



# University of Chester



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International student recruitment at the University of  
Chester

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## **Abstract**

The University of Chester is a higher education institution in the North West of England. Traditionally it recruits most of its students from the UK with few coming from outside the EU. With limits to the number of EU students that the University can recruit being imposed and with little very little non-teaching income, there is very little opportunity for growth in core business.

With no restrictions as to student numbers, increasing student numbers from outside the EU would seem to be a potential strategy for the institution. This study involved semi structured interviews with University staff and questionnaires distributed to existing international students at the University.

The study found that the University lacked a cohesive, embedded international strategy and was dependent on individual interest within academic faculties, however those faculties that made efforts to market their courses did manage to recruit satisfactorily to them. It also found that support services were not designed around the needs of International students and that there was a lack of international community at the institution.

## **Declaration**

This work is original and has not been submitted previously for any academic purpose. All secondary sources are acknowledged.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Background to the research**

The University of Chester is one of the oldest higher education institutions in the UK. It was founded by the Church of England as a teacher training college for teachers in church schools. Whilst one of its faculties remains dedicated to teacher education, the University is now a multidiscipline University which specialises in taught degrees. It has experienced significant growth recently, with its turnover growing from under £20 million for the year ending July 1998, to a turnover of £67 million ten years later. The main sources of funding are government grants paid to the University for teaching supplemented by tuition fees paid by most students. Tuition fees were introduced for full time undergraduate UK students at the rate £1,000 in 1998, these were then increased to £3,000 from 2006, as a result of the 2004 Higher Education act.

There are several pressures currently being placed on the funding of higher education in the UK, and these are only being increased as the UK moved into recession at the end of 2008. With public sector borrowing at record levels it is no surprise that the government, through its higher education funding councils, is not increasing student numbers available to institutions for mainstream courses. Indeed the only numbers that will be funded are those that are run in conjunction with employers (Employer Engagement) as part of the government agenda to increase skill levels in the UK workforce resulting from Lord Leitch's (2006) report. This has proved difficult to implement initially as employers get a feel for how the scheme works, but is likely to get increasingly difficult due to the economic situation. It is not just the main funding councils that are restricting funding, teacher training numbers in the North West are being reduced and the number of students funded by the NHS (nurses, midwives etc) is also in decline as the government seeks to reduce costs. The University of Chester relies on funding from all three of these student types.

In addition to this, there is a demographic impact that will affect higher education from 2010 in the form of declining numbers of 18 year olds. This means a reduction in the core market for all higher education institutions, but the University of Chester especially. Most of the University's income comes from full time undergraduates, the majority of whom come to University after completing their A levels.

Therefore the University must seek to find alternative income streams. Many of these will be in research, consultancy and other income. However these are relatively new areas for the institution and many of these income generation projects would require a related increase in the cost base to enable the institution to achieve economies of scale. The main strength and core business lies in teaching, and as such international students provide a good opportunity for growth, allowing increases in student numbers without adherence to a funding council contract and it could be aligned relatively easily with this core business. In addition international students pay fees in excess of UK students' fees to ensure they cover the contribution the UK government makes to Universities for educating home and EU students.

## **1.2 Research question**

The University of Chester currently has low levels of international recruitment, but there are some courses that attract larger numbers, specifically courses in nutrition, cardiovascular rehabilitation and MBA's. The University has an international marketing department and is allocating increasing amounts of resources to international recruitment, through overseas visits and fee bursaries, for example. The study sought to appraise the successfulness of these recruitment methods, but also analysed to what extent the University is prepared for the unique demands of international students and what impact this has on their satisfaction and the institution's reputation. Finally it looks at strategies the University can implement to improve its international recruitment.

The study found that the University suffers from the lack of an overall international student strategy which is aligned with the overall corporate strategy. In addition the facilities and support services are not adequate to provide for an increase in international student number. The researcher also argues for the marketing of specific targeted courses rather than marketing the University as a whole.

## **Research question**

International student recruitment at the University of Chester

## **Research aims:**

- To understand contemporary literature on International students

- To investigate the current international student marketing undertaken by the University of Chester
- To assess the international student experience at the University of Chester
- To draw conclusions and make recommendations on future international student recruitment strategies for the University.

### **1.3 Justification for the research**

The issue of marketing in higher education is a well researched area with an increasing number of studies focussing on the area of international marketing in particular. This ensures there is a good basis of literature available to the researcher whilst leaving plenty of scope for the researcher's study. The finding will also be able to have practical application as the University of Chester seeks to increase the number of international students it recruits.

The issue of student satisfaction, particularly for international students is less well researched, but there have been several studies in recent years which highlight some aspects of these , for example academic support, social interaction. The study attempts to bring these aspects under the umbrella of student satisfaction.

### **1.4 Methodology**

The research was undertaken within the organisation of the University of Chester using a mixed method approach. This was done so different categories of respondents (staff and students) would have an approach that would suit them better, and so that both Qualitative and quantitative data can be collected. Quantitative data was obtained from current international students studying at the University by way of a questionnaire. This was handed out in class by the lecturer and collected at the end to ensure a reasonable response rate. Qualitative data was in the form of semi structured interviews with colleagues.

### **1.5 Outline of the chapters**

Chapter 2 deals with the first research aim of understanding contemporary literature. This is split into two sections based on the other aims, specifically international recruitment and international student satisfaction.

Chapter 3 discusses the research strategy and methodology used in the study. A mixed method approach is used with the researcher using both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Chapter 4 presents the research findings in two sections. These correspond to the two research methods identified in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5 analyses and draws out conclusions from the findings in Chapter 4 and seeks to answer the research aims and overall research question. There is also an evaluation of the methodology and the limitations of the study are identified together with opportunities for further research.

Chapter 6 identifies key recommendations as a result of the conclusions reached in chapter 5. A realistic timetable for implementation is also set out.

## **1.6 Definitions**

International students are students that attend University in the UK, but their home is a country from outside the EU. Students from inside the EU are often considered to be international students as often they may require similar support to students from outside the EU (e.g. English may not be their second language). This distinction is important as EU students are part of the same funding contract as UK students, whereas Universities receive no government grant for international students from outside the EU zone, and thus pay higher fees.

## **1.7 Summary**

This chapter provided a background to the organisation as well as identifying the research problem and placing it in context. The research was justified and a broad description of the methodology was outlined. The study will now proceed in the following chapters.

## **2 Literature review**

It is important to regard international students as an United Kingdom ‘export’ and contributor to the UK economy. Students who come to the UK from outside the EU contribute over £3 billion in tuition fees and payments for living expenses, making higher education a very large export (Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI 2007). However, the UK market share of international students globally is falling, dropping from 16% in 1998 to 11% in 2004 (HEPI 2007). Recognising this, the government invested more in the British Council to enable better marketing of higher education and made changes to visa applications in order to make the process easier for international students. Findlay & Stam (2006) recognise this as part of a wider strategy to attract ‘global talent’ to the UK labour market particularly in the areas of science and engineering where Universities are finding it difficult to fill their course with UK students. It is hoped that these students will stay in the UK and become part of the workforce when they graduate.

### **2.1 International recruitment**

#### **2.1.1 Higher Education marketing**

The recruitment of international students relies heavily on the success of marketing techniques that the institution uses. Therefore the proposed research (particularly aim 2) will be grounded in marketing theory. Though traditional theories and models, such as the marketing mix (product, price, place, promotion) may not be appropriate to higher education (HE), as they are suited to more tangible products (Ivy 2008) it may be viewed as a service for which theories have been amended to reflect a service based economy. One of these adaptations is to the marketing mix which can be extended to include people, processes and physical evidence (Blythe 2005). It seems reasonable to apply this service marketing theory to HE. For example, the importance of people to HE marketing is high, as they are an extremely important part of the product that students are buying – the quality of a course stands or falls by the quality of its lecturers. There are also several authors who have changed this mix to suit the specific needs of HE.

The service sector marketing mix was criticised by Ivy (2008), who developed a marketing mix for managing MBA education. The author found that price, promotion and people were relevant, but added four new elements. These were Programme (the

specifics of the course), Prominence (of the academic staff), Prospectus (the quality of the Universities mailings to the student) and Premiums (additional benefits of the course such as guaranteed accommodation or international exchange opportunities). Ivy's work is simple but effective. It seems to be just a simplification of the 7 P's model by abandoning some of the P's (e.g. Place) and breaking others down e.g. Product is now Programme and Premiums, but it allows focus on the specifics of higher education and could encourage a common approach to applying the marketing mix in HE. It is also worth noting that whilst Ivy's work was concerned with just MBA students in South African Universities, the University of Chester runs an MBA course targeted at international students.

Despite there being a consensus in much of the literature that HE is a service, this was not the belief of Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) who criticised the fact that authors identified HE as a service sector business simply because they wanted it to be and it was more straightforward to pigeon hole it this way. They argue HE is a public sector service, which it is, but it differs from other public services in that its services have to be sold rather than its policy or its decisions, as in the case of a local authority for example. However it must be recognised that it may be difficult to apply standard service marketing principles that a private sector business would use.

An example of one of the problems with HE marketing is the definition of 'customers'. Maringe (2005) highlights the dangers of treating students like customers of any other service, as they have contributions to make to the education process. This view was echoed by Eagle and Brennan (2007), who argue that Universities should focus on serving students needs and that adopting a 'customer is always right' approach could be harmful and could lead to pressure to lower academic standards, for example. Ivy (2008) suggests that Employers could be the customers, students the raw materials and graduates the product, though ultimately rejects this view as it is the students who pay for the service. Naude & Ivy (1999) noted that students were more 'consumers' than 'customers' as there is no long term repeat business relationship with students. This makes applying marketing techniques difficult as retention of customers is a key marketing objective. It may be suggested that students could return to undertake postgraduate study, but the numbers doing this is marginal.

### **2.1.2 International marketing**

Whilst there is a lot of literature concerned with higher education marketing is fairly general, a large proportion of it is associated with the particular issue of recruiting international students.

Mazzarol (1998) found that the factor which influenced international student recruitment was 'image and resources' over different international marketing methods that institutions may employ. This clearly indicates that older established Universities have the advantage, but institutions from the same country but without the prestige can share some of this quality 'brand'. Although the paper is ten years old, it was a large research project which looked at 315 institutions across the globe. As no study of a similar size has been undertaken since, it retains its relevance.

The importance of this 'national brand' was echoed by several authors (e.g. Gray et al 2003) who found that quality provision was the most important factor influencing international students' choice. The reason they leave their home at great expense is the belief they can get a better higher education than at home. For example, Davey (2005) notes in the case of China (who provide a significant proportion of the UK International student population) their home Universities do not have degree awarding powers, so an international degree is 'worth' more on the Chinese job market. As it is such a large commitment, students will take time to research the quality of an institution which they are able to do via the Internet (Gray et al 2003) which gives them access to league tables and other data on UK institutions. Russell (2005) also emphasises the importance of quality, however the author also believes that Universities have to find their own position in the market. This suggests that 'national brand' will only get an organisation so far, and because potential students can find information easily, institutions should not market themselves alongside the better institutions in this market.

Ross et al (2007) presented different reasons to Mazzarol for an organisation having more international students. They found that there was a simple correlation between having a larger marketing department and constantly reviewed marketing strategies and having a higher number of international students. This implies that institutions are empowered to recruit as many international students as they are able to divert time and resource to. However it must be noted that there is a key weakness in applying this

research as it was only concerned with Australian and New Zealand Universities where the 'national brand' may not be as strong as the UK and USA.

Another positive factor on recruitment levels is having a physical presence in target markets. Mazzarol (1998) found that offshore teaching programmes (perhaps in coalition with local providers) helped market penetration. Gray et al (2003) stressed the importance of prospective students having somebody to talk to about the course and institution. This could be a local agent, a permanent presence (like the offshore teaching programme) or by attendance at British Council exhibitions,

Most of the qualitative literature surrounding this topic is concerned with the organisations viewpoint, however the research of Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) was based on surveying the students themselves, although only a small sample of 62 students was used. This supported the view of quality being the biggest factor influencing recruitment, however the research posed the question to the students as to how Universities can recruit more international students. The number one response was that fees should be reduced followed by increasing the number of scholarships (which is in effect the same thing). This could have been the fact that students had just made their payments and it was fresh in their minds and had they responded after graduation say, they might have responded differently. However it shows that international students seek to study in the UK because it will be worth it in the end, rather than being able to afford it because they come from a wealthy background.

Using previous literature, Cubillo et al (2006) attempted to develop a model of factors affecting the 'purchase intention' of international students: Personal reasons, country image, city image, institution image and evaluation of the programme of study. There are aspects of this model that can be viewed as marketing factors and support the work of previous authors – country image agrees with the notion of the 'national brand' (Mazzarol 1998, Gray et al 2003) institution image concurs with Mazzarol's (1998) view and evaluation of the programme of study ties in with the work of Ivy (2008). The personal reasons factor at first glance seems both obvious and somewhat unusual as the 'purchase intention' is ultimately a personal reason that can be influenced by other factors. However it can also be argued that it is the most important factor and institutions may be able to explore these reasons with students to be able to tailor their marketing and even programme design. These reasons could be discussed when the prospective student is enquiring about the institution or course by email or telephone.

Another unusual factor is city image. Whilst the reputation of the country and the institution are well recognised factors, this geographical location of the University is ignored. It can be implied from this that Universities in cities have a better chance of recruiting students than those that are in towns or maybe occupy an out of town campus. It must be noted that although this model is useful it was devised from a literature review and field research would need to be undertaken to test its validity.

## **2.2 International student satisfaction**

When student satisfaction is measured (e.g. by the National Student Survey) it is not simply the academic side, but all aspects of students life which are collectively known as the 'student experience'. This is measured after the student has attended University as the things that make them choose a place to study are not the reasons that effect their satisfaction when they attend. For example it is interesting to note that despite facilities playing an important part in attracting the students (Price et al 2003) the core product of teaching and learning has the most impact on student satisfaction after they have enrolled (Douglas et al 2006). All the factors that affect home student satisfaction will also impact on international students, but there will also be areas where their satisfaction will depend on different factors, or where the institution has to pay particular attention.

### **2.2.1 Tuition fees**

EU students who study in English HEI's have their fees subsidised by the UK government. In 2006 full time EU students started paying 'top up' fees of £3,000. The HEI would get a similar amount from the UK government. International students receive no such subsidy from the government, so they may be harder to satisfy because of the higher tuition fees they pay. Russell (2005) says that fees should reflect market position, and this is interesting when viewed alongside Binsardi and Ekwulugo's (2003) findings that more international students may be recruited from lower fees. This may suggest that there may be dissatisfaction with the institution quality in relation to the fees paid rather than the fees themselves and that institutions' are not pricing themselves correctly.

However the response to the 2004 white paper on higher education shows that HEI's are unlikely to set their own fees independently of other institutions. From 2006 HEI's could increase their fees up to £3,000, and there was a lot of speculation as to what

extent this would create a differentiated market, but almost all institutions increased their fees to £3,000. One reason for this is that HEI's believed that setting a lower price would lead to an image of low quality.

A UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCOSA 2004) found that international students' satisfaction levels (which were generally high) did reduce when asked if they thought their course was value for money. This seems to validate the viewpoint of the above authors. However it is hard to gauge how much of the respondents view is influenced by the fact that they are in the same class as UK students who paid a lot less. It is safe to presume that International Students are generally unaware of the subsidy from the UK government. It is also worth noting that this survey pre dates top up fees by two years, so the fee differential will be a lot less from 2006.

Interestingly the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) also presented a view on tuition fees in a 2007 paper. They estimated that international students contribute £1.6 billion in living costs alone to the UK economy, furthermore after graduation international graduates who stay in this country contribute a net fiscal benefit of £100 million to the UK economy. This is the amount these graduates contribute in tax over and above the extra government spending they require. This lead the authors to a seemingly logical conclusion – international students should pay less tuition fees and they even went as far as to suggest that tuition fees should be free for international students.

However it seems unlikely that this policy would be successful if applied in practice for a number of reasons. The UK economy would be losing £1.5 billion of fees which would need to be generated from other means. If, for example, the number of international students were to double (thus filling this fees gap with living cost expenditure) this would require more infrastructure particularly in Universities which would require an increase in government spending. Therefore the number of international students would probably have to be triple or more, and it is highly unlikely the potential market for UK education is that great. Furthermore, we know the UK is one of the world leaders in education because of quality (e.g. Russell 2005), and a no fee system could damage this reputation. The example of Germany having a no fee system cited by HEPI is not a particularly good one as Germany is not a key competitor in the international student market, and thus it cannot be said to have worked. Also the

world leader in this market, the USA has higher fees than the UK. An international student will pay far more for a postgraduate degree at Harvard than they would at, say Oxford or Cambridge.

### **2.2.2 Integration**

Integration with UK students and adapting to a different culture is also an issue for international students. This is a particular issue for undergraduate students as they have no experience of studying away from their families previously as those students who embark on postgraduate studies overseas (Wang & Shan 2007). UKCOSA (2004) found that student satisfaction is likely to be higher for those students who have UK friends. However, Russell (2005) notes that international students have found UK students to be unwelcoming. This view was supported by Huang (2008), where the majority of respondents found UK students hard to get to know. Perhaps more significant is the fact that the students surveyed believed that the University was not making efforts to integrate international students. The author (as well as others such as Davey 2005) found that integration into western culture was one of the reasons that students came to the UK to study, so this suggests a key failure on the part of institutions who were not making enough effort in this area. However it must be noted that the same study found that international students tended not to join student societies so this limited opportunities for integration.

Much of the literature identifies language barriers as one of the major factors affecting integration. Sliwa and Grandy (2006) found that international students tended to stay in groups with other international students and did not speak English in these groups, consequently this had a negative impact on the students' English language skills. The desire to improve English is often cited (e.g. Davey 2005) as a reason for studying in the UK versus other overseas Universities as it is the 'home' of the English language which is seen as the language of international business and science. Sliwa and Grandy (2006) found that even after studying in the UK for 3 years international students' English had not improved as expected. Many Universities' attempts to help students with their language problems by providing language classes, but often these are poorly attended and half of the students found them unhelpful (UKCOSA 2004). Although their study was concerned with a small number of Chinese students studying in Australia, Wang and Shan (2007) found that language tests designed to ensure minimum English language proficiency levels were not robust enough to ensure that the

student could communicate effectively in their academic work. It is safe to assume that this applies to students coming to the UK as well, and that language requirements may be set at lower levels in order to ensure it is not a barrier to the students coming to the UK to study. Of course it may also be presumed that students will improve their language when they study in the UK (indeed it is a reason many students study overseas), so it would be wrong to make requirements too rigorous.

The issue of integration can also have an effect on the health of international students. Yeh and Inose (2003) studied the factors that most contributed towards stress when moving to a new country to study. Although their work was done on a North American University, the sample of 359 was of reasonable size and much of the findings seem to apply to the UK due to similarity in culture and language. They found that language difficulties were the main factor both from the point of view of social interaction but also academically, where students found academic writing frustrating. Cultural differences between students were also identified as a key contributor to stress. European students were less stressed than counterparts from Africa or Asia and though there may be similar language difficulties, the authors identified the individualistic culture of America and Europe would be at odds to the collectivist culture of the other continents. This could mean that students from different cultures have different expectations from relationships and that they would find them ultimately unfulfilling as a result. The final factor identified by the authors was lack of social support system, and that international students found leaving their families behind hard. Of course this is a situation that many students will have to face (though home students' families will be closer), so is perhaps not as pertinent as the other two factors, however the difficulties identified in creating new relationships mean that new support networks are not established.

As part of the government measures to attract more international students, the law was changed to allow them to work up to 16 hours per week whilst they are studying and allow their spouses to work too (Findlay & Stam 2006). However UKCOSA (2004) found that students found it hard to get work as there seemed to be reluctance on the part of local employers to employ people from overseas. UKCOSA (2004) suggests that this is partly because of discrimination and partly because employers believe students need a national insurance (NI) number before they start work. In fact the NI number is issued after they get a job. By making the decision to allow students coming from overseas to work, this may be a factor on which students base their decision to

come and study in this country. Indeed many international students may be relying on part time work to fund their studies, and if they are unable to undertake such work it will have a negative impact on their student experience.

### **2.2.3 Learning and teaching**

The quality of teaching and learning is clearly going to be a key driver in international student satisfaction given that we know a quality education is the reason international students choose to study in the UK, but there may be other issues around learning and teaching which affects their satisfaction levels. Russell (2005) identified that because international students make their choice on perceived quality, they will therefore be less likely to understand should this quality fail, than UK students.

A key issue affecting the learning and teaching experience of students from different cultures is that these cultures have learning styles which are not catered for in the delivery of the course. In almost all cases the course design will be centred on UK students. For example, students from Asia tended to have a learning style which focuses on the text book and lecturer as knowledge givers from which the students must learn. For these students contributing in class discussions can be unfamiliar and daunting. The UK style is far more open, with students encouraged to participate, learn by doing and to question accepted knowledge (Douglas et al 2006, Sliwa and Grandy 2006, Russell 2005). UK students will be used to learning this way throughout their time at school so will be expecting a University education to provide even more opportunities to learn in this style. Also assessment in the UK will often be by assignment and group work whereas students used to a different educational style will be more used to assessment by examination (Wang & Shan 2007). Whilst lecturers will try and accommodate international students as far as possible, there is a belief that they have chosen to study in the UK for a reason, and so must conform to UK education, and that academic standards cannot be compromised (Sliwa and Grandy 2006). A further consequence of different learning experiences is plagiarism. Wang and Shan (2007) noted that Chinese postgraduate students are not subject to the same academic conventions (i.e. referencing) in their undergraduate studies that they will be subject to in their studies in Australia. It must be noted however that much of this empirical research was done on a small sample of international students. Each study was done on just a single institution, and those institutions were smaller ones outside of large UK cities. It would be misleading to apply to all institutions especially where there are greater

numbers of international students and the institution may have a better understanding of delivering to students with different expectations of teaching style.

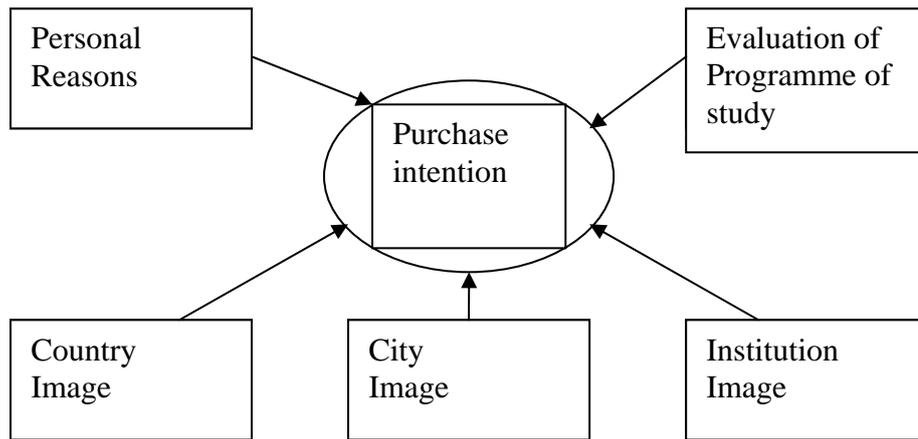
As well as adapting to different learning styles in the lecture theatre, students will have to develop other study skills such as using the University library. Baron and Strout-Dapaz (2001) studied the presence of formal library skills training which may aid international students in this challenge. Although their work involved Universities in the USA, data was collected from 123 institutions and this large sample enhances the validity of their findings. They found that larger institutions were more likely to have these programs, but they found no relationship between a large international student population and the existence of such programs. This suggests that library instruction programs are not specifically designed for international students but are for all new students. Therefore, these sessions may suffer from the same issues regarding a students learning style. It is also interesting to note that although the study found new library systems were an issue, they were not as problematic as the language and cultural challenges identified previously.

The UKCOSA Survey (2004) highlighted the need for cultural awareness in institutions and did note that although many institutions provided this, it was not systematically provided to all new lecturers. This means that tutors will have to pick it up from experience and thus make mistakes, or else enlist ad hoc assistance from colleagues who may also not have been provided with training thus potentially spreading bad practice.

### **2.3 Summary**

The literature review sought to identify the main themes in international student marketing and satisfaction.

The literature identified many factors influenced marketing, such as the quality of an institution's reputation and brand as well as marketing efforts made via overseas visits or having some sort of physical presence in the target market. A theoretical model of how international students made their 'purchase intention' was identified by Cubillo et al (2006) which brought these themes into 5 categories. This model will be used in chapter 5 to analyse the findings about international student marketing at the University of Chester.



(Cubillo et al 2006)

International student satisfaction was influenced by how good they felt the course was given the price (tuition fees) they had paid and how high that price was. The other major factors were integration socially with their fellow students, which tended to be restricted to students from their home country and coping with UK learning and teaching methods. This often differed greatly from the education they are used to and placed a burden of academic support on the University.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter seeks to initially explore the research philosophy of the researcher. This in turn informs the possible research methods that may be used, and these are aligned with the aims of the research question. After these have been devised, the actual research design of how the data collection took place will be outlined, together with ethical considerations.

### **3.2 Research philosophy**

The philosophical stance taken will have a key influence over the methodology as not only will it have to match the style of the researcher but will inform the choice and development of the research instrument. Therefore it must also suit the needs of the research question to ensure that the methodology is fit for purpose.

At one extreme of the philosophical spectrum is the positivist viewpoint. This is a traditional viewpoint and the positivist believes that everything can be known and proved (Fisher 2007). This philosophy relies on the testing of hypotheses and believes that only if something can be observed can it lead to credible data. The data that is collected is quantitative and as such large samples are required (Saunders et al 2007). As an accountant by trade, the researcher is naturally drawn to a positivist stance but this philosophy does not fit in with my research question. Clearly trying to understand the success of international student recruitment and student satisfaction is not an exact science and this philosophy does not lend itself well to the question I am trying to answer. Sobh & Perry (2006) note that positivism is not suited to researching areas of human behaviour such as marketing. As such is more suited to scientific research, and not a social science context.

At the other end of the spectrum, the interpretivist believes that the world is complex and cannot be fully understood and rationalised into general rules and theories. Indeed actions and beliefs depend on our interpretation of them (Saunders et al 2007). This view is probably too much at the extreme to fit with what I am trying to research. The philosophy does not support hard facts and theories (Fisher 2007) and relies on qualitative rather than quantitative data (Saunders et al 2007). I intend to gather some quantitative data in order rationalise the views of international students on what

attracted them to the University and their satisfaction levels once they have experienced life at the institution.

Therefore I need to adopt a philosophy that lies somewhere between these two extreme viewpoints. The philosophy that more represents my stance is that of a realist. Although this is quite similar to a positivist view and indeed is often viewed as the same as the positivist philosophy it is not as rigid in the belief that all things can be known. It does seek to test hypotheses and prove relationships it recognises there will be unknown knowledge. Therefore it does not seek to predict with certainty that things will happen as a more scientific or positivist viewpoint would do (Fisher 2007). Interestingly Sobh & Perry (2006) state that a realist approach suits qualitative research, whereas Fisher (2007) argues that like positivism realist research is usually quantitative.

A development of the realist approach is critical realism. Under this philosophy there is a belief that there exists a level of reality which is not readily accessible (Fisher 2007). Saunders et al (2007) state that critical realism identifies that our sense can deceive us and that the reality that we perceive depends on our viewpoints. This would seem to be closer to an interpretivist philosophy than a positivist one. In practical terms it suggests that in any research undertaken the responses given may not be genuine and to get truthful responses will require honesty on the part of the respondents. This will be especially true if I am interviewing colleagues whose position may be guarded when speaking on the matter to someone they know.

Therefore the philosophy that suits both the researcher and the area of research undertaken is that of a critical realist. It suits the quantitative nature of realist research, which is sure to be central to the research as data is collected from international students and is the type of research I would be more comfortable with. Also it recognises issues that may exist from any qualitative data that may be collected. Therefore the research undertaken involved mixing both quantitative and qualitative data collection.

### **3.3 Research strategy**

#### Quantitative techniques

Research that is based on quantitative data collection makes an assumption that behaviour can be explained by facts (Amaratunga et al 2002). Therefore this technique is favoured in a positivist research design. As the researcher's philosophy is not a positivist one it may be expected that this technique would not form part of the research design. However the data collection techniques used must serve the needs of the study, and a key area of data that needs to be collected is the views of the international students that are studying at the University of Chester

In order to collect this information a common quantitative data collection tool will be used in the form of a questionnaire. This will allow the key themes from studies in the literature review to be tested on the international students at the University of Chester. These include the hypothesis that international fees are high and thus do not provide value for money, that the teaching style is different to that experienced in the students' country of origin and that there is not much integration with UK students.

The questionnaire has been selected as the most appropriate data collection method for several reasons. Face to face interviews or focus groups would provide useful opportunities for gathering data, but such methods may prove daunting for students and as such they may be unwilling to take part as such the response rate would be low. Also for those students who did take part, they may not feel as if they could be honest with their opinions. Furthermore, having gathered the information it could present a challenge in terms of analysing the data, but a key advantage of the questionnaire is that it allows for comparison (Amaratunga et al 2002) as data is collected using a consistent method across the sample.

#### Qualitative techniques

As the researcher has not adopted a positivist viewpoint, it is not appropriate to only rely solely on quantitative techniques. Quantitative techniques can be used to prove or disprove facts that the researcher has already identified as potential reasons for explaining behaviour. However if the researcher wants to be open to discovery of facts not previously considered then qualitative techniques should be used (Amaratunga et al

2002). The qualitative technique that will be used in this study will be interviews with colleagues at the University of Chester.

Fisher (2007) recommends open interviews where the respondents answers are not known where new ideas are expected to be generated (concurring with Amaratunga 2002). This is the form that the interviews with colleagues have taken. Their knowledge and experience of the subject means that issues relating to international students that have not been identified by the contemporary literature may be raised. In particular they will have insight into the University of Chester's relationship with international students.

However, whilst open interviews facilitate discovery of the unknown, the literature review has identified key areas relating to international marketing and student satisfaction. Therefore the researcher will be keen to explore these issues. This means that a semi structured form of interview will be required to steer respondents and to ensure that a response to the key issues is covered in the interview.

### Mixed methods

The researcher is satisfied that the two research methods suited the needs of the study, but there are concerns that the two techniques cannot be combined to produce coherent conclusions and recommendations. However Gummesson (2003) argues that there is no conflict between quantitative and qualitative research as the resulting data from both methods still need to be interpreted. Also the mixed method approach would seem to be a good fit for a critical realism perspective. Just using quantitative techniques would be a positivist approach and would not be practical due to the large sample that would be required. An open qualitative approach would fit with an interpretivist approach but by semi structuring the interviews and combining with quantitative techniques this mitigates to a certain extent the differing weaknesses in both methods (Amartunga et al 2002).

There are two key advantages in the application of these two methods that have previously been identified by Saunders et al (2007). Firstly different methods can be used for different purposes. As the research will involve obtaining information from colleagues and also from students the most appropriate method has been chosen for each sample. Colleagues will feel more comfortable with an interview and the researcher can take opportunities to explore issues that arise, whereas it is less daunting

for students to complete a questionnaire, not to mention a quicker process. The second advantage is that of triangulation. There is a fairly small sample size in terms of international students at the University of Chester, but the colleagues who will be interviewed will have experience of working with many international students. Therefore they will, for instance, have knowledge of what motivates them to study at the University of Chester, or to study elsewhere as well as what has helped their student experience and what problems they have encountered to hinder it.

### **3.4 Research design**

The colleagues who were chosen to be interviewed were chosen because of their particular involvement with international students at the University of Chester, or their role involves a particular issue identified in the literature or from the student questionnaires. The respondents identified and the reason for that they were interviewed was:

- Pro-Vice Chancellor (External affairs and corporate development)
  - o Senior management responsibility for marketing, including international marketing as well as the University's international strategy
- International Development Officer
  - o Responsible for international marketing
- International Student Support and Welfare Officer
  - o A key contact for students experiencing problems as well as practical living arrangements
- Senior lecturer – Business, Management and Strategy
  - o Programme leader for the International MBA, so involved pedagogically as well as international marketing.
- Director of Learning Support Services
  - o Head of department responsible for providing a range of learning support, including English language classes.

The researcher's colleagues were willing to be interviewed as part of this process but the researcher was wary of two potential problems. The first is the area of bias (Saunders et al 2007). The respondents have their own views of international marketing and student satisfaction and the role of these functions in the University, and the researcher expected these views to reflect negatively on the University as the

respondents may 'fight their corner' . For example the researcher expected the international development officer to have the view that the University does not undertake enough activities and the welfare officer that the institution does not care enough about the welfare of its international students. Another issue is that most of the respondents know the researcher who is a senior post holder in the University's finance office. Whilst this should not raise any general issues, there were concerns that when the discussion turns to financial aspects (e.g. tuition fees, funding for marketing activities or financial pressures on international students) that the response may not be a truthful one. This is because the researcher may be seen as a protagonist in any problems that the respondents perceive in these areas and either withhold their opinions or see it as an opportunity to make a point. To address this, it was explained that this work was separate from the researcher's role in the finance office. It is unlikely that this eradicated this bias, but seemed to help focus the interview as the respondents were mindful of it throughout.

Most of the respondents were keen to be interviewed and set aside time fairly quickly to meet with the researcher. They also provided any materials that they deemed relevant. Unfortunately the researcher was not able to arrange a meeting with the International Student Support and Welfare officer. Despite initially agreeing to a meeting, the respondent did not respond to a follow up request for a meeting. This had an impact on the researcher's ability to collect information on the welfare of students at the University and reliance had to be placed on the other respondents and responses from the questionnaires.

In order to analyse the findings of the qualitative data, the researcher sought to categorise and unitise the data (Saunders 2007) based on the responses. There was most categorisation between the International Development Officer and the Senior Lecturer as they were both involved with recruitment and to a lesser extent the Pro Vice Chancellor. The Head of Learning Support had a different focus in her job role so the data had different categories. The key categories outlined in chapter 4 were:

- International recruitment strategy
- The structure and resources of the international recruitment function
- The lack of an 'international community' at the institution
- The potential for growth in international student numbers

The University of Chester does not have a large international student population. In 2007-08 there were 168 full time international students versus 7,367 full time UK and EU students. As such the sample will be small so issues with respondents are even more acute than they would be if the population was larger. The initial plan for collecting this data was focused on delivering self administered questionnaires to international students and giving them a time frame for completion. However it is unlikely that the response rate would be good, and it is the researcher's view that the data would be not as reliable. Saunders et al suggest that in self administered questionnaires there is high levels of 'contamination' of the data as respondents would fill the questionnaires in together and their responses are more likely to be homogenous

In order to reduce this risk, the researcher decided not to distribute questionnaires to all international students but to concentrate on a smaller targeted sample with a good response rate. Therefore the researcher spoke with two lecturers in the University's business school (one of whom was also a subject for a semi structured interview) who agreed to take the questionnaires to a class with a high proportion of international students and asked the students to complete the questionnaires during the class. The responses were then be collected by the tutor at the end of the class and returned to the researcher. The result was that 23 responses were collected out of a potential of 25 questionnaires issued.

### Method of Analysis

Chapter 5 contains the analysis of the findings outlined in chapter 4. The two key research aims (international marketing and international student experience) are analysed there as the other two aims, the literature review and recommendations, are met in chapters 2 and 6 respectively.

The marketing research aim is analysed using the Cubillo et al (2006) model identified in chapter 2 as the researcher believed this provides a useful framework for bringing together the various strands of the students' purchase intention. For the international student experience aim there is not a broad model under which the various strands can be brought together, so the findings were analysed using the headings identified in chapter 2.

### **3.5 Ethical considerations**

Express consent was sought from the interviewees prior to the interview by email. This email requested the interview, explained the dissertation topic and also explained why the researcher wanted to interview them. This was to ensure the interviewee knew what the results of the interview would be used for. Students were asked to fill in the questionnaires in class by the tutor who explained to them its purpose.

The anonymity of participants in both data collection methods has been maintained. No information on names was collected on the questionnaire and the findings of the semi structured interviews refer to the job title of the participants and not their names. It may be argued that referring to the job title strips away a layer of anonymity, but the researcher feels this is vital to give context to the responses.

Confidentiality was maintained by ensuring the data was used for no other purpose than this study. After the study was completed the data was destroyed.

### **3.6 Summary**

The researcher conducted the research within the University of Chester, using a sample of both staff and students. Mixed methods were used to suit the needs of each of the different samples, with interviews conducted with staff, and a questionnaire was distributed to 25 students, of which 23 were received. The findings of the research are contained in chapter 4.

## **4 Summary of findings**

Sections 4.1 and 4.2 provide details of the findings of the research undertaken. The first section details the issues discussed in the semi structured interviews with colleagues, and section 4.2 the data collected in the questionnaires to students. The researcher has made every effort to ensure the data is simply presented in this section, and all conclusions or implications of these findings are discussed in context in chapter 5.

### **4.1 Colleague interviews**

#### **Pro Vice-Chancellor (External Affairs and Corporate Development)**

The Pro Vice-chancellor (PVC) for external affairs and corporate development is the member of the senior management team with strategic responsibility for international marketing. He informed me that there is no formally approved international strategy on an institutional level, but that an emergent strategy had developed at a departmental level. This local strategy seemed to be as a result of personal interest of lecturers, who have either dealt with certain markets with some success previously and they are keen to continue to exploit these markets, or have contacts in the country that they feel can be used to market their individual subject areas.

Another issue that appears to affect the strategic direction of international marketing is the organisational structure below the PVC. Traditionally at the University, international marketing has been the responsibility of the Director of Marketing, recruitment and Admissions, a structure which should align all the institutions marketing effort. However in 2008 a Director of International marketing was sought in order to take control of the Universities marketing in this area, however no appointment was possible and no efforts to subsequently fill the post have been made. The aim of this appointment seemed to be to create an international marketing department that was more specialist as it required a different marketing approach than that of the general marketing department. It is also likely that the Director of Marketing was unable to spend a great deal of time on international marketing given the very small proportion of students that it yields. As no appointment has been made their seems to be a middle management void, with the Director of Marketing taking no responsibility for the area leaving the PVC to take operational responsibility for the area. Clearly this is undesirable as he would not have the time or the specific specialism to do this effectively.

When questioned about the strategic direction that international marketing should take, the point was made that international student recruitment is risky and the University should not try and increase student numbers so much in order that there was over reliance on this income. Institutions of a similar size have around 2-3 times the number of international students and matching this was a realistic target. Therefore this implies the University is playing catch up with its peers and all that can be hoped to be achieved is that the University gets its fair share of students. The PVC seemed to favour a niche marketing approach (which already exists in a rather informal way), selling a small number of specifically developed products (or existing ones if appropriate) to markets that would seem to have an appetite for those courses. The delivery method would also be a factor with teaching taking place in the UK, overseas or even by distance being options.

Maintaining high satisfaction of international students was beyond the remit of the PVC though he recognised the positive impact on future recruitment high satisfaction levels may have. However, he was aware of mistakes that have been made in the past e.g. putting international students in the same accommodation blocks, hence ‘ghettoising’ them. It was clear that the University had not undertaken at any point an exercise to identify the needs of international students and has simply tried to treat them the same way as UK students and has dealt with any issues retrospectively.

### **International development officer**

Interestingly the International Development Officer (IDO) presented the researcher with a copy of the International Strategy despite the PVC stating that the University did not really have one. The document was a very thorough and well thought out but seemed to be a stand alone document and not integrated with other University strategy documents, or imbedded in University processes. The emergent strategy identified by the PVC was in evidence as the IDO identified that the University had courses with a good reputation, and these corresponded to the areas where there was an interest in recruiting international students from the academic staff.

The role of the IDO appeared to be a very broad one and including the administration of international recruitment e.g. overseeing admissions, as well as being the only marketing professional involved with international recruitment and therefore being at the ‘front line’ of attracting students by attending British Council Exhibitions overseas.

The IDO stressed it was important for the institution to attend these overseas exhibitions as the University of Chester did not have an international reputation sufficient to rely on direct applications, and they gave the opportunity to speak to potential students, their parents as well as agents who help overseas students find UK education places. This relationship, once established, would continue throughout the application process as it was felt that only by building up this relationship could a student feel comfortable with their choice to study in Chester. This seemed to be something that the IDO enjoyed, but clearly was placing an administrative burden dealing with individual students over a period of time.

From a student experience perspective, the IDO highlighted accommodation issues that were touched on by the PVC. The accommodation allocations for the current academic year had large proportions of international students in certain halls of residence (depending on accommodation style choice), which many of them may find too expensive. Although self catering rooms are competitively priced with the local market, because University accommodation is always full, the finance assistant responsible for accommodation invoicing confirmed that some students have been allocated full catered rooms which are not cost effective and may not provide the right food. This pressure on accommodation also means that the University has trouble accepting late applicants because there are no rooms available, but this comes as a result of the manager responsible for allocating rooms being under pressure to ensure accommodation is always full so won't want the risk of keeping rooms empty that may not be filled.

Another key area highlighted was that of support for students particularly in the area of academic support. Many students arrive from overseas without many of the skills that would be taken for granted for students arriving from the British education system. Although the University does have a learning support section, the support in the faculties is inadequate at times. The IDO highlighted the first year of the International MBA when around 30 students attended a faculty that would have only dealt with a small number in the past.

In realising the potential of the University, it was not surprising that the IDO had many suggestions, but very few of them were in areas that could be influenced by the international office. These included product development as mentioned by the PVC in which new courses were developed to attract overseas students. However the development suggested was to current programs which had the most number of

international students (health related and business) to provide more choice, but no mention was made of expanding to other faculties. Another suggestion was changing the fee structure with a scholarship scheme. This seemed a reasonable idea, as reducing the headline fee may signal poorer quality, but a scholarship would enable the net fee paid to reduce as well as give prestige to those students in receipt of a scholarship. However the IDO believed scholarships could be offered to everyone on a course, or from a certain country and it's difficult to imagine the scholarship maintaining its prestige in such circumstances.

Finally, the IDO believes that the international office is under resourced from a staffing perspective. It was felt that another marketing professional who could share overseas trips, would make new markets more accessible. Presumably this would be the Director of International Marketing who was not appointed. Also there are currently two part time staff (equalling one full time member of staff) who were responsible for administering applications, and the IDO believed that this should be increased to a quota of 4 increasing the administrative staff by 3. The cost implications of this would seem to be prohibitive but could be supported should numbers increase significantly.

### **Senior Lecturer**

The Senior Lecturer (SL) interviewed was the original programme leader for the International MBA, and whilst the SL had passed that responsibility on, he was still active in the recruitment of international students. This involved travelling with the IDO to British Council exhibitions overseas. The role of face to face contact and relationship building mentioned by the IDO was reiterated and it was pointed out that the MBA course receives very few direct applications. The SL also believed the University had no overarching international strategy and supported the view of the PVC that certain subjects recruited more international students because of the interest of lecturers in that subject. Indeed the SL used himself as an example as he had been successful in recruiting numbers from India for the MBA course because that was his country of origin.

The view of the IDO with regards to fees and scholarships were echoed by the SL who believed the 'price point' (being fee less scholarship) was the most important factor when a student chooses their UK University. These scholarships could be awarded by market or subject but the University was not advanced enough in its international

student recruitment to have the expertise to have any merit scholarships. The SL also believed that the University could recruit numbers in line with the expectations of the PVC, provided it keeps up with its marketing efforts and seeks to develop new courses. In the second year of the international MBA, some students were offered an MSc in management if they were unsuccessful at gaining a place on the MBA giving the University more options to attract students. However it must be noted that the International MBA was the same course that was offered to part time UK students, it was just delivered full time and marketed at international students. It was the view of the SL that the University must seek to develop specific courses to market to international students and not just rely on its existing portfolio.

In assessing the welfare needs of international students, the SL focused on the lack of 'international student community' at the institution. He agreed there were issues regarding student support and accommodation but a lack of an international student society, or a common room meant ways of creating this community that other institutions used were not available at the University of Chester, and this had to have a negative impact on the student experience particularly if the students had friends at another institution where such things existed. Also these things were considered important as international students serve a purpose as part of an academic community, and as such are an integral part of any University, they do not just provide a useful source of income.

### **Director of Learning Support Services**

The Director of Learning Support Services (DLSS) oversees all aspects of study skills at the institution, and there is no separate provision for international students. Indeed the DLSS was intrigued by the definition on international student as a student from inside the EU is just as likely to have the same issues as those from outside. Similarly a student from the UK may struggle with a particular study skill.

The key area of support that would be taken advantage of by international student is the use of English for academic purposes. There has been a recent appointment of an academic skills tutor in this area, prior to this there was no specialist training in academic English at the institution. Even now the tutor spends only half her time seeing students in this area and there is no provision for this service at the institutions Warrington campus or at the multiple sites where nurse training is provided. However

as well as providing study skills sessions for students the tutor can assess the language skills of students and can arrange specialist tuition if it's required. The University provides free (at point of use) language classes through a third party provider and this is a well used service, but occasionally more basic skills are required and the student is directed to local further education colleges. This happens if the student's language skills are at the minimum level required for entry into the University. Occasionally students have been found to have been accepted on to courses whilst falling below the minimum standard. The DLSS maintains the view that these students were enrolled to boost course numbers but this would backfire as they would require a lot of resource and were unlikely to complete the course.

The DLSS also highlighted several other areas that were used by international students as a result of the cultural change of coming to the UK to study. As well as language study skills there are several other areas that are used by international students. These include basic assumptions taken for granted with home students such as taking responsibility to submit assignments on time, but also more serious ones like plagiarism. The DLSS believes international students are used to quoting books without referencing, and this is the biggest problem faced by her department after language issues. Problems with using IT used to be more common place but this is becoming less of an issue, and some international students are ahead of home students in their IT skills.

On the subject of academic tutors response to the study needs of international students the DLSS believes that tutors are more sensitive to the study skills that students require generally, and are used to referring students to the Learning Support department when a need arises. However these are in areas that would affect all students (e.g. referencing, plagiarism), but not specifically in the areas that prove difficult for international students. Indeed the DLSS held the view that tutors do not make allowances for language issues when they are delivering lectures, assuming a certain level of language skills from their students.

## **4.2 Findings from questionnaires**

### **4.2.1 About the respondents**

All of the 23 respondents to the questionnaires were postgraduate students, the overwhelming majority of whom were mature students. This is to be expected as students would only undertake postgraduate study once they had completed an undergraduate degree.

Age	Number of respondents
18-21	1
22-25	6
25-30	13
Over 30	2
Not answered	1

For almost all of the students this was their first taste of higher education in the UK, with 20 attending a higher education in their home country prior to coming to study on their current course. Only 2 had experience of attending a higher education in the UK.

### **4.2.2 Reasons for studying at the University of Chester**

Reason	Number of times selected
To study in the UK	13
Reputation of the University	3
Reputation of the course	7
Tuition fee	17
City of Chester	3
Cost of living	2
Recommendation	1
Personal reasons	4

The 4<sup>th</sup> question of the questionnaire explored the reasons for the student choosing to study at the University of Chester. Respondents were allowed to select as many reasons as they wished. It can be seen from the table above that the main reasons that students come to the University of Chester is because of the tuition fee, which must be seen as low for 17 of the 23 respondents to cite it as a reason for making their choice. The next

most common answer is to study in the UK which seems to reconcile with the earlier response where most students had not studied in the UK, and this could be seen as their opportunity to do so. The reputation of the course seems to be another factor though it is unclear whether this is the reputation of the course at the University of Chester or the reputation of the MBA qualification generally. Indeed it is more likely to be the latter with the MBA being the most common form of postgraduate study undertaken in the world.

The next question asked about tuition fees, with 13 respondents saying the fee was the amount they had planned to pay and 10 respondents saying it was less than they planned to pay. No respondents said they paid more than they expected. Following this question, the students were asked about the value of the course, with 22 respondents saying that the course represented reasonable or good value for money.

#### **4.2.3 Cost of living**

The cost of living in Chester is:	Number of respondents
As expected	7
More than expected	11
Less than expected	4
Don't know	1

Living expenses in Chester are clearly above the expectations of international students, although the fact that many of them are studying in the UK for the first time this could mean the cost of the UK generally rather than being specific to Chester. This response also contrasts with the response to fee levels, which means any financial difficulties that students experience won't be as a consequence of the relatively high tuition fees (compared with UK student fee).

To deal with the higher than expected cost of living students usually try and find some sort of part time work. Of the 23 respondents, 12 already had part time jobs with a further 7 citing they had difficulty finding work. This means that only 4 of the 23 respondents were not seeking work for study or other reasons.

#### 4.2.4 Integration

Most of my friends are:	Number of respondents
UK students	1
Students from my home country	6
International students from other countries	11
Mixture of UK/International students	7

Although two of the respondents made two choices, this did not affect the overall meaning of the responses. Most of the students have a circle of friends made up from the community of international students exclusively, though 7 out of the 23 had UK student friends as well, only a single respondent said that most of their friends are home students. It may be worth adding the qualifier that half of the respondents were from the full time MBA course which is made up entirely of international students meaning opportunities to mix with UK students are reduced.

#### 4.2.5 Coping with problems

Which of the following have caused difficulty during your time at the University of Chester?	Number of responses
English Language (Social Use)	3
English Language (academic use)	3
Adapting to UK study methods (e.g. lectures, reading lists, independent study)	8
Financial concerns	8
Food	3
Meeting religious needs	4
Feeling homesick	7
Keeping in touch with family and friends	6
Making new friends	3
Relationship with University of Chester staff especially lecturers	2

Students were asked to select any of the above issues that caused them difficulties during the studies. This meant that students selected several of the issues, and as such it

is not as clearly defined as to which issues are the biggest, but the responses do show some of the bigger issues even if this is not transparent as some of the other responses. It may be no surprise given earlier responses (around cost of living and part time jobs) that financial concerns rank highly. Indeed these concerns are on a par with adapting to UK study needs which again is no surprise given that most students are studying in the UK for the first time. Of the other difficulties, the related issues of feeling homesick and keeping in touch with family and friends are significant, but perhaps these are unavoidable consequences of going to study in a foreign country for a year at a time. The other difficulties are less significant but it is surprising that language issues are not more significant, especially for academic use.

#### 4.2.6 University services and facilities

The final parts of the questionnaire focussed on how the students have found the services and facilities that the University offers to students. The following details the responses to University services,

	Very Useful	Useful	Not Useful	Have not used
Induction	10	7	1	5
study skills	5	13	1	4
English Language classes		7		16
Advice services	5	7		11
Student Union		5	5	13
Accommodation office		5	6	12
Careers office	2	8	6	7

The University induction where vital basic information would have been imparted was found to be very useful by nearly half the respondents, and only not useful by one who attended it. Also it can be seen that those services offered by learning support services fared well, with study skills being used by 19 students, only one of which found them not to be useful. Advice services and English language classes were also found to be useful by all who used them, though a large proportion of students had not used this service. The more generic services offered by the University were found to be less useful, with at least half of the students who used the accommodation office and student

union not finding them useful. The careers office had a mixed response, but was the 3<sup>rd</sup> most used service after induction and study skills, suggesting students were using it to look for part time work whilst they were studying.

The facilities offered by the University did not score well with the international students questioned. Indeed for each facility most students had not used them.

	Better than Expected	As Expected	Worse than Expected	Have not used
Accommodation		3	5	15
Sports Facilities		6	2	15
Clubs and Societies		5	2	16
Catering outlets	1	7	2	13

Only the catering outlets managed to achieve one response of better than expected but the best that each facility achieved in the main was simply 'as expected'. The accommodation was thought to be worse than expected for the majority of respondents who used it, and when this is viewed alongside the accommodation office not being useful, it does not seem that the University is providing a good accommodation service to international students.

## **5 Conclusions and implications**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter seeks to analyse the findings in Chapter 4 within the context of the literature discussed in Chapter 2. Each research aim is analysed in section 5.3 and overall conclusions are noted in section 5.4. The methodology is evaluated in section 5.2 and the limitations of the study outlined in section 5.5. Finally some opportunities for further research into this area are highlighted in section 5.6.

### **5.2 Critical evaluation of adopted methodology**

The adopted methodology focussed on a mixed method approach in order to get the best results from the different categories of respondents. It is the researcher's opinion that these worked really well. The staff members that were interviewed were senior and experienced professionals and they were very enthusiastic to take part. They were also willing to discuss all issues frankly.

The biggest issue with the interview process was that the international welfare officer was not able to be interviewed as that would have been an important perspective. The interviews could also be improved by interviewing members of departments that did not have a large international student population, who may have identified barriers to international recruitment. The researcher interviewed participants who had a large amount of interaction with international students rather than those who didn't. This view could have provided more balance to the findings.

In seeking the opinions of the second group of participants, the students themselves, the questionnaires did a reasonable job. The researcher was happy with the response rate and would seek to issue them in a similar way if doing the study again. The main weakness of this, however, was that not all groups of international students were represented in the sample. Data from undergraduate international students for example may have proved a useful distinction, even though they are fewer in number.

The main weakness with the questionnaire was the fact that data collected was limited to the questions asked within it, and the multiple choice answers. There are several answers which would have benefitted from further discussion to find out the key reasons behind the response. Therefore holding focus groups may have provided better

opportunities to do this. However as a focus group would have to be made up a smaller number of participants together with them requiring more participant time than a questionnaire, then this would have to be balanced with the likelihood that the number of respondents would be a lot less than the number of questionnaires received.

### **5.3 Analysis/conclusions about each research aim**

The research aim relating to the literature review is answered within chapter 2 and conclusions and recommendations are contained within this section. Therefore this section will relate to the other two aims.

#### **To investigate the current international student marketing undertaken by the University of Chester**

The analysis and conclusions follow Cubillo et al's (2006) model for the purchase intention of international students. This model identified 5 effects on this purchase intention

- Personal reasons

It is clear that anyone entering higher education does so for personal reasons, be they improving employment prospects or for other reasons, however the study attempts to treat the fact that the student is entering higher education overseas as a given and identify whether personal reasons play a part in the student choosing to study in Chester. These personal reasons could be a recommendation from a previous student or the fact that they have family here, maybe even a local community that has a culture they will feel at home in.

From the findings it would appear that very few students have personal reasons for attending the University of Chester. Only 4 out of the 23 respondents cited personal reasons for attending the institution, and as there was no ranking of the reason (such as most important reason etc) it can be concluded that personal reasons are not a factor for most students choosing to study in Chester and they make their choice based on other factors. This is supported by the interview with the International Development Officer who stressed the importance of attending overseas exhibitions to speak to prospective students as few direct applications are received.

- Country image

The importance of 'national brand' was identified in the literature (e.g. Gray et al 2003) as one of the most important reasons that students come from overseas to study in the UK, with it's higher education having a good reputation for quality. This was found to be true in the results of the questionnaire, with over half of the respondents selecting 'to study in the UK' as a reason for coming to Chester, but only 3 of the 23 respondents selected 'reputation of the University' as a reason. The implication of this is that a key selling point for the University is that it is in the UK, and whilst it still has to compete with other institutions in the UK, it does give it some competitive advantage globally.

In addition the Pro Vice Chancellor believed that the University can increase its international student numbers to the level of similar sized institutions. This again indicates reliance on 'brand UK'. Institutions would be similar sized by having similar amounts of the UK home student market, thus to try and recruit the same amount of international students means that the University would seek to get it's 'fair share' of the overseas students deciding to study in the UK, rather than attempt to take students from the American or Australian market. This is further reinforced by the reliance on British Council exhibitions for which the attendees would be potential students of UK institutions.

- City image

There is little evidence that students will be keen to study at the University because of the city of Chester. Only 3 respondents (13%) stated the city as a one of the reasons they made their choice. Indeed Cubillo et al (2006) includes cost of living as an underlying factor in the city image effect and 11 students cited that this was more than they expected. In addition there seems to be little in the way of overseas culture in Chester as a way of helping students settle into the area. Therefore it would make little sense to use the city in the University's marketing efforts to overseas students.

- Institution image

The reputation of the University ranks alongside the city when students were asked for their reasons for choosing the University of Chester with only 3 stating it as a factor. This is not surprising as the University of Chester is not a Russell group institution, lies outside the top 50 UK universities and therefore does not have a high profile globally.

However Mazzarol (1998) stated that image and resources are key advantages in attracting international students, so without an internationally recognised image it may rely on its resources. However the University does not have access to large resources such as an annuity to provide it with regular income or have the advantage of large consultancy and research projects. It relies on funds received for its teaching work in the form of funding council grants and tuition fees. Therefore it will not have these resources which Mazzarol believes are important.

Therefore it would not be unreasonable to question how the University manages to market itself to prospective students with these clear disadvantages. After all, the low number of direct applications seems to support this low reputation finding. However the key for the University seems to be face to face contact with potential students at British Council exhibitions and local agents. Gray et al (2003) stressed the importance of an overseas presence, and the findings seem to concur with this view as both the Senior Lecturer and the International Development officer that were interviewed believed that the University could market itself better when face to face with prospective students.

- Evaluation of programme of study

The programme of study seems to fair better than the institution and the city in attracting students to the University. Of the 23 respondents, 7 of them cited the reputation of the course as a reason for their institution choice. The International Development Officer also offered the view that some courses have a good reputation. As a lot of the international development activity seems to be as a result of a lecturers' interest in increasing recruitment in that area this would seem to explain why their courses would enjoy a good reputation. However this also implies that they are outnumbered by lecturers with little interest in increasing international students, so overall the University reputation is not enhanced.

The tuition fee charged will also play a key part in evaluating potential programmes. Binsardi and Ekwulugo (2003) found that lower tuition fees would encourage more international students and this view was echoed by both the Senior Lecturer and International Development Officer in this study who both advocated scholarships (basically fee discounts) as a potential marketing tool. However 17 of the 23 respondents to the questionnaire cited tuition fee as a reason they chose to study at

Chester, more than any other reason. Therefore, it can be concluded that the fees charged at the University of Chester are already competitive enough and does not provide scope for further fee reductions to increase recruitment. This is supported by the finding that of the 23 respondents, 11 found the cost of living higher than expected, and 8 stated they had financial concerns. This means that the students do not come from wealthy backgrounds and would be expected to be sensitive to high fees, yet they found the University of Chester fees reasonable. It must also be noted that Binsardi and Ekwulugo found that quality was the number one reason students come to the UK to study, and this perception would surely be compromised by reducing fees that students see as reasonable.

Therefore it can be seen that the programmes of study are the key strength when the University of Chester is marketing its courses to international students. The Pro Vice Chancellor and Senior Lecturer both believed that in order to recruit more students the institution needed to develop courses specifically targeted at the overseas market, instead of using existing programmes. The findings would seem to support this view as this area seems to be the best current source of advantage for the University and course can be developed reasonably cheaply, given the right focus from academic departments.

### **To assess the international student experience at the University of Chester**

Conclusions about the international student experience will be analysed using the themes drawn out in Chapter 2.

#### **- Tuition Fees**

As seen in the programme of study evaluation above, tuition fees did not cause a problem for the majority of respondents. Indeed they were the most popular reason for choosing to study at Chester, followed by the opportunity to study in the UK. All the respondents were postgraduate students (a one year course) and only 2 of the 23 had studied in the UK before. Therefore a lot of the students have chosen to study at Chester as a way of getting a UK qualification, to go with their undergraduate degree from their home country. They were able to do it at lower cost than if they had gone to a more expensive University or done a three year course.

In contrast, the cost of living seems to be an issue for students. Only 4 of the 23 respondents found cost of living to be less than they expected. In order to help fund the cost of living 12 of the respondents had found part time work, and only 7 had said they wanted work but had difficulty finding it. This is higher than expected in light of the UKCOSA study in 2004 who found that finding part time work was an issue for international students. This may be due to the fact that there is more information available on work and employers, or students and University advisors are aware of what kind of work can be done and changes in regulations (e.g. the availability of national insurance numbers). It does cause concern however that there are financial difficulties amongst the students despite the fact they have managed to find work. This means there is a large gap in terms the students' preparation for life in Chester, especially if they have not studied in the UK before.

#### - Integration

The view from the literature (Russell, 2005 and Huang, 2008) is that international students do not mix well with UK students. The findings of this study seem to agree with this, as 17 of the respondents said most of their friends were international students and only 1 respondent chose UK students as making up most of their friends. Given the relatively low numbers of international students, this would seem to compound the situation, however as students tend to be on courses with a high percentage of international students this may not be surprising. This also highlights the lack of an international community as mentioned by the senior lecturer.

The University facilities did not seem to be well used by the respondents, and these may have provided an opportunity for integration outside of their course. The majority did not use the University sports facilities (15 of 23) and were not members of any of the Student Union clubs and societies. It is unclear whether the University made enough efforts to encourage students to participate in such activities (which seems unlikely given the lack of an international society), or whether it was simply personal choice on the part of the students. Both these views were found to be true in the findings of Huang (2008). Another clue which points to reasons on both parts could be the fact that 13 students had never used the student union, but of the 10 that did, half of them found it not to be useful.

## - Learning and Teaching

The study found that most students had a good learning and teaching experience at the University of Chester. Only 1 of the 23 student respondents did not find the course to be at least reasonable value for money and this suggests that the academic departments are meeting expectations of students. However it must be noted that the respondents were on a course with a high percentage of international students and as such will be studying with a faculty that is prepared for their needs. The International Development Officer identified that academic support was poor at times within faculties but this could be a generalisation, especially with most faculties having relatively few students from overseas. Given the satisfaction of the respondents this would indicate support from the faculty they studied in was good.

The learning support offered outside the faculty seems to be in it's infancy in terms of providing a service tailored at international students, as evidenced by recent appointment of English language tutor. However there seems to be real commitment by the Director of Learning Support Services to provide as good a service as possible which can be seen in the fact that she wished the service offered to be the same on all University sites. The respondents to the questionnaire seemed to be satisfied with the study support offered, with just a single student from the 19 who had used the service found it not to be useful. The fact they were well used is also an endorsement however the English language classes were less well used with only 7 of 23 students using them, all of whom found them to be useful. It should of course be noted that there are several study skills classes to cover a range of skills, but language classes are only attended by those who need them after a referral has been made. Therefore no judgement on their quality can be made as a result of most respondents having not attended them.

### **5.4 Overall conclusions**

There is a feeling amongst the staff who were interviewed that the University is playing catch up with other institutions in the area of international student recruitment. It is also felt that this is an important area and the University must achieve similar recruitment levels to its peers, but there does not seem to be an appetite to exceed these levels. This however may exist at departmental level where it is felt there is a particular niche for a course. The lack of a coherent strategy which the entire institution adheres to supports the view that the institution is lagging behind, and it's hard to imagine that the

University could achieve the recruitment levels it wishes to without one. This lack of strategy is further evidenced by the situation where there is no Director of International Marketing in place leaving the department without direction and over reliant on a member of the University's senior management team who is, understandably, unable to devote the activity adequate time.

In addition, as all recruitment is driven by academic departments, this is not matched by the institution as a whole with issues about, for example, accommodation and an international community being raised in both the interviews and the questionnaires. There is a danger that a strategy will focus on courses and how academic departments can recruit students but will need to look at wider student satisfaction issues, as most support departments are focused on supporting home students. The exception to this is Learning Support Services who seem alert to their responsibilities but seem somewhat constrained by resources in trying to improve their services. Of course it is difficult to increase resources without extra students but these issues can be addressed by a strategy where resourcing and expectations can both be outlined.

### **5.5 Limitations of the study**

The study used a reasonable sample from within the University of Chester which enabled the researcher to be able to place sufficient reliance on its findings. However the key limitation in that the study was only concerned with one organisation's viewpoint. It is not possible to make assumptions or generalise about choices made by international students attending other institutions or about the marketing or student support at these institutions. This would be the case with any research limited to one organisation, but is especially true in the case of international students, where they make up a larger proportion of the student population than at the University of Chester, so would make inter University comparisons hard.

### **5.6 Opportunities for further research**

Given the limitations of the study identified in 5.6 above, there is plenty of scope for further research into the research problem generally. Indeed the research topic has almost limitless possibilities with international student recruitment globally and it's relationship with economic migration being related research areas. However the appropriate research to follow this study would be to extend the methodology to other institutions within the UK to explore the opinions of the students as well the staff. In

addition a study of potential overseas students undergoing the selection process (e.g. at a British Council exhibition) would enable a contrast with students studying in the UK already and those embarking on the decision to see what expectations and decision making criteria are.

## 6 Recommendations

- Prepare international strategy.

The key recommendation from the study is that the University must develop an international strategy to co-ordinate the institution's approach to international student recruitment. This needs to be embedded across the institution by linking to the corporate plan. Each faculty or service department could then identify their own responsibilities in the strategy and link them to their own planning cycle as part of business planning. This would still allow for departments to market their niche courses but this will be within an overall strategy and will allow for proper allocation of time and resources as well as making the marketing more targeted with clear targets and expectation from each marketing activity (e.g. conference attendance).

- Develop courses that are targeted at specific markets.

This should form part of the overall strategy but is worth drawing out separately due to its importance. As identified in the study, the strength of the University lies in particular courses rather than the University itself. Therefore these should be developed further to meet the needs of target markets. It is important the University undertakes market research to understand what courses are in demand in certain markets and then decide if it can devise courses to meet these specific needs. This will help marketing efforts be more focused rather than a general approach.

- Make more effort to integrate students

With pockets of international students on a small number of courses it is important the university makes efforts to integrate them, both together (via an international society and an international common room) and with the rest of the student population. A lot of this may naturally fall to the Students Union who may consider staging specific international events or making international student liaison a specific part of its officers' remit.

- Provide info on cost of living

Whilst students seem to be quite comfortable with the tuition fees, a significant number had financial concerns during their studies. As most found the cost of living more than expected a way to address this is to provide student cost of living information before

they arrive. This could include rental information for University properties as well as landlords, and information on other key items of expenditure e.g. food shopping, transport, equipment costs. Some work could be undertaken with the current international student population as to what items they purchase most frequently and what financial information they wished they had before they started. It could be argued that by presenting cost of living information which shows it as higher than expected may put off students from coming to study in Chester. However it is clearly not in the interests of students to place them in unexpected financial difficulties once they arrive on the course.

## **6.1 Implementation plan**

Within 6 months:

- Prepare cost of living information for distribution to prospective international students.
- Establish international student society and plan program of events both as induction and ongoing activities.

Within 12 months:

- Prepare an international strategy in consultation with corporate plan and launch before the next planning cycle.

With 2 years:

- Research key international markets and develop a portfolio of specifically designed courses that can be marketed more effectively.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire issued to International Students

#### MBA Questionnaire - Richard Waddington

Thank you for agreeing to complete my questionnaire, it should take not longer than 5 minutes.

#### 1 Age

- |       |                          |         |                          |
|-------|--------------------------|---------|--------------------------|
| 18-21 | <input type="checkbox"/> | 25-30   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 22-25 | <input type="checkbox"/> | Over 30 | <input type="checkbox"/> |

#### 2 Are you a:

- |               |                          |
|---------------|--------------------------|
| Undergraduate | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Postgraduate  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

#### 3 Have you attended any other higher education institution?

- |                                  |                          |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| No                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes, in my home country          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes, overseas, but not in the UK | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Yes, in the UK                   | <input type="checkbox"/> |

#### 4 Reasons for studying at the University of Chester

*Please tick all that apply*

- |                                          |                          |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| To study in the UK                       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reputation of the University of Chester  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Reputation of the course                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Tuition fee                              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| The City of Chester                      | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Cost of living                           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Recommendation from former student       | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Personal reasons (e.g. family live here) | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other ( <i>please specify</i> ).....     |                          |

**5 The tuition fee is:**

- The amount I planned to pay
- More than the amount I planned to pay
- Less than the amount I planned to pay
- Don't Know

**6 Does you think course represents good value?**

- Reasonable value for money
- Good value for money
- Poor value for money
- Don't Know

**7 The cost of living in Chester is :**

- as I expected
- more than I expected
- less than I expected
- Don't Know

**8 Most of my friends are:**

- UK students
- Students from my home country
- International students from other countries
- Mixture of UK and international students
- Don't Know/Cannot say

**9 Which of the following have caused difficulty during your time at the University of Chester?**

*Please tick all that apply*

- English Language (social use)
- English Language (academic use)
- Adapting to UK study methods (e.g. lectures, reading lists, independent study)
- Financial concerns
- Food
- Meeting religious needs
- Feeling homesick
- Keeping in touch with family and friends
- Making new friends
- Relationship with University of Chester staff especially lecturers

What was your biggest concern before coming to the UK to study?

.....

What is your biggest concern now?

.....

**10 If you had a problem, who would you speak to:**

- Family
- Friends outside of the University
- Friends inside the University
- Tutor
- Advice services  
(Student Support & Guidance)

**11 Do you have any part time work**

- Yes
- No - I am too busy with my studies

No - I have had difficulty finding work

No - I didn't Know I could work

No - other

*please specify*.....

**12 How useful do you think the following support services have been at the University?**

*please tick one box per row*

	Very Useful	Useful	Not Useful	have not used
Induction	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
study skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
English Language classes	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Advice services (Student Support & Guidance)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Student Union	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accommodation office	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Careers office	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**13 How would you describe the following facilities at the University**

*please tick one box per row*

	Better than Expected	As Expected	Worse than Expected	have not used
Accommodation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sports Facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Clubs and Societies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Catering outlets	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>