

Enhancing International Students' Recruitment within Higher Education: Focus on the Middle East Region

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Abstract: This paper is providing a brief review of several aspects relating to international students' recruitment with focus on UK based higher education institutions. Furthermore, other key aspects are briefly explored such as cultural differences, the role universities' societies can play to further engage international students and facilitation the process of international students' participation, students' need in terms of accommodation as well as other key internal support to be provided, and recognition by higher education ministries abroad. The paper is more focused on international students coming from the Middle East as a case study which can provide an example of practices that can be further considered by UK based and non - UK based higher education institutions. The paper is providing several key strategic recommendations to enhance international students' recruitment. The paper is based on secondary sources such as academic and professional articles, organisational reports and policies, and several national and international agencies providing statistics such as the Higher Education statistics Agency (HESA) and QS World University Rankings.

Keywords: Students' Recruitment, International Students, Middle East.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions should be committed to deliver high quality education to both home and international students worldwide. UK based higher education institutions are continuously aiming to increase their international students' numbers as they are aiming to enhance their reputation at an international context, growth in terms of students' numbers and diversification of income pipelines leading to more institutional sustainability on medium and long terms. Higher education institutions in the UK are investing to enhance their competitiveness and attractiveness through continues improvement in student experience, diversity, and the quality of education provided. This commitment to improve the whole educational process requires continues growth in international students' recruitment as well as home students.

The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations on international students' recruitment and retaining current international students (Middle East). That would improve and enhance institutional position within the current competitive environment in terms of students' recruitment and would serve as a case study providing key takings to be considered in attracting new students from other regions of the world.

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This paper will be investigating key considerations for improvements and changes to be implemented by higher education institutions to increase international students' recruitment and retention. The paper will be focused at the Middle East region as there is an increasing demand from this region within higher education in the UK. The value of degrees awarded by UK's HE institutions is incredible and students with degrees from the UK have promising career prospect in their own home countries due to the academic ranking those institutions hold internationally as well as the country's reputation in terms of higher education and research quality.

For UK based higher education institutions there are many benefits from attracting more international students from the Middle East such as increase in revenues, improving strategic partnerships, enhancing students experience and diversity at department, faculty and institutional levels, internationalization and enhancing the reputation of the institution in the targeted countries, meeting the strategic goals and objectives of the institution, and enhances the sustainability of the business (Meeting recruitment targets), and more students numbers [1 – 2].

Based on the statistics published by the Higher education statistics agency [6] that students' numbers coming from the Middle Eastern countries has increased in the last 5 years. In the year 2012/13 there was 9,440 students from Saudi Arabia, 2,665 students from Iran, 1,845 from Iraq, 1,845 students from Kuwait, 1470 students from Qatar, 1465 students from Oman, 1,390 students from Jordan, 1,210 students from Bahrain, and 660 students from Lebanon. According to the Higher Education statistics Agency (HESA) that there is a total of 26,380 students from the region were studying at higher education institutions in the UK in 2012/13, divided as the following:

Undergraduate: 12,355

Postgraduate: 14,025

Source: [6]

The breakdown of students' numbers in the Middle East shows clearly that there is a potential for UK based higher education institutions to have proper international students' recruitment strategy specially designed for the Middle East to enhance their share of the market.

II. ENVIRONMENTAL SCANNING

Several factors which are beyond the institutional control will affect its international students' recruitment in general and in the Middle East more specifically.



Some of the negative and positive factors are highlighted below.

According to the [1 – 2 - 7 – 8 – 9] that there are many challenges facing HE institutions such as:

- The intensified investments and initiatives of other major destination countries and emerging regional hubs in increasing international enrolments.
- The comparatively weak efforts by the UK government to bolster the country's reputation as a welcoming study abroad destination and to decrease immigration.
- Significant and continuing drop-offs from important sending countries such as India and Pakistan due some immigration laws and regulations changes in the UK.
- Increase of restrictions on international students such as working hours and post study working opportunities.
- The continues increase in costs of studying in UK such as fees paid to higher education institution as well as other related costs such as living expenses. These costs can be categorised as direct and indirect costs.
- The process of departure of the UK from the European Union creating uncertainty for the status of the EU nationals living in the UK as well as for other key firms contributing to the UK higher education system such as partnerships in other EU countries and funding agencies.
- Changes in global and regional political matters leading to disruption of special relations with other key sending countries of international students as well as funding for projects such as scholarships and research.
- Continues threats and challenges in security matters within the UK such as terrorism making the UK less attractive for international students [3].
- The increasing investment from national and international competitors from other key destinations in efforts to be more appealing for international students.
- Other international and national higher education institutions improve their academic ranking at the cost of other UK based higher education institutions.

Opportunities for UK based HE institutions based on [1 – 2 - 7 – 8 – 9]:

- Diversification of income sources: An international students' recruitment growth strategy which may include (America, Africa, Asia, Europe) this paper and its recommendations can be taken into consideration for the Middle East recruitment strategy. By diversifying sources of international students, UK based higher education institutions would not be largely affected by decrease from top sending countries. The Middle East has a great potential and is growing a year after a year.
- A consistent message that the UK is welcoming to international students: institutions can promote themselves as being welcoming institution of international students.
- During study and post-study work opportunities for international students: higher education institutions can increase their efforts in supporting international

students in terms of employability skills, work experience, internships, or even part time jobs for those eligible for it.

- Increase in competitiveness and ranking of UK higher education institutions globally can be considered as one of the main opportunities.
- Collaboration opportunities with key public, private, and non-for-profit institutions to enhance visibility and attraction of international students.
- More opportunities for UK higher education institutions such as accessibility for research funding and development of links to engage with the external environment.
- Opportunities for local and international partnerships to provide other means and forms of education such as professional courses, work-based qualifications, distance and blended learning, mobility and transnational partnerships.
- Continues weakness of the Sterling pound.
- Further growth of international students' in other underdeveloped markets in different regions in the world.
- Usage of new internet features and technologies to reach and engage more with current and potential students.

III. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Cultural difference is an important factor to consider when thinking about attracting students from the Middle East as students coming from there have different learning styles that they are used to such as the assessment process in this region is different as Universities and FE colleges there are mainly using examinations alone as end of term assessment. Now the solution of this concern can be by having more explanation about the help and support available through the website and marketing materials used to promote educational degrees. Also stressing that there is a well-structured foundation and induction programmes for international students are in place and it is recommended for them to have the extended degree. Foundation degrees will prepare them for what is expected from them at the next stage and to get them used to the learning process which will be vitally important for them during their degree level courses [9].

Also supporting workshops can be arranged for all international students to gain further experience in adapting to the UK's culture in terms of learning and preparations for assessment.

IV. ESTABLISHING MIDDLE EAST FOCUSED SOCIETIES

It is important to have a representative society within higher education institutions to represent students from different regions such as the Middle East. Societies will help in enhancing students' experience and can have regular input in terms of future improvements and promotional efforts.



Also, societies can be assigned the role of introducing international students coming from the Middle East to the institution and its different activities and passing previous experiences from students to the new students. That can create a network between students which will surely have positive impact on improving the institutional reputation at an international context [9].

A. Accommodation Needs

According to the International Office at Leeds University, students from the Middle East have specific expectations in terms of accommodation and facilities within the local community. Many students coming from a relatively wealthy part of the world (the Gulf countries: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman) their expectations may be higher than the average international students. Therefore, the School can work closely with trusted external letting agent to work with to provide proper (within budget and depending on students' financial circumstances) accommodation for those students and even for all international students with the aim to enhance support services provided and enhance the overall experience of students.

There is an interesting issue about students from the Middle East when it comes to accommodation due to cultural, traditions, and religious reasons:

- Female: Female students from the Middle East always look for female only accommodation.
- Families: Many mature students coming from the Middle East prefer to bring their own family with them which means that proper family accommodation is required. (Students who are enrolled on a postgraduate-level course lasting 12 months or more, or who are fully sponsored by their government for a programme of study lasting at least six months, can bring their dependants with them.)
- The availability of local Mosques and prayer rooms in campus (That can be added to the international students' section on the website).

B. Internal support

Higher education institutions can promote its internal support to international students such as:

- The foundation and induction programmes available designed to prepare international students for studying in the UK.
- Careers and employability department: There to help international students find part-time work to support your studies, internships, work experience, and enhancing the employability skills required by recruiters worldwide.
- The learning environment the institution has such as lectures, support classes, currency of modules and learning materials, and the curriculum in general.
- The efforts invested by the academic department and faculty as well as other professional services to enhance the quality of their offering through adopting research informed practices as well as the focus to develop key soft skills to enhance employability of graduates [4 – 5].

C. Recognition by HE ministries in the Middle East

It is important to get the institution recognised by international HE ministries to be added on their recommended list for students aiming to study in the UK. This move would make potential students 100% confident when applying to a degree at the institution as they will know already that their qualification will be accepted and recognised in their home countries.

Meeting all the requirements of recognition provided by HE ministries in the Middle East would add an advantage for the institution. Recognition means that students will have no difficulties when equalizing their qualifications when they go back to their home countries.

For recognition higher education institutions can approach Embassies of those countries for further information or alternatively applications can be found on the HE ministries' websites. Majority of UK based higher education institutions have full recognition in the Middle East. However, some alternative providers such as associate colleges, alternative providers, partners and delivery centres may invest more efforts in the recognition process leading to more confidence within the perspective international student to apply for the institution. Furthermore, the point of recognition may be more crucial point for higher education institutions in other countries.

D. Strategies to be Considered by Higher Education Institutions

Two strategies have been created to support and increase the recruitment of students from the Middle East. Strategy A and Strategy B:

1. Strategy A

Strategy A is designed for the international recruitment team which may include working with external agents:

Proposed activities:

- Developing strategic plan for meeting international student enrolment goals in the Middle East.
- Identifying high yield geographic areas and international institutions that provide Scholarships to international students to study in the UK.
- Developing a focused communication and marketing plan in conjunction with the availability of resources at the institution, the needs and expectations of students from the Middle East.
- Documenting data and information gathered about current international students to identify Patterns of best practices which potentially may be used to enhance promotional efforts for better recruitment of potential international students coming from the same countries.
- Assessing the current efforts and prioritizing the use of resources for efficiency and Effectiveness.
- Developing professional and international networks, including embassy representatives from the targeted countries in the Middle East and UK embassies representatives in targeted countries.

- Maintaining a close relationship with key international and local institutions that can generate pipelines for potential students such as educational Language Services providers such as the British Council in the Middle East.

2. Strategy B

Strategy B is designed for the Marketing department to increase numbers of students from the Middle East region:

- Working with trusted and verified students' recruitment agents across the Middle East. Country specific information and the application can be added to the website to be available for agents and potential students. However, institutions should manage this process closely as it may have its own drawbacks such as the following: Loss of control over bringing the suitable applicant, reputational risks, less income generated from fees as agents charge their own fees for every successful applicant, less interaction between the institution and the applicant, and further investment in training and availability in resources such as staff to deal with agents demands during the application process. Higher education institutions should invest extra resources to diversify their recruitment sources to build a long-term sustainable recruitment model leading to sustainable and healthy growth at a global stage with the consideration of the associated risks of each source [9].
- Encouraging word of mouth utilizing current international students from the Middle East. Involving current international students in promotional efforts internally and externally.
- Designing internet, e-brochures, flash e-mails, and instant messages to international Students on available online platforms.
- Developing relationships and links with educational institutions in the Middle East such as universities, colleges, and English language providers such as the British Council.
- Hosting overseas educational advisors and academics on campus to exchange expectations.
- Building focused online presence through various online platforms: Such as focused social media pages for the Middle East which has advice on applications, Visas, Degrees available, costs, recognition, English Language, and entry requirements.
- Developing marketing and promotional materials specifically targeted to international Students (Middle East) with more specific consideration for market specific needs and expectations.
- Conducting outreach activities to foreign embassies and agencies that sponsor Middle Eastern students to study in the UK (Ministries and government bodies in the Middle East have specific scholarships for their home students to study in the UK. For example, The Saudi HE Ministry).
- Promotional efforts through the educational Language Services providers such as the British Council and other local educational institutions countries in the Middle East.

- Utilizing information technology tools to promote academic offering as well as the associated unique students' experiences.
- Utilizing students, faculty, staff and to assist with the recruitment process.

E. Suggested Performance Indicators and Outcomes of both Strategies A and B

- Increase in the number of undergraduate and graduate applications received from students based in the Middle East region.
- Increase in the number of international undergraduate and graduate applicants receiving admission to the institution.
- Increase in the number of international undergraduate and graduate applicants accepting admission and enrolling at the institution.
- Increase in the number of contacts made to embassies and agencies' officials by staff of the higher education institution to build and enhance links.
- Increase in the number of follow-up communication between staff and prospective international students.
- Increase in the number of applications received through contacts at embassies and other sponsoring agencies.
- Quality of materials produced and used for marketing and recruitment.
- Increase in the number of marketing materials distributed directly to students, colleges, UK Embassies and Education Advising Centres abroad, recruitment agents and others per year.

V. CONCLUSION

The overall goal of this paper is to provide support for higher education institutions in the UK to enhance their strategic direction to internationalize their campuses. Emphasis is focused on a commitment to increase the number of high-quality undergraduate and graduate international students (Middle Eastern) on campus. A second goal is to provide outstanding support services to those students resulting to better educational experience of the highest quality possible, enhancing diversity within the institution, and secure future sustainability of the projected growth. The paper has provided a brief review of several aspects environmental changes that are beyond the institutional control, cultural differences, the importance of societies, accommodation, recognition and internal support. Based on the aspects mentioned the paper has provided key strategies to be considered by higher education institutions to enhance their international students' recruitment with specific focus on the Middle East as a region. However, the paper provides an example that can be considered in targeting other international regions to attract and recruit international students. Furthermore, the paper is mainly focused on the UK higher education institution. However, other non – UK based institutions can consider key recommendations in the process of establishing strategic direction to enhance internationalization of their institutions.



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