Exploring the relationship between Australian university websites and international student enrolments

Nirma Sadamali Jayawardena, Mitchell Ross and Debra Grace
Department of Marketing, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia

Abstract

Purpose – This paper focuses on exploring the relationship between Australian university websites and international student enrolments. Few studies have investigated this relationship and, as such, this research addresses some of the existing knowledge gaps.

Design/methodology/approach – A mono-method qualitative methodology was adopted for this study. Primary data collection was through the website content of selected Australian universities. Six Australian universities were selected; three universities with positive international student enrolments and three universities with negative international student enrolments. The website content of the selected six universities was analysed using the dimensions of the ICTRT framework (Li and Wang, 2011) to evaluate website effectiveness. The study results were based on two analysis levels, an overall thematic analysis (level 1) and an ICTRT framework-based analysis (level 2). The thematic analysis, based on the major themes and concepts, was conducted using Leximancer 4.5.

Findings – Two major findings emerged. First, the websites of universities with positive international student enrolments tend to be more people focused whereas websites from universities with negative international student enrolments tend to be technology or system focused. Second, websites from universities with positive international student enrolments tend to be more visionary or forward focused whereas websites from universities with negative international student enrolments tend to be more backward focused. Additionally, the study findings indicate some important website marketing strategies for Australian universities with negative international student enrolments.

Research limitations/implications – This study used ICTRT framework to evaluate the websites of Australian universities. Li and Wang (2011) proposed this framework for evaluating websites. Hotel, travel agency and destination marketing organisation websites have been assessed using the ICTRT framework (Li and Wang, 2011; Pai *et al.*, 2014; Sun *et al.*, 2017). This model has not previously been used, however, to evaluate tertiary education websites. This study is among the first to examine the university websites using a theoretical framework employed in destination marketing organisations which is a major theoretical contribution.

Practical implications – The major findings indicate that the website attributes, which are future focused and people oriented, are necessary for university websites with negative international student enrolments. Similar to university websites with positive international student enrolments, university websites with negative international student enrolments should also provide more contact details of staff members, should be more people oriented and should provide information focused on future students rather than past and current students. These practical implications are useful for administrative bodies in Australian universities for increasing international student enrolments.

Originality/value – This study is among the first to examine the university websites using a theoretical framework used in destination marketing organizations which is a major theoretical contribution. For example, this study has provided an illustrative example of how a research model of destination marketing organizations will be used in the universities or higher education context.

Keywords Australian higher education sector, ICTRT framework, International student enrolments, University websites, Website marketing strategies

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

International higher education is a major growth industry worldwide (Brown and Mazzarol, 2009). Universities and colleges are striving to increase their student recruitment and advertising campaigns to attract most eligible applicants to their campuses. International education is Australia's largest service export and third largest export. In 2016, on-shore international students represented 21.1% and domestic enrolments accounted for 78.8% of