise that they need to market themselves in a climate of international competition.

This paper presents the results of a systematic review of the literature on higher education marketing. The objectives of the review were to: systematically collect, document, scrutinise and critically analyse the current research literature on

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supply-side higher education marketing; to establish the scope of higher education marketing; to identify gaps in the research literature; and make recommendations for further research in this field.

The paper commences by summarising the marketisation of higher education globally, and follows with a short summary of the emergence of research in the marketing of HE in this new global marketplace. A summary of the method used for selecting and reviewing the literature follows, with details of the search strategy and parameters of the review. The key objectives which underpinned this systematic review are set out followed by a thematic analysis of the findings from the review to establish the current state of research in HE sector marketing. The final section concentrates on a discussion of the weaknesses and gaps in the current research and makes suggestions for further research in the field. The authors conclude, however, that the research field of higher education marketing is still at a relatively pioneer stage with much research still to be carried out both from an exploratory and strategic perspective.

**Internationalisation and globalisation**

In recent years, there has been a paradigm shift in the governance of the HE system throughout the world and marketisation policies and market-type mechanisms have been introduced in countries previously characterised by a high degree of government control (Jongbloed, 2003). In most countries, marketisation has been viewed as a "compromise between privatisation, academic autonomy and state control" (Young, 2002, p. 79) as established leaders throughout the world called for "freedom from all the shackles of government regulation" (Dill, 2003, p. 136).

The literature indicates that the higher education market is now well established as a global phenomenon, especially in the major-English speaking nations: Canada, the USA, Australia and the UK (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003) and the literature provides evidence of marketisation and the deregulation of universities in the USA (Allen and Shen, 1999; Dill, 2003) Canada (Kwong, 2000; Young, 2002) the UK (Middleton, 1996; Williams, 1997; Gibbs, 2001; Taylor, 2003) Australia (Baldwin and James, 2000) and New Zealand (Ford *et al.*, 1999). However, governments have also turned to deregulatory policies in Japan (Arimoto, 1997), Russia (Hare and Lugachev, 1999) the Eastern Bloc (Czarniawska and Genell, 2002), Holland (Jongbloed, 2003), Spain (Mora, 1997), Israel (Oplatka, 2002) China (Williams *et al.*, 1997; Mok, 1999, 2000), Asia (Gray *et al.*, 2003) and Africa (Ivy, 2001; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Maringe, 2004).

In response to these changes, the value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts, which have been effective in the business world, are gradually now being applied by many universities: with a view to gaining a competitive edge, and gaining a larger share of the international market. In light of this, the authors recognise that there is considerable debate surrounding the marketisation of HE internationally (particularly in the major English speaking countries), and the political arguments and ethical concerns surrounding this major paradigm shift are ongoing. The primary purpose of this paper, however, was to identify, summarise and analyse the key literature in this field, which focuses on the marketing of HE internationally, rather than to pursue further the questions regarding the political, economic and ethical basis for privatisation, marketisation and customisation of higher education worldwide, and its implications. It is not, therefore, the intention of the authors to take a stance in this debate, but to act as "beholders", reviewing the current research evidence on the marketing of HE.

The elements of globalization in higher education are widespread and multifaceted: it has been estimated that more than 1.6 million students study outside of their home countries, with more than 547,000 studying in the USA (Pimpa, 2003). The issues and implications of the global marketisation of higher education and privatisation (Arimoto, 1997; Kwong, 2000) have been discussed in the context of a number of key concerns: problems of increasing competition between institutions, nationally and internationally (Conway *et al.*, 1994; Kemp and Madden, 1998; Allen and Shen, 1999; Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999; Mok, 1999; Ford *et al.*, 1999; Armstrong, 2001; Ivy, 2001; Coates and Adnett, 2003; Farr, 2003), funding issues (Brookes, 2003), and widening participation or social segmentation (Ball *et al.*, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2002; Brookes, 2003; Farr, 2003).

Research into HE choice, or consumer behaviour in HE markets, although not extensive, has principally been stimulated by an individual institution's need to anticipate the long-term implications of choice and to understand the key factors involved in student choice (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001) principally in the UK and Australia. The attempts by governments to enhance the quality of HE through the encouragement of market forces is based on an assumption that students are, or will become, informed consumers making rational choices of HE courses and institutions (Baldwin and James, 2000). However, despite the substantial literature on the marketisation of HE and consumer behaviour, scholarship to provide evidence of the marketing strategies that have been implemented by higher education institutions on the supply-side remains limited, and this is relatively uncharted territory. Therefore, in the context of increasing competition universities were forced to equip themselves with the necessary marketing intelligence and information that would enable them to face the challenge of such an international market for higher education (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003).

Based on this systematic review, our argument is that the literature on HE marketing is incoherent, even inchoate and lacks theoretical models that reflect upon the particular context of HE and the nature of their service (e.g. long-term outcomes for clients; a very classified market; service values which relate to the numbers of applicants rejected, etc.). Further, we argue that the research on HE marketing draws its conceptualisations and empirical frameworks from services marketing, despite the differences in context between HE institutions and other service organisations. Thus, some of the models used in this literature seem to be incompatible with the nature of HE and universities' organisational structures.

The following sections explore the emergence of HE marketing, the international context of research in HE marketing, and demand side issues.

## The emergence of marketing in HE

Most educational institutions now recognise that they need to market themselves in a climate of competition that for universities is frequently a global one, and substantial literature on the transfer of the practices and concepts of marketing from other sectors to HE has been developed (Gibbs, 2002). For example, Nguyen and Le Blanc (2001) focused on the image and reputation of the institution and referred to the crucial role these factors played in the development of market positioning – they drew on the well-established concepts and theories in business sector marketing for their study. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003), who claimed that "a centrally important principle of marketing is that all marketing activities should be geared towards the customer", also relied on the literature used in business sector marketing, and applied it to the context of higher education.

Literature on education marketing, which originated in the UK and US in the 1980s was theoretical-normative in nature and was based on models developed for use by the business sector (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2004). Books of this type have continued to be available throughout the 1990s, and to date. The literature included books and manuals on how to market institutions (e.g. Kotler and Fox, 1985; Gibbs and Knapp, 2001) and how to apply well-established above-the-line (advertising) and below-the-line practices (e.g. public relations) used in the business sector, to HE (e.g. Davies and Scribbins, 1985; Keen and Warner, 1989).

Research that began to emerge in the 1990s interpreted marketing within the narrower definition of marketing communications, and was based on the assumption that in order for any HE institution to market itself successfully managers would need to examine the decision-making process and potential students' search for information. Therefore, researchers conducted studies of the content of the print communications available for applicants (Mortimer, 1997; Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; e.g. Hesketh and Knight, 1999). There was also much debate about who the customers of HE were: "students can be either considered as customers (with courses as the higher education products) or as products with the employers being the customers" (Conway *et al.*, 1994, p. 31). There was also some resistance to the notion of students as consumers. For example Barrett (1996, p. 70) lamented that "It is both regrettable and ominous that the marketing focus, explicitly borrowed from business, should be accepted and even welcomed". Such comments serve to highlight increasing concern regarding the marketisation of HE through the use of business terminology, which served to emphasise that HE was rapidly being regarded a business, like any other. In some cases, opponents of the introduction of market forces in education believe that the business world morally contradicts the values of education; therefore, they would argue that educationalists ought to oppose any form of marketing in their institution.

Later, it was recognised that higher education was not a product, but a service, and the marketing of services was sufficiently different from the marketing of products, to justify different approaches (Nicholls *et al.*, 1995). For example, Mazzarol (1998) focused on the nature of services, and services marketing and he highlighted the key characteristics that provided a basis for services marketing: the nature of the service i.e. that education is "people based", and emphasised the importance of relationships with customers.

Business sector marketing theory, and associated definitions of the concepts of marketing developed by well-established authors in the field – particularly Kotler (e.g. Kotler and Fox, 1985; Kotler and Armstrong, 2003; Kotler, 2003) – have continued to be used to underpin research by authors of papers on education marketing (Ivy, 2001; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001; Klassen, 2002; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). Kotler and Fox (1985, p. 6) provided a definition of education marketing as early as 1985, stating that marketing in the context of education was: "the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organisational objectives". Some of the earlier definitions concentrated on "product marketing" for example Kotler and Fox's (1985) definition stated that students were the "product" and employers were the customers, whilst Levitt (1980) also viewed a university's offerings as products (cited by Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). Later in the, 1990s higher education marketing was defined within the services marketing definition, for example Mazzarol (1998) highlighted the key characteristics that provide of services marketing based on the nature of the services using theory developed by well-established researchers in business management (e.g. Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; Parasuraman *et al.*, 2004). The recognition that HE was one of the service industries further shows that some authors in the field were anxious to ensure that HE was recognised as a business: a service sector business.

*International context*

Studies of international marketing focusing on students who sought higher education outside their home country, has been a key topic for empirical research (Mazzarol, 1998; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Gray *et al.*, 2003) and theoretical papers (Nicholls *et al.*, 1995; Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996; Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999; Czarniawska and Genell, 2002). Much of the interest in research in marketing of HE has been stimulated by increasing competition for overseas students, for example, Gomes and Murphy's (2003) study of potential HE students' use of the internet to facilitate information searching and decision making. Theoretical papers identified for this review, focused on advertising and access to information in UK markets (Nicholls *et al.*, 1995; George, 2000), gaining competitive advantage (Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999; Czarniawska and Genell, 2002) institutional and sector image (George, 2000; Oplatka, 2002) and market differentiation through segmentation and market positioning (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996; Czarniawska and Genell, 2002).

*Demand-side issues*

On the demand-side, a number of papers have focused on the choice factors of the student-consumer (Baldwin and James, 2000; Umashankar, 2001; Pugsley and Coffey, 2002; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003) and research seeking to identify key factors in the choice of higher education has been conducted by researchers based in Australia (e.g. Kemp and Madden, 1998; Soutar and Turner, 2002) and the UK (e.g. Ball *et al.*, 2002), with some research on students choice in international markets (e.g. Gomes and Murphy, 2003). The subject of the demand-side of HE markets including choice factors, however, justifies a separate study, and this body of research is mentioned here because these studies overlap the period of this review, and undoubtedly had an impact on studies of supply-side marketing.

## Methodology

Systematic review has its origins in the medical field and has been developed through the Cochrane Collaboration (Sheldon and Chalmers, 1994; Booth, 2001). Some of the features of this approach have been adopted in the social sciences, for example in education (e.g. Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre)) (Hemsley-Brown and Sharp, 2003). More recently, the approach has been closely scrutinised to determine its appropriateness in the management field and conclusions indicate that "for practitioners/managers, systematic review helps develop a reliable knowledge base by accumulating knowledge from a range of studies" (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003, p. 220).

The approach for this study entailed extensive searches of relevant business management and education databases, namely: BEI; Emerald Full-Text; ERIC; EBSCO (Business Source Premier and PSYCINFO); Ingenta (including Science Direct). Hand searches, and internet searches were also conducted to identify secondary references, and further publications by authors identified in the original searches. For example: *British Journal of Management*; *International Journal of Education Management;* and *Journal of Services Marketing.*

Searches of electronic and on-line databases using thesaurus search terms were carried out and tracked during the search process. The searches required the authors to identify thesaurus terms and combine them with "higher education" or "university[ies]" for search purposes for example: branding; markets [not labour markets]; marketing; marketisation; positioning; segmentation; and targeting were used for systematic searching. The intention was to ensure that, as far as possible, all literature in the field was identified, while keeping the focus on literature of greatest pertinence to the research questions to identify the "best evidence" for the review.

The search was limited to publications between 1992 and 2004. The starting date was chosen because "in the UK in 1992 the 42 former polytechnics joined the traditional universities" (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998, p. 108) to mark the start of a new unified HE sector in the UK. The review considered publications in the English language from the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Asia and Europe. Published scholarly journal papers reporting on empirical research were prioritised; unpublished conference papers and opinion pieces in professional publications were excluded.

The searches resulted in 63 papers (empirical and theoretical) being selected for more detailed scrutiny from 937 citations. All searches were tracked using a database and the selected citations were documented using reference manager software (with links to original sources) and a Word (mail-merge) database. Each publication was scrutinised for its pertinence to the remit of the review, and following strict application of the search parameters, 15 empirical research papers on "the supply side of marketing" were selected for inclusion in this review. 13 papers reported on the findings from primary research studies (Mortimer, 1997; Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998; Mazzarol, 1998; Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Ivy, 2001; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001; Klassen, 2002; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Gray *et al.*, 2003; Maringe, 2004) and two reported on analysis of secondary data sets (Farr, 2003; Rindfleish, 2003). Each empirical research paper was subjected to a thorough review, using a standard framework to extract key information about the purpose; the definition of marketing used for the study; design, sampling, methodology, findings and implications of the study.

In addition, the authors identified three journal papers (Nicholls *et al.*, 1995; Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996; Mazzarol and Soutar, 1999), which discussed key theoretical issues pertinent to the research objectives. Issues and conclusions drawn from theoretical papers are referred to separately, and used as supporting evidence for the findings from empirical research or to make comparisons.

For the purposes of analysis and reporting, the authors have used "thematic analysis", derived through an aggregative and interpretative approach, which aimed to summarise what is known and established already, and focused on the extent to which consensus is shared across various themes (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003). A table summarising the key features of the 15 papers used for the review, is provided in Table I. For the purposes of this paper, the knowledge base on higher education marketing has been categorised into broadly three types of studies, based on the themes that emerged during the analysis. The types of studies identified by the systematic review process, for example, whether they were qualitative or quantitative, the method of data collection and the sampling, are presented and discussed. The sections broadly follow an historical timescale where the earliest studies tended to be on marketing communications and consumer behaviour; and more recent studies examined the models of marketing, and discussed issues related to strategic marketing. Findings from the systematic review, therefore, will be presented and discussed under the following section headings:

- empirical studies identified for the review (methodologies and sampling);
- marketing communications: (communicating image and reputation and consumer behaviour issues);
- marketing models (transactional vs relationship; marketing product vs services marketing; and
- strategic marketing: segmentation, targeting, positioning and branding.

## Empirical studies identified for the review

The sampling and methodologies used for the 15 empirical research studies identified for more detailed scrutiny in this review covered a range of techniques, sampling methods and populations (see Table I). Of the studies, eight were based on samples of home-based UK (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998; Hesketh and Knight, 1999; Farr, 2003), Canadian (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001), Australian (Rindfleish, 2003) or international (Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Gray *et al.*, 2003) student-consumers of university education (potential students, current students and alumni). Four studies sampled information sources: one used web sites (Klassen, 2002) and three used print documents such as prospectuses (Mortimer, 1997; Gatfield *et al.*, 1999; Hesketh and Knight, 1999). Four international studies used a sample of managers from universities: vice chancellors (Maringe, 2004), marketing managers or recruitment managers (Mazzarol, 1998; Ivy, 2001; Maringe and Foskett, 2002). Studies also used multiple methods, e.g. Hesketh and Knight (1999) used prospectuses and collected data using focus groups with students, and Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) collected and analysed primary and secondary data.

The research identified for the study was broadly divided into two design categories (Malhotra and Birks, 2000, p. 9): "problem identification" or research that tended to identify a problem associated with the marketisation of HE, and throw down a challenge to academics, policy-makers and marketers for its solution; and "problem solving" research, which sought to apply well-established marketing practice, including strategic marketing, to the HE sector. The findings from this review will be summarised and critically reviewed in the following sections.

| Author | Country | Purpose | Sample and methods | Sample type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Arnett *et al.* (2003) | USA | Aimed to examine the concept of identity salience in the context of non-profit higher education | Quantitative survey of a sample of 953 alumni from one US university using a population of 4,481 from three year groups (20 per cent response rate) | University Alumni (US) |
| Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet (1998) | UK | Explored the perceptions students hold of the former polytechnics – new universities | Two focus groups (total of 20 students) Self-completion questionnaire with 255 potential university students | UK university students and potential students |
| Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) | UK | Explored international students' perceptions about UK education and UK performance in the world market for international education | Qualitative and quantitative survey of a random sample of 62 international students from developed (54 per cent) and developing countries (45 per cent) Secondary data analysis using HESA | International students |
| Farr (2003) | UK | Examined ways underrepresented groups in society could be targeted in a climate of increased competition for applications | Secondary data analysis using geodemographics and UCAS applications | UK university applicants |
| Gatfield *et al.* (1999) | Australia | To examine the factors that were considered important by students in their choice of university education, and compare these factors with the content of print communications | Content analysis of print communications sent to all Australian universities (includes two private) Factors identified by international and Australian students in a previous study | Undergraduate student guidance booklets |
| Gray *et al.* (2003) | Australia-based (Asian markets) | Explored the values students placed on overseas university education and what media used to gain information | Quantitative self-completion survey of 1,096 potential students from three countries (Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong) Three focus groups with Asian students attending universities in New Zealand | International students |
| Hesketh and Knight (1999) | UK | To examine the factors that influence choice of programme, for students choosing taught masters programmes in the UK | Analysis of the content of 50 UK University prospectuses and Focus groups (8 with 62 students) | UK Prospectuses UK students |

(*continued*)

**Table I.**

Table I.

| Author | Country | Purpose | Sample and methods | Sample type |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ivy (2001) | South Africa (and UK markets) | Aimed to investigate how universities use their marketing to differentiate their images in the higher education market | Secondary data analysis and self-completion questionnaire, postal survey of 81 old and 50 new UK universities and 25 South Aftrican Universities and 18 tecnicons. Represents a minimum of 71 UK and 20 SA institutions | Marketing managers from Universities in two countries |
| Klassen (2002) | USA | Used Kotler's (1996) "five-level-model" of relationship marketing to assess the web sites of top- and lower-ranked US universities and colleges | Quantitative survey of 120 US university web sites (using random sampling techniques) | University web sites (US) |
| Maringe and Foskett (2002) | South Africa | Aimed to identify the marketing challenges university marketers perceived to be facing, how marketing was organised and what philosophies underpinned marketing perceptions and practice in South African Universities | Quantitative descriptive survey of stratified sample of seven universities from a population of 48 using self-completion questionnaires | South African university marketing managers |
| Maringe (2004) | Zimbabwe | Explored the perceptions of marketing among vice chancellors of universities in Zimbabwe | Descriptive statistical analysis of secondary data and interviews with nine vice chancellors | Vice chancellors |
| Mazzarol (1998) | Australia | Aimed to identify the critical success factors for marketing international education | Postal survey of 315 marketing and recruitment officers from Universities in Canada, Australia, UK and New Zealand | Managers: recruitment and marketing |
| Mortimer (1997) | UK | Examined the information provided by English Universities to overseas students enquiring about undergraduate courses | Survey of 71 universities' in the UK (50 achieved sample) prospectuses | UK University prospectuses |
| Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) | Canada | Aimed to identify the main effects of institutional image and institutional reputation on customer loyalty | Quantitative survey, using self-completion questionnaires, of a convenience sample of 395 business school students | Business school students |
| Rindfleish (2003) | Australia | Focused on ways that segment profiling could be effectively employed to measure the potential of new market segments and the viability of strategic planning goals in the higher education sector | .Secondary data analysis from a database of 495 students from one university using geo-demographic mapping | Students from one university (Australia) |

## Findings: the themes and areas of the research on HE marketing

Several areas of research arise from the current review, and support the argument of this article in that they represent issues and research agendas that appear to be more on par with the features and processes of industrial/commercial/business and services marketing rather than with the particular features and processes of HE institutions and services.

*Marketing communications*

One of the key themes of the empirical research identified for this study into higher education marketing was issues related to marketing communications and the dissemination of marketing information in the context of choices made by potential students of higher education. Three studies focused on the print communications provided for potential students in the form of prospectuses, booklets and student guides: two studies were conducted in the UK (Mortimer, 1997; Hesketh and Knight, 1999) and one in Australia (Gatfield *et al.*, 1999). All three studies were based on a problem identification approach and based their studies on the possible match, or mis-match between choice factors of student-consumers and the information provided in these documents. In all three cases the authors argued that there was a gap: that documents provided for prospective students frequently failed to give sufficient information about academic and practical aspects of the programme (Hesketh and Knight, 1999); and that items were frequently missed by universities in publications, for example, good teaching, class timetables (Gatfield *et al.*, 1999). All three authors used analysis of secondary data (e.g. Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)) as a basis for their arguments (as opposed to marketing theory) and made assumptions that the choice factors stated by potential students in primary research studies should be met though provision of information in print documents. Conclusions from these papers, therefore, suggested that there was a substantial information gap between choice factors identified by students in the surveys and the information that had been provided by universities in their print communications. These findings led one author to conclude there was a "lack of market orientation and customer focus and that universities could achieve competitive advantage if they became more aware of students' needs and provided that information in these documents" (Mortimer, 1997, p. 225). On the basis of these findings Mortimer (1997) criticised universities for the absence of information that, she claimed put students, particularly overseas students, at a high risk of making a poor choice. These studies were, however, conducted prior the rapid development of on-line access to information about universities.

More recently, in 2002, Klassen assessed a randomly selected sample of 120 web sites of top- and lower-ranked US universities and colleges using Kotler's (1996) "five-level-model of relationship marketing" (cited by Klassen, 2002, p. 82). Unlike the studies discussed above, this study was not focused on the information provided for students based on choice factors, but nonetheless employed a problem identification approach. The agenda had moved on by 2002 and the author identified a new area that he believed was lacking in this form of communication – failure by low-ranking universities to provide sufficient interactive and relationship building capabilities on their web sites.

A more holistic problem identification approach to the study of marketing communications was taken by Gray *et al.* (2003) in Australia with a convenience sample of 1,096 students attending private colleges, high schools, universities and polytechnics in Malaysia, Singapore and Hong Kong. This study, which focused primarily on branding, investigated the media that students used to gain information about foreign universities, and using 0ne-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), and *t*-tests, concluded that "the World Wide Web (WWW) and print media were perceived to be the most important sources of university information in all three Asian markets" (Gray *et al.*, 2003, p. 113). The researchers acknowledged, however, that: "students had different media preferences which might be related to differences in cultural values, levels of Westernisation and communications infrastructure in their home countries" (Gray *et al.*, 2003, p. 111).

The study of marketing communications and information dissemination, however, seems to focus on issues that are hard-to-get in HE; Can, for example, universities publish the rank of their lecturers' effectiveness? Could we expect applicants to gain sufficient information on educational programmes that are virtually non-tangible, hard to define in terms of efficiency and teaching and learning expertise? No doubt, it is hardly surprising that some researchers concluded that HE institutions are less likely to adopt market orientation. It is argued here that the examination of their marketing efforts on the basis of this orientation overlooks the fundamental nature of HE.

*Image and reputation*

In addition to research which studied the information provided in marketing communications, a number of studies focused on the image and reputation of institutions (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001) or sectors, e.g. polytechnics and old universities in the UK (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998; Ivy, 2001); old universities and technikons in South Africa (Ivy, 2001), and the image of HE in the UK as perceived by international students (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). In common with other problem identification research designs Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet (1998) raised concern about lack of information for student decision-makers and explored the perceptions students held of the former polytechnics – "new" universities in the UK. The authors concluded that students in the sample were ill-informed about the research differences between institutions and suggested that "new universities might seek to re-position themselves in order to attract successive generations of students" (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998, p. 108). Research on the marketing positioning of universities was subsequently conducted by Ivy (2001). The study aimed to investigate how universities use their marketing to differentiate their images in the higher education market, and he provided a perceptual map plotting the market positioning of UK (old and new) and South African universities (old and technikon). Based on theory developed by Kotler and Fox (1985) he confirmed that it was important for universities to conduct a market analysis to establish their market position and to present the institutional image effectively (Ivy, 2001).

A study conducted in Israel (Oplatka, 2002), using a problem identification approach explored the messages low-stratified higher education institutions used to increase their organisational image and "product" status and attract prospective students. The author argued that low status HE institutions should refrain from adopting an image of high stratified HE institutions, because it contributed to a contradiction between the image they tried to convey and their reputation in the market. Oplatka (2002) acknowledged, however, that marketers of low-status institutions may face a professional dilemma from the need to elevate the institutional image and attract as many students as possible.

Along the same lines, Canadian researchers (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001) argue that "a review of the research in the field of management education revealed little empirical evidence to support the relationship between institutional image and institutional reputation" (Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001). Based on theories developed by economists, organisational theorists and marketers, the researchers conducted a study of a convenience sample of 395 business students, which aimed to identify the main effects of institutional image and institutional reputation on student retention or customer loyalty. Nguyen and Le Blanc (2001) claimed there was a consensus on the essence of the concept of reputation in that it was the result of the past actions of an organisation, and they found that the interaction between institutional image and institutional reputation contributed to improved customer loyalty. Further, they added that elements such as faculty members and facilities on campus were critical factors that helped determine students' perceptions of the image or reputation of a higher education institution. This approach was also predominantly a problem identification design as were most of the studies that focused on marketing communications, image and reputation (with the exception of work by Ivy (2001)).

It seems important to note that the concept of institutional image and reputation might be interpreted differently in HE compared with other services organisations. A company's high reputation, for instance, is usually connected to high sales and high demand from customers. In contrast, a HE institution's high reputation is often linked to minimal "sales", i.e. the more prestigious the HE institution is, the fewer students it often accepts onto its educational programmes. In this sense, a HE institution that tries to increase its image through new facilities is considered to be less attractive than those to which many apply regardless of these "tangible" aspects of the institution. For example, an "old" university may continue to receive three or four times as many applications as there are places on programmes; thus many potential clients are rejected – but this only serves to improve the reputation and image of that university. In most service industries, however, if customers were repeatedly unable to purchase the service, this would tend to reduce the reputation of that company unless prices were increased to control demand.

*Application of marketing models*

Comparisons were also frequently made between approaches to the marketing of products, and the marketing of services, e.g. (Kotler, 2003). The notion of education as a service as opposed to a product was presented in some papers, and researchers recommended that programmes of higher education should be marketed on the basis of the tenets of service marketing (Umashankar, 2001). Papers were also identified that had examined perceptions of service quality (Athiyaman, 1997; Mazzarol, 1998; Ford *et al.*, 1999), for example, Mazzarol (1998) examined the nature of services and concluded that the reason why the service sector had previously been ignored by marketers was because of the intangibility of services. He quoted from Zeithaml *et al.* (1985) who identified four primary characteristics of services: intangibility; inseparability; heterogeneity; and perishability – characteristics that are well established, and are also quoted by others (e.g. Kotler and Armstrong, 2003).

The two models of the marketing approach which are now very well-established in the field of marketing have frequently been examined by authors, who made comparisons and examined the appropriateness and the value of each approach i.e. transactional marketing and relationship marketing (e.g. Gilbert, 2003).

*Transactional marketing – the 4Ps*

Although an earlier paper had used the 4Ps transactional marketing model (price; place; promotion; product) to examine students' relationship with the university (Noble, 1989), only one paper identified for this study (since 1992), had attempted to apply this marketing model to HE. The central importance of pricing, product and promotional variables in designing and marketing UK education overseas was the focus of a study of the international students' perceptions about UK education and UK performance in the world market for international education (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). This study used secondary data provided by HESA, and well established marketing theory as a starting point for conducting a survey of a random sample of 62 international students from developed (54 per cent) and developing countries (45 per cent). The survey was structured using the 4Ps transactional marketing model and found that most foreign students' needs were clustered around the core and the tangible characteristics of the "product" (e.g. as academic recognition, quality and follow-up services) and the "price" (e.g. the fees, scholarships, students' perceptions of value). Overall, the study concluded that the best way to attract more international students – according to the respondents – was to lower tuition fees; provide more scholarships and give better quality of care and service. Second, based on respondents' views, the best promotional strategy was via: alumni, friends, relatives UK web sites, the British Council, and other promotional media such as television. Findings from this problem solving research, which used the 4Ps model, indicated that for universities to succeed relationships needed to be developed between a range of stakeholders and the institution, on the grounds that relationship marketing is characterised as helping to build "a strong network of relationships and interactions between the organisation and its customers" (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003, p. 319).

*Relationship marketing*

Gibbs (2001, p. 85) pointed out that those involved in higher education "seek to develop educational relationships rather than transactional deals between traders", and claimed that the "economic market commoditises higher education on the basis of the accreditations earned at higher education institutions". Three papers identified during the literature searches, relied on a problem solving research design and conducted analysis based on relationship marketing theory (Klassen, 2002; Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Trim, 2003) as opposed to the transactional marketing model. Researchers from the US (Arnett *et al.*, 2003) conducted research to establish whether there were benefits for non-profit organisations such as universities in adopting a relationship marketing model. They examined the nature of the exchange relationship in higher education for individual consumers, and based on identity theory they developed a model, specific to the non-profit context of HE. Researchers argued that for higher education marketers, encouraging students to be actively involved in school activities and improving or maintaining a level of university prestige encouraged the formation and development of a university identity, which in turn encouraged students to engage in supportive behaviours in the future. Relationship marketing was considered by the authors to be a viable strategy in the context of HE but they claimed that success required non-profit organisations, to not only focus on economic rewards, but also highlight the "social benefits including emotional satisfaction, spiritual values and the sharing of humanitarian ideals" (Arnett *et al.*, 2003, p. 91).

In a study of the international marketing of British education, Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) provided a comprehensive literature analysis which linked relationship marketing to the marketing of services, and emphasised that relationships require at least two parties who are in contact with each other: the customer and the service provider. There was, therefore, much support for appropriateness of applying the relationship marketing approach to higher education, whereas there was little evidence that researchers examined application of the transactional model.

In recent years, it has been recognised that RM strategy seems to be compatible with the nature of the HE services, (and other education sectors) because this approach promotes the involvement of students in the marketing and image-building of their institutions (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2004). After all, even the best marketers and advertisers could not promote a HE institution if the service staff (e.g. lecturers, office managers, secretaries) were not responsive to the students' needs and expectations. Future research on HE marketing, it is suggested, will need to extend our understanding of the RM strategy and the various tactics to employ it in HE institutions.

### *Strategic approaches to marketing*

Strategic marketing approaches are mainly those that are essentially tactical and driven primarily by knowledge of consumer behaviour, in order better to compete in the marketplace. Broadly, there were two approaches to strategic marketing based on first, a problem identification approach where researchers sought to examine the government agenda, for example, widening or extending participation in education, and funding changes and consider the implications of the policy in the context of markets and marketing. Second, a problem-solving design was used by applying well-established business marketing theory and strategies to HE marketing, e.g. the strategic tools of marketing.

### *Widening or extending participation in HE*

Traditional marketing practice is based on the notion that the high participation groups are identified and then targeted, however, the current public policy objective in HE in the UK seems to require the opposite approach, i.e. that low participation groups are targeted in order to increase their participation rates (Farr, 2003). A number of authors have discussed HE marketing in the context of meeting the government's widening (or extending) participation agenda in the UK (Ball *et al.*, 2002; Reay *et al.*, 2002; Brookes, 2003; Farr, 2003). For example, one study used a problem identification design to find out how the widening participation agenda had affected marketing in higher education institutions and argued that there is a need for changes to marketing approaches in HE institutions to satisfy the government policy changes (Brookes, 2003). The paper examined the complexity of the issues associated with both US and

UK HE and highlighted the conflicts (particularly revenue) and the differences in commercial and education perspectives.

A number of papers (e.g. Conway *et al.*, 1994; Nicholls *et al.*, 1995; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Farr, 2003) made recommendations about the possible use of marketing techniques in their conclusions as a way of addressing the research problem they identified. For example, research questions such as: "how can under-represented groups in society be targeted when there is increased competition for applications" (Farr, 2003) aimed to explore how marketing strategies could contribute effectively to meeting the targets of the widening participation agenda (using a problem identification approach). Farr's (2003) paper highlighted the importance of defining the government's aims carefully in order that marketing can be utilised most effectively. Following analysis of secondary data the author identified a problem – he claimed that there were biases in HE participation rates across different socio-economic groups. However, the author concluded that it was difficult to identify appropriate marketing strategies to meet this agenda, and he offered a challenge to marketers of higher education to develop strategies to address these inequalities.

### *Strategic tools of marketing*

A number of research studies focused on specific strategic approaches to marketing including competition and segmentation (Tonks and Farr, 1995; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Farr, 2003; Rindfleish, 2003), targeting (Farr, 2003), positioning (Nicholls *et al.*, 1995; Ivy, 2001; Farr, 2003; Gray *et al.*, 2003) and branding (Gray *et al.*, 2003). Empirical studies and theoretical papers also made recommendations that specifically referred to marketing tools and strategies that are well-established in the business sector: marketing segmentation, market differentiation; market positioning and market planning. This research tended to employ a problem-solving design, by seeking to apply the tools of business marketing to the HE sector.

### *Market segmentation*

Due to the increasing power of technology in the area of customer databases, segment profiling is now commonly used as a way of matching the strategic goals of the organisation with the potential needs and wants of segments within specific markets (Kotler, 2003). The university market has been characterised as forming three main segments: international students; mature students and high-school leavers, and each segment considers different factors when making choices (Soutar and Turner, 2002). One study was identified that explored the application of market segmentation to higher education markets. An Australian study (Rindfleish, 2003) focused on the marketing technique of segment profiling, to examine whether, and in what ways, this marketing tool could be effectively employed to measure the potential of new market segments and the viability of strategic planning goals in the HE sector. The study relied on secondary data analysis from a database of 495 students from one university using geo-demographic mapping. The identity of the university used for this study was not disclosed, and the author highlighted the need to keep such information confidential for commercial reasons. The author argued that the technique was useful as a way reducing the risk of specific strategic planning goals, by identifying the potential of new market segments and streamlining target marketing practices. He claimed that the strategic goals of the organisation, whether they be goals based on student access and equity needs or an increased target of full-cost international students, could be broadly assessed before management decisions were made (Rindfleish, 2003, p. 158).

The subject of market differentiation was also a key theme of problem solving research that aimed to explore the possibilities of applying marketing theory to the HE sector. Researchers suggested that more meaningful differentiation of institutional missions and approaches were called for together with more accurate dissemination of these differences to students (Baldwin and James, 2000). Price *et al.* (2003) recommended a comparison of "reputational pull" and "facilities pull" as a means of differentiating the brand of different institutions. However, achieving effective differentiation, required the institution to project an image of perceived added value in the market (Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996).

### *Market positioning*

Authors have suggested that universities might need to re-position themselves in order to attract successive generations of students (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998) which may involve carrying out a situation analysis to ensure that market positioning is established and strategies are put in place to effectively present the institutional image and develop their position in the minds of the public (Ivy, 2001).

Gray *et al.* (2003) recognised that little research had been conducted on market positioning in international HE markets even though the overseas market is highly competitive and there is an increasing emphasis on branding. Based on a theoretical model, the four-level classification of international branding strategies, Medina and Duffy (1998) identified five main brand positioning dimensions: a university's learning environment (including excellent staff, facilities and resources); reputations (including brand name, achievements and high standard of education); graduate career prospects (including graduates' employment prospects, expected income and employers' views of graduates); destination image (including political stability, safety and hospitality) and cultural integration (including religious freedom and cultural diversity) (Gray *et al.*, 2003, p. 115). They also recommended that future research could investigate the media and brand preferences of parents since they were found to be an important secondary group of decision-makers for choice of undergraduate programmes. This research used a problem-solving design and lends some support to the importance of image and resources identified in the earlier studies, which had used a problem identification design, to explore of the effectiveness of marketing communications and dissemination of information. Here again, nevertheless, researchers have borrowed models that have been developed in non-education sectors in order to explain the marketing needs/processes of HE institutions.

### *Market planning*

Recommendations by authors also frequently related to market planning on the basis that universities varied in their level of awareness of the various types of customers and recommended that universities should incorporate a greater market orientation into their strategic planning (Conway *et al.*, 1994). Papers identified for this review also recommended that marketing should be an integral component of the development planning (Maringe and Foskett, 2002) or strategic planning (Rindfleish, 2003).

Strategic approaches were studied by examining perceptions of HE marketing (Maringe, 2004) and types of marketing strategies (Maringe and Foskett, 2002). Problem identification research by Maringe and Foskett (2002) asked questions about the marketing challenges university marketers were facing in their institutions in the Southern African region, and aimed to identify how marketing was organised and what philosophies underpinned marketing perceptions and practice. They identified four broad marketing strategies that university institutions tended to use: public relations approach; sales approach; customer satisfaction approach; and marketing as strategy approach. In terms of which strategies and approaches to marketing were prevalent in the region's universities they found that institutions were at different stages of development in marketing terms and that marketing functions needed to be more adequately identified and defined. They recommended that marketing efforts needed to be directed at developing longer-term institutional visions and missions that incorporated marketing as an integral component of the development plans.

## Discussion

This review has focused on exploring, categorising and comparing empirical research studies on higher education marketing in an international context. This discussion draws together the key findings, identifies and presents an analysis of the gaps in research in light of the major argument of this article.

First, the research identified for the study was broadly divided into two design categories: "problem identification" and "problem solving" classification of marketing research (Malhotra and Birks, 2000) – although some research papers which focused on problem identification suggested strategic approaches as a way of addressing the issues raised.

Problem identification included: image research, sales forecasting, trends, and market potential (Malhotra and Birks, 2000). Studies identified for this review, included those which used secondary data analysis, and/or government policy to provide a starting point for the argument or exploratory research; and approached the issues with a negative stance (e.g. "there is a lack of . . . ") with recommendations that focussed on speculating, or warning about the future outcomes. For example, one factor the papers on HE marketing communications (both print and e-communications) had in common was that the authors had focused on the shortcomings in the context of the current research agenda. Another example is studies which examined the impact of widening participation policy and its associated implications for the marketing of HE. These studies tended to recommend that marketing tools were applied to the problem, but focused primarily on identifying, justifying and analysing a marketing problem in HE rather than exploring or recommending specific marketing approaches to addressing the issues that are compatible with the characteristics of HE institutions

The first topic covered for this review was marketing communications, where much of the research focused on comparing issues identified by students making choices, with the content of print communications and e-communications. However, there are two areas where there is still a paucity of research evidence. First, the marketing communications mix includes five elements: advertising; public relations; personal selling; direct mail and sale promotion (Kotler and Armstrong, 2003) and each of these areas provide potential for research. For example, research to explore the potential of sponsorship, or research to examine the use of sales promotion such as offering free laptops or reduced fees as incentives. Second, a lack of research on word-of-mouth communications and the diffusion of innovations (Rogers, 1995) seem to provide further topics for future research in this field, all areas that seem to characterise the structure of HE institutions.

Problem identification research was also applied to a number of concerns following policy decisions by governments, e.g. widening participation and funding issues. Authors themselves tended to throw down a challenge to marketers to find ways of addressing these problems through marketing techniques and strategies. It seems clear there is potential here for further problem solving research to examine ways that well-established marketing approaches could be applied. The introduction of new policies such as "top-up" fees in the UK, for example is also likely to stimulate research using a problem identification design, which could subsequently lead to further application of the 4Ps model – particularly "price" – as part of research to explore solutions.

Problem solving research included: segmentation research, product research, pricing, and distribution research (Malhotra and Birks, 2000) and includes papers which focus on strategic approaches to marketing A number of studies identified for the review used marketing theory or theoretical models from business marketing and took a positive approach to the issues (e.g. "this marketing theory is applicable . . . ") based on empirical research and discussion about how the marketing theory could be applied to the context of HE. This design frequently employed survey approaches (often using statistical techniques) with questions drawn from theoretical models used in business sector marketing. Conclusions often provided insights into the appropriateness of applying established marketing theory to the HE context, with some recommendations for adaptation or improved "fit". For example, research examining specific strategic marketing tools, including segmentation or positioning, or models such as relationship marketing, and the distinct characteristics of services marketing, employed this approach.

Although there have been a number of studies that examined image and reputation, the notion of branding has barely made its mark in higher education marketing. There are a number of concepts associated with branding that have still to be explored. For example, the HE sector through programme development, may be reflecting a well established practice developed in business, e.g. development of product lines, product extensions, raising brand awareness, brand recognition and brand recall (Fill, 2003) to name but a few, which could provide topics for further research.

There were also differences between the studied identified for the review based on the historical context. The findings indicated that broadly, the earliest studies tended to focus on problem identification, particularly information dissemination in the context of student choice, whilst more recent studies tended to begin to consider strategic approaches to marketing using a problem solving approach by applying theories that are well-established in the business sector. This pattern has also been observed in countries of the developed world, where university marketing has been described as progressing from its primitive role of serving a tactical function in times of need to a strategic role in shaping the destiny of the institutions. For example, VCs in universities in the developing world had a narrow view of the marketing concept and often related it to advertising, publicity and information dissemination (Maringe, 2004).

There was much interest by researchers in the relationship marketing model, and the rapid development in services marketing in recent years also seems to have gained some ground. However, there is still much research to be done to explore these models in the context of HE. For example work by others (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1985; Parasuraman *et al.*, 2004) offers much potential for application to the HE sector. Finally, more recent developments in customer relationship management (CRM) which have emerged in markets where a relationship marketing model has been followed, also seems to provide potential for research in the HE context.

There are still many issues that remain un-explored, for example: how to market an institution which relies on the profile of existing students for its image in the market-place; and how to widen participation to attract government funding, when this is contrary to the mission and strategic direction of the institution.

There was also some evidence of negative feelings towards the need for marketing activities, and in some cases there was concern about the application of business or industry sector models to the HE sector. Clearly, much research is needed to examine the notions of: ethical perceptions, personal and moral philosophies, ethical values and social responsibilities of those involved managing the marketing of universities, particularly the internal marketing issues. University managers and academics need to consider the marketing not as an alien concept imported from the business world, but as both a viable philosophy and strategy for developing an HE sector which meets the needs of home-based and international customers (Maringe, 2004). The research field of higher education marketing is still at a relatively pioneer stage with much research still to be carried out both from a problem identification and strategic perspective. For those with a passion for research, and a belief in the power of markets and marketing, there is still much to be done in the context of HE markets.

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