Guidance on producing evidence to inform new programme development

Introduction

Suitable market research is intended to inform targeted recruitment activities, establish an accurate picture of target markets and predict trends in subject areas, as well as show emerging growth areas. Market research will in turn support portfolio review, pricing and future marketing strategies.

When conducting any type of market research it is important to clearly define the objectives of the research, as this will influence how the research is conducted. It is also important to think about the wider objectives and implications. The principles and methods outlined can be applied to conducting market research for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes.

The following advice on using market research has provided by University's Brand Communications and Market Research team. If you require assistance on producing market research evidence, as outlined below, please contact the Janice Ellis from the Brand Communications and Market Research team on ext. 58251 regarding your requirements.

Check the statistics

HESA collects and publishes annual figures showing by subject area (JACS code) the number (headcount) of:

- UG, PGT and PGR students at each Higher Education Institution in the UK;
- students attaining first degrees, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research qualifications.

By comparing current and historical data from HESA, it should be possible to identify:

- which feeder subjects are on the decrease/in decline;
- whether your subject area is in decline (numbers have decreased across most/all institutions) or whether there is a particular problem in your School/Division (your numbers have fallen while others' have not);
- which institutions are successful in attracting students in your subject area.

At a very early stage this exercise will provide a good indication of the wisdom of continuing with the development of a new programme. If the School's student numbers are falling as a result of a general decline in the subject area then a new programme (per se) will not solve this problem. A more creative and long term approach may be needed, such as working with Schools or student groups to promote the uptake of the subject or feeder subjects.

If the problem is particular to your School, the data will assist you to:

- estimate the potential market for the new programme;
- understand where potential students may come from in terms of feeder subjects or feeder institutions and may help you to formulate a more targeted marketing strategy.

The identification of institutions that are more successful in this subject area will provide a useful starting point for an analysis of the competition (see below):

How to access the HESA data

Total figures (i.e. for the UK, not broken down by institution) of qualifications obtained and subjects studied are available free online from www.hesa.ac.uk
Detailed figures (by institution and by subject area down to JACS level) are available to purchase from the same site.

Internally, the Planning Support Office produces an annual report of the HESA data by academic cost centre, showing figures for the University of Manchester and for 'peer institutions' from the Russell Group. The report is distributed to Faculties and should be readily available within your Faculty/School.

How to access University of Manchester data

Admissions data for students at The University of Manchester is collated from the HESA data by Student Admissions and Administration. Information can be found on the management information website at:
https://xorg.manchester.ac.uk/sites/sra/MI/Pages/Welcome.aspx*

Undergraduate data can be found at: https://xorg.manchester.ac.uk/sites/sra/MI/Pages/UG-admissions-data.aspx*

Postgraduate data can be found at: https://xorg.manchester.ac.uk/sites/sra/MI/Pages/PG-Admissions-Data.aspx*

* Please note that you will need to apply for access to the Student Admissions and Administration Sharepoint site to access these documents.

Obtain feedback from your own students

Surveying your own (current) students on existing programmes is perhaps the easiest (and cheapest) way to acquire an understanding of why your programmes may be missing the mark and how they might be improved.

Such surveys fall into three categories:

- an 'exit survey' of each student as they near completion of the programme to assess how they found the programme
    - what did they like and dislike about the programme?
    - how could it have been better?
    - did it meet their expectations/match the prospectus?
    - would they recommend the programme to others (why/why not)?
- a 'decliner' survey with applicants who receive but turn down an offer for a programme to identify their reasons for choosing an alternative programme/institution
    - which programme/institution did they choose instead and why?
    - what would have made our programme more attractive?
- in the case of PGT programmes, a survey of your own graduates who have chosen a PGT programme at another institution to discover why they did not continue their studies at Manchester
    - which programme/institution did they choose instead and why?

- what would have made our programme more attractive?

To obtain the best benefit from student feedback it would be an ongoing and continuous process, with exit and decliner surveys being conducted every year, and findings and suggestions constantly feeding in to programme review and improvement. If this is not possible, or while it is being implemented, the benefits of informal feedback (by personally asking your students what they think) should not be overlooked.

Existing students can also be used to obtain reactions to and feedback on proposals for new programmes, either informally or by conducting discussion groups.

The Brand Communications and Market Research Team can provide further information and advice on how to conduct exit and decliner surveys, and to assess student perceptions of the suitability and attractiveness of proposed new programmes.

Identify competitor institutions and find out what they offer

The first two stages or research tasks as outlined above should identify (and possibly rank) the main competitor institutions. Further sources include:

- league tables: The Times Higher Education (THES) supplement, The Guardian newspaper, the Virgin and Push guides;
  - www.ucas.com and www.prospects.ac.uk provide lists of undergraduate and postgraduate courses (respectively) at UK institutions.

If there are a large number of competitor institutions for your subject area, it may be necessary to prioritise or select a manageable number before moving to the analysis stage. The HESA statistics and student feedback should now prove useful.

Once competitor institutions are identified, it is relatively easy to obtain fairly detailed information about their programmes by:

- visiting the institution's web-site;
- ordering a copy of their prospectus.

A comparison or overview of competitor programmes will help you to:

- Assess the market potential for your own proposed programme:
  - Is there a gap in the market?
  - Can you provide something not currently on offer?
  - Are there so many programmes in this area that it is difficult to see how yours would survive/attract any students?
- Understand what differentiates your programme from your competitors (your unique selling points);
- Improve your proposed programme:
  - what can be learnt from competitors' programmes – especially those that are successful in attracting students?

An Excel spreadsheet or Access database are useful tools to assist in compiling an overview or summary of the programmes on offer.

At this stage it may again be useful to call upon your own students to provide feedback on the programmes of competitor institutions and how they compare to your proposed or existing programmes.

Consider further research

If the first three steps or research tasks outlined above fail to provide you with enough information to make an informed decision, you may need to consider conducting further research on a slightly larger scale and with a wider audience. This could take the form of:

Focus groups and/or quantitative surveys with:

- your current students. (the Teaching and Learning Support Office may be able to assist with conducting focus groups/or quantitative surveys with current students);
- prospective students from feeder institutions (the Alumni Office may be able to assist with contacting former students);
- students on competitor programmes.

The University Student Insight Team may be able to assist in understanding the market for your proposed course. Please liaise with the Student Insight Team, on ext. 67561 or email SRID-SCM-SIT@listserv.manchester.ac.uk

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