A comparative study of higher education institutions in North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) and their marketing approaches to student recruitment from China

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Abstract

Introduction

The reform under the Bologna Process in Europe has significantly reshaped the higher education sector. The developments provide European universities with opportunities as well as threats. Due to the harmonisation of degrees, for instance, European universities are becoming more attractive to students from other countries facilitating international student recruitment but, at the same time, stimulating competition.

This paper explores approaches to degree course marketing to recruit students from China by German universities. Previous studies reveal that Germany is the most popular non-English speaking country among Chinese students who make up the largest group of students from the same ethnic background in Germany. However, despite the reciprocal attraction, the cultural differences between Germany and China cannot be denied which – in marketing contexts - entails the question of whether components of the marketing mix require adaptation or not.

The empirical research will first explore the level of adaptation of marketing instruments used by selected German universities for student recruitment from China. In a second step the research aims at revealing whether cultural theories such as Hofstede’s five cultural dimensions are relevant in the adaptation process. Finally, a survey among Chinese students studying in Germany provides views and preferences of the ‘end-user’ or ‘recipient’ in terms of cultural-sensitive marketing.

The research findings allow insights into current approaches to higher education marketing and student recruitment from China implemented by selected German universities. It is revealed that although cultural adaptation is considered important and is implemented to sometimes impressive levels it is not based on a systematic, theory-led process. Cultural theories are deemed too abstract and hence impractical as universities seem to lack both time and resources to transfer the theoretical concepts into practice. The student perspective reveals surprising insights and leads to the conclusion that universities need to rethink their recruitment approaches.

The results show that in order to be worthwhile, internationalisation efforts should include not only the recruitment of foreign students but also their integration into the academic community and their retention as loyal alumni. Therefore, universities should consider international student recruitment as the first phase of a tripartite holistic approach of: recruitment, integration and retention. This will enable universities to benefit from the cultural diversity foreign students bring into the lecture halls and, later on, from growing international networks of loyal alumni and their positive word-of-mouth. In an increasingly international and competitive higher education sector these networks of alumni, who act as multiplicators and ambassadors, will significantly help universities to drive forward knowledge exchange, advance research and foster partnerships worldwide.

The objective of this paper is to explore the approaches of selected German universities towards international degree course marketing to attract students from abroad, especially from China. Preceding this objective is the observation of a phenomenon: The Chinese
recruitment market is said to differ considerably in culture from the German market, yet the biggest group of international students in Germany originates from China. From a marketing perspective it seems appropriate to investigate whether these cultural differences are addressed in marketing material used for student recruitment from China and whether cultural theories – as often discussed in marketing literature - are deemed relevant by practitioners for the adaptation process.

The purpose of this paper is therefore to contribute to the academic research into a rising discipline, international degree course marketing, as well as to provide insights into current practices leading to reflections on the discipline’s opportunities and limitations.

In order to achieve the objective outlined above the following research questions have been developed:

• Do higher education institutions in Germany adapt their marketing instruments used for student recruitment from abroad, especially from China, in order to overcome cultural differences?
• What criteria play a prominent role in the adaptation process and are cultural theories of any relevance?

Literature Review

Over the past two decades higher education institutions have fundamentally extended and intensified their international activities according to Altbach and Knight (2007, p. 290), who ascribe this development to the advancement of globalisation, defined as “the economic, political, and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement”.

In Europe joint cross-border internationalisation efforts have just culminated in the implementation of the Bologna Process. The reform has significantly re-shaped the higher education landscape on the continent, providing universities with great opportunities as well as posing significant challenges. According to the European Commission (2011) “the Bologna Process aims to create a European Higher Education Area by 2010, in which students can choose from a wide and transparent range of high quality courses and benefit from smooth recognition procedures. The Bologna Declaration of June 1999 has put in motion a series of reforms needed to make European Higher Education more compatible and comparable, more competitive and more attractive for Europeans and for students and scholars from other continents”.

Looking at Germany, for example, one of the founding members of the European Union (EU) and the largest EU country by population, universities have recently completed the transition to bachelor and master degree programmes under the Bologna Process. The harmonisation of degrees facilitates student mobility but will also intensify international competition among higher education institutions. In addition, German universities have to cope with domestic challenges such as less public funding, rising costs and smaller cohorts due to demographic change. The German higher education sector is hence said to become a buyers’ market. As a response, higher education institutions have started to employ marketing strategies to meet these challenges and withstand the competition (Bode et al., 2008, p. 27).

According to Bode et al. (2008, pp. 31-32) there are three levels of marketing in higher education: university, faculty and degree course. It could be argued that the aim of becoming more attractive to students from other European countries as well as from other continents, as per the declaration of 1999, would lead to an increased focus on marketing activities, especially at the third level, i.e. promoting degree courses to recruit international students. It could be further argued that the greater the cultural distance between the potential student and
the recruiting university, the greater the necessity to adapt marketing activities in order to accommodate these differences.

In Germany, almost 9% of all students were foreign in 2009 (GATE-Germany, 2010, p. 13) making it the most popular non-English speaking study location. The Chinese make up the largest group of students from the same ethnic background in Germany with a total share of almost 13% (Ceyhan, 2011, p. 26).

Bodycott (2009, pp. 351) argues that “Mainland China poses significant cultural differences from other international student recruitment markets” leading him (2009, p. 369) to the conclusion that “to market effectively in Confucian societies requires an intimate understanding and respect for the cultural values that underlie such societies”. It can be concluded that the awareness of cultural differences is vital for international higher education marketing professionals, especially when aiming to recruit students from China.

In terms of standardisation versus adaptation in the current context, the degree courses provided in Germany will be the same for both international and national students. In most German states universities do not charge tuition fees. It follows that product (degree course), price (tuition fees) and place (country where the course is provided) cannot be adapted to local taste; they are standardised. Although it can be assumed that degree courses have been adapted to some extent to appeal to an international audience; a least adaptation would have been the design of English-taught modules. It follows that the promotion of international degree courses seems to provide most opportunities for cultural adaptation. The cultural theories introduced earlier provide frameworks to analyse and compare national cultures and will hence help to reveal areas where cultural adaptation is appropriate.

When comparing the two approaches by Hofstede and Schwartz some similarities are revealed: Hofstede’s power distance seems to relate to Schwartz’ hierarchy dimension; masculinity (versus femininity) might comply with mastery and harmony, while individualism (versus collectivism) and uncertainty avoidance seem to be covered by conservatism, egalitarianism as well as intellectual and affective autonomy.

Nevertheless, Hofstede’s model appears to be the most accepted one within the marketing discipline (Usunier and Lee, 2009, p. 9). It seems further preferable as it is said to be scientifically sound and empirically tested on a substantial scale, which is less true for Schwartz’ approach. The fact that Hofstede has repeatedly exemplified his cultural dimensions in real-life situations including an educational context is especially helpful for the purpose of this study. Moreover, Hofstede’s cultural dimensions seem less complex and hence easier to re-apply. The five cultural dimensions will therefore be used as the basis for the research. The significance of cultural adaptation in an international marketing context and the usefulness of cultural theories in the analysis of national cultures have been exemplified.

In summary, looking at cultural differences between China and Germany and their implications within higher education, Chinese students seem to consider the relationship to professors as highly hierarchical which is different in Germany. Solidarity and group cohesion are of great importance to Chinese students and they thrive to balance self-assertion and ambition with social competences. German students, on the other hand, seem more focused on their individual situation and progress. Chinese students favour a structured learning environment and focus on long-term results. While a structured curriculum is equally important for German students, they tend to be more short-term focussed and regard free time as valuable.
Research Method
In line with the research questions on whether and how German universities adapt their marketing instruments to attract students from China; and whether cultural theories are relevant in the adaptation process a comparative multiple case study design has been chosen. It allows the in-depth investigation of the subject matter using the example of a few selected higher education institutions.

A mixed methods research, carried out in two phases, is considered the most appropriate method to achieve the research objective. In the first phase, a better understanding of the subject matter is sought through a qualitative analysis of relevant marketing material and through qualitative interviews with experts working in the field. The second phase involved the collection of quantifiable feedback from Chinese students in Germany by means of a web-based survey. Chinese students can be considered the end-user or rather recipient of higher education marketing and recruitment activities and their feedback is hence considered vital to complement the overall picture. Bearing the above statements in mind the sample of higher education institutions for the qualitative part of the research has been purposefully selected on the basis of the following criteria:

• All institutions are based in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia and are subject to the University Autonomy Law enacted in 2007;
• All institutions are based in the urban centre of the Rhineland, a densely populated business and science location at the heart of North Rhine-Westphalia;
• All institutions represent a different form of higher education and fall into one of the following categories: universities and equivalent institutions (incl. technical universities, specific subject universities), universities of applied science (incl. business schools);
• The actors’ willingness and ability to participate.

Document analysis is used to investigate existing material ranging from texts, films, works of art, to name just a few, with the aim of interpreting the underlying human thinking, feeling and acting behind their creation (Mayring, 2002, pp. 46-50).

Based on Mayring’s (2010, p. 99) general model process, the analysis for the research followed these steps:

• Definition of theoretically-derived main and sub-categories;
• Identification of relevant text passages;
• Extraction and paraphrasing of the identified text passages;
• Summary per category.

To accommodate the comparative case study research design, as a last step, findings were congregated in a general overview to facilitate comparison. Again a judgement sampling method was chosen in order to obtain feedback from only those Chinese students actually studying at the higher education institutions represented in the qualitative research sample. It is further assumed that exchange students are not recruited by universities abroad but are sent to their own institution’s partner universities as part of the degree course. Hence, only full-degree Chinese students studying in North Rhine-Westphalia were considered for the quantitative research.

Nevertheless, a web-based survey was used for the quantitative research as Chinese students were expected to be new media-savvy and more responsive to online surveys than traditional ones. Furthermore, the ease of administration and speed of distribution was considered a major advantage. Descriptive statistical methods were deemed most appropriate for the planned research as they allow revealing average perceptions and common preferences with regard to the employment and adaptation of marketing material. In the current case, a combination of three research methods was used, a document analysis, in-depth interviews and a survey in order to obtain data from different sources on the same subject matter.
Research Findings

As part of the qualitative research brochures and websites of the sample institutions have been reviewed and the findings were complemented by practitioners’ statements made in the interviews. The overall outcomes indicate which clusters of information the universities have addressed either in their material or in personal encounters with the target audience. The Cologne Business School is very strong on emphasising ‘hard’ factors, such as reputation, quality of study programmes as well as employability and networks, whereas the RWTH Aachen and the University of Cologne also address the ‘softer’ areas, such as messages by the university leadership, peer group networks and endorsements. The German Sport University demonstrates a lower degree of adaptation which is in line with the lower priority given to international student recruitment overall but the area of communicating its high quality study programmes can be considered a clear priority.

Chinese students studying in Aachen or Cologne were polled on aspects they considered important when choosing a German university to study at. To this end, the sub-categories of the five culture-specific clusters of information were listed randomly and students were asked to rate them as ‘very important’, ‘important’ or ‘less important’ for their decision-making process.

The sub-categories in the order of their average rating (highest to lowest from left to right) were given. The average rating was indicated for each sub-category. The population standard deviation was also provided. The frequency of occurrence where the standard deviation is at a moderate or high level could be ascribed to the fact that the rating options only included nuances of the same adjective: ‘important’. It did not abet polarised replies which options such as: ‘important’, ‘not important’, ‘detrimental’, would have done.

Respondents clearly prioritised the harder factors such as quality, reputation, career prospects and rankings over softer factors such as messages from the university leadership, Chinese communities and support programmes.

Conclusions

The results of the research also allow a more general conclusion with reference to overall strategic recruitment approaches. It reveals that, ideally, international student recruitment should be considered as one part of a three-part approach: recruitment, integration and retention. Internationalisation provides universities with the opportunity to build strong international networks of alumni which help to increase the institution’s international visibility and enhance its reputation (QuIn_UOC; L420-425). If a university fails to establish these sustainable contacts the purpose of internationalisation can be considered at least partly unfulfilled.

The RWTH Aachen has embraced such a tripartite, holistic approach of student recruitment and retention by aiming to create “a lively academic and intellectually stimulating environment” (QuIn_RWTH; L313-136) which everyone, including current and former students, are encouraged to form part of. This approach seems even more sensible when taking into account the RWTH Aachen’s outlook on future developments within international higher education (QuIn_RWTH; L347-360). With the prospect of growing international cooperative, academic networks it becomes even more important to encourage students building a strong attachment to their university as they are likely to study at more than just one. They could hence turn into strong networkers and multiplicators for each of their alma maters if integration and retention are strategically pursued. In this context, higher education institutions could benefit from implementing strategies to recruit students and then move them up the ‘ladder of loyalty’.
References


