The Enhancing Series Case Studies: International Learning Experience

More Than……………. Study
Exploring Relationship Building with Overseas Students

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Summary

This case study provides an illustration of how relationship marketing can influence programme development and delivery. Relationship marketing is an ongoing process that is created by an organisation to develop and maintain enhancement of value over time (Kotler, Armstrong, Saunders, and Wong 1996). We chose to use relationship marketing to illustrate developments in the relationship between academics and cohorts of Hong Kong (HK) students studying on Manchester Metropolitan University’s BA (Hons) Leisure Management Extension Degree programme. Changes within this relationship over time have led to a greater understanding of the needs, both academic and non-academic, of Hong Kong students which the programme team have sought to address. Relationship marketing is enhanced through trust-based long term relationships (Trim 2003) and it in this context that the chapter ends with an illustration of future curriculum developments arising from the maturing relationship.

Objectives

The objectives for this chapter follow a time line exploring the relationship between programme tutors and Hong Kong students from pre-programme entry, through programme delivery and post-programme and are, more specifically:

- To provide an insight into relationship development between Hong Kong students and programme tutors.
- To illustrate differences in relationship building between HK students and programme tutors and HK tutors.
- To analyse the programme tutor/HK student relationship legacy after completion of the programme.
To illustrate how post programme relationships can influence programme delivery mechanisms.

Rationale

Overseas student recruitment has always been a mainstay of Manchester Metropolitan University’s (MMU) recruitment strategy. The university’s Strategic Plan eludes to having “grown its share of international students” (MMU 2008). Apart from the financial benefits (programme and accommodation fees), overseas students bring a wealth of cultural experiences with them that can be used by tutors to provide real enrichment in programme design and delivery. However, failure to draw upon the cultural experiences of overseas students and allowing content and delivery to remain UK centric, may result in disengagement or division.

Competition within the university sector for overseas students is reliant to a large extent upon institution and subject ranking, important marketing tools for recruiters. However, while these are pivotal in attracting overseas students they provide no real indication of the overseas student experience after enrolment. It is suggested that these rankings should be seen as the tip of the relationship marketing process.

A process recognising the fact that overseas students bring with them a wealth of experience should as far as practical be used within programme delivery and then design. Student experience while studying in the UK can and will play an increasingly important part in the marketing of programmes. As part of this experience the relationship with programme peers and programme tutors is pivotal and as Kotler (1996) suggests “creating, maintaining and enhancing ..... building value laden relationships” (p 450) is an essential ingredient of relationship marketing.

Against this backdrop an analysis of relationship building between HK students and programme tutors on one academic undergraduate programme (BA (Hons) Leisure Management Extension Degree) at MMU is undertaken to illustrate how the importance of how such relationships can prove to be more than just a marketing tool.

Context

In May 2001 the BA (Hons) Leisure Management suite of programmes was validated for a September 2001 start. The suite of programmes included the BA (Hons) Leisure Management Extension Degree which is a 1 year top-up degree (Figure 1)
Figure 1

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<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Leisure and Recreation Management</th>
<th>Contemporaneity Leisure Issues</th>
<th>Visitor Management Project</th>
<th>Strategic Management</th>
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A feature of this programme was the unit ‘Graduate Skills for Leisure Management’ which serves as a bridging unit between level 2 and 3 (currently level 5 and 6) but is assessed as a level 3 (level 6) final year unit. The delivery of this unit is intensive over a one-week period and is timetabled one week before first year students start the academic year, during which three assessed activities are undertaken. The remaining assessments are usually completed by the end of the first term.

As part of the validation process and as a result of a previous visit by representatives from City University (CityU) of Hong Kong a Memorandum of Understanding was developed that enabled students graduating from CityU’s Associate Degree in Community Service Management (CSM) (subject to relevant academic and English Language achievement) to progress onto the BA (Hons) Leisure Management Extension Degree programme.

**The Start......Critical Incidents!**

The first cohort of seven HK graduates from the Associate Degree in CSM arrived in September 2001. They were transported from Manchester Airport in a minibus and dropped at the Crewe Campus of MMU to be met by two programme tutors. It was immediately evident from the start that the team were ill prepared for the arrival of overseas students. This was due in part to a lack of internal communication and in part to little understanding and experience of the needs of such students within the team. As a result, this first cohort of HK students faced the following obstacles:

- No bedding.
- No food.
- No catering facilities.
- Closure of refectory and most student campus facilities.
- No knowledge of the locality.
This first point of contact was a disaster. Bitner (1990) suggests that clients often judge the perceived quality of their experience through the interaction and evaluation of the servicescapes [physical environment] (Bitner 1990). The only saving grace in this instance was that the HK students could be seen as a ‘captive audience’ (with few alternatives) and so there was time to change the initial overwhelming negative perceptions. This and the fact that relationship marketing is a trust-based long term development (Baron and Harris 1995 and Trim 2003) meant that we had an opportunity to change initial perceptions over the academic year.

To overcome most of the initial obstacles, programme tutors accompanied the students to the local shops - as campus facilities were closed. At the time we saw this course of action as necessary to rectify our failings, but the HK students found the fact that programme tutors participated in these non-academic activities extremely surprising, reflecting cultural differences in their perception of academic tutors. It was recognised much later that this activity was instrumental in initial relationship and trust building with the first HK student cohort.

The following day (Sunday) the UK students arrived at the campus and took up residency in the same halls as the overseas students. On Monday, all students started their studies.

The first cohort of Leisure Management Extension Degree students consisted of 21 students: five from Ireland, nine from England and the seven HK students. As with most groups, students are readily identifiable by specific characteristics – loud ones, quiet ones, jokers and rare attendees and whilst these do not fall within Belbin’s group dynamic classifications they are prevalent in group formulation and function. The team expected that UK students could be classified by these roles; it was not expected that HK students would follow the same pattern. With the exception of one (a joker) the remaining roles could be classified as - quiet ones, only answer when directly asked ones, and very quiet ones. The joker was the exception as HK culture within academia is that education is a serious matter and there is a belief that the tutor is always right, the ‘font of all knowledge’ and should not be questioned.

This culture came into conflict with the ethos of the Leisure Management Extension Degree programme, which has always been to encourage autonomy, independent thought and learning. This is reflected in the programme assessments which give students the opportunity to mould their assessments around a possible career orientation. It was problematic for HK students (but not UK based students) to become autonomous learners and this showed in the Visitor Management Project (Dissertation) [refer to Figure 1]. Tutors ask students to develop a proposal based on their choice of ‘leisure related topic area’. HK students had great difficulty in developing their topic areas and with one exception (the joker), tended to agree with the first suggestion made by their Project Supervisor.

HK students have a particular cultural view and expectations of their tutors, and this conflicts with the UK cultural view. UK tutors see their role as supervisors and
facilitators of learning and teaching for all units, placing the onus on students to undertake independent study on their topic. HK tutors are instructors for all aspects of learning and teaching including projects and dissertations. HK tutors expect HK students to follow their instruction without question. So there we place a demand on HK students studying in the UK to change their learning style.

Cultural differences reflect different learning styles but they are also in some cases the motivation for HK students to study in the UK, to learn more about UK culture and to immerse themselves in this culture. In acknowledging and responding to this the programme team developed what can be now termed as an enculturalisation process, refined since the first cohort. With the first cohort the enculturalisation process was ad hoc and consisted of a variety of activities throughout the academic year – visits and activities relating to ‘traditional Englishness’ (Bonfire night, Alton Towers, Jodrell Bank, historic buildings, local villages complete with thatched roof buildings) which, as we learned from student feedback, fell short of their expectations.

Baron and Harris (1995) however, point to the fact that satisfaction is not only transaction-specific but also cumulative over a period of time. So once again, as with the initial arrival, when these activities failed to deliver, the programme team had to improve on the quality of the whole experience over the remaining academic year. Happily, the traditional Christmas meal complete with paper hats and Christmas crackers proved to be a hit with the first cohort and also for subsequent cohorts.

HK students also gain UK cultural experience by obtaining part-time employment. Their varied motivations are to improve English language skills, to earn income, to gain experience of working in another country and to build their CV. The first cohort of HK students possessed good language skills and did not feel the need to earn an income. Although they agreed that obtaining work experience would improve their CV, they balanced this benefit against the academic demands of their one-year programme and subsequently decided against undertaking part time employment.

The festive season is a time that needed more consideration than we initially gave. Again through a lack of understanding, experience and communication, remedial action had to be taken with the first cohort of HK students at the Christmas break. UK students went home for the Christmas period and four of the HK students embarked on European travel, leaving three students on their own in halls of residence over Christmas. It became evident in the last week of the academic term that these three HK students would have very few facilities available, as the campus would again be closed over the holiday.

The relationship built with the HK students was open and honest, and the students knew that whilst the programme team were novices with respect to meeting the needs of overseas students (confirmed by their friends studying at other UK universities), they were responsive in meeting their needs and requests.
But the three HK students who were remaining in halls over Christmas were unwilling to inform the programme tutors of their plight as they did not want to burden the tutors with non-academic problems. It was only by accident that programme tutors became aware of these students. The action taken might seem to be above and beyond the call of duty, but one tutor invited the students for Christmas dinner and to stay overnight. This act had a lasting effect not just on the three, but on all seven of the first cohort of HK students and in terms of relationship building was dramatic.

"Social benefits including emotional satisfaction, spiritual values and the sharing of humanitarian ideals" (Arnett et al 2003 p91)

are key features of the relationship marketing process.

In all years, and in contrast to the Christmas break, the Easter period signifies an end to class contact time and the completion of all assessed work. The reactions of HK students and UK students leading up to the Easter break are quite distinctly different. UK students become stressed, thinking that they will not have all the work in by due deadlines, while HK students appear confident in meeting all deadlines, including their project, which can be attributed to their good time management and work ethos.

After the Easter holiday and before the graduation ceremony, HK students tend to travel, exploring new cultures around Europe before returning in July for graduation. The first cohort of HK students not only invited their families to attend the graduation ceremony but also arranged accommodation for their guests. Whether this was because they saw it as a personal matter or whether it was as a direct consequence of their experiences on arrival in the UK is uncertain. It is probably the former rather than the latter as subsequent cohorts of overseas students have also arranged accommodation for their families for their graduation.

The first cohort of seven HK students graduated in July 2002. Five achieved an upper second and two a lower second. It was evident that the HK students had outperformed many of their UK counterparts, a remarkable achievement given the short duration of the programme, cultural differences and everything else they experienced!

The Here and Now........Size Matters!

Since the first arrival, there have been three more cohorts of HK students studying the BA (Hons) Leisure Management Extension Degree. Programme tutors have reflected on early experiences with the aim of developing and enhancing relationships (Payne and Ballantyne 1991) and of improving the experience of subsequent cohorts To some extent this has been successful. However, new groups have also brought new challenges, exposed further naiveties and tested the early initiatives developed to assist overseas students. Specific issues relate to the dynamics of learning and teaching groups and the enculturalisation process, and are detailed below.
The second cohort of HK students numbered twelve and represented 50% of the total intake. The initial problems encountered by the first cohort were overcome with planning and the appointment of a member of the programme team as international welfare officer. Having a member of the teaching team with an understanding of the needs of HK students and with experience of the previous year’s problems enhanced the relationship marketing process.

The international welfare officer visited HK to recruit and prepare students for study in the UK. Using ‘the joker’ from the previous year’s cohort to present programme information provided potential applicants with a HK student’s view of what was to come, a ‘warts and all’ perspective, more than just ‘programme promotion’.

The problems associated with arrival of students at the campus, registering with the relevant authorities (such as police, doctors), details on campus closure times and vacation periods, were addressed at the start of the programme. Integrating the enculturalisation process with the Faculty Overseas Orientation programme helped meet the needs of the second and subsequent cohorts.

In later cohorts group dynamics became an issue in two ways. The second cohort replicated the characteristics of the first one – the joker, quiet ones, those who only answer when directly asked and very quiet ones, with the majority of this cohort falling into the latter categories. Despite the size of the cohort, student interaction was limited, with many students remaining silent, hiding within the HK group. The HK cohort was large enough to hide in. It became increasing difficult to build relationships with this second cohort as, in contrast to the first group, where all seven students became proactive during seminars and tutorials, the second cohort relied on four or five members to talk in seminars and attend small group (three or four) tutorials instead of individual group tutorials. Many chose to be absent from these. This led to two distinct sub-groups within the second cohort; one a proactive, responsive group, resembling the first cohort, and the second a reclusive, reluctant group.

Despite the programme team’s efforts to improve the experience the ‘whole group’ experience was not as enjoyable as that of the first cohort.

Subsequent groups consisted of two or three HK students – the distinctiveness of a cohort that represented 30% or 50% of the total group is lost when the cohort represents only 8% of the total. However, in smaller seminars and tutorials two or three HK students, who might be lost in a larger group setting, can contribute more.

The later groups graduated with similar success to the first cohort with upper and lower class second classifications equally split.

Many authors have reinforced the fact that relationship marketing is enhanced through the development of “workable, trust-based long-term relationships which meet customer expectations” (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Palmer, 1995; Gronroos, 1997; Chee and Harris, 1998, in Trim 2003 pp. 563-4). In following this ethos the programme team have
developed long term relationships with a number of HK universities but the relationships with student cohorts vary.

The first cohort set the pattern for the relationship during the running of the course, but although subsequent groups generally reflected this pattern, there was one major difference between them and the first course. The good relations with the first group outlived the course and continued, whereas later groups did not maintain the relationship with the course team.

This suggests that most relationships formed for the duration of the programme i.e. ‘on-course’ relationships serve a specific purpose – they are academic and programme orientated. Whilst ‘on-course’ relationships that have continued beyond the programme have developed into more socially orientated relationships, which Gummesson (2002) suggests from a relationship marketing perspective are “pivotal” and the “most stable part of business life” (P. 147)

This is clearly illustrated by the fact that regular if distant, contact has been maintained with five of the seven students from the first cohort. These five students have since continued their studies to Masters Level and have subsequently secured employment. Four of them are employed by Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Division.

The Future………Full Circle!

The Memorandum of Understanding with CityU was replaced with an Articulation of Progression and this was expanded to a number of CityU programmes as well as to other Hong Kong universities.

Yet despite this and a number of recruitment visits over the last four years, there has been decline in numbers of HK students studying on the BA (Hons) Leisure Management Extension Degree programme. The main reasons cited for this decline in numbers are financial – cost of tuition, cost of accommodation, living expenses and strong sterling (current year excluded). As a result of the declining numbers and to comply with the University’s strategic focus which seeks to increase numbers of overseas students, the programme team is re-evaluating the course.

As part of the relationship marketing enhancement process, one of the members of the first group from HK (the joker) has been recruited as a Departmental Ambassador to promote leisure management related programmes to HK students. This ex-student is Chairperson of the CityU Alumni and is currently working as a Sports Development Manager for the Hong Kong Leisure and Cultural Services Department.

The delivery of leisure related top–up degree programmes in HK was discussed during recent dialogue with one of the HK partner universities. Traditionally this method of delivery includes mechanisms like distance learning and blocked on-site delivery. However as a direct result of the relationship developed with the first cohort of HK
students, and the continued relationship with five of these students, a new method of
delivery is being devised, drawing on the experiences of past HK students.
As the first cohort of students are qualified at Masters Level in relevant disciplines and
are all currently employed within the leisure industry the proposed on-site delivery will
include members of this cohort.

The advantages of including members of the first cohort in the delivery of an on-site
programme are that they:

• Are ex-MMU Leisure Management graduates and understand the
  philosophy of leisure-related programmes.
• Have a knowledge of quality assurance procedures within MMU
• Are practising industry-related Managers.
• Will provide a HK context to programme delivery.
• Can and will influence programme development.
• Have a knowledge and understanding of higher education in both HK and
  the UK.
• Have a knowledge and understanding of leisure-related employment
  within HK.

If the above proposal comes to fruition then it will be as a direct result of a relationship
marketing approach that was built, developed and enhanced over a seven year period,
covering organisation focused relationships (student/tutor), social relationships (ex
student/tutor) and returning to an organisational focused relationships (tutor/colleague).

Evaluation

There are several factors worthy of note drawn from the experiences we have been
through:

• The size of the overseas cohort is important when considering group dynamics
  and the integration of overseas students with UK based students. The number
  (7) of the first cohort of students represented 30% of the total group (21). This
  first group were large enough to be instrumental in shaping group dynamics yet
  small enough to prevent fragmentation or the sub-grouping of HK students into
  those who shied away from integration and those who sought integration. This
  happened in the second cohort (12) who represented 50% of the total group size.

• Starting the academic programme one week before any other students arrive
  without a doubt aids the acclimatisation of overseas students and later their
  integration with UK students. The intensity of the first week of the programme
  (Graduate Skills for Leisure Management unit) means all students are together
  for six hours in class each day.

• The fact that all students live in the same halls of residence means that bonds
  are formed from the start of the programme. These bonds are strengthened not
only by studying together for long periods of time but by living and socialising together.

• The introduction of assessed group activities during the first week of the programme has the benefit of encouraging (or enforcing) integration. The common goal of achievement, success and a high mark provides a focus for all students.

• The initial meeting with programme tutors on arrival at the institution provides overseas students with information about their perceived value. The fact that tutors are seen to be giving up their time to assist with non-academic activities can be a contrast to previous academic experiences in their home country. This perception can be further enhanced by programme tutors becoming involved with orientation and enculturalisation activities.

• Overseas students should not only take part in the enculturalisation process, they should also inform the process, which should be seen as continuous and include university and faculty orientation activities. Opportunities should be made available for overseas students to immerse themselves in English culture and should include the opportunity to undertake volunteer activities or part-time employment.

Conclusion

Relationship marketing is essential in the development and enhancement of relationships with customers (Baron and Harris 1995). Trim (2003) suggests that universities should adopt a strategic approach to relationship marketing as a means of positioning themselves in overseas markets. The above illustration does not represent a strategic or coherent approach to relationship marketing but provides an insight into the benefits of developing and enhancing relationships over a period of seven years. A direct result of this relationship is the modification of academic programme delivery to overseas students.

Biography

Mike Lowe is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader (Leisure Management) within the Department of Exercise and Sport Science at Manchester Metropolitan University. With over 20 years teaching experience in FE and HE, he has developed Leisure Management programmes and taught across a wide range of leisure related subjects. His current research and academic focus reflects skill development, PDP/CPD, employability and reflective practice within leisure, which provide 'added value' to programmes for both UK and overseas students and is the basis of this chapter.
References


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