Effective Postgraduate Student Recruitment Strategy: Identifying the Prerequisites

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Abstract
The increased accessibility to higher education, coupled with the heightened aspirations for lifelong learning among working professionals have significantly raised the demand for postgraduate degrees in the country. Stiff competition among institutions of higher learning has driven education providers to run universities as structured business entities, where the postgraduate programs offered in the respective institutions are adaptively designed, skillfully packaged and tenaciously marketed. This paper examines the basic prerequisites of expectations and perceptions of potential students for enrolment in the University's postgraduate programs, with the aim of acquiring a better understanding of the students' perception and expectations as a first step in fostering effective branding of the University. A simple online survey was conducted for data collection over a short period of a week, to gauge the response for a number of basic questions. Considering that the University is relatively young in terms of provision of postgraduate programs (20 years), the survey was necessary to identify the salient aspects in outlining an effective recruitment strategy for sustained enrolment of postgraduate students. Besides, the means by which respondents prefer to explore the University and the programs available was identified, along with their preferred choices of tokens upon registration as new students at the University. In a nutshell, the survey shed light on the general recognition and identification of the University, as well as the potentially effective outreach channel and manner to improve the chances of successful new postgraduate student recruitment. A close-loop marketing and recruitment model was also proposed in support of a greater sustainable student enrolment system.
Keywords: Higher Education, Accessibility, Recruitment, Marketing Strategy

Introduction
The boom of knowledge economy since the 80's has been propelling expansion in higher education to enhance the accessibility to university degrees via mass delivery systems (Marginson, 2015). As with everything else, the higher education sector has been overridden by the relentless waves of internet and IT technological advancement ushering in creative and innovative ways of promotion, advertising, delivery and above all, connectivity with the global economy. As rightly foreseen by Brown et al. (2001), high-skilled and high-valued workers would increasingly be in demand to maintain competitiveness of business enterprises and to

meet the rising living standards. In this chaotic fast-pace highway of development, the job market for graduates has become remarkably more and more globalized and competitive (Brown et al., 2010), and interestingly, higher education remains the key to upkeep the societal balance in terms of engagement, tolerance and trust (McMahon, 2010).

At the same time, the open market trend has since spilled over to the higher education industry, with widespread deregulation almost a decade ago increasing the competition within the public sector as well as between the public and private sectors in a market-driven environment, consequently raising the heat among higher education providers to attract and train students to meet the market's demand (Gibbs, 2008; Al Shbail, 2018). Barney (1991) suggested that to steer clear of competition, universities should centre on identifying their strength and niche while emphasizing their difference and specialty. The traditional efforts in student recruitment which often focus on providing universal access to a higher degree with disregard for excellence and talents, Aamodt and Kyvik (2005) have apparently grown less relevant with time.

To remain in the mainstream of training and providing high-skilled and high-valued workers, universities need to go back to the drawing board for a reconditioning of the quality of services and repositioning in the aggressive market to maintain a competitive edge (Stimac, 2012). In other words, universities are called upon to think and function like a business entity with adoption and implementation of business as well as marketing strategies (Badlee et al., 2010), and to build a notable image of distinction for establishing a solid footing in the competitive higher education market (Pataloya, 2017; Tsoutsa et al., 2013). An interesting parallel development is the intensive endeavour to recruit international students by universities, either by setting up shop in other countries (Scott, 2017; Mokhtar, Shaifuddin, Saman & Baba 2018), offering attractive scholarships (Knight and Morshidi, 2011) or introduction of new government policies. All these indicate the global market-driven trend of higher education in general, encompassing the fundamental economic elements such as finance, workforce, value, new age education and branding.

This paper describes a quick pulse-checking of the prospective market and students for postgraduate programs at the University. Using a simple online survey, the perceptions and expectations of potential postgraduate students for enrolment in the University's postgraduate programs were examined as basic prerequisites forming the first step towards effective branding of the University.

Quick Survey
Branding the University by making a definitive articulation of the compelling uniqueness of the institution to ensure it stands out from the competitors in its own class is a first crucial step towards effective and successful marketing. The approach channels adopted for branding purposes should be multi-prong, extending from basic public exhibitions and events to strategic merchandising, social media, alumni network as well as industrial linkages, among others. The branding exercise seeks to establish connection and engagement with prospective students, through targeted advertisements and promotional activities to strongly advocate the University by nudging it onto centre stage without glossing over the less-than-satisfactory features. The survey was used a quick tool to gauge the basic parameters for the purpose.

The survey was simply divided into background questions and outreach tools, requiring respondents to answer either 'YES' or 'NO' for capturing the first impression with little or no premeditation. In the former section, respondents were asked of their current employment status, general and iconic recognition of the University as well as interest to know the University better; while the latter section explores the respondents' preferred channel of advertisement and engagement for the University to literally 'make an impression' and attract them for enrolment. The questions asked (Question 1-4: Background question, Question 5-7: Outreach tools) in the survey are as follows:

Question 1:
What is your current status of employment?
Question 2:
Do you know UTHM? If YES, go to Question 3. If NO, go to Question 4.
Question 3:
What is the first image that comes to mind when you think of UTHM?
Question 4:
Would you like to get to know UTHM?
Question 5:
What is the most iconic feature at UTHM?
Question 6:
What is your preferred choice of medium to learn more about UTHM?
Question 7:
What would you like to have as a souvenir upon registration at UTHM?

Results and Discussions
Followings are the analysis and discourse based on the responses acquired from 104 respondents over a period of one week in the online survey.

Background Questions
Status of respondent
Figure 1 shows the status of the respondents in the categories of students in either UTHM or other universities, as well as employees in the government or private sectors. Almost one-third (29.1%) of the respondents were government employees, indicating the tendency of public servants to seek out public universities as potential places to pursue a postgraduate degree. This is perhaps not surprising as the University does have a good track record of pre-arranged cohorts of employees from the public sector enrolling for the various master's programs, including those from local community colleges and vocational training institutions. In addition, the fact that a quarter (25.2%) of the respondents hail from private companies suggests the relatively lower tuition fees compared to private institutions and other more established public universities to be an attractive factor. On the other hand, 28.2% of the respondents were existing UTHM students, while the remaining 17.5% came from other institutions of higher learning (IHLs).

Recognition of UTHM
Considering that UTHM is relatively young in terms of establishment as a public university in the country, 86.4% respondents reported knowing the University seems an encouraging trend (Figure 2). This is indicative of the University visibility and good name in the higher education

sector. Nonetheless, this number could also be inflated by the 28.2% existing students who took on the survey (see Figure 1). The recognition of the University can be attributed to promotional efforts in education fairs, revised website, Facebook and other outreach conduits. Indeed, a separate survey conducted found Facebook to be the most common way potential students get to know about the University, where traditional advertisement via printed media like newspapers saw the lowest report of usage and reference for this purpose.

First image that comes to Mind

This particular question was asked to gauge the most prominent feature of the University that captures the respondents' attention, namely the main buildings on campus, academic programs offered and others (Figure 3). Note that 'aeroplane' refers to the replica erected in the courtyard of the campus as a representation of the new aeronautics program developed and offered by the University. It was only answered by respondents who were affirmative in Question 2. The library being the landmark of the University clearly gained the most hits at 26%, followed by the University's logo (20%). These are positive signs that the University is prominent geographically where the respondents could relate the library architecture with UTHM. It is also suggestive of a reminder of University's role as a respectable institution of higher learning, centralized and represented by the primary repository in the University, i.e. the library. However it is a little puzzling considering the 17% who claimed to not know of anything to be associated with the University as a first image. A plausible explanation is that the respondents concerned have never set foot in the campus or the town of Parit Raja, Batu Pahat.

Getting to know UTHM

Referring to Question 2 and Figure 2, respondents who answered in negative were directed to Question 4, which responses are presented in Figure 4. 86.7% of the respondents were keen to learn more about the University: a positive sign of the interest UTHM raised in them. On the contrary, the 13.3% who did not express wishes to get to know the University were probably having no plans for furthering their studies in the near future or lacks the motivation to make further enquiries due to various factors, such as location, programs and environment deemed unsuitable for their preferences. Of course, possibility of the unkindled interest could include lack of the desired amenities yet to be afforded by the University, especially for international students of various backgrounds and needs. These could include international schools, accommodation, communities of the relevant ethnicity or nationality, suitable food availability and proximity to larger cities (e.g. in approximation, southbound Johor Bahru is over an hour's drive away, while northbound Bandaraya Melaka is 1.5 hours' drive away, and the nation's capital Kuala Lumpur is 3.5 hours' drive away).
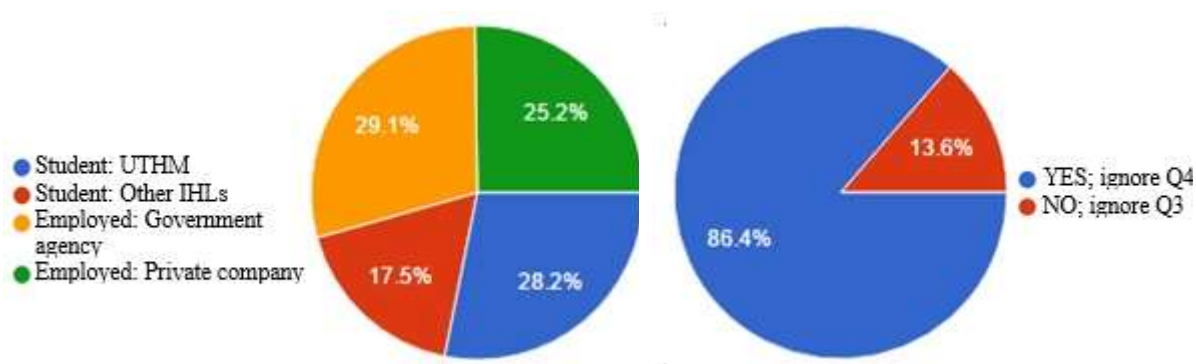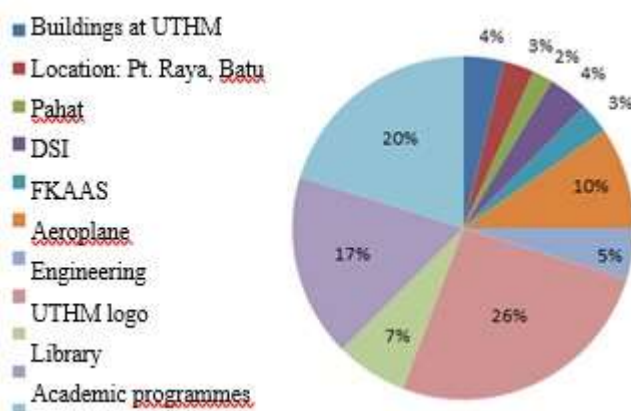
Figure 1. Status of respondents   Figure 2. Recognition of UTHM

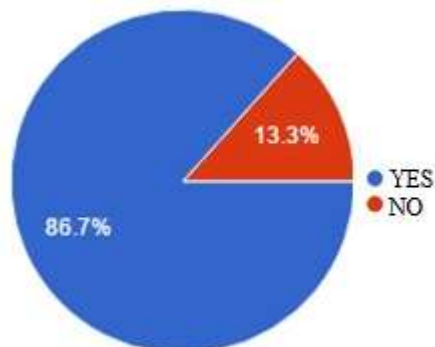Figure 3. First image that comes to mind   Figure 4. Getting to know UTHM

Outreach Tools
Iconic Features
Figure 5 compiles the responses on the iconic feature associated with UTHM. Irrespective of the large portion of the respondents who did not appear to give much thought on the matter, an almost equal number of respondents considered the library (15%) and third prime minister of Malaysia (14%) to be the icons of the University. Note that the University is named after the third prime minister, Tun Hussein Onn who hailed from Batu Pahat where UTHM is located. Choice of the library as the University's icon corresponded with the first image conjured when the University is mentioned (see Figure 3), further highlighting the significance of the structure in association with the University. The historical connotation also hints at the unique brand of the University, i.e. the only public university in the country named after a former prime minister.
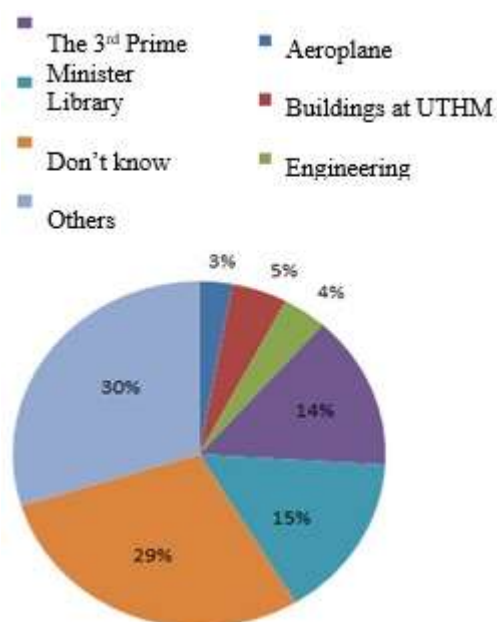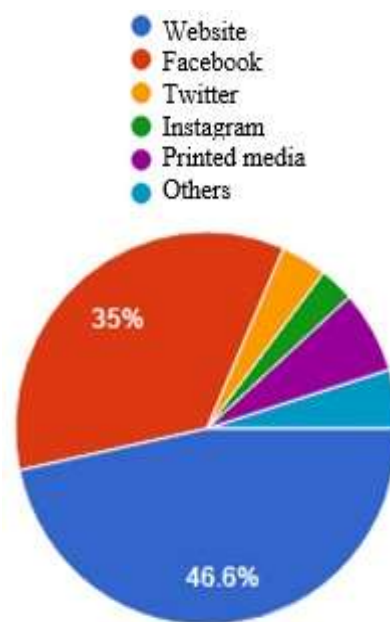

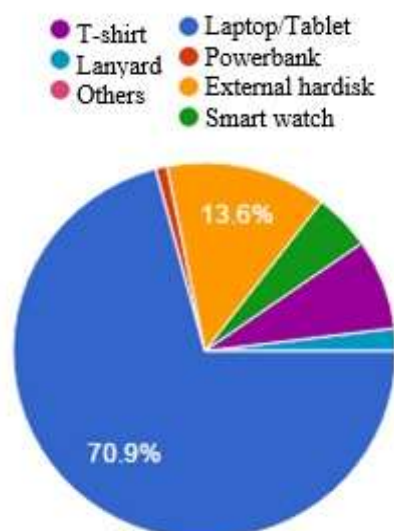Figure 5. Iconic features   Figure 6. Medium of interface

Figure 7. Preferred souvenirs

Medium of Interface

This question aims to extract information on the preferred medium of outreach by the respondents, and the results are presented in Figure 6. Perhaps not surprisingly, nearly half the respondents (46.6%) considered the website to be the most convenient and accessible medium for information on the University. 35% of the respondents learned about UTHM via Facebook, another ubiquitous and popular web-based social platform. Other medium of outreach were seemingly less attractive to the respondents, including the conventional printed media. This is just another sign of the World Wide Web, internet access and extensive global network dominating the mainstream non-face-to-face communications and interaction, which is especially useful for foreign students to obtain information about the University. Indeed, the diminishing impact of information dissemination and advertisement on higher education provision has seen the University cutting back on expenses for such purposes over the years. The latest advertisement by the Centre for Graduate Studies, for instance, covered the space of just a quarter page with only essential information and a QR code that directs readers to the relevant website. This approach was not only more economical but kept pace with the web-based resources accessibility trend adopted by almost all sectors now.

Preferred Souvenirs

It is customary that new registered students are given a token or souvenir. When the question was posted with a list of popular items as choices, 70.9% of the respondents wanted a laptop or tablet. Not surprising, as postgraduate students certainly require a laptop or tablet for their studies, though an expensive token to ask for really. Along the same line 13.6% of the respondents would like to have an external hardisk as a souvenir, most probably for storage of work and references accumulated in their postgraduate studies then. The responses clearly point towards the practicality of gifts preferred by the potential students, who could put the IT gears into good use in the duration of their postgraduate studies at UTHM. Nonetheless it is common knowledge that the 'gifts' are really funded partially by the students' tuition fees. Hence giving out expensive tokens would inadvertently raise the tuition fees and this may not be favourable in maintaining competitiveness in terms of the costs of study.

Marketing Strategy: Philosophy and Outline

While acknowledging the survey to be setting out feelers for the 'likes' and 'dislikes', as well as 'knowns' and 'unknowns' of the public to lay the grounds in marketing strategy design, it is important to have a comprehensive marketing plan to ensure closing of the loop even after the 'clients' are roped in. Figure 8 shows the close-loop marketing and recruitment exercise proposed for a greater sustainable student enrolment system of the University. As can be seen, the survey results and analysis are relevant and useful for the initial outreach tool design stage to attract the outliers either unlikely or contemplating to consider UTHM as their choice of institution for pursuing a postgraduate degree. Following are the descriptions of the proposed model.
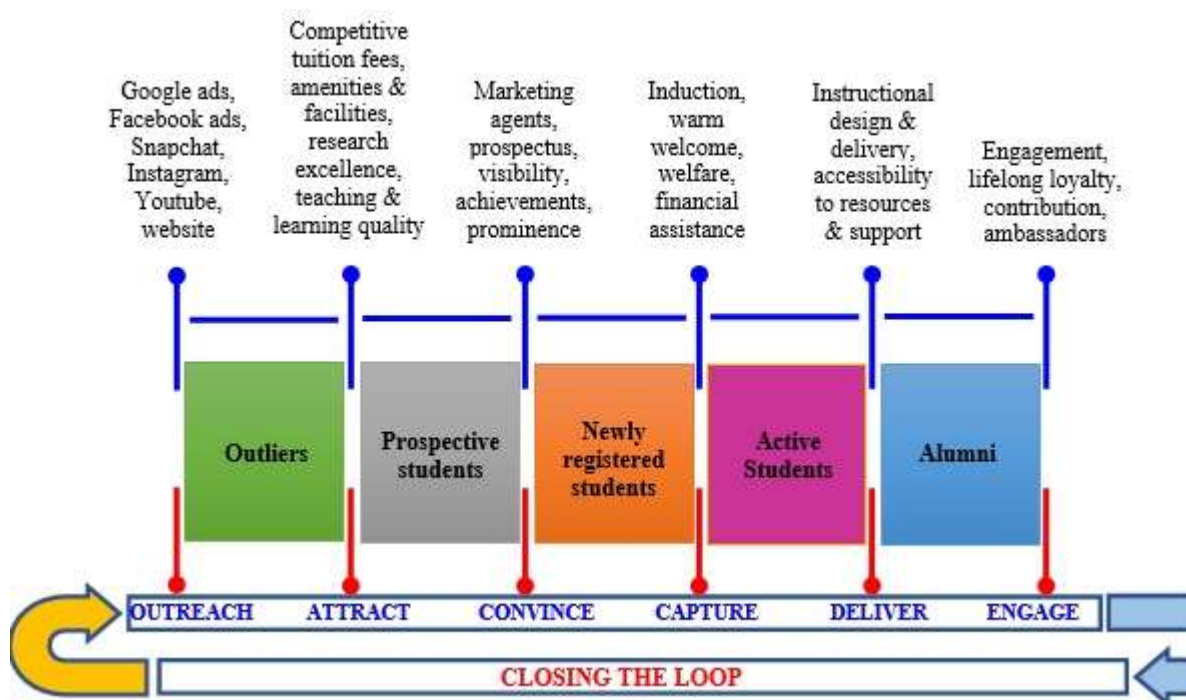

Figure 8.Close-loop marketing and recruitment process

The proposed model consists of 6 stages of actions for 5 evolving categories of people. The actions include outreach, attract, convince, capture, deliver and engage in sequential manner, and self-recycle from the end in a continuous loop. At the outreach stage, primarily internet-based and mobile advertisement campaigns are carried out via platforms like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube for a greater contact radius with the outliers especially. Once contact is made and the attention commanded, efforts are expended to attract and transform the prospective students. The key areas to maintain a competitive edge in the race for new recruits encompass tuition fees, amenities and facilities as well as a conducive and supportive learning or research environment. Next, drawing the prospective students into campus would require concentrated efforts of the marketing team of direct and indirect nature, substantiated by the good reputation and standing of the University in the convincing act. Once a new student is 'captured' and registers, enrolment is notched and the recruitment mechanism is technically completed. Induction of newly registered students into the University would involve taking into account the welfare of the freshmen to avoid early withdrawals due to various reasons, such as financial problem, ill-suited adaptation process

(especially for international students) and others. Nonetheless as mentioned earlier, the proposed model constitutes part of a larger University's agenda to not just raise the enrolment number but to ensure a viable system for long term growth of the institution with relation to number and quality of students as well as graduates. Hence the proposed model extends beyond student recruitment as elaborated in the following paragraph.

In order to ensure students receive value for money in the pursuit of a postgraduate degree, the University must deliver what is promised to meet the expectations of a responsible and accountable higher education provider. It is imperative to put in place well developed instructional design and delivery templates to be implemented by both the academic and supporting arms of the University. The wellbeing and needs of the active students should be constantly monitored alongside the basic teaching, learning and research support provided throughout their study at the University. Satisfaction of the services given and forging of a good relationship that lasts beyond graduation would engage and keep the graduates as ambassadors for the University in future promotional exercises. The sense of gratitude and loyalty instilled in the graduates, buoyed by remembrance of the nurture, cultivation and assistance received at the University would encourage the graduates to spread good words of their alma mater. Having alumni speak highly of their alma mater is arguably the most positive representation of the institution's worth and make honest promotional outreach for those keen or half-keen on signing up for a postgraduate program at UTHM.

Conclusions
The study shed light on the prerequisites to be taken into consideration when laying effective marketing strategy for the University's postgraduate programs. The good mix of respondents from among students and employees points to certain attraction UTHM holds for the potential new recruits, while a good many of the respondents (>80%) already have an idea of what and where UTHM is. Besides, recognition of the University's library and logo suggests an encouraging level of established standing among institutions of higher learning in the country, despite the University's rather young age. In exploring the outreach tools, the library remains the most popular iconic feature favored by the respondents, and the website and Facebook are the most preferred channel for information retrieval on the University and postgraduate programs offered. When asked what they would like to receive as souvenir upon registration, laptops / tablets and external hard disk clearly led the race as these are useful IT gears for the potential students' studies. Finally, based on the survey results analysis, a close-loop marketing and recruitment strategy was proposed: with a comprehensive multi-channel outreach approach to attract new students, followed by meet-the-promises delivery of teaching, learning and research support in a conducive academic environment, and concludes with the engagement of graduates as lifetime promotional ambassadors for the University in the cycle. In the greater context of an institution of higher learning drawing prospective students to its bosom, the university is obliged to stay true to the factual worthiness of its academic standing, research achievement and conducive level of campus living in the promotional exercise. Overblown credentials could backfire as disappointed students enroll but drop out, or worse, disseminate not necessarily correct but definitely negative comments about the university via social media. Like bush fires, the disastrous outcome could be long and wide in extent, leaving an indelible tarnishing scar on the institution's good name and sowing seeds of doubt in potential future students. Then, any promotional efforts would seem lackadaisical if not futile at all.

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