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Reviewing engagement and touch points in Higher Education course selection decision making.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing increased competition and are seeking constant improvements to increase their rankings within league tables (Towers & Towers, 2018). Of the 2.3 million students studying at a UK HEI during the academic year 2016-17, over 551,000 were studying at postgraduate level (Universities UK, 2016). Furthermore, 38% of these postgraduate students are from outside the UK, with up to 52% being international students within the discipline of business and administration (Universities UK, 2016; UKCISA, 2018).

There is a well-established and continued debate regarding whether students should be viewed as a customer in higher education (Guilbault, 2016). Whatever viewpoint is taken, it is clear that students are behaving more like customers and seeking value for money. They now have increasing amounts of information upon which to make their choices between competing providers. Indeed, Millennials have unlimited access to information (Kozar & Hiller-Connell, 2013), and perceive digital as fundamental to their lives (Donnison, 2010). Digital and social media is also said to have changed how consumers behave (Alves, Fernandes, & Raposo, 2016). For example, Hall and Towers (2017) found that Millennials continually engage with brands and their peers regarding their decision.

Decision making has previously been viewed as a rational and linear approach, both outside and within HE (Towers & Towers, 2018). However, more recent models suggest a move to a more circular, continuous process, and recognise the importance of engagement and touch points. There has been limited discussion on the area of engagement and touch points, especially when relating this to HE course selection, which this paper addresses.

Decision making and customer journeys

Traditional decision making process models, such as the Blackwell et al., (2001) model, base decision making upon a number of stages, and consumers approach this in a rational and linear way. More recently, models have suggested a more continuous approach, under a customer life cycle or customer journey approach (for example Court et al., (2009); Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014), Lemon and Verhoef (2016)). The customer decision journey has been defined as “the process a customer goes through across all stages and touch points that makes up the customer experience” (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016: 71). The customer journey perspective is becoming increasingly popular, is closely linked to customer experience, and is a possible result from a need to manage and design touchpoints and service offerings to maximise the customer experience (Folstad & Kvale, 2018; Rosenbaum, Otalora, & Ramirez, 2017; Zomerdijk & Voss, 2010). It therefore has a focus on interactions between service provider and customer, and presents an “engaging story” of this interaction (Folstad & Kvale, 2018). However, there is not always agreement on what constitutes a customer, especially in the area of HE and students (Guilbault, 2016). Furthermore, currently customer journeys, engagement and touch points is a neglected area within HE (Towers & Towers, 2018). Engagement and touch points appears to be closely linked to the social media phenomenon (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012). Social media offers organisations opportunities to strengthen their customer relationships, by using rich media that has a far greater reach (Thackeray, Hanson, & McKenzie, 2008). It encourages customers to engage with their brand and encourages interaction with each other. Customers therefore add value to this interaction through generating content and the potential to influence others in their purchase decisions through peer-to-peer interactions (Sashi, 2012).

Engagement and touch points

Four components of customer engagement have been identified (Kumar et al., 2010): customer purchasing behaviour; customer referral behaviour; customer influencer behaviour; and customer knowledge behaviour. Therefore, customer engagement concerns the various touch points along the customer journey (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). These various touch points become part of the overall customer experience, from prepurchase to postpurchase. A touchpoint has been defined as “an episode of direct or indirect contact with a brand” (Baxendale, Macdonald, & Wilson, 2015: 236). Types of touch points have been identified as: brand owner touchpoints, retailer touchpoints and third party touchpoints by Baxendale et al., (2015); or as brand owned, partner owned, customer owned and social/external by Lemon and Verhoef (2016). Therefore, some of these touchpoints are not under an organisations control. Organisations need to identify which are the most critical touch points for customers and then determine how these can be influenced. The objective would be to improve the customer experience (Steen, Manschot, & DeKoning, 2011). Baxendale et al., (2015) suggest that an evaluation of a customer encounter with a touchpoint should take place immediately after the encounter, rather than retrospectively in surveys, as time may lead to inaccurate recall.

Considering touch points as part of the customer journey, previous studies cover this as part of several other topics, or relate to service design or management, or report on service based case studies such as an amusement park, or to improve customers’ experiences (Folstad & Kvale, 2018). Moreover, this discussion is taking place outside of HE. There appears to be a lack of studies regarding how to apply this to the HE context to analyse touch points during the student customer journey. Previous studies have only highlighted different ways to identify touch points outside of HE, however no evidence was found in the existing literature of HE-relevant touch points.

Methodology

An exploratory phenomenological approach was adopted, exploring the views and experience of only those that have lived the experience that is under study (Goulding, 2005; Spiegelberg, 1982). The primary research consisted of focus groups and interviews. A total of seven focus groups, consisting of full-time postgraduate students, at one university in the North of England were conducted, with a total of 50 students. Nine in-depth interviews also took place. Non-random sampling methods, utilising convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling was used to select an easily accessible sample (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Purposive sampling was used to select participants based upon their eligibility to meet certain criteria (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015). Participants were selected to meet certain criteria to represent home, European Union and international postgraduate students, both male and female. Students were selected from 25 countries across 4 continents. Focus groups and interviews were digitally audio recorded, transcribed and recurrent meaningful themes were established (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings and discussion

The review of literature revealed that no HE specific touchpoints have been identified, although outside of HE previous studies have highlighted different ways to identify them. HE-specific categories have therefore been constructed by adapting those from Lemon and Verhoef (2016), and Baxendale et al., (2015), and are identified as: brand owned, partner and social/external. The results from the research will therefore be presented around these three categories.

Brand owned – these touch points are under the HEIs control, such as their website, owned social media pages, advertising (including online paid search results), loyalty programmes (e.g.. discounts or scholarships), and university open days.

Owned social media pages: All students in each of the focus groups and interviews had access to a pre-course specific Facebook page, run by each of the Programme Leaders. In the focus groups, many positive comments regarding this aspect were seen, as illustrated by the quotes below.

“It really relaxed you, so when you came in you felt like you already knew you almost. If I had any problems I felt like I could really approach you. I didn’t worry at all” FG5

“Nice to do an introduction to see who else would be in the course before you start” FG2

“I think it is a good idea, it shows the tutor cares about the students” FG5

“It was kind of nice to see with whom I was going to study” FG7

“It was a good way to communicate with you, because we didn’t have classes” FG1

However, not all responses were positive regarding use of the Facebook group:

“Before anyone meets you, people might look through your Facebook pictures and have the wrong impression of you. They might assume you are a certain type of personality from your pictures” FG5

I don’t know if interacting with people on Facebook before you have met them is always a good idea though, just because you might have some assumptions about them just by the photo” FG4

“I haven’t been the present on Facebook because, I don’t know, I want to keep it private, I don’t want to get that involved” FG5

Website:

The website appeared to be extremely important to all respondents in the focus groups and interviews.

“I was looking at the website and the quality of the teachers/staff, personal experience and their PhDs, if they were experienced. With MMU I can actually check the website and published paper list, the staff are highly published. And the good thing in the website I can actually check who is taking the module and see the experience and expertise” I1.

“I was looking at university websites. MMU had a really good explanation about what the course actually was, as opposed to some of the institutions I was looking at” I6

“I printed off each brief from every course, and compared them, from the websites” I4

“I was looking at the website” I7

“I looked at European websites, American and UK and compared them” I8

Loyalty programmes:

Many universities offer discounts for students to continue with the same HEI, or offer scholarships.

“I didn’t get a scholarship from Essex. I was offered a scholarship from MMU and Hull” I1

University open days:

The importance of the open day was discussed by a number of the respondents, as I3 illustrates:

“If I had come here and not liked it, I would have looked at others. But I came here and it just felt very good and very efficient. The course content was fantastic, the lecturers knew it all, and it was like well they care about this course, they care about the business school and that is more important”. I3

“I attended a postgraduate open evening as well. I think that was a big influence in terms of being back on university campus” I6

Partner owned: Whilst these are not directly under the control of the HEI in the way that Lemon and Verhoef (2016) suggested, they are an important aspect to consider, and include agents, Government departments (for Visa and/or loan approval), accreditations and links with professional bodies, and recruitment fairs. Also included here is place marketing, as for example organisations such as Visit Britain/Visit England undertake campaigns that may highlight certain countries as a destination.

In the interviews, respondents 1,3,6 and 9 mentioned accreditation and professional body links as being important. Therefore, HEIs need to ensure they have clear links on their website. Two respondents mentioned recruitment fairs, whilst three respondents mentioned place related aspects.

“My agency and my company have a close relationship with this university, so I didn’t apply anywhere else” FG5

“My agent recommended the UK and MMU” “FG5

“I went to the universities MMU official agent in my country” I1

“I started to look at accredited courses, because that is important” I3

“What I was looking at first of all was CIM accredited courses and professional courses” I6

“I also talked to German PR bodies, where they had heard of certain universities” FG7

“I planned to come here for 2015, but my visa was refused” I9

“Some of the universities in the UK have AACSB and CIM accredited” I1

“Manchester is a very good place... I chose MMU because of the location” I1

“I just started with the UK because I love the country” I2

Social/external: This covers the role of other external people such as alumni, family and friends; external third party information such as rankings, rating and review sites, discussion forums on social media and general social media comments. These are outside the control of a HEI.

In the interviews, connecting with alumni was important to 7 out of the 9 respondents, and connecting with current students important to 3 of the respondents.

“When I applied, I came to the interview, and talked to some of the students working on their projects” FG2

“What I did do was speak to people that had been on a masters programme at various institutions I was looking at” I6

“We have consulting groups in my country” I8

“I talk with alumni from that university” I9

Ranking and review sites also played an important role for the majority.

"I only look for some information, like the rankings from the internet" FG3

"I looked at a couple of reviews and what they had said... a couple were really bad value for money and stuff, but it was generally positive" FG5

"I went to the website that shows the rank of the universities. It was the Complete University Guide" I7

"It was a mixture of rankings and what other people had said" I2

However, one student explained about comments found online:

"These comments on those sites aren't always dead reliable" FG7

In addition to past and existing students, family and friends appeared to be a big influencer with many students:

"A lot of friends were positive about Manchester " FG5

"My brother and sister they study here, so I just come here" FG1

Touchpoints and stages

Having a comprehensive list of touch points, together with an understanding of how important each touch point is, and the qualitative comments from the interviews and focus groups, provides a comprehensive picture to assist in highlighting any improvement required by the service provider (ie. the university). The stages included for the analysis, informed by the work of Lemon and Verhoef (2016), are highlighted as prepurchase (covers pre-search and searching for information stage), purchase (covers application and decision stage) and postpurchase stage (covers post purchase evaluation, and includes any WOM/e-WOM).

The in-depth interviews allowed touch points to be plotted against stages. This provided a comprehensive overview of touch points used at each of the three stages, and for HEIs to consider. See Table 1.

Conclusion

Customer journey mapping allows an organisation to understand the customer experience, although there is still confusion regarding how to do this (Folstad & Kvale, 2018; Rosenbaum et al., 2017). There are a limited number of customer journey maps available outside of HE, which frequently focus on consumers and retail (such as Wolney and Charoensuksai 2014), or are quantitative studies (Baxendale et al., 2015), or conceptual (Folstad & Kvale, 2018). The results of the mapping need to be useful for HEIs, and allow an understanding of the customer experience, thereby enabling HEIs to improve the customer experience. Of course, there is a great deal of debate regarding whether students are consumers/customers in the true sense of this definition. Whatever viewpoint is held, it is very clear that students are behaving more like consumers/customers, and that HEIs need to maximise positive experiences, to ensure positive future WOM/eWOM. Touch point analysis provides HEIs with a list of areas that need to be evaluated from a customer experience perspective.

Table 1: Touch point analysis linked to stages (In-depth interviews)

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Touch point	Detail	P r e	P r e	P r e	P r e	P r e	P r e	P r e	P r e	P r e	A p p	A p p	A p p	A p p	A p p	A p p	A p p	A p p	A p p	P P E	P P E	P P E	P P E	P P E	P P E	P P E	P P E	
Brand Owned	Website	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X									
	Email						X				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X					
	Open Day			X	X											X												
	Telephone call						X	X										X										
	Scholarship	X									X																	
	Search engine results		X		X	X			X	X																		
	University staff												X						X				X			X		
	Social media									X														X				X
	Advertising online						X																					
Partner	Agents	X								X	X								X									
	Government Visa										X								X	X								
	Government Loans			X			X	X								X												
	HEA PTES Survey																											
	Accreditations & professional body link	X		X			X			X									X									
	Recruitment fair			X						X																		
	Place related		X				X			X																		
Social/ external	Alumni	X	X			X	X	X	X	X	X						X	X	X									
	Current students	X				X	X																					
	Friends		X		X	X		X	X	X						X		X	X				X	X			X	
	Family	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X	X				X		X			X			X				
	Ranking & Review sites	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	X												X				
	UG lecturers	X	X	X		X							X								X	X	X				X	
	Students at previous institution																				X	X						
	Social media																						X					X

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