In Depth Interviews – Strategizing Online Program Management & Recruitment

Prepared for: [REDACTED]

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BENCHMARKING
ANALYSIS

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

[REDACTED] would like to explore how competitors with established online programs have approached marketing and recruitment internationally as well as which strategies/vendors have been most successful.

✓ Understand how peers **approach online program marketing and recruitment**

✓ Identify promising **online program management vendors** with which to partner

✓ Explore **effective online student recruitment strategies** among peers

METHODOLOGY

Hanover Research reached out to administrators of more than 50 online programs at other Group of Eight universities in Australia and previously identified top online providers in the U.S. and U.K. markets. This resulted in **5 in-depth interviews** with online program administrators, all located in the United States. For a full list of interviewees, please see the Appendix.

Note:

Qualitative research is exploratory and designed to add insight and a depth of understanding to a particular question or topic. Qualitative findings provide commonalities and trends but are not intended to be statistically significant or to provide generalizable conclusions.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1 First, establish a goal (e.g., increasing enrollments) with input from stakeholders, ensuring these goals parallel [REDACTED]'s institutional mission.

2 To attract international students, begin by targeting countries where [REDACTED] has had historic success with on-campus enrollments.

3 Implement a wide range of marketing strategies to attract different types of students (e.g., an adult student has different expectations compared to a Gen Z student).

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Universities with large online portfolios typically work with a central marketing team to perform key marketing functions.** These internal teams typically provide oversight for departments, perform market research, and maintain the primary website for online programs. Common marketing tools include email, text, and direct mail; social media outreach; search engine optimization; and call centers. To reach international students, competitors partner with third-party vendors, consider in-country policy restraints, and target markets where they already have a brand presence among on-campus students.

- **Central marketing teams typically outsource select functions to online program management (OPM) vendors.** While most marketing services are performed in-house by the institution, peers most often outsource call center functions and marketing to OPM partners as a means to increase capacity and reach. Interviewees note positive experiences overall with both Coursera and Blackboard in these areas.

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KEY FINDINGS

- **Effective marketing and recruitment strategies typically include varying communication styles, knowing your audience, and using multiple marketing avenues.** Implementation of these strategies should lead to increased enrollment and retention of online students as well as the speed at which prospects are converted to enrollments. Challenges to meeting these goals include an intensely competitive online landscape and rapid changes in marketing (e.g., new marketing technologies). In addition to utilizing effective marketing and recruitment strategies, interviewees also recommend investing ample resources up-front, capitalizing on the university's existing strengths/reputation, and ensuring buy-in from senior level administrators.

MARKETING AND RECRUITING APPROACHES FOR ONLINE PROGRAMS

ROLES OF CENTRAL MARKETING TEAMS

In relation to online programs, central marketing teams typically:

Oversee programmatic outreach

The central marketing team works with individual schools, departments, and programs to develop a marketing strategy

"

"The academic programs or academic colleges still control the academic nature of online programs… We just kind of provide essential oversight, central management of services and support. It's once again a process where we… work with the different Deans when they have a project or a program that they want to really push and market to."

[Anonymous]

Perform market research

This research can involve market trends and competition across new and existing programs

"

"We have a dedicated group of marketers that are responsible for focusing on our recruiting efforts... We have a marketing research function which is designed to provide research for programs that we may consider launching or programs that we may consider updating, provide information on competition, and provide general information on market trends. ."

[Anonymous]

Maintain the primary website

The institutional website acts as the entry point for online traffic for distance programs

"

"[We] have an in-house creative services unit that's responsible for website content or website design, content development and editing. And then we have a web and CRM team that are responsible for essentially for what we call The Campus… and they're responsible for maintaining our prospect and student related website and our CRM systems that we use to track our prospects."

[Anonymous]

COMMON MARKETING TOOLS

EMAIL, TEXT, & DIRECT MAIL

CALL CENTERS

FOCUS GROUPS

SOCIAL MEDIA

CENTRAL WEBSITE

EVENTS

SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

VIDEO & RADIO ADS

INTERVIEWS

Above are common marketing tools referenced by interview participants.

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RECRUITMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

When marketing to international students, online programs typically:

Use third-party vendors with international reach

Sample services include market research, call fielding, and tailoring marketing materials (e.g., in different languages)

"
"The international [OPM] partner is just doing some of the marketing for us based on a fee for service model, but then they're routing all prospective students back into my call center... So really all they're doing is help us with the ad buys and the content… We have seen a dramatic increase in the number of international students just within the last couple of months."

[Anonymous]

Consider the policy landscape

Investigate both policy restraints and opportunities on a country by country basis

"
"We can't offer certain engineering programs in Iran or Iraq or North Korea and Cuba, so… these are the countries that we need to kind of limit our reach to because of federal policy."

[Anonymous]

Review origins of on-campus students

On-campus international students represent existing networks that could translate to online programs

"
"What we did, we kind of looked at the international students that are attending campus-based programs... We kind of focused on countries that we knew we already had a fairly good relationship with because we already had students from there. That's kind of where we started."

[Anonymous]

INTERNATIONAL TARGET MARKETS

India

Turkey

Russia

Southeast Asia

Canada

South Korea

Brazil

Europe

China

"

*"We did… more **secondary research** that… focused on getting information about demographics, ability to pay, geographic regions, competition, et cetera... [Then] we **pared it down to a much smaller set of institutions or markets**, about 25. And then we dug considerably deeper in to that market which included some **conversation with individuals in that marketplace**. And then we narrowed it down even further and… did **specific focus groups**."*

[Anonymous]

These countries/regions represent international target markets noted by at least one interview participant. As referenced on the previous page, most markets were selected due to existing relationships with the university or international student groups on campus.

ONLINE PROGRAM MANAGEMENT PARTNERS

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In (**Coursera**'s) case, it's different from say contracting with **Pearson** or someone else where it's like you're promoting (the university) ... It's not like that where they're branding on behalf of the university. It's Coursera, and by the way, Coursera has a partner from fill-in-the-blank university … **So we do have identity, but the primary identity they have is Coursera.**

-Anonymous

OPM PARTNERS AND DIVISION OF LABOR

The most common OPM partners among respondents include the following. Respondents who have worked with Blackboard and Coursera generally rate these providers positively.

Bb Blackboard

coursera

canvas

However, most recruitment functions are still performed in-house:

" We have one vendor that we work with that helps do some of the advertising placement on the ground for military… But outside of that, we ... manage in-house. "

Anonymous

" We worked with a few agencies for various things, search or big campaigns or creating a television spot if we need to and stuff like that. Aside from that, we do everything in house. "

Anonymous

" We do have external partners that… help us with our call center… but that's all fee for service… We don't want to get into a web share model… so we're going to be very cautious with any kind of external partnership. "

Anonymous

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EVALUATING OPM PARTNERS

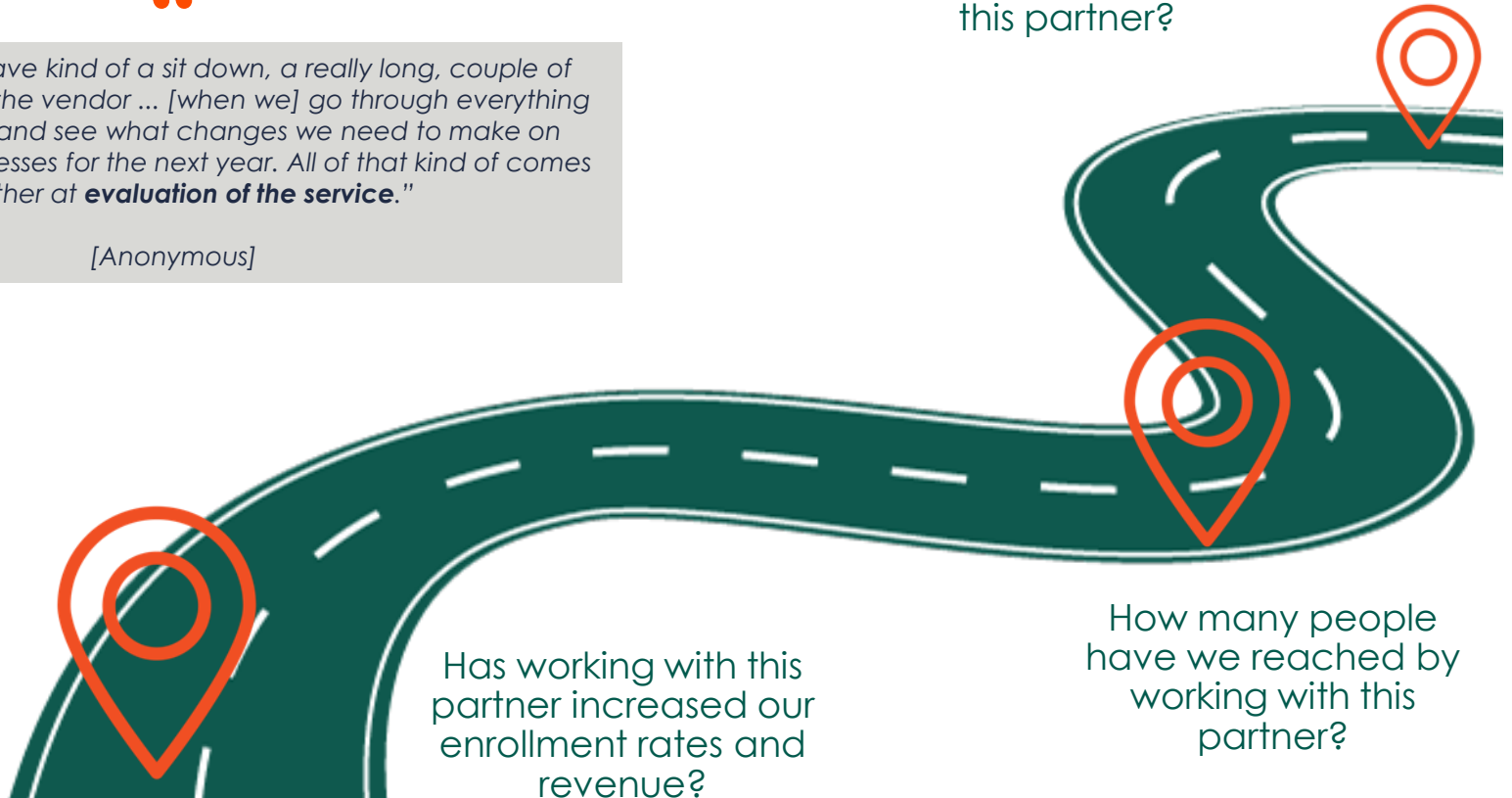|	
Blackboard *[Anonymous]*	***Evaluating Blackboard's student services side, which provides call center support to current and prospective students*** • **Positives**: Fee for service model means you "know what you're getting", 24/7 student call support, "they do a great job" • **Negatives**: Potential to overspend if the university overestimates student numbers,
coursera *[Anonymous]*	***Evaluating Coursera's marketing and recruitment support*** • **Positives**: Easy to work with, a more "academically oriented company," large international reach, good reputation, flexible, strong marketing support, partnerships with corporations • **Negatives**: 50/50 revenue split, platform is just "okay" and centred on MOOCs

EVALUATING OPM PARTNERS

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"**Every year** we have kind of a sit down, a really long, couple of days sit down with the vendor ... [when we] go through everything and kind of look and see what changes we need to make on content or on processes for the next year. All of that kind of comes together at **evaluation of the service**."

[Anonymous]

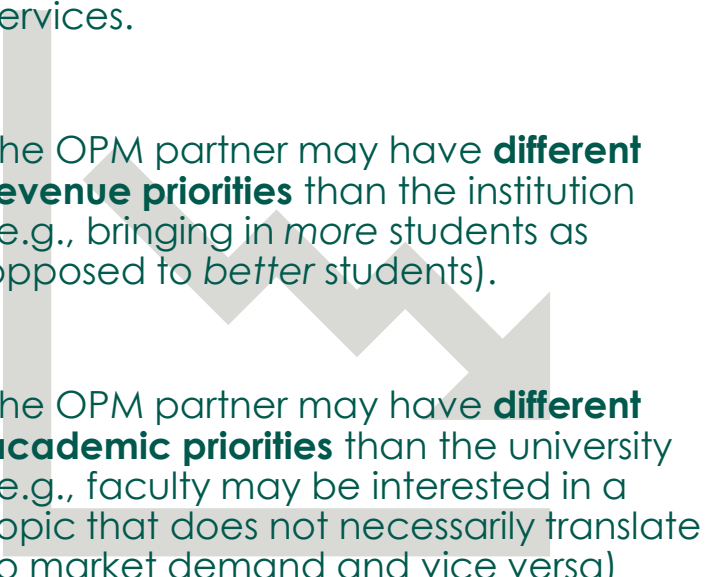What feedback have we received from students and faculty regarding this partner?

How many people have we reached by working with this partner?

Has working with this partner increased our enrollment rates and revenue?

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Questions from Anonymous

EVALUATING OPM PARTNERS

(+) POSITIVE OUTCOMES:

- Using an OPM partner can lead to **increased enrollments and revenue**.

- Established OPM partners offer **easy-to-use technologies**.

- Large OPM providers come with **strong networks** that institutions can utilize.

- Marketing teams can **outsource specific functions** that they are not able to perform themselves (e.g., call centers, online program management platforms)

(-) NEGATIVE OUTCOMES:

- Fee-for-service model can lead to **overspending** on the university's part if it does not fully utilize the contracted services.

- The OPM partner may have **different revenue priorities** than the institution (e.g., bringing in *more* students as opposed to *better* students).

- The OPM partner may have **different academic priorities** than the university (e.g., faculty may be interested in a topic that does not necessarily translate to market demand and vice versa)

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EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

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Customers who interact online with companies have become used to a very, very high level of **customer support** and **immediacy**. You know you have companies like Amazon and others that have set a pretty high bar when it comes to **expectations for how customer expect to be treated online**. For a traditional academic institution, it's a tall order.

-Anonymous

EFFECTIVE MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

> " [Our marketing approach] definitely depends on the student and the program. We have some… audiences that respond better to **phone calls**… Some prospects respond better to just **email** and **text** message. Some are self applicants that **don't really want to be communicated with at all**.
> *[Anonymous]*

> " We've utilized some of our football players that have gone on to play in the pros but have finished their degrees online. [Some] of our **targeted ads** are at some of the sporting events either on campus or off campus, and that has helped as well. It's kind of **connecting that audience with the right person**.
> *[Anonymous]*

Vary communication styles

Know your audience

Use multiple marketing avenues

Establish a goal

> I think the key is to touch prospects through multiple avenues. If we do a **display campaign**, we need to make sure that our **paid search** or our organic search presence is strong because people may see a particular campaign but not respond immediately but may come back later and **Google** us.
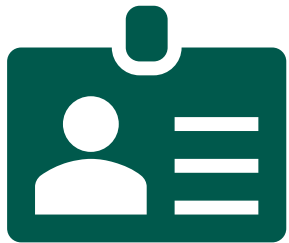> *[Anonymous]* "

> **Success is generating enrollments**. We look very closely at student success and retention rates... We try to make sure that we're not only getting students but that we're getting students that we know we can help be successful.
> *[Anonymous]* "

MEASURING SUCCESS

ENROLLMENT

Did we reach our target enrollment numbers?

SPEED

How fast did we convert prospects to matriculants?

RETENTION

Did we retain more students than we lost?

# MARKETING AND RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Regarding online programs specifically, major marketing and recruitment challenges cited by respondents include:

- **Intense competition** (e.g., Arizona State University, Southern New Hampshire University, and Drexel University in the United States)

- **Rapid changes in the marketing landscape**, including new marketing capabilities and technologies, shifting market demand, and younger consumers with different expectations

"

*"As our student base gets **younger** and the **Gen Z** population starts to come in, I think we need to start shifting the way in which we market to these individuals... That generation has **different priorities, different ways of being reached out to**. There's certain likes and dislikes that they have. It's important for us to shift along with our changing demographic."*

[Anonymous]
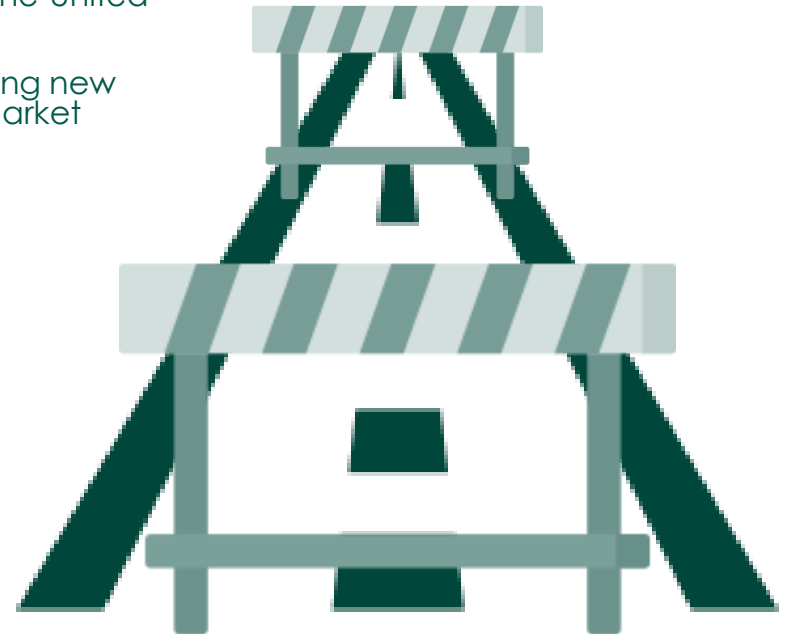
FINAL ADVICE

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Realize you've got to have a lot of **upfront investment** and try to **capitalize on what sets your program apart…** it helps with your marketing ability and your ability to recruit and attract students… away from somewhere else they might have wanted to go.

-Anonymous

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FINAL ADVICE: INVEST RESOURCES

Invest ample resources up-front to support marketing and recruitment efforts:

- Allocating resources (e.g., time, space, personnel) is key to the success of online programming.

- Ultimately, return on investment does take time due to the conversion lag between application to enrollment.

*"[Online programming] does take commitment by the institution to **invest on the front end to make sure the infrastructure and the resources are put in place**… it's very front end loaded in terms of time, in terms of cost, and all of that. **You will eventually see the returns, but it will be a bit** because the online students do take a while to convert from inquiry to applicants and enrolment."* [Anonymous]

*"[Spell] out an **infrastructure that's going to be adequate for being able to realize your strategic goals**, whether it's a certain number of programs, the level of support, that you have adequate market research, marketing, instructional design, development… and that you have your own internal goals in terms of tracking where you are in terms of progress."* [Anonymous]

FINAL ADVICE: SUPPORT THE MISSION

Consider your institution's mission, goals, and strengths:

*"**Make sure that the plan that you develop, the strategic plan, is being driven by the academic objectives of the institution**. So not just saying 'Okay, we need to do this because everyone else is doing it.' Or 'We need to do it because we need to make money and bring in revenue.'* [Anonymous]

- Ensure that your marketing strategy reflects the mission of the institution, rather than enrollment or revenue alone.

*"**Know overall the strengths of your university**. You are representing… the brand of your institution and especially with a global strategy is going to largely hinge on what individuals know about that institution... So, knowing your strengths of your institution, the programmatic strengths, hopefully you're able to build online programming that follows that."* [Anonymous]

- Capitalize on your institution's strengths and reputation to successfully recruit domestic and international students.

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FINAL ADVICE: INVOLVE KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Ensure adequate buy-in from stakeholders:

- Senior administrators should be involved in the selection, planning, and implementation process for new online programming.

*"[Make] sure that there is, ideally, **strong support from the highest levels of the institution**. Everyone I've talked to out of successful programs always talked about you'd like your president and your provost to be on board with it." [Anonymous]*

- Involve central marketing units wherever possible to promote the university's brand.

*"I would say another key bit of advice, one thing that's been really helpful for us is to have a very **close and working relationship with your centralized university marketing unit**." [Anonymous]*

FINAL ADVICE: ASSESS THE MARKET

INVESTIGATE MARKET DEMAND

Now AND in the future,
once the program is launched

[Anonymous]

FIND NICHE OPPORTUNITIES

Consider high-demand existing programs
Differentiate from competitors

[Anonymous]

USE FREE TOOLS

UPCEA Hallmarks of Excellence
Online Learning Consortium Scorecard
Quality Matters Rubric

[Anonymous]

ASSESS INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

Regulatory environment
Political setting
Financial considerations

[Anonymous]

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