

Vanity! Fair?

A cautionary tale of the success, and lack of success of new courses, and the hoo-hah surrounding my recent article.

Don't let the truth get in the way of a good story. It's an old adage, and my recent experience is that this can be rewritten as - don't let a badly chosen phrase hide what you want to say. Let me explain.

Last year, I was asked to write an article for a refereed journal, giving my personal view on marketing and communications in higher education. In the article, I reflected on how the role of the PR and marketing professional has changed and how we're now an essential part of the HE world. I talked about, indeed stressed, collegiality and the role as a key adviser. I also made some pointed observations, one of which was that many universities have launched new courses "not because a market was identified, but because staff wanted to teach their specialist subject." Was this fair comment? I thought so. As did a lot of other people who took the trouble to comment on my article, and The Higher who ran a story about the article.

But, and to my huge regret, the story became dominated by just two words - 'vanity courses'. I'd added them to make my point about some new courses having no market. They were not even my words. I was merely repeating an aside from a respected Director of Marketing at another university.

But, wow, what a response! In the online Reader's comments (there's a pun in there somewhere), I was both a spiv and a troll. The article was "an outrage". And for the University for which I'm proud to work "the most important thing is to pile in the 'students', whether by trawling the villages of 3rd World countries or by Hoovering the street-trenches of the UK." Ironically, the last two comments appear to come from an individual linked to a website 'Bullying of Academics in Higher Education'.

All of this was summed up rather neatly by the final online comment which starts "I'm astounded at the vitriol this relatively innocuous article has produced, particularly from the so called educated and one assumes ...relatively intelligent academic community..."

The following week, Laurie Taylor got in on the act too; 'You're so vain' ran the headline. (At least that's one for the CV.) So why am I recounting this tale?

- Everything else I said was lost in the hoo-hah, and there's an important lesson there
- A recent HEFCE-funded study, due to report later this year, has shown many new courses never recruit a viable student cohort.

The second point is the most important and what I want to reflect on here. After all, the figures given at a dissemination conference held last November are chilling. An analysis of the UCAS database showed 18,137 new courses were added in the period 2005 - 2008. If success is considered to be recruiting 10 students in three successive admissions cycles (in my view a somewhat modest target), less than 15% of courses met this target. Worse still, 23% of new

programmes fail to recruit any students (for joint honours courses, this figure rises to 51%). **Yes, one in two new joint honours courses fails to recruit a single student.**

So new courses are either an instant success or they are never a success – well there's a surprise, not! The study also suggests most successful new courses are 'me too' courses, those in subject areas which are new to the institution but are successful elsewhere. And, indeed, 'me too' type courses have a greater probability of success. But courses in subject areas that fail elsewhere are also likely to fail with you. Why? Because there's no market for the subject!

The i-Map (Innovation in Market Assurance of new course Proposals) study has some other relevant findings. For example, courses that do not recruit viable numbers in the first couple of years, do not recruit successfully later. So bang goes the old argument that a new course failing to recruit well in its first years should be given time to develop. Or, to put it another way, no matter how brilliant the marketing, if there isn't a market at the outset, there won't be a market later.

I doubt any of this surprises many higher education marketers. But, at long last, and to my mind the important thing - there is now hard evidence to support saying "no" to spending ever more on courses in a weak market.

The i-Map study also collected evidence of the cost of developing a new course, which it estimated to be £20,000. This is before any marketing and investment in new staff and equipment. For higher education, the potential savings, mostly staff time, are put at around £5million a year.

So how can education marketers use these findings? I'd suggest, as I said in my refereed article, portfolio management becomes ever more vital. At a time when all institutions are being cautious on expenditure, the opportunity to argue for more input to new course development from market research, market intelligence and market testing has never been stronger.

And, as I also argued and I stress this point, this is best done collegially, working alongside academics, testing new ideas with them and for them. For example, sourcing and analysing UCAS and HESA data, conducting competitor analysis and planning together.

Interestingly, there is some evidence institutions have woken up to the need to review course portfolios. Some institutions (not only the troubled London Met) that consider themselves to be more prestigious are very publicly rationalising their course portfolio. It has also been reported recently that the number of courses on the UCAS database is lower this year than last. But more needs to be done – with the assistance of marketers – to review existing portfolios. Considering the product lifecycle is not exactly rocket science!

We probably don't know the full story yet. The i-Map study focussed on the full-time undergraduate market. The target numbers for postgraduate and part-time markets are frequently lower. So, there's clearly more work to be done.