Marketing
Australian universities to overseas students

By John W Wilkinson

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Many Australian universities appear to make little use of the expertise of their marketing academics within their overseas marketing programs. Also, most university administrators believe that they could improve the effectiveness of their marketing programs quite significantly. This situation is surprising, given the substantial potential income from Asian and other foreign students. On the other hand, most institutions do appear to have at least some degree of “customer-orientation” with respect to their international student programs, consistent with a marketing philosophy.
Introduction

Foreign students now provide an income of more than $150 million annually to Australian universities (Lewis, 1991a). Significant financial opportunities exist for those universities that are willing to market their courses to overseas students. These opportunities have been recognised by many tertiary administrators, and there has been increasing awareness of the need to promote institutions and their courses (Edmondson, 1987; Brown, 1988; Miklich, 1988; Woodhall, 1989; and Dougherty, 1990). Indeed, many tertiary institutions now actively seek overseas students to improve their financial positions (Gerrie, 1986; Woodhall, 1989). However, there have been some concerns that Australian institutions are not marketing themselves effectively in overseas markets (for example, McKanna, 1991).

There also has been recognition of special problems encountered by foreign students (Brash, 1989; Burke, 1989). Indeed, it is widely recognised (Sharp, 1982; Ballard, 1989; Brash, 1989) that tertiary institutions have special responsibilities toward overseas students. Obviously, any assistance offered by institutions should be aimed at addressing the problems facing these students.

Institutions also need to recognise that local students might not welcome support exclusively provided to overseas students. Brash (1989, p 71) has argued that Australian students already “have shown interest in what is being done to provide additional support for overseas students”. In part, this response by local students has resulted from substantial growth in student enrolments in tertiary courses during the past decade, financial constraints imposed upon institutions, and the resultant problem of over-crowding on many campuses (Lewis, 1991b).

This study focuses on Asian markets, which account for roughly 75% of foreign students in Australia (Williams, 1989). The study considers three major areas: the special needs of Asian students studying in Australia, the use made by Australian universities of the expertise of their marketing academics, and the effectiveness of institutional marketing programs.

Literature review

Special needs of Asian students

Significant research, including that discussed below, has been undertaken regarding problems experienced by students when studying overseas or at institutions with different cultural norms to students’ home environments.

Problems relating to differences in culture have been identified and analysed through case studies of black students on predominantly white campuses in the United States (Stikes, 1984). Stikes has argued that the personal development of students from minority cultural groups is affected by factors including “organization of the university, delivery systems for services, administration, management and supervision, teaching methods, counseling approaches, small-group interaction, ... and students’ learning styles” (Ibid, p 121). It seems reasonable to assume that such factors also could affect Asian students studying in Australia.

Within an Australian context, Brash (1989, p 66) has identified advantages and benefits of overseas students for local students. For example, the students act as role models, or the students can help local students attain higher academic standards.

Major experiences and problems identified by foreign students in South Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences/Problems</th>
<th>% Respondents (Range over three surveys)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terms most often used to describe experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>53 - 67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>42 - 67</td>
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<td>Stressful</td>
<td>55</td>
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<td>Lonely</td>
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<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusing</td>
<td>35 - 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major problems identified as serious or significant</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Workload</td>
<td>45 - 64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic/lecturers' expectations</td>
<td>43 - 54</td>
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<tr>
<td>Writing assignments/essays/reports</td>
<td>44 - 48</td>
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<td>Taking notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Australian teaching style</td>
<td>33 - 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding Australian speakers</td>
<td>33 - 43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding a part-time job</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Major experiences and problems identified by foreign students in South Australia

Sources: ACUE, The University of Adelaide: Report on the Overseas Student Questionnaire; 1991 (Unpublished internal report); Sealie, Lynne; Gurry, Claire; and Quintrell, Neil: A Survey of Overseas Students During Their First Year at Flinders University; 1990 (Unpublished internal Flinders University of South Australia report); and Wilson, Matt: New Overseas Students: Questionnaire Summary; 1991 (Unpublished internal University of South Australia report).
problems associated with language and "differences between the intellectual traditions of Asian and Australian students". Burke (1989, p 75) has identified the following issues as those "that cause overseas students the greatest difficulty":

- Cultural adjustment;
- Finances and accommodation;
- Living independently;
- Language and communication
- Study-related concerns, including difficulty in mastering critical analysis, patterns of argument and principles of relevance;
- Being different ... [and having] experiences of racial intolerance and relatively low level of contact with Australians.

Separate studies of foreign students have been undertaken recently by the three South Australian universities (Sealie, Gurry and Quintrell, 1990; ACUE, 1991; and Wilson, 1991). The findings of the South Australian studies regarding the experiences and problems of overseas students are summarised in Table 1. Although details are somewhat different, some broad similarities are evident in the findings of these studies, and the major findings are consistent with those identified by researchers such as Brash and Burke (discussed above).

Table 1 suggests that Asian students are likely to experience special problems when studying in Australian universities, as well as problems typically experienced by many local students. These special problems can be categorised as cultural, language and support-related types.

Cultural problems include differences in academic expectations and teaching styles, differences in customs, and experiences of racial intolerance. For example, respect for authority may inhibit many Asian students in debating issues with, or questioning the views of, their lecturers, while Australian lecturers may view such reluctance as a sign of inadequate reading or a lack of understanding on the part of the student. Some of these specific problems could be reduced by the provision of special services for foreign students, by the "education" of lecturers regarding these cultural issues, and by encouraging lecturers to alter their teaching styles to accommodate Asian students.

Language problems include difficulty understanding lecturers and other Australians, being understood by Australians, participating in tutorials, taking lecture notes, understanding text books, and writing assignments and examinations. Language problems probably contribute to Asian students' difficulties in understanding lecturers' expectations. Again, some of these problems could be reduced by the provision of special services and changes in teaching styles. For example, lecturers could be encouraged to provide Asian students with copies of lecture materials, so that such students could listen, rather than attempt to write extensive notes, during class.

Support-related problems include finding appropriate accommodation, adjusting to living independently, being homesick or lonely, fearing failure, and experiencing financial problems. Difficulties are also encountered in obtaining part-time employment. The psychological impact of these problems probably is increased for Asian students by the presence of cultural and language barriers. These problems could be reduced by encouraging the development of Asian student "networks", or by the introduction of some form of mentor program in which each staff member monitors the progress of foreign students.

In summary, research suggests that Asian students studying in Australia are likely to experience various difficulties, mainly due to differences in culture and language. All of these problems are understandable, given the circumstances of many Asian overseas students, including age and lack of experience in non-Asian cultures. Many of these difficulties could be reduced by the provision of special services by tertiary institutions, preferably based on specific information regarding the experiences and progress of foreign students.

**Involvement of marketing academics in overseas marketing programs**

It would seem appropriate for an institution to undertake a range of promotional activities to communicate with its target markets. The coordinated use of several promotional activities has been supported by Weirick (1978) in her discussion of promotional methods successfully utilised at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In addition, Vicere (1988, p 73) has noted that most tertiary institutions use a range of promotional activities, including "direct mail, telephone, and personal contact".

Within this context, universities could be expected to involve marketing (and other) academics in the selling process. Such a view is supported by the findings of several researchers. For example, Woodhall (1989, p 145) found that about 66% of UK institutions make use of "lecturers' visits abroad to distribute literature, etc", about 55% have "links with institutions abroad", and about 45% have organised "promotional visits" to certain overseas markets. Similarly, Davis (1989, pp 110-111) has noted that Australian institutions utilise "personal representation overseas" and "participation in international and AUSTRADE educational exhibitions", as well as the services of other institutional organisations, to promote their awards overseas.

In addition, universities could utilise the expertise of their marketing academics in the marketing planning process. Given the successful involvement of many marketing academics in consulting and other "practical" marketing activities, use of this internal expertise by universities would seem both appropriate and desirable.
The effectiveness of marketing programs

Intuitively, it would seem reasonable to expect some positive relationship between the degree of utilization of available resources and the level of success of marketing programs. Conversely, Mc Ara (1982) has suggested that the lack of necessary resources could affect the viability of certain marketing decisions.

Equally, it would seem likely that those institutions that identify students' needs would be better able to make appropriate marketing decisions. As argued by Hague and Jackson (1988, p 10), market research "will provide the best possible chance of the correct action being taken". Similarly, Kotler, Chandler, Gibbs and McColl (1989, p 93) have argued that "marketing managers need more and better information" than frequently is available, although not so much that they risk "drowning in it".

As already mentioned, it is important not to overlook the needs of Australian students, who otherwise would become dissatisfied with particular institutions. Indeed, to compete successfully within the local market, universities should analyse needs of Australian students and incorporate such analysis into local marketing programs. Based on results of earlier research by the writer (Wilkinson, 1990), involving a survey of 88 Australian students, the following factors appear to represent the major criteria used by prospective business students when selecting institutions and courses of study:

- career opportunities offered by a particular course;
- a preference for a liking of a particular subject;
- the "educational breadth" of a particular course;
- the location of an access to a particular campus;
- the reputation of the institution among employers;
- feedback received from family or friends; and
- recommendations received from school teachers.

Interestingly, these findings are consistent with those of Williams (1987) and Patterson and Pascoe (1990) with respect to foreign students' preferences.

Besides long-term issues, such as campus access and location, any given university obviously needs to ensure that the reputation of that institution and its courses is developed or maintained throughout the community. In particular, the institution would need to promote itself and its courses to professional bodies, employer groups, and secondary schools. In addition, it seems important to ensure that existing students are satisfied with the courses and other services provided by the institution.

In summary, utilisation of the expertise of marketing academics, adequate monitoring of and response to the special needs of overseas students, and attention to the factors influencing selection of institutions and courses of study (for local as well as overseas students) would seem to be essential requirements for the successful marketing of universities and their courses.

Methodology

Following a review of relevant literature, discussions were held with administrators within the three South Australian universities with responsibilities for overseas student programs, the marketing of the universities and their courses in overseas markets, and the design and delivery of bridging programs for new overseas students.

Two surveys were conducted on a national basis. One set of questionnaires was mailed to heads of marketing departments on 56 campuses which appeared to offer marketing subjects within business-related courses (based on information in Ashenden and Milligan, 1991). Thirty-one responses were received, 30 of which were usable.

This represents an effective response rate of 54%.

The second set of questionnaires was mailed to managers of international student programs at the relevant 44 universities. Twenty-one responses were received, following the initial mailing and a reminder letter, representing a 48% response rate.

Use also was made of earlier research by the writer (Wilkinson, 1990), regarding course and institution selection criteria of students. That research included a survey of Australian students enrolled within the School of Business at the Magill campus of the then SACE (now part of the University of South Australia). Following two rounds of pre-testing, the final questionnaire was self-administered by 95 students in an economics class of about 125 students (in which the writer has no teaching involvement and with participation being voluntary basis). Eighty-eight of the completed questionnaires were useable.

Results

Following are the major findings of the surveys of marketing academics and international student administrators, all but one of whom indicated that there were Asian overseas students studying at their institutions.

Recognition of the Special Needs of Overseas Students

As shown in Figure 1, all responding international student administrators indicated that their institutions provide at least some special services for overseas students. A large majority of institutions appear to have introduced a reasonably wide range of special services. (The 'Other' services mentioned by respondents include airport reception [24%] and pre-departure talks [9%]).

About 81% of responding international student administrators indicated that their institutions had conducted major surveys of their
overseas students within the past three years. In addition, a significant proportion (38%) of these respondents indicated that their institutions were likely to conduct further surveys of their overseas students within the next year or so. While all respondents indicated that their institutions had made some changes to services as a result of these surveys, only 18% indicated that "major" changes had been made.

These responses suggest that the international student administrators within many Australian universities are monitoring the special needs of overseas students on an on-going basis. However, few institutions appear to have made major changes to student services.

Twenty-nine of the 30 responding academics indicated that there were Asian overseas students studying on their particular campuses, and 27 of these respondents indicated that some of the Asian students were studying marketing subjects. However, only 37% of these respondents indicated that marketing academics on their campuses altered their teaching methods to accommodate Asian students.

This is somewhat surprising given the philosophies underlying marketing orientation and customer service. If marketing academics were to practise the marketing principles which they teach in classrooms, then they surely would attempt to reduce cultural and language barriers by modifying their teaching styles. In fact, it would seem reasonable to expect marketing academics to be at the forefront of research into the special needs of Asian students, especially in those departments or schools that emphasize market segmentation, customer service or relationship marketing in their curricula.

Of course, there are various possible explanations regarding why most marketing (and other) academics do not alter their teaching styles to accommodate Asian students. Some academics might not be prepared to devote additional time to provide copies of lecture materials to Asian students, or might believe that special attention to foreign students would constitute discrimination against local students. Ignorance of Asian culture, in itself, could be a major factor.

Of course, academics could be targeting local students, who would constitute the major "segment" in their classes. (However, without additional support for overseas students, academics really would be practising "mass marketing" rather than "target marketing").

Interestingly, there are indications that greater involvement in overseas marketing activities may lead to modification of teaching styles to accommodate Asian students. Specifically, based on responses from the marketing academics, there is moderate positive correlation (0.62) between the likelihood of marketing academics altering their teaching methods and the involvement of these academics in overseas promotional activities (discussed below). Thus, it is possible that involvement in overseas marketing activities results in greater understanding of, or tolerance toward, overseas students.

Involvement of marketing academics in marketing programs
Consistent with previously mentioned research findings, most responding academics and international student administrators indicated that a range of promotional activities is undertaken by their institutions within both local and overseas markets. Based on responses from the administrators, each of the following activities is undertaken in overseas markets by at least two-thirds of responding universities:

- overseas exhibits;
- overseas visits;
- media advertising;
- use of agents; and
- mailings to schools.

More than 90% of responding academics indicated that administrative personnel within their institutions were involved in promotional activities. Indeed, about 77% of these respondents indicated that their institutions had administrative departments responsible for the marketing of courses locally or overseas. However, as shown in Table 2, based on responses from academic and administrative respondents, it appears that marketing academics are actively involved in marketing programs in only about half of the relevant campuses or institutions. Given the breadth of promotional activities undertaken by most universities, this situation is somewhat surprising.

Perceptions of marketing academics regarding the use made of their expertise within overseas marketing programs are summarised in Figure 2. In summary, most respondents
Proportions of respondents indicating that marketing academics are actively involved in promoting institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Group</th>
<th>Local Markets</th>
<th>Overseas Markets</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Academics</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n = 30)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Student</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators (n = 21)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Perceptions of marketing academics regarding the use made of their expertise (n=30)

![Graph showing perceptions of marketing academics regarding the use made of their expertise]

The effectiveness of overseas marketing programs

About 95% of responding international student administrators indicated that their institutions planned or wanted to increase the enrolments of foreign students. Reasons given included financial considerations (29%) and an interest in “internationalising” or broadening the cultural base of the institution (33%). Clearly, therefore, institutions should be attempting to maximise the effectiveness of their overseas marketing programs, in order to meet their overseas student enrolment objectives.

Responses regarding the (perceived) effectiveness of marketing activities undertaken by universities are illustrated in Figure 4. Despite a wide range of responses with respect to marketing effectiveness, there appears to be substantial scope for improvement by most institutions.

Interestingly, based on Student's t-test results, there is a significant difference between results for administrators and academics at the 0.10 confidence level. This difference could reflect a lack of objectivity among administrators or a lack of detailed knowledge of insti-
tutional marketing programs among academics.

Overall, given the interest in overseas student enrolments, it is surprising that more emphasis is not being placed on increasing the effectiveness of overseas marketing programs, particularly since the “practitioners” themselves recognise the mediocrity of some of these programs.

Conclusions

Many Asian students experience cultural, language and support-related problems while studying in Australia. Fortunately, most Australian universities do appear willing to undertake some research to identify the special needs of their Asian and other foreign students, to monitor these needs on a regular basis, and to alter or add to their range of student services in order to improve “customer service” to these foreign students. However, few institutions seem prepared to make major changes to student services.

Most marketing academics do not appear to have changed their teaching styles to accommodate Asian students. If academics in other disciplines are similar to those in the marketing area, then it is likely that only a minority of university lecturers alter their teaching styles to accommodate these students. Such a situation would tend to entrench the learning-related problems experienced by many Asian students and could lead to dissatisfaction with the “teaching product”.

Most Australian universities appear to have recognised the need to undertake a range of promotional activities to attract overseas students. Similarly, most institutions appear to utilise the services of external facilitative organisations such as Austrade and IDP. However, only about half of the institutions appear to involve their marketing academics in promotional activities, and most make little use of the expertise of these academics in the overall marketing process.

Given the potential export earnings from overseas students, it is surprising that senior management within universities has not encouraged international student administrators to make full use of the expertise of academic staff. Conversely, marketing academics should question their collective role within institutional marketing processes, since their lack of involvement is likely to adversely affect the effectiveness of programs undertaken by their institutions.

With respect to promotional strategy, it appears that universities should place particular emphasis on development and maintenance of image and reputation in both local and overseas markets. Importantly, promotional activities need to target relevant professional associations and employer groups, as well as secondary schools and prospective students. In addition, given the likely importance of “word of mouth” in the development of the reputation of institutions in overseas markets, it is important that administrators monitor customer satisfaction levels among overseas students and encourage academics to place greater emphasis on the effectiveness of the “teaching product” being provided to these students.
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