Determinants of undergraduate level business school choice in the UK: the role of research reputation

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Role of Research Reputation in Marketing of Undergraduate Business Programmes in the UK: Research Leaders' Perspective

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Structure of presentation

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- The objectives of the research
- A brief review of the literature
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Purpose of the research

- The aims are to investigate the role, perception and integration of research in undergraduate level business school choice by analysing the perspectives of both service providers and receivers.
- This is a three stage study of which the first stage is partially completed.

Objectives

- In this first stage of the study the researchers are specifically looking at four related issues:
  1. The broad factors that may influence undergraduate student choice of business education provider
  2. The extent to which undergraduate business students choose universities on the basis of research reputation.
  3. The ways in which research reputation and research activities are communicated to prospective students and the extent to which academics are involved in the preparation of these messages.
  4. The ways in which research is translated into use in the classroom for pedagogical purposes.
A brief review of the literature

- Joseph and Joseph (2000) suggest that student choice is dictated by four factors: academic issues, the costs involved, recreation facilities and location of the institution and influence of primary reference groups among which, reputation appeared to be most important.
- Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) concluded that institutional image and reputation are an overall impression formed by tangible and intangible attributes such as buildings and staff/student interactions. They found a positive correlation between student retention and perceptions of image and reputation.
- Soutar and Turner (2002) analysed Australian high school students university choices pointing out that course suitability, academic reputation, future job prospects and teaching quality were most important in choice selection.

Helmsley Brown and Foskett (2007) underlined the dynamic nature of students choice making using a four component model indicating macro and micro environmental factors, the student’s psychological processes and the institutional offering. They concluded that decision changes and justifications could be rapid as prospective students realise that they cannot achieve entry to their original first choice institution.

Ivy (2001) Found that students’ perceptions of the institutional image of a particular provider are relative to the image of other Higher Education institutions. Ivy also differentiates between the marketing communications of old UK universities (pre 1992 HE reforms) and new universities where distinction lies on the level of emphasis on research output and staff reputations by the former, while new universities focus more on the selling of the institution as a whole highlighting recreational aspects to the university such as spots facilities and student union activities.
Methodology: The long-term project

- The study intends to use a mixed method approach over three stages triangulating qualitative and quantitative data in an exploratory and explanatory framework.

- Data collection techniques will include semi structured interviews (with academic staff and HE practising marketers), focus groups and questionnaire survey (both with students).

Methodology: first stage project

- The first stage study involves semi structured interview questions with research directors in UK business schools.
- Non probability, snowball sampling is being employed using referrals from academics that the researchers were in contact with.
- So far, five director's have been interviewed. The directors and institutions were afforded anonymity for ethical reasons.
- The five institutions are based in London. One is a pre 1992 university with a very good research reputation. Three are large, post 1992 universities which do not have particularly strong reputations in business studies research. The fifth is a private higher education institution with no research reputation.
Methodology: first stage project

- The interview agenda was based around four key questions with follow up and probing questions used as necessary:
  1. Tell me why you think that your undergraduate business degrees are chosen or preferred by your students? Why do students choose XXXX business school?
  2. How do you feel that your research reputation influences undergrad student recruitment? Do you think that there is a relationship between research reputation and recruitment? Do you think that students come to your university because of research reputation?
  3. How is research prowess or performance communicated in the marketing of undergraduate programmes? To what extent do the academics drive or participate in the presentation and marketing of research activities to prospective undergraduate students?
  4. Please tell us how you translate your own or your colleagues’ research into the classroom? How do you utilise your research in your undergraduate teaching?
Findings and analysis

- Recorded data collected from the semi-structured interviews is initially being transcribed and analysed listing key ideas and recurrent themes at this familiarisation stage.

- The key responses are presented by question. School 1 is the business school with a strong research reputation, Schools 2 to 4 are the post-1992 universities with some research reputation and school 5 is the private institution with no research reputation.

Tell me why you think that your undergraduate business degrees are chosen or preferred by your students? Why do students choose XXXX business school?

- School 1. Main reason job opportunities and future salary potential. Quality of school and staff. Reputation of the school.
- School 2. Location, extensive marketing, WoM, Good programme structure, accreditation, good links with foreign partners international student body.
- School 3. Location, novel courses, friendly staff, technical facilities, sports facilities international student body.
- School 4. Open access entry, international student body, not sure. ‘I’ve never spoken to students about why they chose this school’.
- School 5. WoM, location, entry qualifications, less academic more practical, small class sizes, study period abroad, international environment.
Findings and analysis

How do you feel that your research reputation influences undergrad student recruitment? Do you think there is a relationship between research reputation and recruitment? Do you think that students come to your university because of research reputation?

- School 1. Can’t be sure but thinks that research is important. Not explicit but implicit. Research rep has a substantial role underlying job opportunities and future salary potential.
- School 2. Really doesn’t know how it influences students. Does’t think that people go to many universities due to research reputation. More the reputation of the university. Research rep doesn’t influence this type of university.
- School 3. No. ‘We are not even in the ranking lists, so difficult for students to determine how we stand’. Sts. Don’t know about our research rep and it wouldn’t make a difference if they did.
- School 4. Feels that for PG students there is an influence but not so sure for UG. ‘Until 3rd year students aren’t interested or aware of research’. We are always at the bottom, or near the bottom of the rankings for research and there might be some parental influence.
- School 5. The school is not reputed for research. Sts. become aware of lack of research activity after they enter the school. They have mentioned they want to be taught by research active staff.

How is research prowess or performance communicated in the marketing of undergraduate programmes? To what extent do the academics drive or participate in the presentation and marketing of research activities to prospective undergraduate students?

- School 1. Doesn’t know for sure. I think it is web pages/student brochures. Only involved in marketing in a limited way. Does promote school on international visits but not involved in preparation of UG brochures.
- School 2. Not involved in communication of research but it is promoted. Different bodies responsible for checking data in brochures. Research profile isn’t strongly promoted because it isn’t that strong and it is done by the marketing department not academics.
- School 3. Research centres, current projects and professors are placed in the UG brochures and on the website. There is a marketing group made up mainly of managers with some academic representation. PR and marketing teachers are drawn in to provide input. Course Leaders also asked to input.
- School 4. ‘I think with UG sts we do tell them we have research centres but we don’t push it much more than that. PG sts. We publish research papers that students have access to. Some information on the website.
- School 5. Although there is a committee to raise research profile not sure if this is fed into our marketing communications. Not at all involved in marketing communications to recruit students.
Findings and analysis

Please tell us how you translate your own or your colleagues’ research into the classroom? How do you utilise your research in your undergraduate teaching?

- School 1. “In a university you should work to deliver your research to the students.” I think all research active staff must teach and I think the best researchers should teach at first year level to attract students and give them a strong basis. Class debate is better informed and more critical when led by researchers.

- School 2. Uses own research in teaching and is certain colleagues do the same. Students appreciate this. Both UG and PG students benefit from access to researchers when writing dissertations. There are research seminars but the focus is on PG students.

- School 3. At an abstract level teachers are expected to be research active so they should be using this in class and teach cutting edge ideas. This is tenuous though. ‘Tricky to get great connections between the two.’ Research centre meetings aimed at PG sts. Don’t even do research methodology courses on the UG programme. Good researchers are not necessarily good teachers.

- School 4. Uses commercial data from research in class. ‘Students love real life data’. Some colleagues involve PG sts in research activities but not UG sts. ‘UG do not have the time to get involved in research’. Good researchers might not be able to teach.

- School 5. Research should inform teaching. Non research active staff tend to regurgitate from textbooks and the quality of class debate is lower. Not sure how widespread this type of teaching is as the school is teaching led not research led.

Some preliminary conclusions

- Research into general reasons for undergraduate choice conducted so far seems to echo Ivy’s findings on institution type.

- Some uncertainty as to influence of research reputation in UG recruitment. Research directors from 4 of the 5 schools either weren’t sure or felt that research reputation wasn’t important in students’ choice. Even school 1 director gave a guarded response.

- Research directors and academic staff weren’t involved to a great extent in promoting research activities through marketing communications activities. Mainly left to external relations or practising marketers.

- Most directors felt that research active staff should bring their research into the classroom and this could lead to better class discussions. Two directors did feel that researchers don’t always make good teachers though. Research seminars and workshops tended to be aimed at PG students. There seemed to be a passive approach to research in teaching. The researchers telling students about research rather than involving them. No uniform policy or monitoring adopted.
Next stages

- Continue with interview programme universities in Midlands and Scotland approached.
- Need to interview practising marketers in HE and probe why more interaction doesn’t take place.
- Examination of websites and brochures for correlation and further analysis of marketing communications issues.
- Further investigation of pedagogical applications.
- Begin focus groups with students.

Selected Bibliography