

Chapter 10

Beyond Lead Generation: AI and Personalization in Student Recruitment

Joseph D. Morrison

Concourse Global Enrollment, USA

ABSTRACT

International education is rooted in the ideals of diversity, inclusion, and cross-cultural understanding. However, the industry falls short of these ideals during the student recruitment process, which is often concentrated in just a few source markets, with impersonal systems and practices. New technology, notably artificial intelligence, is creating new opportunities for institutions to address this challenge. New platforms can spread the attention and engagement of university recruiters to every corner of the globe, deliver a more personalized experience to prospective applicants that have historically been ignored, improve campus diversity, and lessen the industry's climate impact by reducing the need for travel. Insights can be drawn from the high technology industry to create trust and scale, adequate venture capital is available globally, and organizations such as the Groningen Declaration Network (GDN) can provide the necessary governance. Together, these factors will enable a global electronic marketplace for education with greater diversity and personalization.

INTRODUCTION

International education is rooted in the ideals of diversity, inclusion, and cross-cultural understanding. Through international education, students can improve their ability to navigate language barriers and different modes of thought, gain a degree of immunity to xenophobia, learn to think about global issues, and are more likely to be productive and successful in culturally diverse work environments after graduation (Knight & Altbach, 2007).

In a bold statement calling for more diversity in admissions practice, The Association of American Universities held that "...our students benefit significantly from education that takes place within a diverse setting. In the course of their university education, our students encounter and learn from others who

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have backgrounds and characteristics very different from their own.” In addition to the benefit within the classroom, “...a significant part of education in our institutions takes place outside the classroom, in extracurricular activities where students learn how to work together, as well as to compete; how to exercise leadership, as well as to build consensus” (AAU, 1997).

However, the high concentration of recruitment from just a few source markets means that industry practices in international education diverge from these ideals from the moment of first contact, even before students arrive on campus. Universities recruit students primarily from a small set of regions (at some cost in diversity), in some cases channel them into pathway programs (corporate entities that recruit for and manage first-year programs for international students) where they do not integrate with domestic classmates (an inclusion issue), and promote their programs through automated marketing and in some cases third party education agents (missing opportunities to develop mutual understanding and personalize the recruitment process).

There are historical justifications for these practices. Why do universities concentrate their recruitment activities in a small set of regions, at the cost of diversity? Because mainstream student recruitment regions (typically large, prosperous cities in Asia) are easier to access. It is challenging to identify the volume of self-financed students from emerging countries and reach them through a cost-efficient and effective channel (Choudaha & Kono, 2012). Why do universities rely on pathway programs, at the cost of inclusion? Because pathway programs can be helpful to close the gap between lower performing international students and their domestic counterparts in terms of study skills and language ability, as well as creating a natural separation of concerns enabling student recruitment to be more easily outsourced (Redden, 2017). Why do institutions rely so heavily on automated marketing? Because – while that may be impersonal and contributes little to cross-cultural understanding – it is also one of the few ways to achieve scale for large institutions. A typical recruitment funnel might yield only one enrollment per 20,000 leads sourced from digital marketing activities, but if an institution needs to enroll 100 students, at least it is *possible* to source 2 million leads. It means that students mostly view advertisements for institutions that they will never attend, but sometimes there is no better route available to meet enrollment objectives.

Education agents offer a higher recruitment funnel efficiency for education institutions, by filtering through prospective students and delivering applications that are more likely to yield enrollments, and for some institutions they are an effective method of student recruitment. Agents tend to favor institutions with a high global ranking or a strong brand. They offer personalized service to students and families, but their interests are not perfectly aligned with those of their institutional clients. For many institutions they are an unreliable channel and can create communication and understanding barriers between institutions and students. As a volume business, it is inherent in their model that conversations with students and families are simplified.

New changes in the technology landscape offer an interesting opportunity. Personalization can be enhanced in the student recruitment process by introducing more technology. Companies like Amazon, Microsoft, and Google have made Artificial Intelligence and Big Data technologies readily available and inexpensive to deploy. As of 2020 it is now possible for software to analyze vast amounts of information about students and institutions on a global scale, put the right parties into contact with each other, and arrange meaningful engagement to help match supply and demand in a virtuous way. It is a similar technology problem to building dating websites, but with participant profiles oriented around academic information and specialized rules of engagement. With the right matching rules, the economics change completely. No university representative would be willing to have 20,000 conversations with

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