

Benchmarking International Office Operations

Stephen Connelly

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International student recruitment is as much about maintenance of quality and standards in international admissions as it is about recruitment efficiency and costs, or what might otherwise be termed 'cost of acquisition'. Both are important, but sub-standard admissions processes will undermine the best recruitment practices, and a poor recruitment program will never provide enough appropriately qualified candidates for a college's admissions office. Both have to work well and work together to achieve enrolment objectives.

As universities and colleges in the USA begin to embrace a more proactive international student recruitment model, including use of agents, it will be important to develop an understanding of how efficient and successful international operations are in achieving institutional recruitment objectives. Benchmarking of international office operations provides an opportunity to assess not only efficiency and cost, but also important outcomes such as academic progression and retention linked to recruitment channels, agent performance and student diversity. While agents, for example, provide greater recruitment coverage for institutions and the opportunity for improved service provision to prospective students, they also represent an additional cost in the recruitment process. So how do institutions know the total cost of acquisition of international students as a starting point to measure the effectiveness of agents? Indeed, what aspects of international office operations should be included in any exercise designed to measure operational effectiveness, efficiency and quality?

For benchmarking of this nature to be successful there needs to be a group of institutions prepared to share data in a manner that protects and preserves commercially sensitive information, whilst at the same time providing meaningful measures of performance. The recent benchmarking exercise in learning mobility undertaken by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) is a good example of this. Australian university international offices (IO's) have been participating in benchmarking for well over a decade and have a vast amount of experience of the advantages and challenges of the exercise. In 1998 universities in the state of New South Wales (NSW) undertook the first attempt to measure and benchmark IO operations. The initiative was led by the senior international officers of those universities and their IO directors, and soon colleagues in other states wanted to follow their example. A few years later, a national body of international office directors was established, called the Australian Universities International Directors Forum (AUIDF). One of the first activities of AUIDF was to implement a national IO benchmarking exercise, with all Australian universities invited to participate. That exercise took place in 2003, with 29 of 38 AUIDF member universities

benchmarking their 2002 IO operations, and since then Australian university IO's have benchmarked on an annual basis. Most recently 37 universities participated in the 2013 exercise. Alan Olsen of Strategy Planning and Research in Education (www.spre.com.au), an independent education consultant, has conducted the benchmarking since its inception, and presents findings at the annual Australian International Education Conference.

Each year international directors discuss the elements of IO operations to be benchmarked. The most recent study included:

1. international office costs;
2. staffing of marketing, enquiries, admissions, compliance;
3. admissions policies, procedures and quotas;
4. international student services;
5. international student mobility resourcing;
6. cost of recruiting in key source countries;
7. conversion of applications to offers and acceptances;
8. the structure of international offices;
9. accommodation;
10. scholarships;
11. the efficiency of recruitment channels.

With more than 10 years of national benchmarking data, universities now have annual access not only to what is essentially a performance review of the previous year's IO operations, but also time series data. Additional reports are produced that benchmark certain universities within a designated sub-set group of like or member universities. Australian universities know, for example, that they spend on average a higher proportion of gross onshore international student tuition fee revenue each year on scholarships, fee waivers and stipends for international students than they do on commission payments to student recruitment agents.

The challenges of such an annual undertaking are not insignificant. While universities obviously need to provide data and information for the benchmarking exercise, they need to be able to collect and collate that data and information appropriately in the first place in order to be able to report efficiently. Systems need to be geared up in advance to collect data to facilitate accurate and efficient reporting. I know from personal experience the pain of participating in this important exercise without the support of a system that provided the necessary data in the best possible format.

The benchmarking exercise therefore helps to inform decisions about data collection and system development. Benchmarking reports are also able to

inform considerations about recruitment costs and channel efficiency, team performance, resourcing levels, budgets, target setting and KPI's.

These days, Australian universities participate in four benchmarking exercises annually, providing IO directors with a wealth of information they can draw on in planning and resource allocation. The principle exercise is the benchmarking of International Office operations, as described above. While resourcing of mobility activity within International Offices is included in this study, a comprehensive but separate benchmarking exercise is also undertaken each year to examine all other aspects of student mobility, including participating numbers, types of experience, destinations and discipline backgrounds of participating students. The third key data gathering activity measures commencement and enrolment data for all international student types at Australian universities, onshore and offshore, for full degree, exchange and study abroad programs. This exercise is conducted three times annually to capture all intakes throughout the year. Universities can see their relative standing within their state and nationally in terms of both commencing numbers and enrolled numbers, including broken down by source country. The final benchmarking exercise gathers publically available data reported by universities to the federal education ministry, and feeds it back to institutions to demonstrate their standing against other Australian universities. Data include student academic progression rates and retention/attrition performance, comparing both domestic and international student cohorts. The common reporting format for all of these benchmarking exercises indicates individual institutional performance measured against blind data of universities across the country. Each institution can see for each data set where it sits in relation to all other institutions and the national average, but can't identify other individual institutions.

Clearly, there is a lot of work that goes into international education benchmarking at Australian universities. International Offices are able to measure their own performance, see where they stand vis-à-vis other institutions, and identify threats and critical success factors crucial to their future recruitment prospects. This includes the efficiency or otherwise of recruitment channels such as agents and pathway programs and cost of recruitment by source country, and provides the intelligence needed to inform strategic planning and implementation.

Stephen Connelly was the inaugural Chair of AUIDF and oversaw Australia's first national IO benchmarking exercise. He is the immediate Past President of the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA), an ISEP board member and a Director of GlobalEd Services (www.globaledservices.com). This paper is an accompaniment to the NAFSA 2014 session "Using Data to Advocate for Comprehensive Internationalization."