



Towards more transparent marketing in UK Higher Education: What do International Students say about Universities' online marketing strategies?

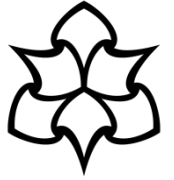
Dr. Khawla Badwan
Manchester Metropolitan University
06.12.2017

Six universities told to change advertising claims

By Sean Coughlan
BBC News education and family correspondent

🕒 15 November 2017 | Family & Education

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Universities have been told to be more careful about advertising claims

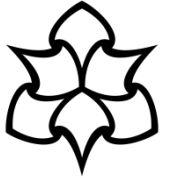
Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, said that intensifying competition between universities now has a "touch of the Wild West about it".

"Universities should be careful about their claims, which need to be robust, truthful and useful.

"But it is a good thing that they are telling potential applicants more than they used to in the past."

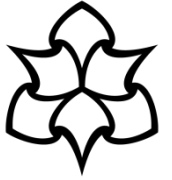
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-41984465>

The advertising watchdog has told six UK universities to take down marketing claims that could be misleading.



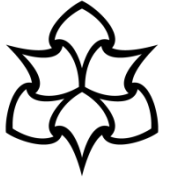
On the menu...

- Marketisation and branding in Higher Education
- Students' perceptions of consumerist orientations
- University websites and information provision
- Reporting on the MMU funded UKCISA research
- Recommendations for Practice



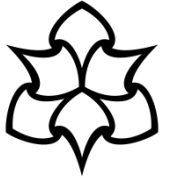
Marketisation and branding in HE

- Due to decreased government funding for universities, universities in the UK are under increasing pressures to recruit more international students (and)
- Business practices are now commonly used in HE and research suggests these practices improve institutions' revenues (Natale and Doran, 2012)
- No person could argue for the complete removal of a business model in these difficult economic times!!
- Marketing in HE is **a global phenomenon**



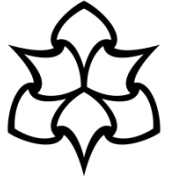
Marketisation and branding in HE

- This could lead to tensions between ‘promoting themselves attractively and giving honest information to prospective students’ (Harris, 1997, p.38)
- The competitive landscape in HE drives universities to differentiate themselves through branding, which is based on **particular promises of particular experiences** (Moores, 2004): building prestige to create brand equity



Marketisation and consumerist orientations

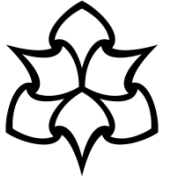
- Is marketing only about recruitment and admissions?
- No, because students often have much greater value to the institution as alumni (Natale and Daron, 2012)- Also value for classroom experience
- The consumerist orientation, embedded in student satisfaction surveys and other module surveys, places students at the centre
- This can make them see their degrees as a purchased product (Bailey, 2000).



But do students perceive themselves as consumers?

- Students are rational, choice-exercising consumers
- But how do students view their relationship with their institutions/university staff/ teachers?
- To this Michael Tomlinson (2017) responds:

The evidence....showed that whilst the student-consumer is a position that students are aware of, and feeds into their understanding of their relationship to higher education, it is not one that is universally subscribed to by students
- Is this good or bad? What does this mean for HE practitioners?

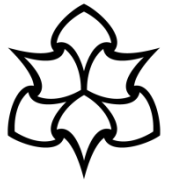


University websites and information provision

University websites are a key marketing tool as they are viewed by nearly 95% of prospective students (Slack et al. 2014)

Three questions:

1. What information do students look for on our websites?
2. What controls what we SHOULD include on our websites?
3. What challenges do we face around information provision?



University websites and information provision

- The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) **instructs** UKIs to provide comparable information called Key Information Sets (KIS)
 3. A Key Information Set is a set of standardised information about undergraduate courses, which enables them to be easily compared. It has been designed with the needs of prospective students in mind.

<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/201215/>
- However, KIS provides limited information on Learning and Teaching
- To this, the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) responds by producing more **guidelines** to provide additional information of Learning and Teaching

QAA Guidelines (2013)

Explaining class size: Guidance about providing information for students



Publication date: Aug-2013
Category: Higher education reference points
Size: 109KB
Download: [Explaining class size: Guidance about providing information for students](#)

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=74#.WUzp5k2Wwfg>

Explaining student workload: Guidance about providing information for students



Publication date: Aug-2013
Category: Higher education reference points
Size: 288KB
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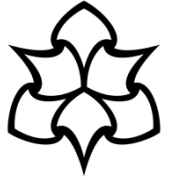
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=84#.WUzhcE2Wwfg>

Responding to feedback from students: Guidance about providing information for students



Publication date: Aug-2013
Category: Higher education reference points
Size: 189KB
Download: [Responding to feedback from students: Guidance about providing information for students](#)

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/publication/?PubID=201#.WUzhgk2Wwfg>



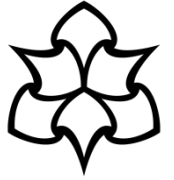
University websites and information provision

A 2016 study which included 38 HEI indicates that:

Many HEIs adopt a procedural and formulaic approach to information provision. The limited website L&T information appeared to be a consequence of various **issues** raised by institutional and individual practices to information provision (Rao and Hosein, 2016, p. 8)

These issues included:

1. Programmes are not static
2. Pressure of CMA (Competitions and Marketing Authority) compliance
3. Institutional bureaucracy



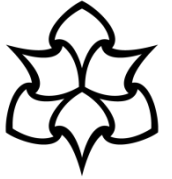
University websites and information provision

But...

1. Students need more Learning and Teaching information in order to make informed decisions (more accurate expectations of study in UK HEIs)
2. Will the current situation change in light of the TEF?

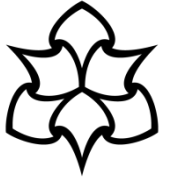
According to a 2016 government report issued by Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS):

TEF presented an opportunity to bring together information on access, retention, student satisfaction, teaching quality and employability. This would give prospective students a better picture of the learning, teaching and the student experience they could expect and would allow them to make better comparisons and decisions about where and what they study (p.6)



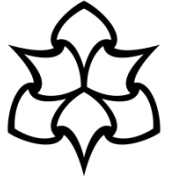
Reporting on the MMU Research funded by the UKCISA

**Between expectations and lived experiences: recruitment
strategies and their impact on international students'
academic and social experiences in UK HE**



Project's aims

- a) analyse the online marketing discourses of three universities in the same city in the UK;
- b) understand how these particular discourses influence decisions pertinent to student mobility, and the impacts of these discourses on students' expectations of imagined life in the UK;
- c) raise students' voices by asking them about the differences between their imagined and lived Britain and the factors that might contribute to creating a gap between these two visions;
- d) suggest ways of enhancing universities' professional practices when they market their courses to an international audience, if they are to reflect a more 'real' lived experience.



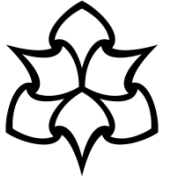
MMU UKCISA Project

Location: one of the UK's super-diverse cities which has three universities;

1. a Russell Group HE institution (henceforth U1),
2. a 1990s university status institution (U2),
3. and a 1960s university status institution (U3)

Stages: the project consisted of 4 stages:

1. A multi-modal analysis of the marketing strategies on the three universities' websites
2. Group interviews with 34 international students during the first term of 2016/2017
3. Individual interviews with 19 participants at the beginning of the second term of 2016/2017
4. Group interviews with 18 participants at the end of the academic year 2016/2017



Key Research Findings (Stage 1)

Striking similarities between the online marketing discourses adopted by these universities with at least 6 common strategies:

An attractive city

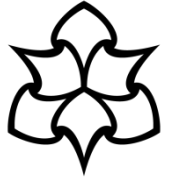
Facilities on campus

Diversity on campus

Testimonials from former students

Promises, opportunities, investment

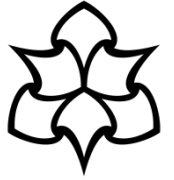
University recognition



Key Research Findings (Stage 2- beginning of term)

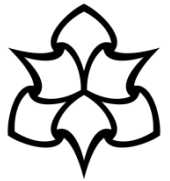
1. Interviews with 34 students)

1. The website does not appear to play a critical role in determining students' choice of university
2. Those who visited the websites tended to focus on pages relating to their course, and to finding accommodation
3. Some were surprised at the number of students from one particular sending country. For a few, this was a comfort; for the majority, it was a disappointment
4. Students from all participating institutions reported some difficulty in adapting to the independent, interactive, multi-modal teaching and learning styles prevalent in UK HE



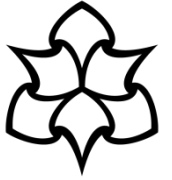
Key Research Findings (Stage 3- beginning of Term 2. Interviews with 19 students)

1. Participants generally reported feeling more settled in this second semester
2. Students appeared to be adapting to UK teaching styles
3. Students reported good academic support. Some however, would have appreciated more individual support and more support in securing work placements
4. A few students took part in activities organised by the Students' Union in their respective universities but most were unaware of what the Students' Union had to offer
5. Students commented that it was difficult to socialise with British students



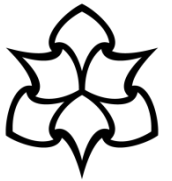
Key Research Findings (Stage 4- end of Term 2. Interviews with 18 students

1. many participants stressed that university websites can be difficult to navigate *'we can find everything on it but we just don't know how'*
2. Some felt that the university website for their respective university did not include sufficient information about the units/modules on their course
3. Some students continued to believe that class discussions *'wasted'* their contact time and demanded shorter group discussions
4. Some even advised future students not to be too rank-driven



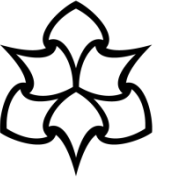
Comments on the Findings

- These findings suggest that international student recruitment is a dynamic process affected by multiple factors
- University websites tend to be populated with information that creates a ‘brand’ with a lesser focus on the detail of what to expect regarding academic life in the UK (styles of delivery, modes of assessment, support mechanisms, relationship with tutors, etc.)
- Findings suggest that the majority of the participants who visited the university websites were not interested in reading about what universities say about themselves



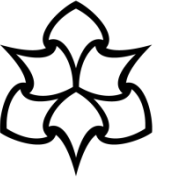
Recommendations for Practice

1. Summarise key information on university websites in different languages
2. Present a clear timeline with an overview of what students will study and the activities and tasks they are required to complete (to minimise anxiety by removing the fear of the unknown)
3. Provide a departmental support tutor for international students; preferably someone who has been an international student
4. Provide a handbook for (**international?**) students (L&T information, support system, feedback and grading, student union and international societies, profiles of students who typically studied at this institution, etc.)



Conclusions

- It is time to face the elephant in the room
- More dialogue to overcome the structural limitations within HEIs



Dr. Khawla Badwan

K.Badwan@mmu.ac.uk

