



How to attract international students in difficult times

Alan Preece and Jared Brueckner 25 January 2019

Share

Nobody seems in any doubt that global student recruitment has become more difficult for institutions in the United States. Recent surveys show that 57% of college and university admissions directors are concerned about maintaining international student numbers in the coming year.

The best will see the challenge like elite sportspeople – clarity of objectives, control the controllables and recognise that marginal improvements add up to winning margins.

There is no room for self-pity or wishful thinking. Institutional rankings, the visa system and US government rhetoric are unlikely to change significantly for the better in the near future. But these difficulties have been faced in other parts of the world and the smart players have adapted.

De Montfort University in the United Kingdom has a strong claim to being the UK's top university for international growth in recent years. Its international enrolment between 2012-13 and 2016-17 grew by around 70%, compared to UK growth of less than 3%.

International student fee income has grown from £14.7 million to £34 million (US\$18.9 million to US\$43.8 million) in just six years. It's a startlingly good performance for a university ranked 65th in the UK (*The Times*, 2019) and only in the 600-800 band internationally (*Times Higher Education World University Rankings* 2019).

A hostile climate

The growth was also achieved during a period when the UK had appeared increasingly hostile towards international students. In 2010 the incoming government committed to reduce net migration (in which students were counted) from over 200,000 to less than 100,000. In April 2015 the number of language testing centres acceptable for visa purposes was cut from more than 1,000 worldwide to fewer than 200.

Thomas Edison noted that "genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration" and some of De Montfort University's published highlights suggest that international success is the same. Good strategy and leadership for sure, but a whole-university approach, clarity of purpose and a focus on implementation at pace. Perhaps critically, the international growth reflected a wider strategic plan based on supporting all students to develop their academic and career-enhancing skills.

In 2013-14 the university refocused its international strategy on a portfolio of key markets to

avoid both over-reliance on a single market and inefficiencies generated by working in too many markets.

The vice-chancellor was engaged to lead on the establishment of strategic partnerships with international higher education institutions, but he also met more than 500 prospective Chinese students in-country. Perhaps the 56% of college and university presidents who claim to be 'somewhat' or 'very' concerned about enrolling more international students should be looking hard at this example.

#DMUglobal

In autumn 2013, De Montfort University launched the #DMUglobal programme, intended to give students an international experience. A key aim was flexibility of placements of varying durations across the world and more than 3,000 students participated in 2017-18.

Examples of activities at the pilot stage included work placements at the FIFA World Cup, field trips to Brazil, China and Gambia and internships in DMU's Beijing and Delhi offices.

With more than 10,000 participants travelling to over 60 countries since its launch, #DMUglobal is thought to offer the UK's largest outward student mobility programme. #DMUglobal mass participation trips have included 1,000 students travelling to New York, undertaking 17 unique academic programmes designed to enrich their cultural learning and more than 800 students and staff from 35 different courses visiting Berlin.

Results count and it is notable that in 2016-17 as many as 18% of new students cited #DMUglobal as a primary reason they chose to study at DMU.

In 2013 the university also launched its partnership with private pathway provider Oxford International Education Group. Unusually, the undergraduate pathway was part of an 'integrated' four-year degree programme allowing students to secure a single visa for the entirety of their studies.

Most other UK pathways required students to re-apply for an undergraduate visa after completing their foundation course.

Global instinct

Critically, the university maintained momentum. In 2015 it launched an ambitious new international strategy, Global Instinct, with the aim of having a 20% international student population and a globally minded student and staff population by 2020.

The strategy featured 10 game-changing ideas to transform DMU's international agenda, with programmes including enhancing language and cultural learning, establishing overseas global centres and embedding an international experience in every undergraduate programme.

And at a time of uncertainty caused by Brexit, DMU launched #LoveInternational within 24 hours of the referendum result being announced. #LoveInternational overseas trips included Cyprus, Poland, Sweden, Lithuania, India, Germany, China and the US. The

success of the campaign was confirmed with a 29% increase in applications from European Union students, set against a national decline in applications.

The university's new corporate strategy launched in 2018 is equally assertive. Ambitions include providing 25% of all undergraduate and postgraduate students the opportunity of professional experiences with a distinct international element through #DMUworks and sending more than 20,000 DMU students overseas between 2018 and 2023.

There are plenty of lessons to be considered from the De Montfort example, but their combination of strategy and practicality seem particularly powerful. Each idea, slogan and theme is aligned with activity, investment and targets that provide the framework for action.

But creating interest and applications is of little use unless those opportunities can be converted into enrolments and it is worth considering some specifics drawn from practical experience across pathways and universities.

Admissions policy directly impacts recruitment outcomes, and effective policies can make or break how well you convert applications and convince students to enrol with you rather than competing institutions. Universities work extremely hard to create great programmes, evangelise that value across the world and convince students to apply.

However, that is only the first hurdle, the challenge is that once students apply you must convince them to confirm and enrol. And as all enrolment professionals know: applications do not equal enrolments.

Multiple applications

In recent years enrolment counsellors have seen, and felt the impact of, students applying to a growing number of universities. Supporting that feeling, *Forbes*, the *New York Times* and others have reported that the current generation of students are applying to more universities than ever and agents and counsellors are encouraging students to maximise their opportunities and scholarship offers through multiple applications.

With the increase in noise, to use an engineering term, effective policies maximise your chances of being the 'signal' amidst the noise and being the first choice of students.

Tailoring your admissions policies can be a challenge, but it is one that is worthwhile. As veterans of two of the largest pathway companies in the world, we believe one of the foundational keys to success for large recruitment machines like pathway companies is streamlining admissions.

It is so critical in fact that it is one of the primary considerations in selecting a new partner, a considerable part of the contract process and the first area of focus post-contract.

Pathway companies are dependent on enrolment success to stay in business and admissions policies are vital to that success. Several of the secrets and lessons learned from our experience can help as you look at your policies and adjust to sustain, or gain, a competitive edge. Here are three keys that can help you begin.

Clarity

- Clear entry requirements that are published, easy to find and don't make the student navigate multiple pages or fill out info forms to see them.
- Students want to know what it takes, and they don't want it sugar-coated. Just tell them and make it clear and easy to understand.

Simplicity

- Only ask for what you need to decide on admission: GPA, transcripts and a passport photo. Three years of transcripts. That's it. The maximum. No more. If you ask for more, in most countries that requires that a student return to a middle school that doesn't understand the request – it isn't typical for them – and that causes delays, in the best case, and if you require it and another doesn't then you'll lose the student, which is common.
- Don't require ancillary documents such as student statements, motivational statements, etc. The most successful admittance programmes no longer demand them.

Speed

Everyone talks about speed and understands its importance – yet so few offer it. Yes, contemporary students want an answer immediately. They can access an entire season of a show on Netflix with a click – why would they feel comfortable waiting for four or five days to hear back from you?

The fastest schools, and pathway providers, get offers to students within one day. If you're taking longer than that you are not competitive.

Jared Brueckner is senior vice president of iDesign, which helps colleges and universities harness the potential of emerging technologies to design courses and degrees. Alan Preece is a former chief operating officer from INTO, a leading pathway programme organisation.

<https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20190121125240478>