

Information & Insights No. 1

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Developing an international marketing and student recruitment plan: a process to follow

1. Who is this information sheet aimed at and what will it provide?

This step-by-step process is aimed at those who are responsible for developing an international marketing and student recruitment plan for their institution.

It will be of most interest to newer / smaller HE providers who are developing their first such plan. It may also offer a useful touchstone for more internationally experienced institutions reviewing or updating an existing plan.

This document outlines:

- Key steps to prepare a sound international marketing and student recruitment plan
- Some questions your institution should be asking itself along the way
- Some useful resources and information sources

The proposed process is derived from many years' experience as a Director of International Office, enriched by my work with a range of institutions as an independent consultant in the area of international strategy and marketing.

It focuses on **what** you need to do at each stage of the process. If, having read it, you would like to discuss **how** to approach this, see section 4 for further information and next steps.

2. Proposed process for developing your international marketing and student recruitment plan

There are five main stages in the process:

- Clarify internal and external context
- Pinpoint institutional priorities
- Work through the marketing mix
- Plan marketing and recruitment activity
- Articulate targets and monitoring mechanisms

2.1 Clarify internal and external context

2.1.1 Define your overarching objectives

Taking your lead from the institutional strategic plan, define the overarching objectives (and scope) of the new International Marketing and Student Recruitment Plan and consider how you will measure success. Is this just about recruiting **more** international students? Are EU (non-UK) students within scope? Do you want to improve the diversity of your intake and reduce reliance on certain countries? Do you want to improve recruitment to specific subject areas or levels of study? Do you want to attract more academically able international students? How do your recruitment objectives relate to wider institutional aims around internationalisation, learning and teaching, student experience, research etc.?

2.1.2. Be realistic about timescales and resources

What period of time will the plan cover? And what resources are available to deliver it? Will it cover a longer period of time (4 years plus) at a high level or a shorter period (1-2 years) in more detail? Or (my preferred approach) are you setting out a medium-term 'roadmap' with key milestones, coupled with a detailed activity plan for year one only? Are the resources available to you adequate for your ambitions? If not, scale back those ambitions or stretch targets over a longer period (or secure more resources!). Be realistic and bear in mind the lead time needed to build relationships in your target markets and start to generate applications and enrolments.

2.1.3 Gather internal data and intelligence

Analyse your institution's international student enquiries, applications, acceptances and enrolments (including trends over time, country of origin, domicile on application, subject area / course etc.). Look at where website hits and social media followers come from. You should also be aware of individual staff and departmental international links: membership of international alliances and networks at subject level, associations with institutions and academic collaborations. Are there countries with clusters of alumni or other key contacts?

2.1.4 Gather external data and intelligence

Look at trends relating to specific countries of origin and specific subject areas that you offer. Some datasets need to be paid for but a good deal of information is available free of charge via HESA and UCAS. Tap into forecasts relating to international student mobility (the markets of the future) and consider external factors which may impact on these (eg. tightening of immigration controls). Identify your key competitor and comparator institutions for international student recruitment (these may not be the same as for UK recruitment). Within a competitor / comparator set of five or six institutions, include at least one that is where you'd like to be in ten years' time. Gather rich intelligence on these institutions' infrastructure for international students, portfolios, fees, scholarships, target markets and promotional tactics: much of this will be available on their websites.

2.1.5 Do a SWOT analysis

Whether or not it's in the traditional two-by-two SWOT format, use all of the above information to determine your institutional strengths and weaknesses and the external opportunities and threats that exist when it comes to international student recruitment. Articulating these in writing will help to guide your priorities.

2.2 Pinpoint institutional priorities

2.2.1 Define your guiding principles

It's useful to have a set of guiding principles (aligned with institutional ethos and priorities) to act as a touchstone for your international marketing and student recruitment.

2.2.2 Identify supporting developments

If you are planning significant growth in international student numbers, you will need to ensure that your institution gears up for this. Do you need to recruit specialist staff or develop existing staff? Where are the gaps in your knowledge base? Are there useful

associations and networks you could join? Do you need to review services and support for international students? Are you absolutely confident in your key processes (enquiries and admissions; visa advice; agent management etc.)? How do you plan to foster an international mindset amongst staff and encourage them to share ideas for building international profile and relationships? Which elements of the above need tackling as an urgent priority and which can wait?

2.3 Work through the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion)

2.3.1 Take product-related decisions

Having a programme portfolio that appeals to international students is important. Does yours need any development? Have the curriculum and delivery models been scrutinised with international students in mind? Are programme titles clear and unambiguous? Which are your flagship programmes for proactive international promotion? Do you have any relevant niche programmes that competitors don't offer?

2.3.2 Take price-related decisions

How do your headline international fees compare to those of competitors? Are they well-aligned with your institutional positioning? What about scholarships? Are you using these strategically to open up new markets or highlight key subject areas? How do your entry requirements (international academic qualifications and English language) compare to those of competitors?

2.3.3 Take place-related decisions

Based on all of the data and intelligence gathered at stage one, which markets (countries) are you going to target proactively? In year one? In subsequent years? Which programmes and levels of study will appeal in each market? Are you going to spread your net wide (only recommended if you have extensive resources) or focus on a few key markets initially and build from there? Do you have the right balance of target countries to spread risk?

2.3.4 Take promotion-related decisions

What is the balance going to be between short-term promotion and long-term relationship building? What is your relationship-building strategy? How will you reach key influencers (parents, teachers, agents, government departments etc.)? What are your key messages for international students and do these need to vary at all from market to market? Which communication channels and promotional tactics are you going to use?

2.4 Plan marketing and recruitment activity

2.4.1 Develop your year one activity plan

Break your plan down into generic promotional activities and country/market-specific activities – providing detailed timescales and costings for both. The former will include: website development, video and other marketing collateral, social media, on- and offline events, building a network of ambassadors and advocates. The latter will detail the specific tactics you will use to build relationships and recruit students in identified countries. The plan should also include any activities you need to undertake in year one in order to prepare the ground for new developments or markets in year two.

2.4.2 Know where you're heading in subsequent years

Even if this is a one-year plan, you need to know where you are heading so include some longer term milestones. If preparing a road-map for subsequent years, note down the key developments that will need to take place in each year of the plan. Work out exactly what time of year you need to start fleshing out your year two plan in detail (and plan this into your activity schedule).

2.5 Articulate targets and monitoring mechanisms

2.5.1 Spell out targets, income and costs

Work out student enrolment targets, income (gross tuition fee income and net income taking into account agents' commission and scholarships) and costs over the full period of the plan (and possibly beyond). It is important to be clear about when any upfront investment should start to yield results and to keep the international student growth trajectory in mind when planning developments in other areas of institutional activity.

2.5.2 Put in place mechanisms to monitor progress

The main measures of success (KPIs) and key milestones should be articulated; and mechanisms need to be in place to monitor and review progress against these.

3. Useful resources

Statistics:

HESA: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/free-statistics>

UKCISA: <http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges--schools/Policy-research--statistics/Research--statistics/International-student-statistics/>

UCAS: <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/data-and-analysis/end-cycle-data-resources>

Qualitative info:

A number of organisations offer free web-based resources and newsletters (you just need to provide an email address) which give insights into issues relating to international student recruitment (and international education more widely):

UK HE International Unit: <http://www.international.ac.uk/>

The PIE News: <http://thepienews.com/>

ICEF Monitor: <http://monitor.icef.com/>

World Education News and Reviews: <http://wenr.wes.org/>

INTEAD: <http://intead.com/> (where you can download their free e-book: *88 ways to recruit international students* – written from a US perspective but nonetheless useful).

British Council: <http://www.britishcouncil.org/education/ihe/knowledge-centre> (a wide range of paid-for services are also available via subscription to the BC's Services for International Education Marketing: <https://siem.britishcouncil.org/>)

4. Further information and next steps

As previously highlighted, this information sheet outlines **what** needs to be considered at each stage. If you would like to discuss **how** best to go about this (or any specific element within the planning process), I'd be happy to provide a free telephone or Skype consultation (with no obligation to use my services further). Please drop me an email (vickylewisconsulting@gmail.com) or give me a ring if this sounds like a good next step for you.