

A Comparative Study of International Recruitment – Tensions and Opportunities in Institutional Recruitment Practice

The purpose of this research is to explore international student recruitment at higher education institutions (HEIs) by examining the development and implementation of international recruitment activities. There is little research regarding the internal operations of HEIs, how HEIs conduct international recruitment efforts, and the challenges that international recruiters encounter. This study finds that although national policy frameworks vary by country, the practice of international recruitment remains remarkably similar amongst the case study institutions. It further suggests that regardless of rankings, HEIs are facing commodification within the international student recruitment market. Furthermore, it suggests that institutions may improve their recruitment activity by addressing role clarity, improving coordination, differentiating their offerings, and ensuring flexibility to respond to market forces.

Keywords: higher education, international student recruitment, recruiters, activity theory

Introduction

It is well documented that students all over the world desire to undertake higher education in countries other than their own (Soutar and Turner, 2002; Briggs, 2006; Tatar and Oktay, 2006; Szekeres, 2010). They aim to achieve degrees from highly-recognised universities, particularly in English-speaking countries (Zinn & Johansson, 2015). This, in itself, is not a new concept—during the mid-sixteenth century, higher education institutions (HEIs) attracted international students. However, a rapid increase in globalisation and internationalisation has led to dynamic changes in international education such as student mobility, overseas campuses, and privatised educational institutions. (as cited in Wilkins & Huisman, 2011). According to the Organisation of

Economic Cooperation and Development, the global demand for international higher education is set to grow from nearly 4.1 million students in 2010 to 7.2 million students in 2025 (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, 2015). As competition to acquire the best student talent intensifies, institutions are developing rigorous strategies and policies, supported by financial investments, to increase enrolment.

Student recruitment can be defined as a function ‘to generate an interest in a learning institution and attract a sufficient number of prospective students who apply and eventually enrol in the program’ (Beneke & Human, 2010, p. 436). A prospective student is any student that a HEI would like to recruit and eventually enrol (Zinn & Johansson, 2015). In this context, international student recruitment refers to the practice by which HEIs connect with, and attempt to attract, students from other countries.

This paper examines international student recruitment practice at three HEIs in Canada, the United Kingdom (UK), and Hong Kong. The study applies the responses and perspectives of recruiters from these institutions to contextualise national systems and to explore the macro-, meso-, and micro-level influences that shape international recruitment practice at HEIs.

Literature review

Institutions of higher education use internationalisation to connect their organisations to the accelerated pace of globalisation. At the national level, internationalisation impacts funding for teaching and research, policy reform, programmes, and institutional regulations. However, the actual process of internationalisation takes place on the individual institutional level (Knight, 2004). This internationalisation occurs by

expanding institutions, physically and abstractly, across borders and bringing different cultures and international activities to institutions (Knight, 2004). This activity is evident in recruiting international students, international school partnerships, international academic programmes, international research opportunities, branch campuses, distance education, and further inclusion of international and intercultural practices in educational curriculums (Knight, 2004).

Historically, international recruitment is not a deeply-rooted practice amongst HEIs. However, over the past several decades, it has had increasing influence on HEIs. In 1975, approximately 800,000 students studied abroad. A decade later, an estimated 1.1 million students undertook higher education outside their country of citizenship (Sood, 2012). In 2012, the number of international students was approximately 4.5 million (Sood, 2012). By 2025, the number of internationally mobile students is expected to surpass 7 million (West & Addington, 2014).

Australia is one of the top four destinations in the world for international students. As a result of its experience and perceived success in international student recruitment, many other countries are mimicking Australia's efforts. Australia first began attracting international students around 1950, but the major shift to proactive international recruitment occurred in 1986 with significant changes to government policy and a reduction in public funding for HEIs. This led to the adoption of more business-like practices among HEIs to finance operations (West & Addington, 2014), a move that the Australian government encouraged with grants of up to \$200,000 to 'develop promotional materials and marketing plans for the recruitment of international students' (West & Addington, 2014, p. 24). Through the recruitment of international students,

along with branch campuses, franchises, and twinning arrangements, Australian HEIs created lucrative opportunities from international recruitment (Trilokekar & Kizilbash, 2013). For example, many Australian HEIs were able to retain a large portion of income from international student fees, which were usually considerably higher than the tuition paid by domestic students.

Many have argued that these kinds of shifts in government policy have led to the commercialisation of the higher education platform and that higher education is no longer solely about educating students as much as it is about turning a profit. Nevertheless, the Australian model reinforced the notion of engaging international students as a means to fill the financial gaps created by reduced public funding. After the success of the initial investment became obvious and HEIs were profiting from their marketing efforts, many other HEIs around the world began to establish international offices to support ongoing marketing and recruiting efforts (West & Addington, 2014).

Globally, many HEIs have experienced the same funding cuts to higher education as witnessed in Australia and have pursued international recruitment opportunities to fill the void. Today, the United States (US), Canada, the UK, and Australia are the top four countries for international student study (Goralski & Tootoonchi, 2015). As such, it is implicit that these countries are in competition to attract and enrol students from around the globe. This increasing competition between nations and HEIs, as it relates to international student recruitment, has not only shifted the way people view these institutions, but also how HEIs operate. Due to the perceived lack of funding for HEIs, recruitment is viewed as a necessary strategy to seek new means of funding and financing (Marginson, 2011).

International student fees and tuition rates have proven to be a good source of income and an adequate alternative revenue stream for many HEIs that are faced with the threat of limited funding (Zinn & Johansson, 2015). Institutions are engaging in business-like practices such as marketing, recruiting, and competing in what can be referred to as the international student market (Zinn & Johansson, 2015). In this context, higher education is being conceptualised and marketed as a service and then sold to students in national and international markets, with countries and HEIs competing for a share of the student population.

In New Zealand, it (international recruitment) generates more earnings than the export of wine; in Canada, more than lumber and coal; and in the United Kingdom, more than the automotive or financial services industries. (De Wit, 2015, p. 13)

The fees and expenses applied to international students became a noticeable contributor to economic growth in the 1980s with the introduction of the tuition cost differential factor (Koh, 2015). This model, which was more often employed by Western countries like the US, was used as a strategy to obtain more funds to finance operations. Though the UK introduced a tuition differential much later, other European countries have not implemented a tuition model that separates residents from international students; this serves as a method to compete with other countries (De Wit, 2015).

Student decision-making around selecting a HEI has been well explored in the literature (Soutar & Turner, 2002; Briggs, 2006; Tatar & Oktay, 2006; Szekeres, 2010). Many HEIs understand students are the primary decision-makers when choosing where to study, however many influences such as parents, rankings, and programmes impact that choice (Lindsay, 1994). The complexity of the decision-making process puts greater

pressure on HEIs to influence students by various means and at various stages of the process. This involves commercial marketing and sales techniques, which typically take the form of agents, brochures, websites, social media, prospectuses, media relations, alumni networks, and recruiters (Briggs, 2006; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Szekeres, 2010).

The international student market is one of the most competitive arenas for HEIs (Hanover Research Council, 2014) and institutions have adopted unique strategies to attract students. A 2016 study by Chankseliani and Hessel at the University of Oxford, which interviewed admissions and international office personnel from 14 HEIs across the UK, cited agents as being highly influential resources. Agents, with networks in countries that the institutions could not otherwise support, have knowledge of the local market and student preferences. This study found, in addition to agents, that country visits, the use of customer relationship management (CRM) systems, alumni engagement, and country-specific scholarships were effective recruitment strategies. The study further suggests that these HEI's were aware they could not compete with larger schools in North America and China to recruit students, and therefore tried to engage more with regions outside of the dominating countries. Lastly, the Chankseliani & Hessel study found that a large support system was considered a good investment for international recruitment. One interviewee in this study stated that the international office at their institution had grown to over 60 people and that university also employed other teams to help students with immigration, accommodation, settling on campus, and their overall well-being while in the studying in the UK. It was believed that these additional supports contributed to the HEI growing international student numbers at a more robust rate (Chankseliani & Hessel, 2016).

Previous studies have ascertained that students have a broad range of motivations to attend HEIs (Binney & Martin, 1997; Hesketh & Knight, 1999; Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999, Payne, 2003; Soutar & Turner, 2002) and suggest that academic programmes, career opportunities, parent and peer influences, and financial capabilities are key factors that influence a student's choice of institution. At the same time, other considerations, such as a HEI's 'brand', can play a highly influential role in an international student's decision. 'International students have a somewhat different set of considerations, with institutional reputation being much more important' (Szekeres, 2010, p. 431). As such, institutions have invested in branding strategies and have focused on rankings in order to appeal to these types of students (Farrell & Van der Werf, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010; Marginson, 2011).

While the factors impacting student decision-making are well researched, understanding institutional adoption of recruitment strategy and practice is lacking. The growth of the middle class in developing countries, the reliance on international enrolments to address the new financial needs of HEIs, and the increasing importance for HEIs to be globally relevant have contributed to the increase in international recruitment phenomena (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2014). HEIs continue to adapt and evolve recruitment strategies to keep pace with the changing structure of higher education. A qualitative study of 35 international enrolment officers found three main themes of successful recruitment practices:

- (1) technology for expanding reach in a cost-effective manner;
- (2) partnerships for creating pathways and visibility; and

(3) research to prioritise efforts and measure return on investment (Choudaha et al., 2014).

These elements indicate that international recruitment practice is a dynamic process. Technology is advancing and institutions are using strategies and adopting techniques similar to those used by commercial enterprises. These strategies include attending virtual fairs, updating and translating websites, offering virtual tours, hosting webinars, and increasing the use of social media platforms, an area that has become extremely important in recent years (Choudaha et al., 2013). Partnerships with third party agencies, such as high schools, agents, governments, and other organisations, are described as critical to successful international recruitment strategies. These partnerships enable HEIs to explore and develop new markets and to link to local authorities that have access to prospective students and their families (Choudaha et al., 2014). Lastly, HEIs are employing research as a strategy to better understand changing market dynamics. This research gathers intelligence that is used to assess certain returns on investment; using admission funnels and aligning student segments to institutional profiles have been mentioned as important elements of research gathering and the associated strategies implemented by international institutions (Choudaha et al., 2014).

Today, as student recruitment becomes an increasingly important issue (as well as a necessary practice) for many HEIs, institutions are being challenged to adopt innovative ways to market themselves (Zinn & Johansson, 2015). This literature review, which outlines both the demand (i.e., prospective students) and supply (i.e., HEIs) factors that impact international student recruitment, points to extensive research into student decision-making and the complex choice models related to that process. However, the

literature pertaining to international recruitment activity within HEIs is not extensive. This may be due, in part, to the competitive nature of international student recruitment. Regardless, there is much to be learned from exploring HEI recruitment activity and how institutional recruitment evolves at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. Furthermore, given the highly competitive international student market and the intricate nature of choosing an institution, HEIs must examine their practice of recruitment. ‘Institution managers are increasingly focused on marketing techniques, such as targeting and communicating with market segments’ (Rindfleish, 2003, p. 148). As institutions adopt marketised approaches such as recruitment, the impact of student decision-making, other institutions, government policy, and internal dynamics need to be explored to better understand effective recruitment practice.

Theoretical framework

This study used activity theory as the main theoretical framework to examine the activity of international recruitment at three HEIs in Canada, Hong Kong, and the UK. Activity theory, which is a multidisciplinary theory is used to analyse systems in a triadic manner (Engeström, 1987, 1999a, 1999 b, Russell, 1995). Activity theory is descriptive and explanatory; it allows an activity to be examined in historical and cultural contexts and can assist in uncovering and highlighting new knowledge and understanding for both researchers and practitioners. It is valuable in that it gains insight from looking at a system as a whole rather than studying an activity’s individual parts (Barab, Evans, & Baek , 2004). Barab et al. (2004) also suggest that activity theory facilitates the examination of system development as it occurs and evolves rather than at a static point.

This is particularly important in the context of this study where international recruitment is a culturally-embedded activity that is evolving within each case study institution.

Activity theory is useful, especially in HEIs, because it provides a framework for understanding human behaviour within a hierarchical, systemised, and dynamic approach (Hashim & Jones, 2007). It recognises the cultural and historical position of the environment and people and views activity as a unit of analysis rather than an individual action (Hashim & Jones, 2007). This is particularly useful when examining the evolution of managerialism activity such as export marketing orientation and internationalisation agendas within HEIs. Within a higher education setting, analysis of a hierarchical activity system is relevant to the dynamic evolution of education through the use of new tools, settings, rules, etc. (Isssroff & Scanlon, 2002).

Activity theory also identifies resistance to change and disruptions caused by integrating new items, which is the result of contradictions (Blin & Munro, 2007; Hu & Webb, 2009). Contradictions play an important role when examining the success or failure of a system in response to change. Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares (2008) noted ‘the examination of change is facilitated by the investigation of how contradictions are approached and resolved’ (p. 246). Looking at activity theory and contradictions identifies how changes occur and are transformed within a system (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2008).

Positioning this study within activity theory allowed for the three case study systems of international recruitment (and the factors that shape them) to be compared and contrasted in local and global contexts. By highlighting mediated activity, rather than individual actions, international recruitment could be examined as a strategy that situates

social, cultural, and historical factors in local (institutional) and broader (government and market) settings (Engeström, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978). The use of activity theory helped to define the inherent complexity of strategic practice within higher education settings by acknowledging the values that exist within individual HEIs, as established through the various perspectives of the study participants (the recruiters). Through these perspectives, the framework helped to reveal dissonance within each system and served to contextualise and compare international recruitment at micro-, meso-, and macro-levels.

As outlined previously the data is presented in Figure 1 in a triadic manner utilising activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999a, 1999 b, Russell, 1995). Figure 1 illustrates the international recruitment activity system used in this study and outlines the various elements that impact the system, such as rules, tools, objects, outcomes, and community, that were identified by the study participants. This activity system facilitates the evaluation of patterns of growth or decline as contradictions arise in an evolving setting (which is often seen when evaluating organisational learning such as international recruitment). It provides a qualitative methodology by which to view a wide variety of methods and contexts (Hashim & Jones, 2007).

[Place Figure 1 near here]

Understanding the development and implementation of the commercial practice of international recruitment at HEIs is a meaningful addition to existing research on recruitment and higher education management. The academic body of knowledge on the inner workings of HEIs is limited; this research will contribute to the academic literature on managerialism within higher education and international recruitment practice. The use of activity theory facilitates the examinations of organisational and workplace learning,

as it relates to international recruitment in HEIs. This research may also further inform recruitment policies by providing practical insight into international recruitment within HEIs.

Methodology

This study compared and contrasted international student recruitment practice at three institutions in three countries: Canada, Hong Kong, and the UK. Comparing these HEIs and the associated national systems supported the examination of the macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors that shape international recruitment practices at HEIs. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the perceived challenges for recruiters in their respective roles related to international recruitment?
- (2) How can the lessons learned from these case studies assist in informing international recruitment strategies for HEIs?

The study employed a case study research approach to compare and contrast the three institutions. Case study research is valuable because it allows for multiple cases to be examined singularly and as a whole. There have been many appeals for empirical research within higher educational operational management (McCutcheon & Meredith, 1993), citing that more field-based data would improve information about operation management systems in a real-world context. Case study research, though criticised by some for lacking objectivity or rigor, supports the investigation of real-world conditions (McCutcheon & Meredith, 1993). This approach can be effectively used to examine international recruitment practices by looking at several data resources in real-world

contexts, where there was no previous research before (Jensen & Rodgers, 2002). As found in the literature review, little empirical research exists for HEIs and international recruitment; as such, the case study approach provided the flexibility to examine multiple sources and to gather appropriate qualitative data for this study.

Within each country, one institution was selected and, more importantly, agreed to participate in the research. Given the competitive and proprietary nature of international recruitment, institutional participation can be challenging. However, because these institutions, namely the University of Prince Edward Island (Canada), the University of Lancaster (UK), and the University of Hong Kong (Hong Kong), agreed to participate. These institutions, which were all actively involved in recruiting graduate and undergraduate students, were purposively chosen for the following reasons:

- demonstrated institutional history and experience in international recruitment;
- exhibited different national policy frameworks (for comparison purposes);
- provided a range of institutional size and cohort (a mix of graduate and undergraduate programmes);
- comprised a mix of ranked and unranked institutions.

It was understood, upon selecting the case studies, that differences in institutional history, culture, national policy, and leadership would impact the role of international recruitment at each institution. This formed the core of the case study comparison. Within in each institution, research participants were identified through their professional institutional roles related to international recruitment. Two different methods of data collection are used in the research: documentary analysis and semi-structured interviews.

For the documentary analysis, documents are sourced from two basic areas, government policies related to international student recruitment and institutional documents related to strategic plans, enrolment plans, international student attendance, organisational charts, and institutional website content. These documents provide context and history regarding national policy and the institutions' activity related international recruitment, enrolment results, processes, structure, and organisation. Data was also collected using semi-structured interviews, which provide flexibility when exploring the nature of an activity and the various perspectives of participants in that activity. The interviews were designed and adjusted to ensure questions were relevant to each participant's role in international recruitment (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Penner & McClement, 2008). In total, 28 in-person interviews were conducted across the three case study locations: 5 interviews were conducted at one institution, 8 at another, and 15 at the third. Each interview lasted approximately sixty minutes. The variations in size reflected the level of effort and resources dedicated to international recruitment at each institution.

Analysis

Based on national policy frameworks, institutional culture, and historical structures, participants' perspectives on international recruitment practices presented differences amongst the HEIs. However, the activity of international student recruitment remained highly similar for recruiters, irrespective of these forces. This analysis focuses on four key areas of tension shared by case study participants: 1) goals and targets; 2) culture changes in administration, faculty, and students; 3) commodification and rankings; and 4) resources. The similarities and differences of each area are highlighted and underscore

the local dynamics impacting recruitment practices. Table 1 outlines the main areas of tension within each system, which are further explained in the analysis.

Canada	Hong Kong	UK
Communication and coordination – lack of clarity within the system	Resource allocation and strategy adoption	Centralisation
Rapid change in the system and investment in resources	Government and recruitment – rules of internationalisation	Government policy – changing rules
Faculty and teaching – changing culture on campus	Faculty and students – changing cultures on campus	Resource allocation and the Management School

Table 1 – Tensions in each system

Shared tensions

1) Goals and targets

As recruiters, participants identified the act of attracting more students as their primary objective. However, the interpretation and meaning of ‘attracting more students’ was viewed differently in each case. At the Canadian HEI, an unranked institution, the goal was to increase applications with an underlying assumption that this would lead to conversions. In Hong Kong, recruiters identified their goals were to compete for top students and to promote the institution’s brand globally, in accordance with the institution’s strategy to be internationally recognised as a diverse institution. At the UK institution, the goals were mixed; recruiters worked to increase international student enrolments, to attract top students, and to diversify programmes. However, regardless of

the institution, there was a marketing or sales component to recruiters' roles and recruiters worked in highly competitive environments (against other institutions) to attract students .

...I think of it like a branding war. You want to have your name branded in a certain country, you know India, Thailand, Dubai or whatever, but in the meantime, you need to remember there are probably 12,000 other universities who are also trying to achieve the same thing you are. Everybody's competing. (Interviewee 3)

In this context, recruiters worked to attract as many applications from the best possible students by outperforming other 'competitive' institutions. They felt responsible for communicating the benefits of attending their institution over another. Yet, while they felt pressured to increase application or enrolment numbers, there was a disconnect between what those numbers were and how they related to their performance in international recruitment.

I don't actually know how many students we actually enrolled in September. I'd like to know more about how many people, specifically what am I getting from these different areas that I recruit from. (Interviewee 4)

In the Canadian and UK institutions, goals and targets were not well understood. In both cases, the targets established for international recruitment were considered to be 'top-down' with an expectation of growth each year. In Hong Kong, international student enrolments were based on a quota system established by the University Grants Committee (UGC), a government organisation. The quota limited the annual number of international students to 20% of undergraduate enrolment (a total of 600 students), with half of the quota designated for students from mainland China and the other half for

students from the rest of the globe. For study participants, it was crucial to balance the quota established by the UGC.

We have to be accountable to meet the quotas that are set aside by our Government. So we kind of have to work, have strategies to make sure we meet the quota and make sure we don't over enrol or under enrol, to make sure we fit all the policies.
(Interviewee 13)

While the quota clearly established targets in the Hong Kong case, it created tension because recruiters had to manage limited seats for prospective students by modifying target markets (to meet student allocations from mainland China and other international markets) and to work internally to ensure compliance with the UGC. The quota dramatically shaped the recruitment strategy and placed more importance on the admissions process than the recruitment process.

The study's findings suggest that recruiters' motivations to increase applications, attract top students, and diversify the student body were performance-related but communication gaps within the systems created a lack of understanding about goals. Consistently within each case, participants were unclear about how to define success within their roles as recruiters. In particular, they found it difficult to understand how their role shaped the strategy and how they were to prioritise various institutional agendas for diversity, growth in student population, and faculty demands.

2) Cultural changes in administration, faculty, and students

The UK case study demonstrated a comprehensive approach to international recruitment by embedding responsibility for internationalisation within the faculties. The institution was undergoing a change in structure to centralise recruitment and to instill an

international focus within the administration and academia. The institution was striving to be internationally relevant and to advance in the league table rankings. In this case, the engagement of the faculty acknowledged, to a certain extent, the importance of the institution's culture, history, and practices. This gave the study participants a greater appreciation for the institution's strategies. While issues still existed, engaging the academic faculties in the recruitment strategy appeared to assist the institution in advancing its *centralised* agenda to be a globally-relevant institution. The institution's Management School was an exception to the centralised model. Given its historical recruitment success and the high level of demand from international students, changing the School's recruitment structure was met with some trepidation. As a result, it continued to operate its own formal international recruitment function somewhat outside of the centralised approach.

Probably because they've got the money to do it. So all the other departments wouldn't necessarily have the budget, and obviously, all management schools have a bit of cash flow within the university. (Interviewee 20)

In the UK case, the combination of faculty autonomy and negotiated centralisation of recruitment and administration supported the expansion of programmes, off-shore campuses, and international recruitment efforts. This suggests that aligning agendas within the system, to the extent possible, may advance international and international recruitment agendas.

In the Canadian case, participants indicated that faculty were vital to the success of international recruitment in terms of student experience, particularly around student persistence and retention, but not for attracting prospective students. With respect to

international recruitment activity, faculty were perceived as passive members of the community.

No one approaches us to say ‘hey, you’re recruiters. You are the way we’re getting students internationally. That’s the money maker. (Interviewee 4)

At the Canadian institution, faculty were engaged in recruitment activity sporadically and with little planning. At times recruiters consulted faculty when they needed to understand programmes and particular programme details; faculty members also occasionally participated in recruitment trips. In general, faculty held a responsive position; they were not actively involved in the strategic planning or implementation of recruitment activity.

At the Hong Kong institution, faculty admission and quality standards dictated much of the activity associated with recruitment and created a focus on admissions. Faculty standards and the extent of international student enrolments by programme varied. For instance, the faculty of Medicine only admitted local cohorts of students. There was a sense among study participants that some faculties preferred different nationalities over others; these preferences were implicit and were dealt with between admissions and the faculty. Overall, demand was high, with more applications than available spaces at the institution, placing pressure on admissions, recruitment, and faculties to find the appropriate students for their programmes.

It’s still the faculties who have the final decision of whether they want to admit the students or not. So, we let them have all the background of particular qualifications and things like that, to convince them that they’re admitting the students of the right calibre that is comparable to the local standard. (Interviewee 13)

For the Hong Kong case study, participants perceived dynamics amongst students on campus as tense. As internationalisation occurred on campus, the student cohort changed from a predominantly local population to one with more overseas students. This changing culture appeared to affect the work of recruiters as they attempted to convey the student campus experience to prospective students. Recruiters were reluctant to portray the institution as being highly internationalised when the reality of student life could be somewhat different. Yet, the institutional strategy was highly focused on being an international institution.

The Student Union carries out their business in Cantonese, and it's the Student Union and their official mandate in Cantonese that troubles me a little bit into thinking you're trying to say that you're an international university, but your Student Union carries business in Cantonese. Your whole residences constantly get students complaining that activities are in Cantonese and they can't join in. (Interviewee 12)

Some study participants observed that international recruitment was affecting the cultural landscape for students and that social integration was not occurring in the manner that suggested a truly international campus. This divide appeared to be more prevalent in the Canadian and Hong Kong institutions, but in the Canadian case, as the institution achieved substantial growth in international student enrolments, the perception of institutional success was also reinforced, regardless of the perceived tensions.

...over the last number of years, our international student numbers have grown very, very significantly. We are probably one of the leaders of growth in this area.
(Interviewee 2)

Perceived tensions within the student communities suggested incongruence between the appearance of internationalised campuses and student experiences.

Increasing demand for student supports placed pressure on infrastructure and programmes and there was a sense that the institutions were nearing their carrying capacities, both in terms of academic supports and infrastructure. Though these carrying capacities were not clearly defined, participants felt institutional resources were being stretched. Participants suggested that the changing cultural landscape also created strain on the faculties and that not all faculty members were prepared for the changing student cohort.

We also have to have the capacity to support them through student affairs, and that includes accommodations, the health centre, and orientation, etc. In addition, there are some accommodations or acclimatisation by the faculty who have not, in some cases, had many international students in their classes. That's a little unsettling to some of the faculty. (Interviewee 1)

Study participants also indicated that local students were not reaping the benefits of an increasingly international campus; as previously stated, it wasn't a 'given' that students were embracing cultural change on campus and recruiters had concerns about the social integration of international students on campus.

As cultural changes (with respect to students, faculty, and administration) are experienced within each system, participants highlighted tensions that create opportunities for learning and change within international recruitment practice.

3) *Commodification and rankings*

All of the case study institutions expressed similar issues about competing for students, most arising from commodification of higher education. At each institution, participants

described the challenge of attracting students, indicating that ‘everyone is saying the same thing.’

How do I promote the university? It’s a tough question. Everyone is offering internship or co-op, everyone is offering exchange, everyone has got undergraduate research. So really what sets us apart from the others? (Interviewee 12)

Arguably, rankings served as a point of differentiation when programmes, research, and services tended to blend in the higher education landscape. However, the distinguishing factors between institutions became more relevant when recruiters could discuss the attributes of their institutions, beyond the rankings, and provide specific details at an *individualised* level to prospective students and parents.

You struggle with the concept of this aggressive sales idea, which I think is what we’re definitely going towards. Families are spending so much money and it’s their education and at the end of the day it’s your email address and your name that they’ve got, and when they don’t like you, they want to drop out. I had a recipient family in the office crying. They brought the daughter here, she’s dropping out, and it’s me they come to because they’ve got my contact. So I think it’s alright saying you know, aggressive sales just get them in, but it’s an education. (Interviewee 25)

Commodification appears to be occurring as the HEI international recruitment environment becomes increasingly competitive and may be contributing to the focus on rankings. However, demand was increasing for each case study institution, even within the Canadian institution that had no international league table ranking. This suggests that commodification can occur with or without rankings and that enrolments can increase regardless of ranking status (Asaad, Melewar, & Cohen, 2014).

For institutions, lessons can be learned from the focus on ‘sales’ (applications and enrolments) over retention and student success. There are competing forces within the recruitment activity suggesting a longer-term view towards success is warranted, where ‘graduation’ is used as a performance measure within recruitment. These case studies suggest that students’ perceptions of quality extend beyond rankings, yet the systems and structures in place today appear to be moving towards more sales-oriented models.

Often they (rankings) are used by students and, to a certain extent, staff as a proxy for quality. Certainly, nationally they’re important. Internationally, I think it’s more of a signal, a symbol of the kind of university we want to be. (Interviewee 27)

Study participants viewed rankings as a symbolic measure, but considered them as being as overly simplistic with regard to student recruitment. Recruiters used the rankings as a stepping stone with prospective students, but their real focus was on getting the ‘right fit’ between the prospective student, the institution, and the programme.

There are so many factors that determine the rankings. We might be the best university in the world, but if nobody wants to come because it’s a small city, the rankings don’t always mean everything. It’s a starting point. (Interviewee 25)

Participants recognised that international recruitment at HEIs is a highly competitive, marketised environment that is increasingly under pressure due to commodification. As recruiters, they saw opportunities for HEIs to move beyond rankings and branding to focus on more individualised approaches to recruitment.

4) Resources and investment

In each case study, there was a community of actors engaged at different levels of international recruitment practice, strategy, and implementation. Participants suggested

there was a lack of coordination among the players as well as a lack of understanding about the various roles and the development of plans within each institution. Specifically, recruiters lacked understanding about their institution's broader strategy—how it is created and prioritised—particularly as competition and market demand increases. Role clarity can be complex in both larger systems (e.g., the UK institution) and smaller systems (e.g., the Hong Kong institution), due to power relationships or lack of awareness. Lack of clarity may also be the result of a void in communication, which creates stress within systems where resources are limited.

Each case study HEI experienced significant growth in international applications, yet infrastructure and support systems did not appear to keep pace with the increased demand. For instance, in Hong Kong, participants suggested that the appropriation of resources to admissions was a source of dissonance within the recruitment activity. As a result, resources were stretched, leading to multiple roles for any one actor or placing emphasis on admissions rather than recruitment. While the strategy stressed internationalisation, the resources did not align to the strategy.

You see that system that [once] supported 100 to 1500 [applications]... now there is 15,000. We can't handle it. We have to justify that cost. What are we going to sacrifice? (Interviewee 12)

In each case, participants deemed their institutions to be relatively new to the international recruitment 'game' and suggested that many other institutions were investing in advanced marketing techniques.

Some universities are so aggressive in their marketing; they use all the latest technology and geofencing and all that kind of stuff. We're not aggressive enough. (Interviewee 26)

In the UK case study, resource appropriation and structural organisation created tension between the international recruitment office and the Management School, primarily regarding roles, functions, and resources. The centralised planning process positioned international recruitment as a centralised activity, but the participants involved in central roles viewed the activity differently than those in the Management School.

What we'd like to get to is where the central international office does recruitment and the faculties do the conversion. Right now, the Management School does its own thing. (Interviewee 15)

Lastly, there was a consistent level of flexibility devolved to recruiters at each case study institution. In each case, decisions related to priority markets, market partnerships, the types of recruitment tactics (e.g., fairs, agents, etc.) were purposively delegated to the recruitment teams. This flexibility appeared to be warranted and necessary given the dynamic political and market realities that recruiters and institutions face. Recruiters experienced dynamic forces, such as currency fluctuations, political discourse, changes in scholarship policies, acts of terrorism, disease, and visa issues, as immediate pressures that could potentially disrupt recruitment activity. In that environment, the flexibility given to international recruitment appeared to be an effective approach. As one respondent stated, '*I was thinking maintaining market share is the hardest (thing to come yet).*' The need for flexibility does not negate the need for medium- to long-term planning, but it does suggest that flexibility and market responsiveness are important considerations when seeking to attract market share (Asaad, et. al. 2014).

Discussion

HEIs undertake international recruitment ‘to generate an interest in a learning institution and attract a sufficient number of prospective students who apply and eventually enrol in the program’ (Beneke & Human, 2010, p. 436). This study found that the goal of achieving a ‘sufficient number’ of students was not well understood within the case study institutions unless specific policies, such as Hong Kong’s quota system, were in place. Even so, Hong Kong participants suggested market demand exceeded supply and competition for the top students created pressure to compete. HEIs in different parts of the world experience similar competitive pressures, regardless of the internal dynamics that occur within the recruitment activity. Hence, international recruitment practice is highly predicated on the increasingly competitive landscape in higher education.

Study findings also suggested that rankings are not a necessary ingredient to achieve growth in international student enrolment. Of the two case study institutions that employed a rankings strategy, rankings served as a means by which to strive for the ‘best students’ and to position themselves globally, in both the quality and quantity of students. The Canadian case study was an unranked institution that experienced significant growth in international student enrolment. This is an interesting finding that suggests that rankings are important to international students, but not all students are influenced by rankings; it supports previous studies that indicate prospective students are influenced by other factors outside of rankings (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010; Marginson, 2011, Asaad et al., 2013, 2014).

This study found functional commonalities amongst the case study institutions, with respect to international recruitment, and highlighted gaps that these particular HEIs may face when adopting further commercial practices. Choudaha et al. (2014) found that

technology and research were instrumental for effective international recruitment. Study participants suggested that research and technology were resources or tools that were underutilised within the systems. It was understood that effectiveness was measured by achieving targets, generating applications, and converting those applications to enrolments. This definition of effectiveness is limiting and suggests that international recruitment may be improved if greater recognition is given to tools that enable effectiveness, namely marketing, research, and technology (Choudaha et al., 2014).

Interestingly, participants noted that they experienced commodification at the face-to-face level of recruitment activity. Recruiters felt challenged to differentiate their institutions, programmes, and offerings compared to other institutions. This suggests the promotion of education is somewhat homogenous in nature (Molesworth, 2011; Schwartzman, 2013). Yet, while commodification appears to be occurring, market demand continues to grow. ‘Fundamentally, all colleges and universities do the same things and deliver the same things. This sets up a race to build more and grow larger’ (Sickler, 2017, p. 4). In the case studies from the UK and Canada, the pressure to grow was evidenced by the participants, strategic plans, and enrolment plans. In Hong Kong, the quota system acted to restrict growth. However, all case studies experienced commodification in their promotional efforts. It can be argued that the lack of differentiation is the result of market and demand forces and the changing perceptions of education from a social good to a commercial product. As evidenced in Hong Kong, growth agendas may be mediated which suggests that growth may be driven by revenue objectives that are imposed by political and policy environments.

This study found activity theory to be useful for exploring international recruitment because it places institutional strategy and implementation in an international context. This study illustrates the importance of market responsiveness and coordination within international recruitment and identifies areas for improvement in international recruitment practice within HEIs. The challenges imposed by potentially commodified markets suggest greater attention needs to be paid to the internal strategies and operations of HEIs and their approaches to recruitment.

Conclusion

In summary, study findings present learning opportunities for HEIs. As described, the case study institutions shared similarities in how their recruitment systems functioned, including a lack of coordination; tensions between government, faculty, students, and administration; and the adoption of competitive structures and actions. The study also revealed opportunities to improve international recruitment practice by addressing role clarity, coordination, and commodification and adopting a flexible response to changing forces.

Qualitative research has limitations on generalisability, and as such, this study's findings provide implications rather than generalisations and suggest further research is needed to validate the findings as they relate to HEI strategy and international recruitment. The research did not specifically explore the academic perspective on international recruitment. This was a deliberate decision based on the research questions and the lack of existing research on the professional and administrative aspects of international recruitment. However, further exploration of academics' perspectives on international recruitment would be worthwhile and would provide greater insight into

both the practice and research of international recruitment at HEIs. This study highlights the contradictions that exist within HEIs' administrative and academic bodies and provides a useful framework to further explore workplace practice and learning to enhance outcomes for HEIs. It also suggests further research into the nature of changing campuses and how those changes impact HEIs and students.

This study contributes to the underexplored area of internal international recruitment practice in HEIs. Market perspectives, student decision-making, and marketing methods dominate much of the literature on international recruitment (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Rindfleish, 2003; Briggs, 2006; Eder, Smith, & Pitts, 2010). This research expands the literature by demonstrating how internal and external forces impact institutional practice in different parts of the world and by identifying how institutional culture and history shape international recruitment practice.

This study has also practical implications. For institutional practitioners, it can help in the examination of interactions occurring within institutions and how the shared activity of international recruitment is viewed amongst participants. For senior leadership and individuals involved in international recruitment activity, the study's findings can assist in informing strategies and policies by ensuring there is role clarity amongst actors, improving coordination mechanisms within recruitment and the institution, addressing potential commodification and differentiation of the educational offering, and enabling flexibility within recruitment functions to respond to changing environmental forces. As well, the unique environment of each case study provides insights for policy-makers to inform decision-making with respect to funding and policy. Finally, this research provides greater understanding about international recruitment practice that can assist

professional staff in allocating resources, creating international recruitment strategies, and perhaps, developing a longer-term view to institutional goals related to recruitment.

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