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Measuring communication impact for university advertising materials
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Abstract

A total of 20 per cent of Australian universities are ranked in the top 500 exporters and since 1987 international student growth in Australia has exceeded 60 per cent each year. Few investigations have been directed to measuring the effectiveness of international advertising and promotional material. This article examines this aspect with a focus on content analysis of the international student study guides. The investigation used a qualitative research approach comprising a blend of the convergent interview technique and Delphi method. The outcomes were that there was a significant disparity between student perceived needs and those communicated by the universities printed material. Although the methodology was created to investigate the effectiveness of promotional publications in higher education, the methodology can be applied to other industries where there is a high interface between written advertising material and the recipient.

It has been stated that Australian universities are currently "one of the most valuable export industries in the services sector" (Lewis, 1991, p. 12). However, the education export industry is not a recent advent. The industry export initiatives has had a relatively long history with the first international student coming to Australia to study in 1904 (Williams, 1989). But despite this modest beginning the watershed year was 1987 when the Dawkins full-fee policy for international students was introduced. From 1987 to 1994 there was a 500 percent increase in international student numbers (Maslen and Slattery, 1994). This represented a compound annual growth rate of 62 per cent across the higher education sector (Maslen, 1994). This article focuses on student expectations in relation to materials design. This research consists of two parts, the first to determine the factors which are considered important to international students; the second to examine if the variables are expressed in the international students study guides.

Determining student perceptions of the important factors

To establish the factors that were considered important to the students in their choice of university education a scale was utilised developed by Gatfield (1997). This scale was developed through the examination of 359 undergraduate international and Australian business students studying at a south east Queensland university. The scale had high internal validity with a Cronbach alpha score of 854 and a factor analysis, utilising varimax rotation, yielded four clean and substantial orthogonal factors. The variables and factors are shown in Table I.

The four factors in Table I form the benchmark for the second part of the investigation.

Examination of factors relevant to International student study guides

The second part of the study was undertaken to examine the degree of what international students considered as important as reflected in the international student guides provided by the relevant higher educational institutions. The material under examination is generally known as the International Student Guides (ISG). However, universities in some

Table I Importance variables and factors

Factor – Academic instruction	Factor – Campus life
Good teaching	Good natural and physical environment
Course content	Personal safety on campus
Fairness of grading	Public transport
Intellectual stimulation	Health services
Course variety	Food services
Access to lecturers	Social cultural activities
Small class sizes	Campus housing
Good class timetables	Sports and recreation facilities
Library facilities	
Computer laboratories	**Factor – Guidance**
	University handbook
Factor – Recognition	Career guidance
Recognition by government	Pre-enrolment advice
Recognition by potential industry association	International student office
Recognition by potential employer	

cases name their literature as Prospectuses for International Students, or International Undergraduate Prospectuses. The examination was achieved by utilising a content analysis of the printed material using as a benchmark the variables and factors of student perceptions as detailed in Table I.

Methodology

The methodology chosen for this investigation was a content analysis of the ISGs. Content analysis is an appropriate method when the phenomenon to be observed is written communication (Kolbe and Burnett, 1991; Malhotra *et al.*, 1996).

Content analysis was developed in the 1940s in the field of communications (Bellenger and Greenberg, 1978). It has been defined in Berelson's seminal work as "… a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communications" (1952, p. 18). Communications, in this context, means any written form (Festinger and Katz, 1966).

There are many approaches to content analysis which depend primarily on the objectives of the research. Berelson (1952) delineates three main methods and expands each category with up to 16 sub-categories. However, the most appropriate approach for this investigation was the sub-category which examines the correspondence between the content of the media and the cognitive content of the recipients (Festinger and Katz

1966). It rests on the assumption that items or themes should be inherent in the communication form and addresses the issues salient to the needs of the target audience.

Data collection and analysis method

The data collection and analysis was undertaken in four stages: first, collecting ISGs from universities in Australia; second, defining a classification system; third, developing a methodology for coding and verification; fourth, aggregating and examining the data.

Collecting the data

The total population of Australian publicly-funded universities and the two principal private universities were included in the sample frame. The rationale for including the two private universities is that these are in head-to-head competition in the same market as the publicly-funded universities. Institutions not carrying the title "university" were excluded.

The unit of analysis was the written material sent directly to the inquiring international student seeking information on business studies at the undergraduate level. This is the information package which usually includes the undergraduate business study ISG booklet, details of costs and an application form. Only the undergraduate guide booklet was considered in the examination.

Defining a classification system

The categories chosen for this study, in respect of the elements deemed important by students, were the 25 variables and four factors used in the first part of the study.

For qualitative data analysis, it is often considered desirable to engage the use of numbers in exploring systematic relationships and especially when the data are to be used as an aid to comparitive measurement (Festinger and Katz, 1966). Lazerfeld and Barton (1951) recommend one of three coding methods: "dichotomies", "serials" or "variables".

"Dichotomies" involve either the presence or absence of a condition. "Serials", on the other hand, provide a numerical value for categories that may reflect low, medium or high conditions. No assumptions can be made about absolute points and equal intervals cannot be assumed with exactitude. By contrast, "variables" contain absolute points and equality of intervals can be assumed. This investigation adopted the "serial" category which according to Festinger and Katz (1966) is the most preferred method for content analysis. The categories chosen for the content analysis of the text are:

0: item not mentioned;
1: item given one word or mentioned in a very short phrase;
2: item given a sentence;
3: item provided with substantive content such as being mentioned in a number of different places or indicated by a number of illustrative aids such as photographs or graphs.

Methodology for coding and verification

Quantitative analysis carries the implied understanding of rigour, portability and economy (Dick, 1990a). By comparison, qualitative data investigations can appear uncertain and cumbersome (Dick, 1990a) and clear-cut procedural rules are difficult to lay down (Cicourel, 1964). Despite the risk of subjectivity, there are few alternatives to analysing textual data other than through the qualitative approach. However, to assist in reducing the difficulties and to inject a degree of rigour, a specific methodology has been developed by the writers for this second part of the investigation which is based on a combination of the convergent interviewing technique and the delphi research method.

The convergent interviewing technique, pioneered by Dick (1990a), is defined as:

> … a way of collecting qualitative information about people's attitudes and beliefs through the use of interviews … conducted by two or more interviewers working individually but in parallel (Dick, 1990a, p. 1).

The principle advocated by Dick (1990a) is in the context of in-depth face-to-face interviews. The interview is initially unstructured and as it proceeds the questions become increasingly more structured. Later, interviews become more focused and a tentative interpretation emerges. Through this iterative process, with in-tandem interviewers, a "convergence" is made towards a final interpretation. Dick terms this a dialectic (1990a; 1990b). The essential attributes of the method in relationship to this study is that the process is reflective, iterative and involves at least two independent assessors.

The "delphi" method, originally developed by the Rand Corporation in 1967 (Callahan *et al.*, 1986), is a structured approach to gaining the judgments of a number of experts on a specific issue related to the future (Bartol and Martin, 1991). The method is characterised by a five-stage process:

(1) a problem is identified and a solution, set out in the form of a questionnaire, is sent to field experts;
(2) each expert, anonymously and independently, completes the first questionnaire;
(3) results are compiled and each expert receives a copy;
(4) each expert is requested to review their previous assessment;
(5) stages 2 to 4 are repeated until a consensus is reached (Adapted from Robbins 1991).

The essential elements of the "delphi" process, as it impacts on this research is that they are: iterative, anonymous, reflective, rely on expert judgments, and focus on outliers not on measures of central tendency. Although the method has been essentially applied to significant commercial industrial and social applications (Callahan *et al.*, 1986; Bartol and Martin 1991), the process can be adapted in this study to validate content analysis codes.

Five important elements of the "convergent interview" and the "delphi" methodologies are blended to aid the analysis of the textual data of the undergraduate ISGs. The elements are:

first, the use of multiple experts; second, the application of a dialectic reflective process; third, the anonymity and independence of researchers; fourth, the focus is on outliers rather than on commonalities; fifth, the process is iterative. A schematic view of the operationalisation of the verification method developed by the writer for the content analysis task is shown in Figure 1.
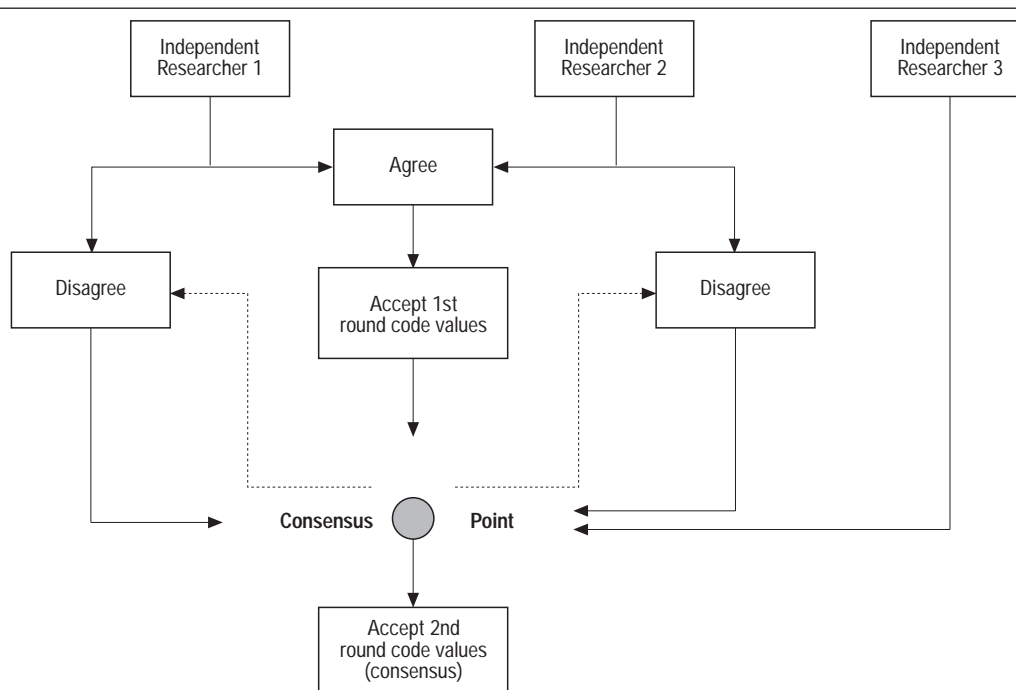
Figure 1 shows the use of the first two independent researchers, initially in the first stage without conferral, engaged in content analysis of the data. The parties either have the same, or different, code values. On conferral, and focusing on disagreement of various assignment values, a third party is introduced as a team member bringing additional expertise on coding. The third party uses a mediation process to challenge the researchers to re-evaluate their original positions. Through the iteration method a consensus is reached on all original disagreed values.

In the first instance, there were two independent researchers: the first was an undergraduate 18-year-old female first year student; the second was a male 22 years of age, who had completed a full year of university study. The criteria for selection of the researchers was to obtain a balanced gender mix of those who had personal experience in seeking Australian higher education institu-

tion options. Both researchers were briefed on the requirements of the research and trained in the coding method and research methodology. The researchers were not allowed to confer with each other in the first round. On completion of the first round coding, the scores were compared and elements of discrepancy identified and discussed with the principal writer, who acted as main researcher and third team member. A consensus was reached for every identified difference.

The process required rigour, yet flexibility and a creative sensitivity to marketing and communication materials. In addition, there was a need to understand semiotics which involves the nature of meaning in areas such as signs, symbols and pictorials (Belch and Bech, 1993). Two examples are useful here. First, it was difficult to clearly identify the variable "intellectual stimulation". The nature of expressing this in print was often seen in photographs of situations involving one-to-one communication with lecturing staff. In addition, it was frequently scattered in various texts related to other themes such as libraries and computer support where there was clear evidence, or suggestions, of personal cognitive engagement. The second example was the variable "natural and physical environment". This was rarely expressed in written text but usually seen in pictorial form

Figure 1 Code verfication model

Source: Adapted from Dick (1990a) and the "delphi" technique (Robbins 1991)

showing campus surrounds and generally through the use of creative layout.

Aggregating and examining the data

The response rate of the universities was 78 per cent. Each of the 25 variables were provided with a final score of either 0, 1, 2 or 3, which was recorded on code sheets. The variable scores for each university were summated and averaged for each factor. The data for each factor for the universities are shown in Table II.

The data should be interpreted as an index only. The exact intermediate distances between values are not known with any accuracy. The only assumptions that can be made are that the value of 3 has a deeper communication meaning than that of value 2, and correspondingly 2 is greater than 1 and 1 is greater than 0. The grand mean for each university has not been considered owing to the different contributions each factor makes to the total variance.

Results and discussion

The content analysis of the ISGs has revealed four important aspects; first, the large variance between the collective factor indices; second, the considerable disparity between the indices related to the various universities; third, that some of the factors and variables that were provided with reasonable attention; fourth some variables were frequently ignored. These aspects are examined.

Table II ISG publication average factor index

University	Factors Academic instruction	Campus life	Guidance	Recognition
Australian Catholic University	1.2	2.4	0.8	0.0
Bond University	1.6	2.5	1.5	0.0
Charles Sturt University	1.6	2.4	1.8	0.7
Curtin University	1.9	2.6	2.8	1.0
Deakin University	1.0	1.9	1.0	3.0
Edith Cowan University	1.2	1.1	0.5	1.3
Flinders University	1.1	2.5	1.8	0.0
Griffith University	1.2	2.5	0.8	0.0
James Cook University	1.0	1.6	1.0	0.0
La Trobe University	1.0	2.5	1.5	1.7
Macquarie University	1.5	1.9	1.5	0.0
Monash University	0.9	1.4	1.0	0.0
Notre Dame University	1.2	1.3	1.3	0.0
Northern Territory University	1.0	2.0	1.5	0.0
Qld University of Technology	1.3	1.6	2.0	0.0
Sunshine Coast University	0.8	1.3	1.0	0.0
Swinburn University of Tech.	1.2	1.0	1.8	0.0
University of Adelaide	1.6	2.5	2.0	0.0
University of Canberra	1.2	2.3	2.3	0.7
University of Central Qld	1.4	1.5	0.8	0.7
University of Melbourne	0.8	2.1	1.3	0.7
University of Newcastle	1.2	2.1	1.8	0.0
University of NSW	0.9	1.8	1.3	0.0
University of Queensland	0.9	1.9	0.0	0.0
University of South Australia	0.9	1.8	1.8	1.7
University of Southern Qld	1.1	2.5	1.5	0.7
University of Western Sydney	0.7	2.4	0.8	0.0
University of New England	1.3	2.5	1.8	0.0
Victoria University of Tech.	1.6	2.0	1.0	0.3
Average index	1.2	2.0	1.4	0.4

Variance between the collective factor indices

It can be observed from Table II that, on average across all universities, the ISG index was 1.2 for "academic instruction", 2.0 for "campus life", 1.4 for "guidance" and 0.4 for "recognition". There was a wide disparity between the factors but all indices were substantially lower than the potential value of 3.0. This was especially true for the factor "recognition".

Disparity between the indices related to various universities

Table II shows that there were substantive differences in the ISG quality indices between the universities. A noteworthy point is that some of the perceived "red brick" higher profile institutions, such as the Universities of Queensland and Melbourne, did not have very high ISG indices on most factors. By contrast, some of the lower profile institutions such as the Universities of Charles Sturt, Southern Queensland and Curtin had relatively higher indices. It is interesting that many of the universities with reasonably high indices received university status only in the last decade.

Variables and factors adequately identified in the ISGs

The data of the individual variables for each factor related to each university (not illustrated in this article) showed that some variables had an index of 1 and 2. At the other end, category 3 was mentioned on average in only 35 per cent of occasions. However, this must be moderated by the principle that not all variables require full and detailed descriptions for the student to make an informed opinion. The data showed that only the "campus life" factor received reasonable attention where 16 of the universities had ISG index values of 2.0 or more.

Variables frequently ignored

For many of the universities' publications a number of the variables were not mentioned, i.e. scoring zero. On average there were ten zeros for each university and for one institution it recorded a score of 17 zeros. The items frequently missed included "good teaching", "class time tables" and, most importantly, "recognition". This last aspect was seldom reflected in the ISGs. A total of 62 percent of the universities did not mention any of the three "recognition" variables.

Limitations

This has been directed to the analysis of the ISG literature, but directed to Australian universities. Although the principles of analysis have application to other institutions outside of Australia a generic application of the results cannot be assumed. The second area of limitation is the scale utilised in the analysis. The instrument used in the first part of the investigation has been designed in respect to business study students studying in Australia. The instrument should ideally be validated in other disciplines and in other countries before application is made.

Summary

The objective of this has been to ascertain whether the student perceived importance variables and factors elements is reflected in the undergraduate ISGs. The focus has been on the content analysis of the ISGs of most of Australia's universities. The investigation utilised benchmark standards as determined by a scale developed by Gatfield (1997). The study has explained a methodological approach to content analysis based on the blend of the convergent technique and the Delphi approach. The data were examined and specifically mention made of: the variance between the collective factor indices; the disparity between the indices related to the various universities; factors and variables that were provided with reasonable attention and variables which were frequently ignored in the ISGs. The conclusion was that there was a substantial communication gap, in most areas and with the majority of universities, between student perceptions of what is deemed important to those understood by the compilers of the ISGs. This research has considerable implications for university policy makers and international education marketing practitioners.

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