

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Student recruitment marketing in South Africa– An exploratory study into the adoption of a relationship orientation**

**Justin Beneke\* and Gert Human**

Faculty of Commerce, School of Management Studies, University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa.

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Changes in the competitive environment, largely spurred by restrictions in government funding and an increase of educational service providers in the market, have forced higher education institutions to become more proactive in terms of student recruitment. In response, many institutions have turned to corporate principles to run their operation and to recruit their 'customers' (that is, the students themselves). This exploratory study serves to ascertain whether using a relationship marketing approach is conducive to the task of identifying, selecting and recruiting highly desirable students. In this respect, particular emphasis is placed on whether these individuals are actually interested in establishing a pre-application relationship with a selected number of institutions, as well as the benefits they hope to accrue from such relationships. A hypothesized framework is thereafter appended as a guide for initiating and developing relationships with prospective students. Key variables influencing the decision process were probed. The reputation of the institution was found to be the most important factor in a scholar's decision of a place of further study, followed by geographic location and thereafter campus safety. However, these differed between ethnic groups. Scholars' receptiveness to the prospect of entering into a pre-application relationship with a tertiary education institution was found to be favourable. A mere eight percent of respondents claimed that they didn't wish to have a relationship with an institution prior to the applications period. The remainder wished to be associated with one or more institutions. It was concluded that on average, the more serious scholar is interested in relationships with two institutions. In this regard, the factors attracting scholars to such relationships were identified. The availability of financial aid was found to be the most prominent factor, followed by curriculum advice and reduced application fees. It was therefore concluded that scholars seek real value and are less concerned with social benefits.

**Key words:** Student recruitment, marketing, higher education, relationship marketing, customer relationship management, South Africa.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Public tertiary education institutions in South Africa have for decades followed the same practices in order to entice students to apply to their institution. In most cases, attracting the right number or the right mix of students was not a priority as state funding – often provided with minimal reporting requirements other than academic performance – ensured a constant stream of income to finance operations. In recent times, that appear to have

changed, the national government has insisted on more representative student bodies and has implemented strict budgetary constraints on tertiary educational spending, while ensuring that this is more equitably distributed amongst all public higher education institutions.

This has forced both traditional Universities and Universities of Technology to become more proactive and to more carefully manage which students are admitted into their respective institutions – academic standards and equity concerns appear to be more important than ever before. Owing to competitive pressures, institutions therefore need to become more proactive in their marketing endeavours (Wonders and Gyure, 1991;

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [justin.beneke@uct.ac.za](mailto:justin.beneke@uct.ac.za). Tel: 021 650 4392. Fax: 021 689 7570.

Zemsky et al., 2001) and in response; many institutions have already turned to corporate principles to run their operation and to recruit their 'customers' (that is, the students). According to Ivy (2008), as the variety of qualification offerings has grown and become more competitive, the need for institutions to differentiate themselves has become self-evident, resulting in the role of marketing in student recruitment increasing in importance (Taylor and Darling, 1991; Canterbury, 1999; Nicholls et al., 1995; Coates, 1998).

Traditionally, most higher education institutions in South Africa have been rather unprogressive in terms of marketing themselves to prospective students (Law, 2002). While they have acknowledged the need to feature in the media through advertising and public relations campaigns, as well as engaging in direct selling, most seem to have stopped short of embracing the true concept of marketing. Arguably, the fundamental reason as to why this may be the case can be found in their heritage. Universities and Universities of Technology throughout South Africa were historically, as well as currently, supported to some extent by the national government. This has meant that they have not been exposed to truly competitive enterprise and are not accustomed to competing in an environment where survival, rather than being guaranteed, is a privilege that needs to be earned. Additionally, it appears as though few institutions have a comprehensive, institution wide, coordinated marketing programme. It would appear that at present, marketing is at best executed on an ad-hoc basis.

An exception to this norm may be the attitude of public higher education institutions toward their alumni and donor markets. Institutions appear to pay special attention to graduates in the hope that these individuals will act as fine ambassadors for the institution and possibly more importantly, provide future funding to the institution in the form of personal donations and/or donations from the companies/organizations at which they are employed.

Here, it would seem that many institutions have taken a significant leap forward and have fully embraced the concept of marketing by means of a relationship focus. Miller and Layton (1999) define relationship marketing as "building personal, long-term bonds with customers". In this scenario, bi-directional communication is encouraged and alumni are sent newsletters on a regular basis, as well as being invited to attend formal functions at the institution, participate in sporting events, serve on committees and so on. This integrates them into the fold and makes these individuals feel part of an extended family. It therefore increases the likelihood that they will make future contributions to the institution as they start to see the institutional community as an extension of their own lives.

Seemingly, it is no longer a foregone conclusion that students will apply to study at a specific institution

because there has always been demand in the past. Shifting demographics, fluctuating student preferences and even changing requirements in the job market are fundamentally changing the rules of the game (Wilms and Moore, 1987). Similarly, government funding, research grants and donations from alumni are no longer taken for granted by institutions, as these are becoming increasingly precious as the competition for such income streams intensifies.

In summation, it would appear that little effort has been intentionally made by South African tertiary education providers to personalize the student recruitment process. To this end, it is a fairly rare occurrence when relationship marketing techniques are used to improve the status quo. However, the lack of effort to implement a relationship marketing solution in a South African student recruitment context appears to differ remarkably from the scenario in several overseas markets, notably in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. In these countries, the merits of relationship marketing in the field of student recruitment are acknowledged and such programmes are being developed across public and private higher education institutions alike.

## AIM OF THE RESEARCH

It seems that a change in recruitment philosophy and practice may be necessary to avoid the uncertain outcome inherent in the traditional recruitment approach as outlined above. This approach implicitly assumes that the market will favourably respond to the institution's value proposition and places little emphasis on bi-directional relations at the application and pre-application phases. In this respect, relying on the reputation of the institution, effective advertising, a persuasive sales pitch, as well as a few special events, may no longer be sufficient to attract top achievers.

The research problem therefore serves to ascertain whether using a relationship marketing approach is conducive to the task of identifying, selecting and recruiting highly desirable students. In this respect, particular emphasis is placed on whether these individuals are interested in establishing a pre-application relationship with a selected number of institutions, as well as the benefits they hope to accrue from such relationships.

It should however be stressed that within this study, the consideration of relationship marketing – from initiation of the relationship and beyond – is strictly performed within the microcosm of the student recruitment function itself. In this sense, it seems appropriate that only a specific time frame of the relationship is analysed. To this end, this paper does not advocate that the relationship be terminated in any manner at the point at which the student recruitment function is complete. However, for the purposes of this research, the consideration of the

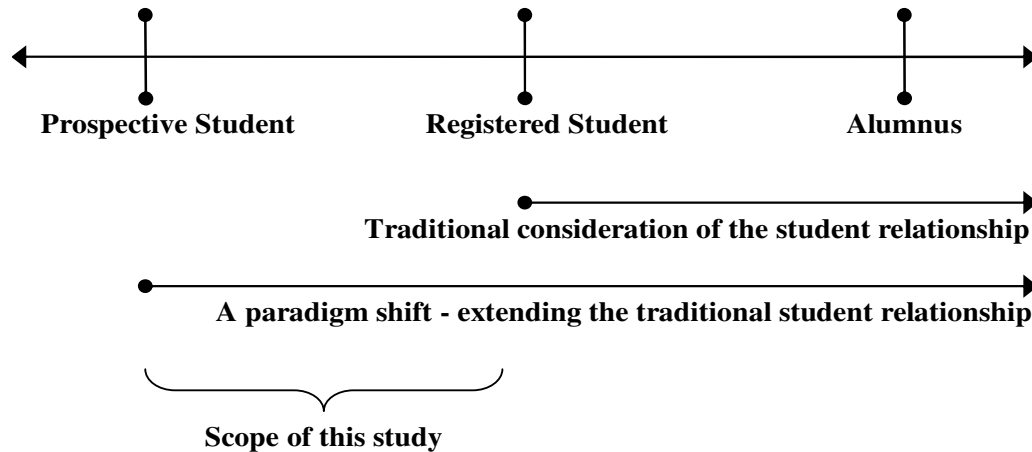


Figure 1. An extension of the traditional student relationship.

relationship ends at this stage as this effectively becomes a crossover point whereby the prospective student (for example, a high school scholar) then becomes a registered student. This scenario is illustrated in Figure 1.

## THE MARKETING LANDSCAPE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Kotler and Fox (1995) describe marketing as the “analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of value with target markets to achieve institutional objectives”. They add, “marketing involves designing the organization’s offerings to meet the target market’s needs and desires, using effective pricing, communication and distribution to inform, motivate and service the markets”.

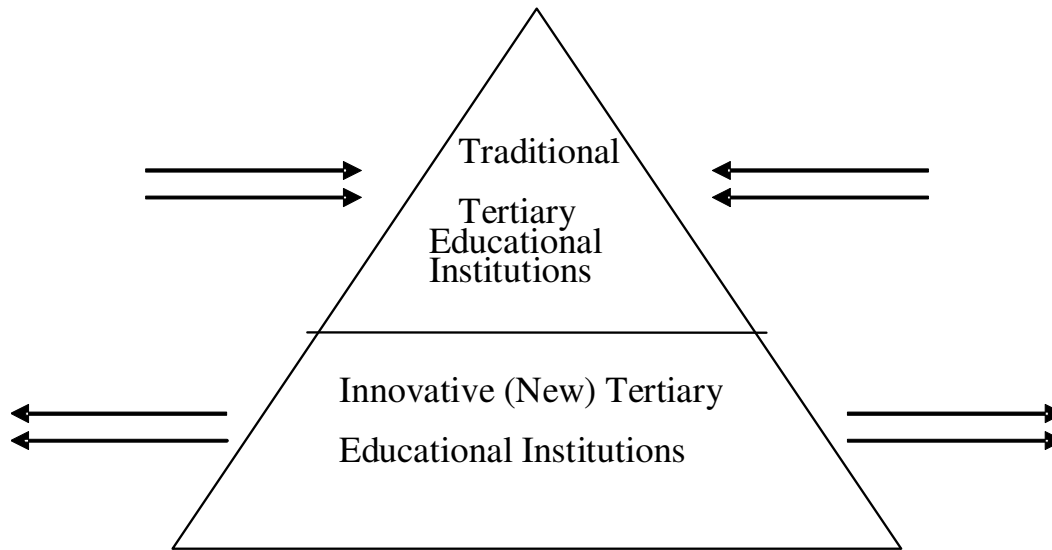
However, several authors advocate that marketing is seen as holding little value by many individuals in the higher education sector. In this respect, Ziegler (2002) claims that when higher education institutions use the term marketing, they actually mean promotion – “brochures, direct mail, advertising, public relations efforts, etc”. Likewise, it is not an uncommon perception of institutions that marketing equates to little more than advertising and selling (Perreault and McCarthy, 2005). As a result, many administrators tend to use only the promotion elements of marketing like public relations, advertising and personal selling to increase enrolments (Ivy, 2002).

It is contended that part of the problem emanates from the attitudes held by academics towards the marketing discipline (Kirp, 2004). In this respect, Smith, Scott and Lynch (1995) contend that few academics emanate from a marketing background and in most cases do not have a thorough understanding of the discipline. For this reason, they hold a negative attitude towards marketing.

Piyushi Kotecha, former CEO of the South African Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA), performed research on the topic of branding activities within South African higher education institutions. He concluded, “while many academic staff may understand this concept in theory, branding smacks of something vulgar and market related. The sustained myth that surrounds institutions is that branding is not needed when the institution has a solid reputation and long tradition.” (Kotecha, 2003).

However, despite the negative views towards the various aspects of marketing and its commercial connotations, it appears that modern thinking realises that the need for marketing in higher education definitely exists. Underscoring this is the extent to which higher education is becoming commercialized in the literature. For example, Bay and Daniel (2001) contend that universities with a large number of international students are referred to as “export industries” (Gatfield, 1998), courses are termed “educational products” (Adler, 1998), new instruction methods such as Internet courses are referred to as “distribution methods” (Gatfield, 1998) and other institutions are referred to as “competitors” (Landrum et al., 1998). Furthermore, potential students are sometimes referred to as the “customer base” (Browne et al., 1998; Licata and Maxham, 1998), returning students are called “repeat business” (Nichols et al., 1998) and attempts to determine to what extent the institution is meeting the students’ perceived needs are related to “customer satisfaction” (Licata and Maxham, 1998).

According to Ivy (2008), marketing in the higher education sector is certainly not new. In fact, many authors are cited as having recognised the increasingly important role that marketing is playing in student recruitment (e.g. Cubillo et al., 2006; Ivy, 2001; Maringe and Foskett, 2002; Fisk and Allen, 1993; Carlson, 1992; Wonders and Gyure, 1991).



**Figure 2.** Forces acting on providers of higher education.  
Source: Adapted from Newsclip Media Monitoring (2002).

Demand for services in the higher education sector appears to be being reshaped over the course of time. While mainstay institutions – typically traditional Universities and Universities of Technology – have enjoyed sustained demand in terms of student applications, Newsclip Media Monitoring (2002) reports that specialist education providers such as cookery schools, bible colleges and film colleges are also making inroads into the market and are currently attracting interest from a growing number of top achievers. Historically, this would have been a strange scenario as the most notable academic achievers were assumed to enrol at one of the elite public universities. To this end, it would appear that such developments have prompted a growing interest in the field of marketing in higher education. Figure 2 depicts these external pressures. The inward arrows signify the pressures placed on traditional tertiary educational institutions to offer ‘market-friendly’ qualifications in response to employment market demands. In contrast, the outward arrows signify the positive exertion of innovative (new) tertiary educational institutions on the market, as they provide qualifications which allow their graduates an expedited entry into the working world through equipping their graduates with a contemporary skill set.

Furthermore, as higher education institutions realise the merits of marketing, they gain a better appreciation that students deserve attention over a longer timeframe than previously anticipated. In fact, several authors (Christopher et al., 1991; Kotler and Fox, 1995; Peck et al., 1999) have proposed opting for a lifetime view of the individual – ascending through the stages of ‘prospect’ to ‘partner’. A number of frameworks, including those of BearingPoint (2003), Kotler and Fox (1995) and Oblinger

(2003), further substantiate this viewpoint.

## RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

It seems that much of the research on relationship marketing has focused on for-profit firms and their relationships with stakeholders. However, it may be argued that non-profit organizations, notwithstanding higher education institutions, face similar competitive forces that make relationship marketing an attractive strategy for many for-profit firms (Arnett et al., 2003b). In this respect, it seems plausible that higher education fits the profile of organizations that may benefit from relationship marketing. Relationship marketing can thus act as a facilitator for building long-term commitments to students, donors, grant-funders and communities (Tomer, 1998).

Arguably, the nuances of mass marketing versus relationship marketing are most succinctly summarized by Strauss et al. (2006). The authors contend that mass marketing is centred on the issues of discrete transactions, short-term emphasis, one-way communication, an acquisition focus, share of market and product differentiation. In contrast, they contend that relationship marketing is centred on the issues of continuing transactions, long-term emphasis, two-way communication and collaboration, a retention focus, share of mind and customer differentiation.

Exploring relationship marketing at a deeper level, Palmer (1996), building on Berry’s (1995) conceptualization of three levels of relationship marketing, contends that relationship marketing can be classified into three broad

approaches. At a tactical level, relationship marketing can be used as a sales tool. At a more strategic level, relationship marketing has been seen as a process by which organizations seek to 'tie-in' customers through legal, economic, technological, geographic and time bonds (Liljander and Strandvik, 1995). At a more philosophical level, relationship marketing may be argued as being the heart, or core, of the marketing philosophy. Most student recruitment marketers are thought to still be operating at the most basic (that is, tactical) level, the challenge then being to upgrade their efforts.

Nonetheless, there are reported short-comings of relationship marketing. Firstly, in terms of relationship desire, not all customers wish to commit themselves to a relationship with an organization (Newell, 2003; Verhoef and Langerak, 2002). In fact, some consumers are more likely than others to form relationships, which are of varying types and intensity depending upon the service context (Barnes, 1994). Secondly, the nature of the relationship may be misunderstood. It is argued that parties to an exchange may have no expectation of ongoing relationships (Palmer, 1996). Thirdly, relationship marketing can serve to increase costs, as well as revenues (Newell, 2003). The excessive use of financial incentives to create loyalty may place a firm at a cost disadvantage in a market where cost leadership is important (Porter, 1998), while securing little underlying loyalty. These may thus be considered as impediments to employing such a strategy in a higher education student recruitment context.

## METHODOLOGY

Emphasis has been placed on acquiring empirical information about the local market through a series of experience interviews and a comprehensive student survey. This two-pronged approach was important to assimilate the two views – those held by professionals with the responsibilities of recruiting students into their respective institutions and the views held by scholars themselves as to the approach they prefer and the areas wherein they pursue personal benefits.

In terms of the qualitative research, eleven experience interviews with student recruitment marketers and administrators at numerous higher education institutions throughout South Africa were conducted. This was necessary to avoid a strong regional bias. Although every effort was made to extract the official view of the institution, it is somewhat difficult to filter out the specific view of the individual. This constitutes a limitation in the research.

In order to facilitate quantitative research, a research instrument (attached as Appendix I) was developed and administered to 895 first and second year students across institutions in three of the largest provinces in South Africa – namely, the Free State, Gauteng and the Western Cape. In this respect, Perreault and McCarthy (2005) indicated that such an approach has the advantage that "samples can be larger and more representative and various statistics can be used to draw conclusions". A cluster sampling technique was utilized, whereby entire classes within the various faculties at the different institutions were targeted for data collection purposes. This ensured a high response rate and allowed for an adequate degree of diversity in the sample. However, a concern

existed that viewpoints might be materially different across the institutions surveyed. To this end, analysis of variance tests were conducted to ascertain whether such differences would compromise the results. Negligible variance was found to exist, thereby suggesting it safe to pool the data sets.

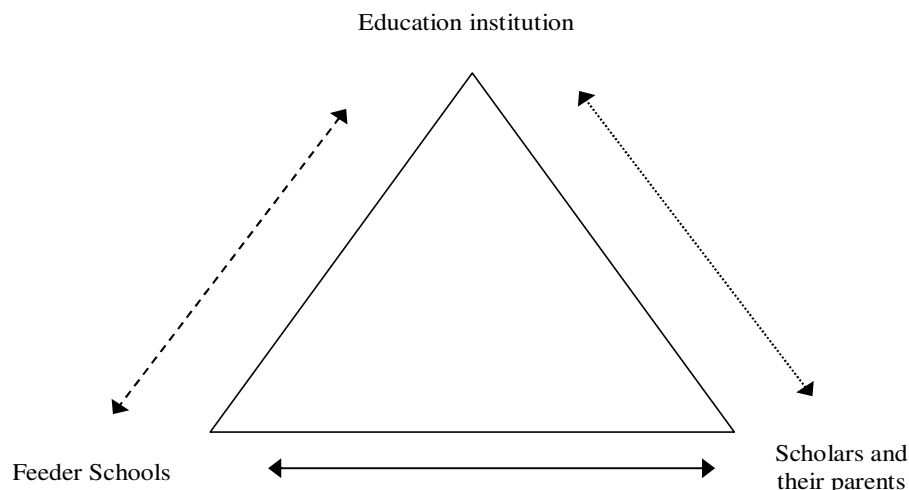
Tertiary students were selected as surrogates for senior scholars at high school (the target market for student recruitment). This was done for three reasons. Firstly, in order to ensure greater accessibility to the sampling frame. Unfortunately, schools were reluctant to co-operate with this initiative as they saw little direct benefit for themselves. Higher education institutions were, understandably, significantly more co-operative in this respect. Secondly, Bickman and Rog (1998) indicate that respondents that have a moderate to high involvement with the topic under investigation are more likely to participate in the study. All the respondents in this survey had made the decision to continue their studies. Thus, this approach minimised the risk of reaching respondents with absolutely no interest in pursuing tertiary education studies. Thirdly, first and second year students had already engaged in the higher education decision and application process and had thus already experienced the various recruitment efforts of higher education institutions. These individuals were therefore able to review this in hindsight and assess these efforts, as well as contributing their own opinions and suggestions.

As is customary in South African questionnaire design, respondents were asked to select the ethnic group into which they classify themselves. In this respect, "Black" is understood to include indigenous people of the African continent, "White" is synonymous with "Caucasian", "Coloured" includes mixed descendents from both of the above ethnic groups, while "Indian", "Asian" and "Other" would include migrants and their descendents, who have settled in South Africa.

## THE INSTITUTIONS' PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENT RECRUITMENT

A number of student recruitment marketing practices were found to be employed by institutions in South Africa. In terms of mass marketing practices, these included radio, television and print advertising, as well as outdoor sponsorship. In terms of semi-direct and direct marketing practices, these included in-school presentations, career evenings at schools, career exhibitions for grade eleven and twelve scholars, open days at the institutions, recruitment via an institution's alumni and database/direct marketing to senior scholars.

The empirical research discovered three prevailing attitudes towards student recruitment marketing in higher education. The first mindset perceives the idea of marketing as being a foreign and unwanted component of the student application process. These institutions shun such terms as 'recruitment', 'selling' and 'marketing'; instead claiming to exist 'in the name of science'. They feel it is their duty to educate the population without wanting, or needing, to enrich themselves in the process. The second mindset perceives the idea of marketing as being necessary in the foreseeable future, but not at present. These institutions tend to receive an abundance of applications each year and seek competitive advantage in finding quality students through the sheer quantity of applications received. Their focus is therefore



**Figure 3.** The 'student recruitment relationship triangle'.

on the process of refining selection rather than enhancing their recruitment efforts. The third mindset perceives the idea of marketing as being fundamental and integral to their recruitment strategy. These institutions generally enjoy a favourable reputation in the market, yet are still building their brand and believe they have much to accomplish. They are relentless in their pursuit of marketing excellence and place a premium on ensuring that all members of their institution are effectively marketers themselves (a view prescribed by McKenna, 1991). This suggests that these classes of institutions are at different levels of readiness to adopt a relationship marketing student recruitment approach.

Despite the dissenting views apropos marketing philosophies, the vast majority of recruitment professionals acknowledged the fact that the higher education sector is becoming increasingly competitive. However, there do appear to be a significant degree of co-operative competition within the sector. Somewhat surprisingly, many institutions don't view the potential student solely as a customer in the conventional sense, but rather an individual whose future needs shaping. In this respect, many institutions exhibit a significant degree of ethical behaviour. Another finding reveals that traditional Universities and Universities of Technology generally perceive themselves to be competing in different market segments. They therefore appear to be orientated toward recruiting fundamentally different 'customers'. This may, in part, account for the ethical stance described above.

Representatives of the higher education institutions reported that they consider relationships with schools to be absolutely critical. This is due to the fact that schools provide these institutions with access to their target market – in effect, acting as "information gatekeepers" (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). This is especially true in the case of key 'feeder schools', of which the

relationships are deemed to be of pivotal importance to the respective institutions. It is felt that these relationships, or the lack thereof, may count heavily for or against the success of an institution in the long term.

The 'Student Recruitment Relationship Triangle', illustrated in Figure 3, was developed to depict a relational map showing the relationships between three key constituents in the student recruitment process, namely the higher education institution, feeder schools and scholars and their parents. The strongest relationship in the triangle appears to be that between the school and its scholars. The moderate strength relationship in the triangle is that between tertiary institutions and their 'feeder schools'. The weakest relationship in the triangle is that between the higher education institution and the prospective student. In part, the latter is due to the notion that the traditional applications process appears to be very impersonal in nature. However, it is proposed that this 'weakest' relationship is paramount to success in recruiting high quality candidates and therefore needs to be developed beyond that of a generic relationship whereby the prospective student is viewed merely as another statistic. Figure 3 depicts this triangle.

The marketing strategists' challenge is therefore to leverage the power of the relationship between the school and its scholars, so that higher education institutions can 'win over' schools and therefore project a positive image of themselves, through the school, onto prospective students.

## THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE OF STUDENT RECRUITMENT

In terms of the applications procedure, the institutions reported that the treatment of prospective students during the applications process is regarded as 'relevant', yet not

'critical' in the scholar's final decision of a place of further study. According to the survey conducted, 80% of the respondents thought the applications process to be "fair" or "good". It may therefore be concluded that scholars are largely satisfied with this process. The biggest grievance focused on the length of time taken for the application to be processed and the lack of feedback both during and after this process. In numerous instances, the suggestion was provided that institutions engage in a higher level of communication with prospective students and furthermore become more transparent with respect to the process being undertaken. Other suggestions include maintaining a comprehensive and frequently updated web site, implementing an online applications system whereby scholars can apply via a web interface and ensuring that admissions staffs are both well trained and accessible, therefore being in a position to comprehensively deal with basic and advanced queries simultaneously.

Feedback from the questionnaire indicates that although some scholars pay serious attention to their future course of study from grade 8, a significant increase is registered from grade 10 onwards. This consideration peaks in grade 12, wherein almost two out of five respondents first gave serious thought to their higher education course of study. An almost identical trend is observed in the case of the choice of institution. With respect to the period in which scholars first perceive the need to consider the financing of their further studies, it is evident that significant momentum is only gathered in grade 11. In grade 11, approximately one out of five respondents first gave thought to the financing of their tertiary studies, while approximately three out of five respondents first considered this in grade 12. Comparing this with the feedback from higher education institutions, the conclusion was drawn that scholars are not as proactive as is thought by the institutions themselves. This obviously has implications in terms of the timeframe in which to initiate and build relationships with prospective students.

Just under half (49%) of the individuals surveyed applied to a single institution and just over a quarter (28%) applied to two institutions. Approximately 15% applied to three institutions. Very few individuals applied to four or more institutions. These statistics coincide with the finding that 87% of the respondents indicated that they had a strong preference of institution. In this respect, it may be argued that scholars are particularly selective about the institution they wish to attend and subsequent to this decision, become committed to achieving this objective. It is evident that scholars exhibit behaviour which indicates that they are either loyal, or potentially loyal, to their preferred institution.

There are a number of parties that offer tertiary education advice to prospective students – some via personal channels and others via mass orientated channels. The most credible source of information is

deemed to originate from the scholar's parents. Thereafter advice appears to be valued from school teachers and headmasters, friends and siblings, the media and the scholar's extended family, respectively. This reiterates the perspective revealed in the student recruitment triangle, that the school and the home are the two most important avenues when acquiring tertiary education advice. These cluster profiles are illustrated in Figure 4.

However, the data analysis revealed that responses fell within a narrow range, suggesting a limited degree of variability in terms of credibility. Nonetheless, three distinct cohorts were found to exist. Therein, credibility profiles matched to a very close degree. The first cohort consists exclusively of the prospective student's parents, the second cohort consists of school teachers/headmasters and friends/siblings and the third cohort consists of the scholar's extended family and the media. This simplistic framework may therefore be used to provide effective segmentation with the cohorts offering descending orders of credibility, respectively.

The factors determining a student's place of study were also investigated, the results of which are displayed in Table 1. These elements cannot be overlooked as they provide a foundation for the promotional efforts of the institution. The reputation of the institution was found to be the most important factor in a scholar's decision of a place of further study. Geographic location is considered second most important, campus safety third, tuition fees fourth, financial aid offered fifth, ease with which accepted sixth, social programmes offered seventh and recommendations from friends/family eighth. These findings appear to be largely consistent with those proposed by Cosser (2002).

While the three most important factors and two least important factors are largely consistent across the board, it is nonetheless clear that ethnic groups have different priorities in the middle of this range. Here, those respondents from disadvantaged backgrounds appear to be more need-driven and thus inclined to favour financial support offerings, while those respondents from traditionally affluent backgrounds seem to place emphasis elsewhere.

A mere eight percent of the respondents claimed that they did not wish to have a relationship with an institution prior to the applications period. The remainder wished to be associated with one or more institutions. It was concluded that, on average, the more serious scholar is interested in relationships with two institutions. This data would suggest that an opportunity is available for institutions to create platforms in order to build and harvest this potential loyalty. In this regard, the factors attracting scholars to such forums were identified. The results are included in Table 2.

The availability of financial aid was found to be the most prominent factor, followed by curriculum advice, reduced application fees, an expedited application

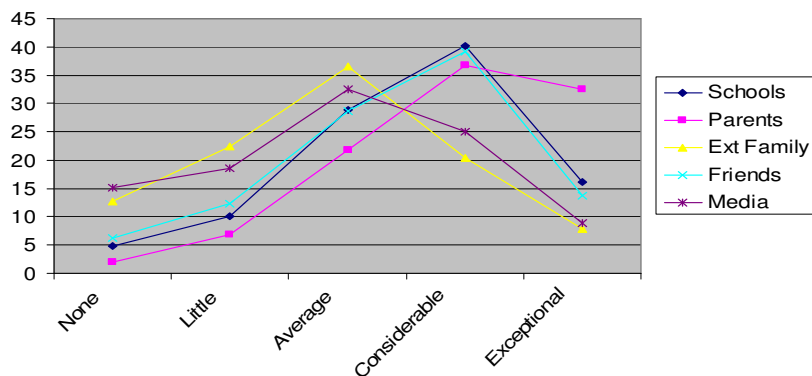


Figure 4. Graph illustrating profiles of tertiary education advice.

Table 1. Factors determining a student's place of study.

	All	Black	White	Colored	Indian/Asian/Other
Geographic location	7.01 (2) (2.72)	6.47 (4) (3.06)	7.75 (2) (2.03)	6.58 (4) (2.86)	8.00 (3) (2.36)
Reputation	8.55 (1) (2.00)	8.49 (1) (2.10)	8.63 (1) (1.73)	8.42 (1) (2.21)	9.15 (1) (2.03)
Ease with which accepted	5.97 (6) (2.86)	6.34 (6) (2.85)	5.39 (6) (2.82)	6.65 (3) (2.64)	5.50 (7) (2.61)
Tuition fees	6.12 (4) (2.93)	6.43 (5) (3.08)	5.45 (4) (2.59)	6.08 (6) (2.97)	7.55 (4) (2.72)
Campus safety	6.81 (3) (2.82)	7.34 (2) (2.92)	5.99 (3) (2.60)	6.31 (5) (2.85)	8.20 (2) (2.02)
Social programme	5.26 (7) (2.80)	5.32 (7) (2.87)	5.23 (7) (2.78)	4.77 (7) (2.69)	6.10 (6) (2.55)
Financial aid offered	6.00 (5) (3.21)	6.77 (3) (3.26)	4.83 (8) (2.99)	6.88 (2) (2.44)	6.45 (5) (2.93)
Recommendations from family/friends	4.77 (8) (3.05)	4.30 (8) (3.13)	5.44 (5) (2.73)	4.58 (8) (3.61)	4.80 (8) (3.04)

The mean rating is shown (1=completely unimportant, 10=absolutely critical), with its respective ranking in bolded parenthesis and the standard deviation in italicized parenthesis.

process, invitations to social events, prestige and receiving merchandise. It therefore appears that scholars are looking for real value and are less concerned with 'feel good' offerings such as invitations to social events, the prestige of being associated with a prestigious institution and receiving free merchandise. The general consensus seems to be that scholars want serious benefits which will have a significant impact on their further education. In this respect, it may be concluded that 'window dressing' such relationship programmes will actually achieve relatively little.

## BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF A RELATIONSHIP APPROACH

The authors contend that a relationship approach to student recruitment marketing certainly merits consideration. However, there are also pitfalls which should be avoided. Three noteworthy issues are raised below.

Firstly, inherent differences in the structure, culture and outlook of different institutions suggest that a relationship marketing based student recruitment programme does not lend itself to a 'one size fits all' philosophy. Before



**Table 2.** Factors influencing scholars to participate in pre-application relationships.

	<b>All</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Coloured</b>	<b>Indian/Asian/Other</b>
Merchandise	4.89 (7) (3.15)	5.35 (6) (3.51)	4.26 (7) (2.62)	4.54 (7) (2.97)	4.84 (6) (2.63)
Expedited application process	6.26 (4) (2.68)	5.70 (5) (2.83)	6.86 (3) (2.40)	5.77 (4) (2.47)	7.26 (4) (2.58)
Financial aid available	7.61 (1) (2.49)	7.71 (1) (2.70)	7.23 (2) (2.29)	8.39 (1) (2.12)	7.95 (3) (1.84)
Curriculum advice	7.27 (2) (2.44)	7.05 (2) (2.66)	7.38 (1) (2.23)	7.54 (2) (2.30)	8.26 (1) (1.49)
Reduced application fees	6.90 (3) (2.82)	6.85 (3) (3.14)	6.75 (4) (2.52)	6.77 (3) (2.90)	8.00 (2) (2.11)
Prestige	5.40 (6) (2.74)	5.24 (7) (2.89)	5.58 (5) (2.59)	5.20 (6) (2.66)	6.26 (5) (2.81)
Invitations to social events	5.62 (5) (2.79)	5.96 (4) (3.08)	5.35 (6) (2.29)	5.64 (5) (2.58)	4.79 (7) (3.07)

The mean rating is shown (1=completely unimportant, 10=absolutely critical), with its respective ranking in bolded parenthesis and the standard deviation in italicized parenthesis.

committing substantial resources to a comprehensive programme of this sort, the institution would be advised to launch a pilot programme for testing purposes. The effectiveness and efficiency of this limited trial should be closely monitored and then thoroughly assessed, before a decision is made whether to launch or abandon a full scale programme. This approach also means that unforeseen difficulties encountered may be corrected and the programme optimized before final launch. This will also serve the purpose of fulfilling skills training and allowing the personnel involved to gain valuable experience. To this end, an institution may wish to launch the programme within a single faculty, or alternatively within a selection of departments, before considering extending it throughout the entire institution.

Secondly, it is envisaged that mass marketing practices will continue to play a pivotal role in student recruitment for the foreseeable future. For many institutions, this is an indispensable component of the recruitment drive. That said, it is also likely that relationship orientated programmes will play a niche role in the near future and a considerably more prominent role over the medium to long term. For this reason, it may be highly opportunistic to consider implementing such a programme as an immediate and direct replacement of traditional recruitment practices.

Due to the high management costs involved (as suggested by Newell, 2003) and without very significant budgetary increases, it is almost impossible to envisage a feasible CRM approach having the same widespread effect as that of a traditional (that is, mass marketing

orientated) student recruitment campaign. Therefore, by adopting an exclusive CRM approach without deploying a large capital outlay, an institution risks losing a significant quantity of the demand created and as a result, applications received. Owing to the fact that many institutions have found success in generating quality of entering undergraduate students through the sheer quantity of applications received, it would appear ill advisable for institutions to abruptly abandon these tried-and-trusted practices. Rather, it seems plausible for institutions to have a dual mechanism whereby the strengths of both approaches are utilized for different aspects of the student recruitment function. Thus, it is suggested that a CRM approach may form an appropriate basis for recruiting students at the upper end of the target market (that is, those truly deserving of being 'head hunted'), while a conventional approach may best suited to capture those at the lower and middle ends of the target market.

Finally, Kotler (2004) advocates that competition in the future will have a strong network orientation. In this respect, "a marketing network consists of a company and its supporting stakeholders, (parties) with whom it has built mutually profitable business relationships. Increasingly, competition is not between companies, but marketing networks." It appears that this theory may be suitably applied in a student recruitment context as institutions realize that their future success may be achieved through an extended marketing network. Here, alliances and relationships are likely to take on a critical dimension. Institutions insisting on a high degree of autonomy or

independence in their marketing efforts may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage. To this end, a reliance on relationships with alumni, key feeder schools and even other institutions in the vicinity that may issue referrals, are bound to increase in significance in the future as these become vital avenues for building brand equity and connecting with the target market. However, the three key relationships as discussed in the 'Student Recruitment Relationship Triangle' are undeniably pivotal to the successful recruitment of high quality students.

## FRAMEWORK OF A HYPOTHETICAL RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED STUDENT RECRUITMENT PROGRAMME

In order to illustrate the practical significance of a relationship based student recruitment programme, the authors have developed a hypothetical framework which may serve as a basis for developing such programme. This is not intended to be prescriptive and is merely included as an example.

The framework is presented in Appendix I. It includes five broad stages: Internal Needs Analysis, Scouting for 'Prospects', Initiating Relationships, Nurturing/Growing Relationships and finally, Harvesting.

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## APPENDIX I

### FRAMEWORK OF A HYPOTHETICAL RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED STUDENT RECRUITMENT PROGRAMME

Included below is an example of how a proactive relationship-driven recruitment programme might function in reality. The hypothetical framework encompasses the following five stages.

#### Stage 1

##### Internal needs analysis

This examines the needs of three different layers within the higher education institution: academic departments, faculties and the institution as a whole. Three examples follow:

- (1) The School of historical studies may want to recruit students for their new economic history major which has recently been introduced.
- (2) The Faculty of Business Studies may wish to introduce students to its new extended curriculum programme for previously disadvantaged students.
- (3) The institution, at a strategic level, may wish to optimize its demographic constitution through favoring candidates from a particular ethnic group, a geographic area (e.g. within SADC borders), etc.

This process allows for internal needs (those of the institution) to be considered and aligned with, external needs (those of schools and prospective students). As a consequence, this process may, in turn, influence selection criteria. For example, some institutions may move further away from high school grades based admission assessment, in order to achieve higher priority strategic objectives.

#### Stage 2

##### Scouting for 'prospects'

This stage entails scouting for high quality prospective students and subsequently selecting which scholars to form a relationship with. The criteria determined in stage

one will be implemented here. 'Prospects' may be obtained from the following sources, inter alia:

##### (i) Schools

As discussed earlier in this article, this is the most likely source of obtaining a sizeable database of prospective students with accompanying academic records. In short, relationships with schools are paramount to success.

##### (ii) Open days

Most institutions hold 'open days' on an annual basis whereby interested scholars can visit the institution to experience the campus and communicate with current students and staff. This also affords scholars the opportunity to obtain further information on courses and programmes offered by the institution. Thus, this occasion may be deemed to be an excellent opportunity to identify candidates for a relationship marketing student recruitment programme. It should also be considered that 'open days' provide a suitable means to reach home school scholars – a market that may easily be forgotten in the student recruitment drive.

##### (iii) Competitions and Olympias

Many senior scholars partake in inter-schools competitions and olympias. These academic achievers' are likely to be key targets for a schools club if academic criteria are applied. Mathematics, English, Afrikaans and Computer studies olympias are all familiar to high school scholars in South Africa.

##### (iv) Databases compiled by private companies

Databases compiled by private companies, with details of prospective students, are currently being marketed to tertiary education institutions. The details within these databases are voluntarily submitted by grade eleven and grade twelve scholars, along with their desired course and institution of study.

##### (v) Referrals from other sources

Current students, alumni and even commercial establishments with whom the institution has a relationship (e.g. bursary providers, vacation employment providers, etc.) may be in a position to supply institutions with 'leads' pertaining to desirable prospective students.

#### Stage 3

##### Initiating relationships

This stage entails establishing direct contact with those

prospects identified in stage two and then enticing them into a relationship with the institution. It is imperative that institutions reposition or reaffirm the candidate's attitude towards the specific institution, so that he sees it in a favorable light and regards it in higher esteem than the competition. Candidates should be persuaded that it is a mutually beneficial prospect to enter into a relationship – the benefits (the 'value proposition') should be clearly stressed at this point.

In this respect, it may be argued that the inherent benefits are two-fold. Firstly, in terms of intangible benefits, candidates should feel awed, inspired and honored to be a part of the programme, thus motivating them to be loyal to the institution and to integrate themselves into the programme whole heartedly. Secondly, the financial incentives of belonging to the programme should be stressed to prove that there is tangible value for the scholar. The findings in this study suggest that the matter of finances is a strong motivational force and should therefore be used as a key positioning tool in the advertising and promotions strategy.

Developing the relationship with the prospective student at this early stage may entail providing various tangible incentives to create appeal. This could be in the form of a 'welcome pack' including branded appeal, stationery kits, matric study guides, etc.

#### **Stage 4**

##### **Nurturing/growing relationships**

The relationship development stage is undoubtedly a critical period. Although the groundwork may have been laid, it is imperative that prospects don't lose interest in the offering of the institution or become distracted by the recruitment efforts of other institutions.

Due to the fact that this is essentially the reinforcement stage of the framework, a considerable level of support should be offered to identified prospects, which may include free career counseling, as well as providing direct channels of access to the institution. In this respect, it is recommended that a dedicated person be tasked with dealing with the young prodigies. This person may come to represent the face of the institution to these individuals. Therefore, it is advised that an experienced, yet friendly and understanding, person be appointed to this position. In essence, this stage of the relationship building phase provides a taste of what is yet to come for the prospective student, hence delivery of service needs to be at its finest.

It may be appropriate at this stage to introduce additional incentives. These may be in the form of invitations to exclusive social functions where scholars can 'meet the team' (that is, the academic departments, faculties, the institution's hierarchy, etc.), or may merely be the conventional incentives – scholarships, financial aid packages, preference in residences, etc.

In short, loyalty should be continuously built throughout this stage. It may be argued that this is the most decisive stage of the entire programme, as the relationship appears most vulnerable to attack in this interim period.

#### **Stage 5**

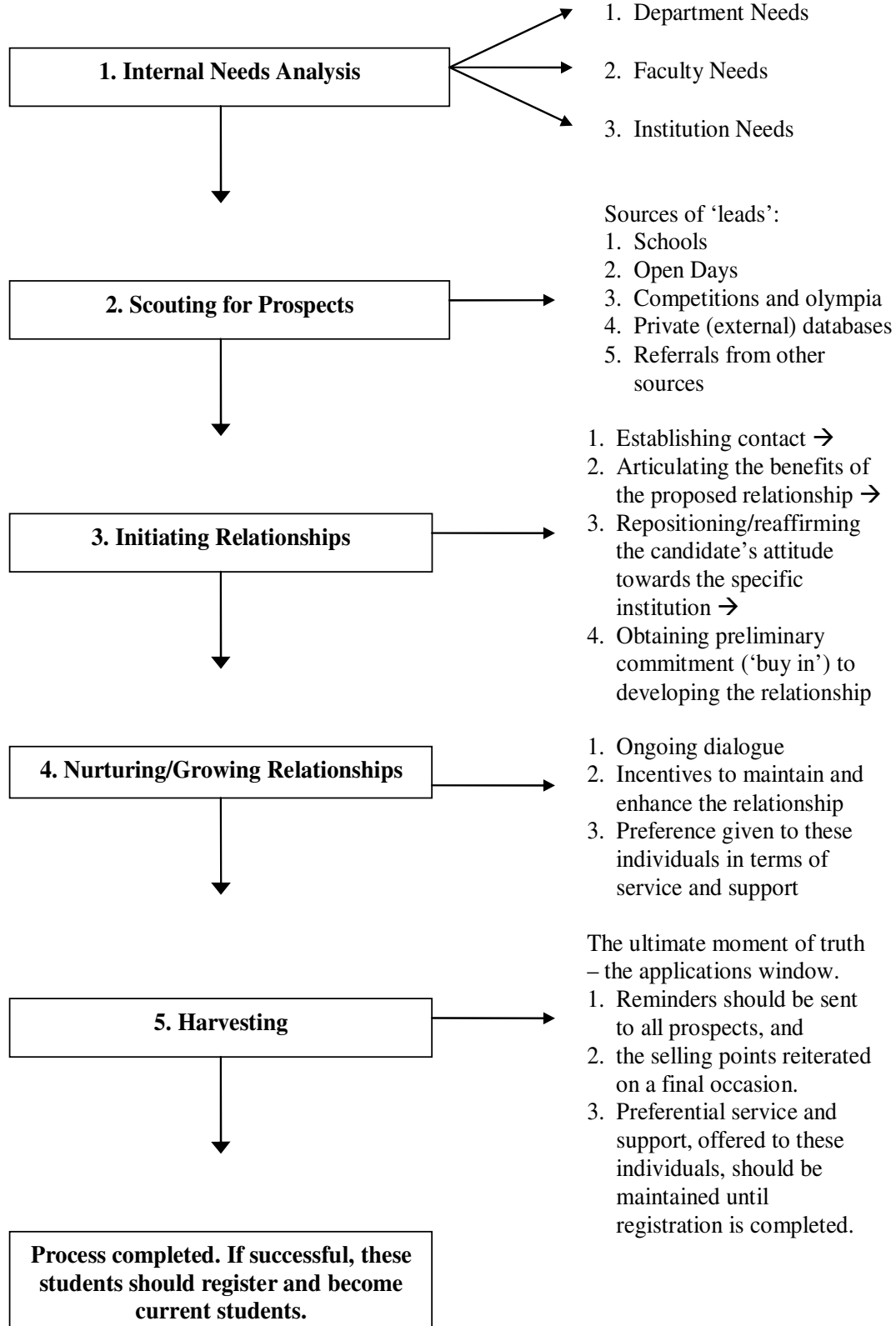
##### **Harvesting**

This is the ultimate 'moment of truth' (Carlzon, 1989) – the period in which applications are submitted to the institution. This is the stage where it will become apparent whether the institution's efforts have borne fruit or not. In an ideal scenario, the loyalty established en route to this stage should result in a wealth of applications received from the prodigies. If this is not the case and an institution fails to leverage this apparent loyalty successfully, the programme should immediately be reviewed to determine where failure occurred. It should however be noted that this is not a period in which student recruiters can afford to reduce their efforts and merely reap rewards. On the contrary, this is thought to be the last opportunity to encourage the prodigies to apply. Here, reminders should be sent out to these individuals, in advance, clearly informing them of application deadlines. Incentives, such as application fee waivers (or a credit refund in the case of students using central admissions processing agencies), should be seriously considered by institutions to give themselves the best chance of receiving a large batch of applications from the prodigies.

Post application submission, levels of motivation and enthusiasm should be maintained through active efforts. For example, it would be advisable for institutions to send the prodigies a bottle of sparkling wine when their application has been successfully processed, thereby congratulating them on a wise choice and welcoming them into a caring 'family'.

Once again, it is critical to keep communication channels wide open. For example, some applicants – having applied to multiple institutions – may still be deciding which institution to attend. Here, it is necessary to continue giving the prodigies priority in alleviating any hassles or irritations they may be encountering. This stage of the programme should extend until the moment at which they register (enroll) at the institution. At that time, they become current students and fall outside of the auspices of this recruitment programme (Figure 1), on the following page, visually depicts the hypothesized scenario.

## APPENDIX



**Figure 1.** Broad stages in the hypothetical relationship-oriented student recruitment programme.