Marketing for whom? Higher education institutions' student recruitment strategies

Description of the problem
Branding is rising to the top of the institutional policy agenda (Stensaker 2007). Increasingly, not only US but also European HEIs are seeking to distinguish their research and educational profile from other HEIs in a more competitive national and global student market. Development of recruitment strategies is directly related to marketing and branding of the HEIs. However, recruitment strategies also involve the development of attractive educational programmes, which are embedded in the specific institutional competencies. We will contribute to the knowledge pool on branding by undertaking a study of different HEIs’ student recruitment strategies and by relating these to the student market in which the Norwegian HEIs compete.

Background
International analyses of student recruitment direct attention toward recruitment of students from different social and ethnic backgrounds (Yens et al. 1986; Rodgers 1988), the impact of student financial aid (Robinson 1990; Reuterberg and Svensson 1994), and the impact of branding, marketing and advertising in higher education (Anderson 1994; Olson 1992).

Studies of higher education and strategy extensively address teaching and learning (Leathwood and Phillips 2000; Ho et al. 2001; Checkoway 2001; Gibbs et al. 2000; Kaldeway and Korthagen 1995; Entwistle and McCune 2004; Heikkila and Lonka 2006; Loyens et al. 2007). Strategy studies also treat globalisation and internationalisation (Marginson 2002) and competition and cooperation among HEIs (Westera et al. 2004; Robertson 2006; Coates 2003). However, specific studies on how HEIs develop their student recruitment strategies are scarcer, notably in the European context.

Description
Methodological approach
In our analysis we combine quantitative and qualitative data. HEIs’ strategies are investigated using document analysis and in-depth interviews with management and faculty. The HEIs’ market position in the student market is studied by analysing the relationship between applicants and the number of students accepted at the HEI.

Results
Issues raised in the paper
We explore whether an HEI’s position in the student market (measured as the relationship between the number of applicants and the number of accepted students) influences the recruitment strategy of the specific institution, and, if so, in which ways. We address the following themes: marketing and branding coupled to development of attractive educational programmes; competition in several markets; diversity in educational programmes; diversity in student recruitment; and strengthened institutional hierarchy in the Norwegian higher education system.

Conclusion
Possible conclusions
The paper demonstrates the influence of HEIs’ position in the student market on HEIs’ recruitment strategies. Perceived competition in the student market may also affect the institutions’ recruitment strategies and policy. To investigate this we contrast the impact of the
market position on strategy with the influence of other factors of known importance to recruitment.

Results
Implications
The results of our study contribute to the knowledge pool on higher education strategies. We find that the relationship between student markets and recruitment strategies has not been adequately investigated, particularly within publicly funded higher education systems in Europe. Higher education policy is increasingly incorporating measures to improve educational quality and efficiency, not least by means of performance-based funding. This development justifies empirically grounded investigations of European HEIs’ response to these policies.

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