Revenue-generating language programs at Canadian post-secondary institutions: Emerging themes from a documentation analysis

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Abstract: This presentation identifies emerging themes in study combining documentation analysis (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004) and interviews that examines policy statements, promotional materials and various institutional documents from selected English as a Second Language (ESL) programs one Canadian university. It looks at how and why ESL programs are perceived to be tools for revenue generation and some of the implications this has, both at the program and institutional levels. The philosophical, ethical and practical challenges of international marketing of educational programs that generate revenue are explored.

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Background and context

"The word 'marketing' used to be a negative concept to educators. Not anymore… School marketing has been transformed into an essential management function" (Vining, 2000). Although not all educators would agree with Vining's position, traditional models of education are giving way to hybrid models, incorporating business philosophy and practice. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, government funding cuts to public education at all levels led schools to seek new sources of funding (Marginson, 1987, 2002). Schools have been forced to seek programs that generate revenue, but at the same time do not distance them from their primary educational goals. These programs must be marketed and students need to be recruited to take them. From this perspective, the phenomenon of marketing in educational institutions has been critically examined by Vining (2000), Topor (1983; 1986; 1992), Sevier (1989; 1996) and others . However, no studies have yet been undertaken to examine the marketing of English as a Second Language (ESL) courses at the post-secondary level. Since ESL courses at universities are often required to generate revenue, they are the focus of the research reported here.

The fact that these unique problems have not been studied to date is because the problem itself is rather new, in the scope of the history of education. Gardner (1994) points out that, "at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there were some for whom

the idea of education for all was anathema… In the maintenance of social order and national prosperity, popular ignorance was preferable to popular learning. This was a view for which support receded with every passing year of the new century." As time passes, our understanding of what education is, or should be, evolves (Geiger, 1988; Marginson, 1985). Each year marketing is becoming more and more a part of educational administration, though it has only been in the past twenty years that language programs at post-secondary institutions in Canada have shifted from having a community focus to being cost recovery to needing to generate revenue (Eaton, 2006).

This paper reports on the progress to date of this study. It teases out some of the prominent themes that have emerged from the data collected and offers some initial points for discussion. Its conclusions are preliminary and may change as the data are further analyzed and processed.

Objective

This study examines how language programs are used to generate revenue at post-secondary institutions and how these programs are marketed internationally. The goals are to examine critically:

i) how and why language programs are used to generate revenue at post-secondary institutions;

ii) how programs compete in the global market place; and;

iii) the ethical and practical challenges of revenue-generating ESL programs.

Research Objectives

Three specific research questions inform the research presented here:

1) What do publicly available policy and marketing documents tell us about how language programs are (or ought to be) marketed at select Canadian post-secondary institutions?

2) Do publicly available documents reveal any challenges faced by language program administrators? If so, what are they?

3) What are the philosophical and policy implications of the contents of the documents?

Methodology

The project was delimited to Canadian post-secondary institutions that have English as a Second Language Programs that generate revenue either for their own department or for the university in general.

The original intention was to conduct a collective case study (Herriott & Firestone, 1983; Stake, 2005, 2006; Yin, 1981) at selected Canadian universities. ESL programs at three Canadian universities (one each from the western, central and eastern regions, namely the University of Calgary, the University of Toronto and Saint Mary's University) were initially invited to participate in the study. Ultimately, Saint Mary's University was somewhat reluctant to participate in the study and the University of Toronto refused to answer any communications (e-mail, phone or letter) about the study. As such, it was decided to focus solely on the University of Calgary (U of C).

Due to the fact that the U of C has multiple ESL programs designed to generate revenue each of which operates in a different unit on campus, the three of the main

programs were chosen: the ESL program in Continuing Education; the Centre for Language Assessment and Learning, under the direction of the Vice-Provost International and English for Academic Purposes, housed in the Faculty of Education. There are other, less formal ESL initiatives that have existed from time to time at the U of C, but these three constitute the major revenue-generating programs. Because each program is housed in a different unit on campus, with different directors and unique staffing and operational models, the programs were deemed different enough that each could be considered its own case, and that they could be compared and contrasted in a collective case study.

The study began as a documentary analysis (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004) of policy statements, promotional materials and various institutional documents. After the documentation was collected, it was determined that insufficient data was available to conduct an in-depth analysis that would address the research questions, particularly if a case study methodology was used, which calls for an in-depth examination of the data. We wanted rich, "thick" data that would help me to address the research questions. Therefore, it was decided to supplement the study with interviews conducted with program managers, all of whom agreed to an interview.

Theoretical Framework

At the beginning of the study, critical theory was proposed as it would have allowed the research to focus on the internal and external politics of education, the social conditions and historical relations in which language education is positioned. Habermas' (1979; 1993) use of critical theory is relevant given his concern with discourse and power, which led to his development of a theory of communicative action, as well

Foucault's (1991) focus on the relationship between knowledge and power. In addition, the historical approach discussed by Tyson (1999) was proposed to frame and inform this study of marketing as the practical application of discourse as knowledge and power.

As the study has progressed, it became clear that this theoretical framework was not entirely appropriate, given that the documentation revealed little about notions such as power, nor the social or historical conditions in which these programs exist. As a result, an exploration of other theoretical frameworks began with a view to using a theory which lent itself well to business applications being used in public post-secondary language programs.

This drastic change in the study was driven by the data uncovered and a philosophical assumption that it is possible to find a socially responsible way to incorporate business and marketing practices into educational administration. Stake (2006) points out that researchers must be open to the idea of changing their perspectives and even their research questions as a study progresses, rather than steadfastly holding to preconceived notions of how one might want to conduct the study, which can "can distract researchers from recognizing new issues when they emerge" (2006, p. 13).

The quest for a theoretical framework that encompassed both education and business led to Appreciative Inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider & Whitney, ; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003). The appeal of this approach was that it has a history of being used both in not-for-profit and business organizations. It may have fit well at an earlier stage of the project, it is a methodology focused on interviews and since the interviews were already in process, it would have affected the data collection significantly to change the methodology at that point. Furthermore, the AI approach focuses more on

methodology than on theory and so, it was ultimately, a search for the theoretical underpinnings AI were sought.

This led to a constructivist approach (Lambert, 1998, 2005) which was determined to fit both the philosophical assumptions of the study and the data collected, as well as the researcher's field of study (educational leadership). Thus, the theoretical basis of the study was adjusted and this allowed the data to be analyzed within that framework.

Significance

The innovative aspect of the research is its focus on the marketing of language programs themselves, rather than educational programs as a whole (N. Foskett, 2002; N. H. Foskett, 1998; Maringe & Foskett, 2002). The findings will increase understanding of how language programs market themselves and generate revenue and how this affects institutional practices both locally and globally. This study is important as it explores how programs are marketed and reveals information about the people in charge of such programs. From this we can begin to explore the implications these findings may have for educational programs in the future.

To date, little work has been done on the problems and challenges faced by language program administrators in terms of marketing their programs (Eaton, 2002, 2006; Kaplan, 1997; Miller, 1997). This work will add a new voice to the existing dialogue on the topic of marketing of post-secondary institutions; one that focuses on the topic of marketing language programs, particularly in a Canadian context.

Emerging themes

As this is a work in progress, this paper can only present preliminary findings. Nevertheless, the data reveal a number of emerging themes with regards to these programs. The themes can be divided into two distinct and related category; those that pertain to the language programs and how they are marketed and those that relate to the program managers themselves. We will look at each category separately.

Emerging themes related to language programs

1) International scope

These programs are, by their very nature, international in scope. They welcome, and rely on, students from a variety of non-English speaking countries. Although each of the programs had contracts or relationships with organizations or schools in particular countries, none of the programs focused exclusively on students from any one region. There was a general awareness of the need to diversify and not rely too heavily on any one market for students.

The need to understand international markets and business practices was a common theme in all the interviews. All three programs produced marketing materials in a variety of languages and sent staff (either management or recruitment staff) abroad to meet with prospective clients, negotiate agreements or attend trade fairs.

2) Perceived lack of understanding from other departments on campus

All three program managers expressed frustration to varying degrees about how their programs, and their own role as managers of a revenue-generating language program, did not "fit in" with other programs on campus, either because they were not part of a degree program or because they were so much more international in scope, or

both. Each of the program managers was also keenly aware of how their program differed from the other English language programs on campus, emphasizing that the differences between them were significant.

3) Focus on quality and standards

All three program managers emphasized the quality of their programs and a preoccupation with ensuring that standards for their program were high. Though each program had different ways of controlling quality (placement exams, evaluations, minimum qualifications for teachers, or having their courses approved by a faculty council, for example) all three program managers noted that quality was a significant aspect of their programs.

Emerging themes related to program managers

1) International experience

The program managers all had experience living or working abroad. Without being prompted to do so, all three gave examples from their experiences living and working abroad in their interviews. They all expressed an awareness of the need for cultural sensitivity in business and administrative operations, as well as in their marketing.

2) Higher education, training and experience

All three of the program managers held a minimum of a Master's degree. One had a doctorate. All of the program managers had experience teaching language and began their careers as language teachers. Of the three, only one had taken courses in business

and marketing. All three expressed that the majority of their knowledge of how to market their program had come through on-the-job experience.

3) Personal awareness and experience as being important

All three of the managers interviewed commented on their own personal experience living and working abroad (as opposed to academic or professional training) as contributing significantly to their understanding of multicultural contexts and how to deal with international clients.

Discussion

The commonalities among the programs were their focus on international markets and students and the need to be culturally sensitive in business dealings and marketing practices.

That these programs were different from other programs on campus is not a new notion. ESL programs differ from specializations or majors in degree programs in that their purpose is different. "Traditional programs do not regard training that leads to eventual success as their primary mission; they teach the content of their disciplines and consider the acquisition of that content to be the end of education in those disciplines, not, like language training, merely a preliminary means to that end" (Eskey, 1997).

The purpose of an ESL program is to acquire language skills, but the acquisition of *knowledge*, rather than *skills*, may be a more apt way to describe most academic programs. To the best of my knowledge, no other study has yet acquired data to support this assertion. The interviews conducted for this study provide qualitative data that confirm what Eskey expressed in his work over a decade ago.

In addition to these differences, it cannot be overlooked that ESL programs are populated by international students, many of whom must deal with the various aspects of culture shock, as they face life in a new country at the same time as they undertake what is likely their first experience in a post-secondary environment. (For a definition of culture shock see Storti, 1990).

The personal challenges that students must overcome to have a successful ESL experience are numerous. Sion and Romano (2002) ask us to consider that "there are aspects of the program that are not measurable: for example, how much more tolerant, understanding, and less ethnocentric are these young people after the course of study than they were before". Certainly tolerance and understanding are part of a successful study abroad experience, but such qualitative results are both difficult to monitor and equally difficult to use as criteria for success in programs for which one purpose is to generate revenue.

The common denominators among the program managers were also significant, particularly with regards to a general lack of formal training for their management responsibilities. Nolan (2001) cites empirical research by Hussein that examined future language program administrators, summarizing that "In a survey of 100 graduate programs …. future teachers of ESL were seen to have no administrative training (78%), while the majority of program directors (62%) declared that they had been poorly prepared to administer an ESL program (Hussein, 1995)". Lack of training for the position was a concern as far back as almost two decades and continues to be a concern today.

More specifically, lack of formal training in the area of international marketing and marketing in general were identified as themes. The Australian report by Quay Connection (2000) observes that in terms of marketing "there are … great examples of good practice and people with strong skills but there isn't a systematic way to learn from these or to use skilled services to mentor

others". Although the report was published almost a decade ago, the data from the current study reveals that lack of training is still an issue for language program managers. Although one of the people interviewed had taken classes in business and marketing, these courses were not designed for those working in the field of education and there was little opportunity to connect with others marketing educational programs internationally.

While the individual program managers had a personal backgrounds rich in international experience and extensive academic education, none of them expressed satisfaction with the training they had received to market their programs before they took on their managerial positions, citing professional experience as the main method for their acquisition of knowledge.

Conclusions

At this point in the study it would be imprudent to draw final conclusions about the study. Thus far the data point to a continued need for professional development for program managers, as well as a deepening of understanding across the campus in general as to why these programs are significant and how they might be valued more deeply by others in the academic community.

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