
The marketing of public FET colleges in South Africa: issues for policy and practice

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Abstract

This paper considers the rising trend of introducing marketing practices into public education through the lens of South African further education and training colleges. It provides an review of the international literature on 'for-profit' and 'non-profit' marketing of products and services. It examines some of the key aspects that need to be considered in an education and training context for an effective, appropriate and relevant marketing and communication function to be established. In particular, the potential and limitations of concepts used in both the for-profit and non-profit contexts are re-examined together with some important insights into the existing literature on marketing in a post-school higher and further education context. It illustrates the conceptual complexity of using 'for-profit' notions in a 'non-profit' education context in light of the public purpose mandate of public sector institutions charged with a national development responsibility. It offers not only an alternative conceptual basis for establishment of marketing and communication functions in the South African Further Education and Training College context, but provides a discussion of its use in this context. It suggests that this discussion is of wider salience for those concerned with public education in South Africa.

Introduction

Marketing has long been seen as an essential part of the activities of private businesses specialising in the sale of products (e.g. Kotler, 1967). Over time, marketing theory and practice has been adapted to apply to the different context of selling services (e.g. Berry, 1980; Grönroos, 1980) and thence to the non-profit sector (e.g. Kotler and Andreasen, 1987; Drucker, 1990); and to education (e.g. Berry and Allen, 1977; Kotler and Fox, 1985).

Although writing about marketing education stretches back at least 30 years in the USA, with its long tradition of elite private higher education institutions, it is far more recently that marketing has take on an important role in public education in other countries. This is clearly linked to the neoliberal turn at the beginning of the 1980s and the related emergence of the new public management. Thus, in the UK, it was the 1992 *Further and Higher Education Act* that marked the rise of public educational marketing in that country as

colleges and universities were encouraged to become more responsive to multiple markets and stakeholders. In South Africa, the rise of marketised solutions to state provision can be seen as emerging in the latter years of Apartheid. In our area of focus, the public FET colleges, however, it is only in the current decade that marketing, and the wider range of new management approaches, has emerged as part of the transformation of provision after the 1998 *Further Education and Training Act* and the *New Institutional Landscape* of 2001.

The emergence of a new college system prompted the Human Sciences Research Council to embark upon a range of studies of the process of transformation. One of these studies, funded by Danida, looked at the piloting of marketing and communication units in four colleges – also with Danida funding. It is this project, which we led, that prompted us to reflect further on the implications of a marketing orientation for South African public FET colleges (HSRC, 2006; McGrath and Akoojee, 2007).

This research found that there was a clear rationale for developing marketing units in colleges. This rationale was two-fold: to assist in the building of institutions that are better attuned to satisfying the needs of various internal and external stakeholders; and to help create a better brand image for both individual institutions and the college system as whole (McGrath and Akoojee, 2007). The case study colleges were more focused on external than internal stakeholders. It was clear that the role of staff as marketers had been given little thought and that there was no real sense of the importance of linking marketing with quality assurance, curriculum development and staff development. Generally, understandings of marketing in educational contexts were weak. Nonetheless, it seemed likely that marketing was going to become increasingly important for colleges.

Many of the issues with marketing reflected the broader challenges faced by South African FET colleges at the time of fieldwork. Colleges had been merged between 2001 and 2003 out of formerly racially-separate technical colleges. These mergers were inherently complex but the new institutions faced a new set of challenges regarding their purpose. The old assumption that technical colleges should provide theory training for apprentices had effectively disappeared in the 1980s as apprenticeship in South Africa collapsed. The emergence of a new skills development system under the Department of Labour made it difficult for the colleges to reposition themselves back in this position of occupational preparation as there were tensions between the Departments of Education and Labour over control of the

new approach to skills. This had the effect of constraining colleges' relationships with employers, sector education and training authorities and the new learnership programmes developed by the Department of Labour. Until some time after the project ended, staffing remained a provincial function and additional staff (such as marketers) typically had to be employed on worse pay and conditions than provincially-appointed staff due to funding limitations within colleges (McGrath, 2004 and 2008).

In this paper, we will not seek to get into the same detailed analysis of the early practice of marketing in South African FET colleges. Rather, we will review key elements of the international marketing literature and how it has been applied to non-profit settings and to public education, drawing particularly on the recent literature on the marketing of further education colleges in Britain. This review is intended to bring this literature to the attention of South African educationalists and to stimulate a debate about the appropriate role of marketing in public education settings, using the FET college sector as our particular focus.

Marketing goods and services for profit

Marketing in the corporate sector is driven by the commercial imperative to increase profitability by retaining, and expanding, a consumer market. Such growth is considered to be fundamental to enterprise survival and sustainability. While the *raison d'être* is profit, there is a need to gain competitive advantage and increasing market share by ensuring that existing customers (or clients) are satisfied. This is achieved by providing either a superior product or outstanding service and consequently ensuring the provision of better value.

Kotler (2005) provides the philosophical underpinnings of an organisation which adopts a marketing-oriented policy. He identifies a need for organisations to strategically penetrate the market by focusing on a specific market segment and constantly being aware of the changing needs of the customer. The 'know your customer' philosophy ensures responsiveness to the external environment of the organisation. The notion of understanding the post-millennium market as in a state of 'hyper-competition' is a particularly significant one as in the corporate ethos of staying 'ahead of the pack'. Marketing, therefore, ensures that enterprises display constant innovation and provide creative new approaches to selling products. Thus, notions of branding, competition and customer orientation are important areas for

consideration in the continued survival of an organisation in a corporate context.

It is generally agreed that marketing of a service is distinct from product-based marketing because of the very different nature of the output and circumstances that prevail for each. Services are clearly less tangible than goods and the often very personal nature of the services suggests a very different initial and ongoing nature of the client relationship. Where the product does have a high service component, there is substantial responsibility on the people who interface directly with the customer and consequently have a direct impact on the level of customer satisfaction (see, for example, Berry and Allen, 1977; Berry, 1980; Baker, 1991).

Grönroos (1980, 1983, 1991) suggests that where services are produced and consumed simultaneously and there is necessarily a substantial inter-personal interaction between buyer and seller, customers look for clues by which to evaluate service quality. In this context, the role of employees, as those responsible for service quality, assumes an added dimension of responsibility. Liao, Foreman and Sargeant (2001, p.256) refer to the notion of “customer consciousness” in quality service delivery and satisfaction, which reflects this responsibility. Kotler (1994) argues that there are four basic pillars of marketing in a service context: customer orientation, integrated effort, goal achievement and market focus. This last dimension requires that the entire organisation be focused on the marketing of the service to ensure organisational sustainability.

The importance of a marketing orientation is considered essential for organisational sustainability. Slater and Narver (1995) contend that:

A market orientation is valuable because it focuses the organisation on (1) continuously collecting information about the target – customers’ needs and competitors’ capabilities and (2) using this information to create continuously superior customer value (p.63).

This perspective implies that the development of a marketing orientation requires some concerted attention within an organisation. In a service context, a marketing orientation should permeate the whole organisation. A marketing strategy, therefore, cannot be an isolated marketing department function. The interaction of the whole organisation with the customer means that marketing as a function of the enterprise should permeate the whole organisation.

Marketing in a non-profit context

It is not at all surprising to find that the literature on marketing for the ‘not-for-profit’ sector appropriates conceptual categories used in the for-profit context. However, this appropriation has resulted in its sometimes unproblematic application into the provision of public services, sometimes strangely even in a context where the state is the only provider. In a telling critique of non-profit organisations that seeks to encourage them to become more responsive to their ‘markets’, Drucker (1990) notes that non-profit organisations have a duty towards their stakeholders to allocate scarce resources to results rather than to ‘squander’ them on being ‘righteous’. This notion of seeing non-profit organisations in profit terms has, however, been questioned. Liao, Foreman and Sargeant (2001, p.262) with reference to the term marketing orientation, contend that: “Given the history of the construct it would seem inappropriate to merely ‘transfer’ it from one sector to another”. In particular, the personal profit motive and the assumptions of corporate, personal and shareholder reward, which fundamentally underpin the actions of for-profit organisations, are not present in not-for-for profit organisations.

Instead, Liao, Foreman and Sargeant (2001) offer the notion of societal orientation, which highlights the social development objectives that need to be embraced and the multiple stakeholders that need to be accommodated.

It has also been suggested that the application of the term market to the not-for-profit sector is meaningless (Bennett and Sargeant, 2005; Liao, Foreman and Sargeant, 2001). While not-for-profit organisations operate in market environments for resource and service acquisition and allocation, these are often not true markets in the economic sense (Hansmann, 1980; Bennett and Sargeant, 2005). Indeed, as Hansmann (1980) notes, not-for-profit organisations typically exist as a response to particular forms of market failure. Furthermore, profit-seeking firms, it is argued, will only supply goods and services at the quantity and price that represent maximum social efficiency when consumers are able to:

- compare accurately between competing products and service;
- reach agreement with the firm on goods to be provided and the price to be paid; and
- determine whether the supplier complied with the terms of the agreement.

(Adapted from Hansmann, 1980)

This implies that if consumers are not in a position, for whatever reason, to exercise these considerations, profit-seeking firms will either lower quality or raise prices. In circumstances where organisations do not have the liberty to do either, which is typically the situation of not-for-profit organisations, using a marketing rationale would be counter intuitive (Liao, Foreman and Sargeant, 2001). The inability to raise prices and the negative impact of deteriorating quality will invariably contradict the terms of their very existence. It results in a breakdown of conventional market mechanisms and, thus, points to the inappropriateness of using conventional market strategies in a non-profit context.

Another distinctive feature of the non-profit sector that makes use of the term market orientation less appropriate is the distinction made between recipients and the source of funding and resources in the not-for-profit context (Bennett and Sargeant, 2005; Lovelock and Weinberg, 1990; Sargeant, 1999). In a for-profit context, clients or customers pay for and exact the service, either directly or indirectly. In a non-profit situation the funds almost always come from elsewhere, i.e. donors, government or social responsibility programmes of larger corporates. Whereas there is a clear-cut buyer-seller relationship and accountability mechanism with some regulatory mechanisms in place where disputes arise¹ in the for-profit context, the link between payment and receipt of a service, characteristic of market environments, is broken in the non-profit context. Thus, in a not-for-profit context, the service is often provided to a third party – the beneficiary. Thus, if the beneficiaries or recipients have not chosen the service in a free sense, there is an absence of a market, which renders the term market orientation inappropriate. In addition, the use of the term market orientation also assumes a form of exchange, which has little meaning for the not-for-profit sector (Foxall, 1989; Liao, Foreman and Sargeant, 2001). One suggestion is to replace ‘exchange’ with ‘matching’, as Foxall (1989) suggests. This is particularly useful in the case of state education provision, which is associated much less with market choice than it is of harmonising skills required in the market with individuals who have the potential to develop the targeted skills.

In the non-profit sector, the notion of a market orientation must infer an awareness of the service to a wider audience. In the national post-school public education context, the underpinning rationale for market awareness

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The use of ombudsmen in various private sectors is used as a case in point. In the insurance and private health industries for instance, the ombudsman regulates relations and ensures that clients are provided some protection from poor or ineffective service offering, to prevent the resort to litigation.

increasingly is the targeting of recipients who are most likely to benefit most from the service to ensure that the limited resource use is maximised.

Marketing in the for-profit sector is informed by a competitive and survivalist mindset, which, as described in the previous section, fits only one part of the equation in the not-for-profit sector. The two primary client groups to which not-for-profit organisations respond are agencies that fund their service activities, and those that consume the services provided. While it is necessary for not-for-profit organisations to ‘compete’ for financial and other resources from funders, when it comes to providing services, there should not be any shortage of demand. Excess demand removes competitive dynamics from non-profit service delivery. As Bruce (1994, p.259) contends, “Demand for non-profit goods and services are often so insatiable that to regard other non-profit organisations as direct competitors would be wholly inappropriate”.

The notion of collaboration is offered as an alternative to competition in not-for-profit environments (Kotler and Andreasen, 1987; Bryce, 1992). Kotler and Fox (1985), for instance, suggest that not-for-profit organisations should be able to identify suitable opportunities for collaboration with both public and private sector entities. Clearly collaboration provides an important conceptual alternative to the competitive and sometimes individualistic profit-based imperatives of private sector organisations.

Marketing and education

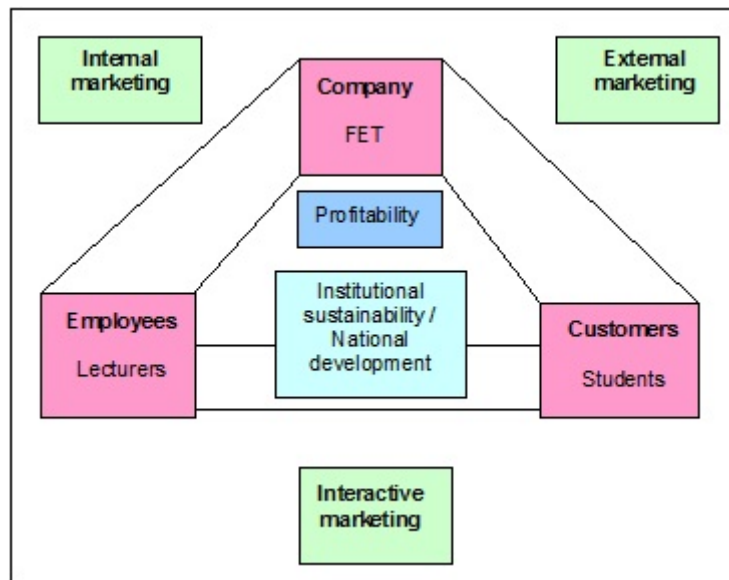
Key elements of service marketing in an education context need to consider trends in service marketing. Kotler’s service market triad (1994) is particularly useful in this respect. Reference is made to key marketing relationships in a service-marketing context which include, *inter alia*:

- the relationship between the customer and the company (external marketing)
- the relationship between customer and the employees (interactive marketing)
- the relationship between the company and the employees (internal marketing).

(Adapted from Kotler, 1994, p.70)

Figure 1 depicts the Kotler model adapted to the education context, which could be used as a starting point for understanding current practices.

Figure 1: Service marketing triad as adapted and applied in an education environment



(Adapted from Kotler 1994)

In applying this triad – originally describing a for-profit environment – to a state education context, the company becomes the institution, the customers become the students, the employees are represented as institutional personnel. In this model institutional sustainability and national development replaces profitability. While this figure inserts the stakeholders as understood in conventional marketing terms, it comes with a health warning which asserts that terms like company and customer are not unproblematic when applied in a not-for-profit state education provision context.

Using this Kotler model allows education institutions to situate their marketing practices as either external, internal or interactive. These are discussed below to understand the way in which they might impact on education and training.

External Marketing

Marketing measures in higher education have used product-marketing tools and consist of a combination of academic programmes, research outputs, staffing and the overall learning experiences of the students (Cope and

Delaney, 1991). Thus the terminology of competitive edge, market segmentation, and target markets has become an integral part of the higher education discourse in the current era (Sargeant, Foreman and Liao, 2002; Law and Van Schalkwyk, 2002).

External marketing in this perspective is understood primarily in terms of student recruitment. In a service context, where education is the product being 'sold', the emphasis on increasing enrolments is considered the only and critical indicator of market effectiveness. The objective of an external marketing drive is, therefore, directed at raising brand awareness of the service in a particular target market. Defining this target market and identifying strategies to reach this market represents the core function of marketing units, which are assessed in terms of the quantitative indicator of increased enrolments. These units concentrate on branding and maximising market awareness through a mix of print, electronic and other media interventions.

Internal marketing

Internal marketing points to the internal processes that lead to successful client transactions. The effective delivery of services, in a service marketing context, requires attention to the conditions under which the service is delivered. In this regard, the importance of staff buy-in is considered critical to complement the external marketing strategies employed in most institutional contexts. Attention to internal marketing enables staff to be convinced about their role in marketing (Gray 1991; Hartley 1999).

The notion of internal marketing, therefore, ensures that attention is paid to the role that employees play in the organisation. Lings (2004) contends that in an internal market orientation (IMO), ensuring that employees are satisfied with their work becomes particularly crucial. Ensuring that employee satisfaction is achieved by, *inter alia*, successful human resource practices designed to maximise appropriate conditions under which work is undertaken is likely to be the focus of attention in internal marketing. Satisfying the conditions for internal marketing is likely to result in increased employee motivation and offers the likelihood of retention. Reduced attrition is likely to ensure experienced quality service delivery and suggests the likelihood of a more motivated staff complement to ensure customer loyalty. Thus service managers are motivated to engender a strong employee and customer focus. A powerful IMO within the organisation, therefore, requires marketing managers to incorporate marketing practices into the human resources plan (Lings, 2004).

In an education context, the importance of ensuring that staff are adequately motivated to undertake the task which, in part, hinges on creating appropriate working conditions. As the front-line of the service delivery components, they represent the critical component at the coalface of the delivery of service.

Interactive marketing

Scandinavian researchers Grönroos (1994a and b) and Gummesson (1987) identify two essential marketing strategies in a service context: conventional and interactive marketing. Conventional marketing takes place primarily at the stage of creating customer interest in the service and is important in generating first sales, while interactive marketing takes place primarily during the consumption process and is an important component of generating repeat sales. The key feature of the interactive nature of the marketing is predicated on the active management of the buyer–seller relationship at every stage of the service delivery loop, from initial attraction, through delivery of the service and ensuring retention by providing conditions for repeat sales at another time.

Successful implementation of interactive marketing will therefore depend upon a high degree of cooperation between the external marketing component and the human resource functions within the organisation. As Brennan, Felekis and Goldring (2003, p.148) contend: “Where interactive marketing has been implemented, it is to be expected that marketing and human resource strategies will be substantially integrated”. It thus incorporates the internal marketing perspective.

For Kotler (1994), interactive marketing, which describes the relationship between customer and the employees, is a crucial ingredient for effective marketing, especially in a context where considerable attention has traditionally been paid on the external environment. Gummesson (1987) has identified certain key advantages that arise from an interactive approach. Firstly, the customer can become part of the production process. In the educational sector, this is where the contributions of and face-to-face interactions with a learning group or class are an important facet of the individual’s learning experience. Second, rather than being a separate activity, marketing is intertwined in the occupational roles of employees who fulfil other functions in the firm. Internal marketing becomes an important activity in its own right, so that all of the part-time marketers charged with the responsibility of achieving and maintaining customer satisfaction have the information they need. In this way, “efficient internal marketing becomes a prerequisite for efficient external marketing” (Gummesson, 1987 p.18).

Marketing in further education: lessons from Britain

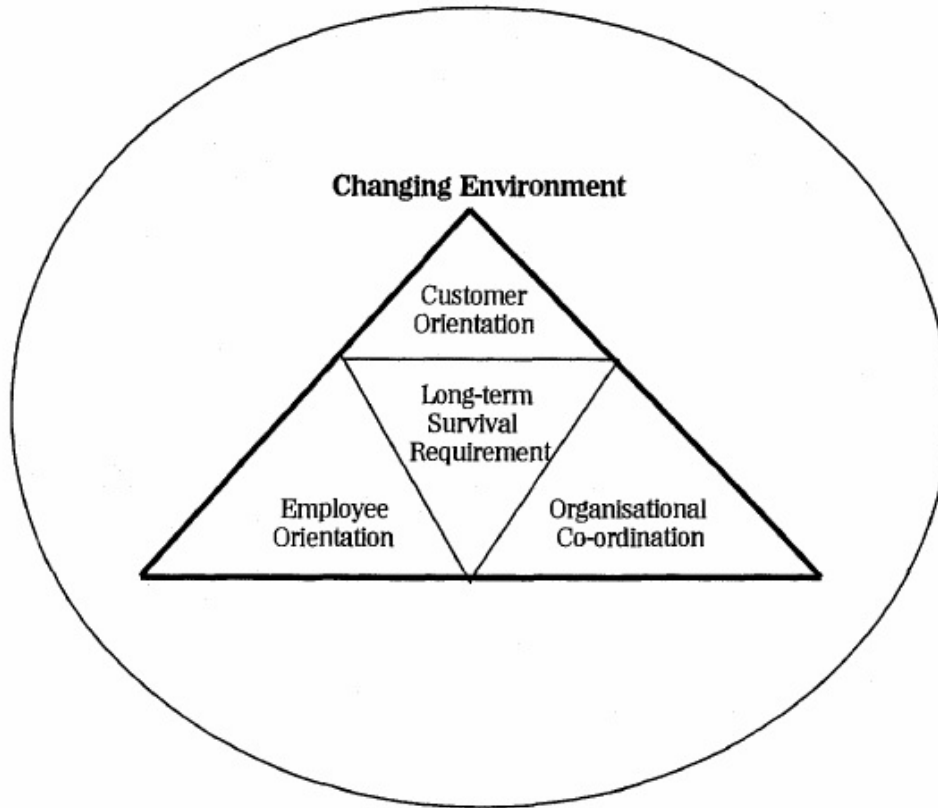
As mentioned earlier, marketing in education has been particularly active in the higher education sector, which has become aware of the need for marketing as a result of the considerable subsidisation by the state and the consequent re-thinking. The state resource cutbacks as a result of dwindling student numbers have become pressing giving rise to a competitive climate for student clientele. In some cases, the decrease in demand from the age group 18 to 22 has resulted in various measures to identify new market segments and expanding target markets to postgraduate and part-time segments (Law and Van Schalkwyk, 2002). More recently, this fiscal squeeze has been felt in the further education and training sector.

Siu and Wilson (1998) and Brennan, Felekis and Goldring (2003) have undertaken work in the marketing of the further education sector in Britain. These accounts have not been as heavily influenced by the for-profit product orientation associated with the higher education. Brennan, Felekis and Goldring (2003), for instance, refer to the importance of the integration of marketing and human resource strategies. For an educational organisation to ensure that it is responding to the marketing dynamic, they argue it is necessary to assess "...whether marketing and human resource strategies have been integrated with each other and have been integrated into a broader strategic thinking within FE colleges" (Brennan, Felekis and Goldring, 2003, p.144).

Other literature, also in reference to the British college context, has been concerned for reputation management (Bush, 1999; Hartley, 1999). It is concerned with the projection, respect and protection of the brand name. However, it also reflects strategic concerns to ensure that the existing 'customers' (learners, parents and businesses) are at least satisfied with, and are preferably positive about, the service they experience from the college.

Sui and Wilson (1998) have provided a framework for understanding the marketing function in the FE context in Britain, replicated in Figure 2 below. It serves as a useful model for thinking about marketing in South Africa.

Figure 2: The conceptual framework of marketing orientation in an FE context



Source: Siu and Wilson 1998, p.297

The replacement of the notion of profit with a survival requirement provides an important shift from the for-profit marketing perspective. In a context where state institutions are required to justify their very existence, ensuring that adequate student numbers justify cost of service cannot be underestimated, especially in a context where accountability mechanisms require adequate motivation for securing state resources. The model also stresses that an appropriate employee orientation and relevant organisational coordination are intrinsic to successful institutional marketing contexts.

The objective of long-term survival represents an important alternative to the profit motive used in the for-profit context. This decision criterion for implementing a marketing orientation in a public FE context enables institutions to establish the context for sustainability.

While the term marketing orientation was critiqued earlier in this paper as less than appropriate for use in the non-profit sector, the way in which the term is

used here suggests that it has moved away from its for-profit derivation. In terms of this understanding:

The aim of marketing orientation is to seek a dynamic balance among orienting to the demands of clients and employees, co-ordinating the infrastructure of an organisation, and coping with an unpredictable environment within resource limitations for long-term healthy survival (Siu and Wilson, 1998).

The importance of what the authors refer to as an employee orientation (cf. Gummesson, 1987; Liao, Foreman and Sargeant, 2001) suggests a vital criterion for ensuring that the organisational ideals permeate to the level at which the service is provided.

The literature above suggests that the conventional understanding of marketing as a process of using publicity mechanisms (i.e. an external marketing perspective) to attract custom needs to be reviewed. It is perhaps more effective to adopt a holistic approach, and to ensure that the marketing process is infused into every aspect of the organisation where some form of customer interaction takes place (Brennan, Felekis and Goldring, 2003).

It is assumed that most marketing of services takes place in direct interaction with the customer and attention to this aspect is the most effective way of retaining customers. In an education context, Black (2004) argues that the internal marketing and communication function actually represents the co-ordinated face of the institution, which involves all members of staff who come into contact with institutions. Rarely do students distinguish between academic and administrative functions of the institution.

More and more, the need for an integrated marketing and communication (IMC) strategy is emphasised (see, for instance, Sevier, 2002; Brennan, Felekis and Goldring, 2003; Black, 2004) which ranges from the need to coordinate media production to the big picture of coordinating all resources of the institution. It is suggested that all marketing material from advertisements, to web pages, stationery and multimedia presentations should be consistent (Black, 2004). The integrated marketing and communications plan should ensure a steady message stream, which provides the basis for choice. It is important that

Collectively. . . the communications should present a consistent image of the institution designed to synergistically motivate students to enrol, persist, or donate time or money. It is the cumulative effect of the communications plans that influences choice, not a single contact.

(Black, 2004, p.54)

For IMC to succeed at the institutional level there is a need to combine resources, financial and human, *together with* buy-in from all sectors of the institution. According to Black (2004, p.54): “Integrated marketing communications will only become a reality if there is vision, adequate resources, an action plan, staff skills, and campus-wide-buy-in. If any of these elements are missing, integration will be difficult, if not impossible to achieve”. In addition, IMC is resource-hungry and requires the support and strategic leadership and commitment of everyone in the organisation for its realisation.

Sevier (2004) similarly notes the increasing importance of an IMC at colleges and universities which is embodied in a “. . .comprehensive, coordinated, institution-wide effort to communicate mission-critical messages in ways that target audiences notice, understand, and respond to” (Sevier, 2004, p.49). In order to achieve this, three broad strategies are identified: brand marketing, direct marketing and customer relationship management. While brand marketing is concerned with awareness and name recognition of the institution, direct marketing is focused on student recruitment and fundraising, and customer relationship management is concerned with delivering on promises made in the course of brand and direct marketing.

The immediate financial implications of establishing marketing functions in education institutions have also been addressed in the literature. The not unsubstantial economic costs of establishing and running the various functions required of an integrated marketing unit needs to be championed at every level in the organisation. As Sevier points out, these costs can be considerable and leadership may be inclined to balk at the initial outlay. He observes:

One of the biggest challenges anyone faces. . .is that of re-orienting people away from a focus on initial costs toward a focus on return and effectiveness. . .its not an easy challenge especially when all eyes are focused on budget cuts. . .But it’s during a tough economy – more than at any other time-that the economics of marketing must be properly understood.

(Sevier, 2002, p.24)

It is important to unpack the complexity of measuring service impact in an educational context. If profit is removed from the equation, just how are not-for-profit education institutions expected to get assess effectiveness and quality? There are, however, a range of stakeholders which makes much more complex the linear relationship between supply and consumption. Using a range of customer satisfaction surveys, translated in this context as learner satisfaction surveys, has become a major activity of British further and higher education. However, this can only provide one strand of the feedback

necessary in an education context. It needs to be augmented by measures of perception surveys that look at all of the stakeholders, including parents, employers and state regulatory bodies. This process might well be difficult to achieve in the context of resource scarcity, but might well be necessary if a true sense of the effectiveness of the organisation is to be attained.

Moreover, Liao, Foreman and Sargeant (2001, p.262) have also contended that the very nature of education as a service requires the provider to “change customer behaviours” and that this is likely to result in some dissatisfaction. This is all the more worrying since the ‘sword of Damocles’ is the grading that needs to be the outcome of the learning. While part of the solution is to locate the assessment task outside of the delivery loop, the power relations that exist mitigates against complete confidence in student satisfaction surveys.

It is also likely that satisfaction surveys by other stakeholders might well be contradictory on the one hand and the multiple voices present might not be able to be satisfied at the same time. The government, as the major funder of the education and training institutions, is likely to understand quality in various, sometimes contradictory, ways. Thus an institution’s effectiveness in responding to national development prerogatives might well be judged in ways that are not always consistent with efficient practice. Thus in South Africa, enrolment from a particular social grouping by itself might be construed as effective practice, irrespective of the less than satisfactory outcome measures. The call for resources by the institution to respond more effectively to the changing student body, which is what is necessary from a redress perspective, might well be construed as limited commitment to the task (Akoojee and Nkomo, 2007).

It might, therefore, not always be possible to marry these national considerations with labour market stakeholders who need to see immediately realisable outcomes, sometimes in a short-sighted manner, as significant. This grouping often needs to be provided immediately utilisable skills and translate these as tangible outcomes.

Keeping all the constituents satisfied might well be the most important balancing act necessary for institutional leaders. The various demands made on individual institutions might well be less realistic to implement than anticipated and might have important implications for effective realisation of marketing and communication strategies. It suggests that conventional marketing strategies used in the for-profit context need to be carefully replicated in the public sector, charged as it is, with a multiple of stakeholders and perspectives to which it is subject (McGrath, 2003; Unwin, 2003).

Marketing in FET colleges in South Africa

We have highlighted the way in which notions such as marketing have entered the public education discourse internationally (especially in Anglophone countries) as part of a wider ideological shift towards neoliberalism. This deeper and broader footing for marketing as a legitimate activity for public education clearly means that it has powerful impetus and cannot easily be ignored, resisted or subverted.

The impetus to adopting a marketing perspective and practices into public education is arguably most powerful for the FET college sector. Whilst all of public education is charged with being more economically (and socially) responsive, internationally this pressure is exerted most strongly on the part of the system that has always been explicitly vocational as its core identity.

In developed countries, this drive for improved college responsiveness has led to the development of institutions that attempt to serve a wide range of constituencies and agendas. An American, Australian or British college isn't simply the place to get training for intermediately skilled work (the principal function of the old technical college). It is also increasingly the means of extending access to higher education; a provider of remedial basic skills to those who 'failed' in school; a source of second chance senior secondary education (and provider of more specialist subjects such as law, sociology and psychology); a core deliverer of English language skills to immigrants, including refugees; a strong competitor for contracts to deliver skills upgrading both for the employed and the unemployed; and a supplier of education for the penal system. It is not surprising, therefore, that Unwin notes that:

Such diversity can, however, mean that colleges struggle to achieve recognition and/or status for being specialists in particular types of provision. Attempting to service the needs of too many stakeholders also makes colleges subject to constant change and so can weaken their ability to stand firm when stakeholder pressure becomes overly intrusive (Unwin, 2003, p.3).

Of course, these colleges have always sought to be responsive; it has been their lived rationale. What has happened, however, is that the economic and political context in which they are working has changed and, too often, they have been simultaneously undermined in their ability to change by policy weaknesses whilst being scapegoated for economic failures by politicians and employers.

Naturally, there are clear merits in the still relatively new FET colleges becoming far clearer about who it is they are to serve and how to serve them. Thus, a marketing function could bring about a far richer institutional

understanding of local communities and economies. Equally, it is also uncontroversial to argue that the identities of the colleges are still in formation and that internal marketing and communications could play a crucial role in building the new colleges. Therefore, strengthened marketing and communications could support the emergence of strengthened institutions that are able to plan more strategically and deliver more effectively. In turn, such college improvement would contribute both to the public value of the FET college brand and to overall national development objectives. This would be very much in the spirit of Siu and Wilson's model.

However, there are also potential dangers in the move to marketing. One way in which providers in Britain have responded to the responsiveness imperative and the need to increase income generation is by simply selling more aggressively what they already had on offer (Gravatt and Silver, 2000; Unwin, 2003). This can result in learners being badly advised about the suitability of programmes for them, leading subsequently to problems of motivation, satisfaction, retention and throughput. Alternatively, providers can be excessively market-responsive, offering whatever programmes they can sell regardless of their relationship to staff capabilities, institutional strategic visions or national development objectives. In both cases, growing enrolments and income become the ultimate goals of the institution rather than local or national educational and developmental mandates.

Equally, in the South African context, a broad sense of developmental mandate runs the risk that colleges will seek to supply programmes that respond not to the real needs and demands of communities and individuals but to external ideas of what is good for them. Too often, such responses are rooted in a deficit model of poverty and underdevelopment that cannot hope to promote participatory and sustainable development.

The challenge of building the new colleges is a sensitive one, and has been given a further twist by the 2006 FET Act, with its radical revision of the nature of staff employment. Just as internal marketing and communications can play a vital role in building new common identities for colleges, so it has the potential to exacerbate the potentially negative elements of college transformation.

In Britain, new terms of conditions for staff have been one element of a broader shift towards marketisation and managerialism (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Gleeson, 1999; Gleeson and Shain, 1999; Avis, 2002). In this process, there has been the development of a large gap in perceptions and identities

between lecturers and managers, the latter who have increasingly come from outside the sector into specialist roles in finance, marketing, etc. Whilst British colleges have become more concerned with marketing and communication, there is a strong tendency for teaching staff to treat this very cynically as part of a broader national business–political culture of spin. Thus, inappropriate approaches to marketing and communications, located within broader trends that stress lecturers, are likely to undermine the construction of strong new college identities.

The development of new corporatised images and identities for colleges also brings particular risks in South Africa, where an important proportion of delivery has historically been located in poorer communities and where considerable importance is still given to improving access. Moves towards a more corporate feel need to be carefully considered for any potential negative impact on epistemological access (Morrow, 1993).

Unsurprisingly, the impact of marketing on South African public FET colleges will largely depend on the playing out of far larger forces: the international discourse of neoliberalism (leading to new public management, managerialism, responsiveness, etc.) and the national context of Apartheid past and the contestations about the nature of the future (crudely between equity-redress and trickle-down growth).

It will also be very dependent on the broader working out of education and training policy and practice. The new version of the NQF appears to suggest that the promise of articulation between the academic and the vocational will exist in little more than symbolic terms. This has profound implications for the college sector, which has been hamstrung for more than a decade by the tensions between the Departments of Education and Labour (McGrath, 2004).

For colleges to develop strong marketing and communications, to be more strategic in their planning and to be more responsive to their multiplicity of potential clients, requires them to have both capacity and autonomy. Clearly both have developed in the seven years since the *New Institutional Landscape* was announced. However, there remain capacity weaknesses at all levels of the system. At the college level, strong councils and senior managers are particularly required. Nonetheless, many of the most pressing challenges are at the systemic-policy level.

How flexible colleges can be in responding to the market is far from clear. It is too early to judge how much of the curricular answer the new DoE

programmes launched in February 2007 will be, although there are grounds for considerable scepticism about both their academic and labour market value. Nonetheless, it is certain that they cannot respond to immediate skills needs. It is unclear to what extent colleges can also seek to respond to these immediate needs and how such programmes can be funded. Quality assurance remains a problematic issue too.

There are grounds for limiting institutional autonomy to decide what to deliver as this can cause short-termism and excessive competition. However, it is far from clear that provincial and/or national officials are best placed to make the necessary decisions. Rather, it might be better to focus on building the capacity of colleges' leadership and governance structures. One useful contribution that has been made to managing competition, however, is that of the provincial FET college marketing strategies, which were in evidence in both the case study provinces – KwaZulu-Natal and the Western Cape.

Conclusion

The 'move to marketing' is a broad international trend in education in which South African is largely a follower. It needs to be seen as part of the broader neoliberal turn since the 1980s and cannot be seen independently from the rise of new public management in the developed Anglophone countries. We argue that it is an inevitable element of the discourses and practices of the South African public FET colleges since the 2001 reforms as the state seeks to construct new, more relevant and responsive institutions.

Our motivation for writing this paper is that this emergence of marketing within a branch of public education requires critical analysis. We suggest that this requires two foci: first, on the international theory and practice of marketing, as it has developed for services, for non-profit organisations and for education; and, second, on the opportunities and challenges that the move to marketing raises for the South African public FET college sector.

The first of these foci leads us to raise concerns about the ways in which marketing theories can and should apply to public education. It also leads us to conclude that the South African shift to marketing has not been meaningfully driven by an understanding of such debates, but is rather a largely unconscious response to a hegemonic discourse.

The second focus suggests, nonetheless, that there are possible opportunities for making the marketing move work in progressive ways. If the new FET colleges are to succeed then it is essential that they strengthen their strategic responsiveness to economic and social demand. They must build new and broader external relationships. They must also grow internal relationships and, ultimately, construct new college identities that have value for both by internal and external stakeholders. An intelligent approach to college marketing, therefore, can play an important role in building the college brand in substantive ways.

However, there are real dangers in the marketing move if it prioritises short-termism, opportunism and a focus simply on who can pay. Equally, there is a risk that colleges develop understandings of their surrounding communities that are limited to a deficit model. Moreover, there is a danger that the corporate style of marketing may feed off other processes within the new colleges to widen gaps between staff rather than building bridges.

We have made it clear that marketing needs to be located within the broader context of the neoliberal shift. Equally, at the college level it cannot be separated from the wider transformation project. In particular, the possibilities of college marketing inevitably will be constrained by national and provincial policy positions that limit college autonomy, for whatever reasons.

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