Abstract

A framework for relationship-based higher education management

Dr. Attila Pausits

Based on the stakeholder view, this paper emphasises the importance of the relationship between higher education institutions and their stakeholders. With a special focus on this relationship, the author describes the student lifecycle with a broad and strategic view toward establishing and improving a long-term relationship with the higher education institution. Within the framework of life long learning, students should return to the higher education institution many times throughout their lives in order to update their knowledge. The author describes the different tasks and important aspects of relationship-oriented higher education management within his concept of student relationship management.

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1. Introduction

Institutional changes in higher education (HE) have become necessary as a result of competition in the market, due primarily to the increasing number of public and private higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as the Bologna Process as the driving force toward a new European Higher Education Area. Additionally, new HE regulations in many European countries mean that HE is in a process of change. More market- and stakeholder orientation leads to a competition-oriented HE system and to new profile development at the institutions consequently underlining the need for innovative management instruments. HEIs thus require modern management approaches and tools to cope with this "competitive stress". The question of exactly how these concepts are implemented is the particular challenge faced by an expert organisation (Pellert 1999) on the way to further developing HEI organisation and the corresponding professionalisation of management. Meanwhile, HEIs have demonstrated a certain amount of resistance against the adoption of new models as well as reform ideas. In many cases, Humboldt's ideal of autonomy runs counter to Machiavellian objectives and limits as well as the state and governmental influence (Clark 1983). Thus, there is a conflict of priorities between the impulse for renewal and the necessity for control on the policy, institutional, instrumental and individual levels (Hödl, Zegelin 1999, p. 12ff.; Cordes, Westermann 2001, p. 7ff.; Fröhlich, Jütte 2004, p.10f.).
HEIs are knowledge-based expert organisations with a strong focus on teaching and research. Recently, HEI leaders tend to think of academic services as the third pillar, and they have begun to pay more attention to these services within HEIs. Education and research activities are de facto services to the public, companies, students, etc. Faced with strong competition in the HE market, institutions are compelled to search for competitive advantages. Knowledge production alone is not enough. This limited mission of HEIs has to be changed. The integration of a service culture provides additional support for success, over and above the original tasks of HEIs. In this "service mode", HEIs have to change away from the attitude of being ivory towers and should be transformed into relationship-based organisations.
The relationship management approach is theoretically based on the idea of stakeholder-value and customer relationship management. HEIs have to clearly identify their stakeholders and develop specific strategies to use the relationship to these stakeholders in a proper way. The framework described in this article is a theoretical model. Some of elements have already been implemented at the Danube University Krems, Austria (DUK). DUK is a state university for which more than 70 percent of the annual budget derives from third party, mainly postgraduate, study programme fees. As a European "model project" of a state university offering only postgraduate programmes, the DUK is one of the most entrepreneurial universities within Europe's higher education landscape. Theoretical and practical issues will be discussed below, following the development of the framework of relationship management as well as the preliminary experiences with this model at the Danube University Krems.

2. The Rules of Relationship Management

The orientation and "changes in knowledge transfer" (Müller-Böling 2000, p. 5ff) from teaching to learning refer to a customer orientation in which the "potentials and processes are coordinated with the learning prerequisites provided by the students." (Hansen 1999, p. 371) Examples of this are the new flexibility of times and places of learning or the use of E-learning. Improvement of an institution's services occurs by orienting the services towards the students, as well as through the better use of students as external factors. This customer orientation is reflected in the main processes of the HEI, i.e. teaching and research, as well as in the perception of students, strategic partners and enterprises as "customers". The core competences of HEIs are still knowledge development, transformation and sharing. Meanwhile, HEIs should also become a "partner for life" through life long learning. As a knowledge service organisation, the HEI is not yet prepared for this shift. The first steps toward creating new relationships and developing competitive advantages for the institution include such initiatives as alumni management, technology transfer centres or continuing education centres based on the core competences of teaching, research and academic services. More and more scientific studies are adopting "customer orientation" as the motto of reform efforts at higher education institutions (Bastian 2002; Krulis-Randa 1996; Meissner 1986, p. 125ff.). The approaches, for example, of Hansen, Sinz or Müller-Böling, (Hansen 1999; Sinz 1998a; Müller-Böling 2000) to turn HEIs into real service providers are becoming more and more accepted within HE organisations and the relevant ministries. These demands are reinforced by the causality between services and the HEIs (Bastian 2002, p. 11f.; Heiling 2003; Hansen 1999, p. 369ff):

- Services are immaterial. At the higher education institution, they include research (in the sense of the progress of knowledge) and teaching (as knowledge transfer) (Sinz 1998b, p. 3; Hansen 1999, p. 371).
- Services are largely about experience and trust, and are thus *a priori* not entirely measurable (Wochnowski 1999, p. 287ff). For example, the evaluation of the quality of teaching only takes place during or at the end of studies (von Lüde 1999, p 135f). Students must trust the HE institution to follow through on the evaluation results.
- Services, moreover, require an external factor – these are the students at the higher education institution – which actively participates in the production process of the service and thus has an influence on the quality (Hansen 1999, p. 371).

A fundamental difference between HEIs and service enterprises is the educational task. Different target groups have divergent demands with regard to teaching and research. Thus, an orientation towards any individual group of customers – students, the state, providers of third party funds, etc. – is, strictly speaking, only possible to a limited extent. Instead, the HEI has to consider the interests of all the social stakeholder- and customer groups (stakeholder approach) in the course of any educational task (Stegner 2000, p. 1f.; Franck 2000, p. 19ff.; Hödl, Zegelin, 1999, p. 5).

In addition to their educational tasks, HEIs also have to pay attention to the particular logic of the relevant market at any given time. A transition from a sellers' market to a buyers' market has occurred. This transition forced HEIs to critically examine their own potentials and processes and to better orient themselves to the various demands (Thielemann 1997; Schäfer 2003, p. 144; Rothschild, White 1993, p. 20f.; Stauss, Balderjahn, Wimmer, 1999, p. 1). In a sellers' market, there is little incentive to orient potentials and processes towards the expectations of different groups of customers by means of a service orientation (Schrader, Eretge 1999, p.104). A shift from sovereign institutions (such as education ministries) demanding services to potential students has only begun in recent years. For example, the Western Hungarian University in Sopron offers a business administration study programme in German. This educational offering appeals to both Hungarian students as well as those from neighbouring countries, but it is not one of the priorities of the national ministry responsible for education.

There are different approaches to the theoretical examination of the education market as a buyers' market. Ruch calls this "trusting the marketplace" (Ruch 2001, p 68ff), Slaughter and Leslie even speak of "academic capitalism" (Slaughter, Leslie 1997), and Keller sees a "management revolution" (Keller 1983, p. 16ff) at HEIs. These considerations indicate a shift from a transaction-oriented and knowledge-based perspective to a relationship-oriented perspective in HE management. The advantages of relationship orientation are systematised by Hennig-Thurau and Klee (Henning-Thurau, Klee 1997, p. 737ff) in the following way:

- **Social Benefits** refer to the forming of social relationships between customers and companies. In the context of higher education institutions, this finds its expression in the social integration of students into the HEI (Tinto 1993), as well as into the HEI's community as a network.
- **Confidence Benefits**, on the other hand, result from the degree to which students and graduates have confidence in the actions of the HEI and its members.
- **Special Treatment Benefits** result from the degree to which customers experience individual care by the HEI.
- **Identity-related Benefits** in the context of higher education refer to the advantages that result from the public prestige and image of the HEI and the positive consequences they have on professional life.

Customer orientation does not automatically ensure the customer base, but it does create the necessary preconditions for such a base. It has to be clearly stated that periodic satisfaction ratings and evaluations of teachers and courses are a necessary, although not the only, requirement for building long-term relationships between students and any given HEI. Today, due to the lifelong learning (LLL) approach, we assume that students will not only study at the HEI once, but they will have recourse to the (teaching) services of the HEI again and again over time. Thus, the relationship takes on the character of lifelong companions. However, most HEIs are not yet prepared for this kind of commitment. Continuing education in sciences is still underdeveloped as a basic support and participation of HEIs in the LLL-process, particularly at public HEIs in Europe. A reorientation of HEIs is necessary here.

The potentials, processes and outcomes of an HEI form the basis of its relationship orientation. Hansen emphasises that the HEI's processes and potentials are rarely coordinated because "the desired outcome quality is not always clearly defined and because the potentials and processes are not interpreted clearly enough as determinants of the outcomes" (Hansen 1999, p. 377). Therefore, attention has to be paid to coordination in the development of the Student Lifecycle Management model. The organisation of potentials and processes of the production of services determines the quality of the outcomes.

In service-oriented fund appropriation systems, students are the HEI's capital. Something similar applies to alumni, who open up attractive cooperative and financing opportunities for HEIs above and beyond the students' studies. Thus, one of the paramount tasks of the higher education institution is to structure its relationship to these two groups without restricting students' freedom in the process.

A relationship is based on strategy, processes and people to manage the interaction with stakeholders in an organised way. New information and communication technologies such as internet, data warehouse solutions, etc. are useful to support this triangle and improve their performance.

First of all, relationship management stands for the development and implementation of a new stakeholder-centred higher education strategy. A re-orientation of all the processes and responsibilities of HEIs towards stakeholders has to take place in order to implement relationship management. Relationship management is a higher education strategy aided by state-of-the-art technologies that is used to optimise the quality of the relationship between the higher education institution and its stakeholders in the long term. The task of relationship management is therefore to analyse, plan and structure the connection channels of the stakeholders. Along the lines of McKenna (1991, p. 86ff) and Diller (2000, p. 20ff), the basic principles of Relationship Management are as follows:

- **Intention of a unique relationship:** The objective is to set up a special relationship, which has the goal of beneficial cooperation for all parties involved .
- **Individuality towards stakeholders:** Different types of stakeholders should receive different service options.
- **Information on stakeholder:** In order to be able to fulfil the first two points, it is imperative to obtain, store and analyse as much comprehensive information on the relationship and stakeholders as possible.
- **Integration of stakeholders:** Stakeholders' should be connected to the HEI in the best way possible, according to their role.
- **Interactions with stakeholders:** It is only possible to gather data and information or to build up a relationship at all through interaction with stakeholders.
- **Investment in stakeholder relationships:** None of these steps can be realised for free. Relationship management also requires the readiness to commit oneself financially. In view of the target successes and outcomes, there are more than just costs involved; an investment in stakeholders and thus in the future of the HEI as an organisation is also necessary.

These six I's are the basic driving forces for strategic relationship management. In the end, the framework for relationship management is based on these rules and has to follow them by creating specific tasks and actions to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the relationship with the stakeholders.

The key element of the information technology revolution, particularly the Internet, is the opportunity it gives HEIs to choose how they interact with their stakeholders. The Internet opens up the possibility to create better relationships with stakeholders than was previously possible in the offline world. By combining the abilities to respond directly to potential student requests, for example, and to provide the same stakeholder group with highly interactive customized services, HEIs have a greater ability to establish, nurture, and sustain long-term relationships today than ever before. This is also necessary for opening the gates of the ivory towers, as was mentioned earlier. Gibbons at al. describe this as Mode Two knowledge production (Gibbons at al., 1994). Whereas Mode 1 is seen as discipline-oriented, homogenous, stable and more hierarchically organised, Mode 2 is seen as transdisciplinary, heterogeneous, heterarchically organised and transient. In Mode 2, value, sustainability and social acceptability are fundamental criteria in the evaluation of quality. In Mode 1, it was the academic communities that "spoke" to society. Under Mode 2, society "speaks back" to the academic communities. Thus, the conventional academic model of "open science" and discipline-based research driven by internal reflection is challenged (Arbo and Benneworth p.40). The connectivity between HEI and their stakeholders is more complex and therefore strategic management of the different relationships to different stakeholders' groups is needed. The hybridisation between forms of knowledge and forms of organisations, and previously separated realms of society are becoming more and more intertwined. Figure 1 illustrates the complexity of stakeholder relationships in Mode 2:

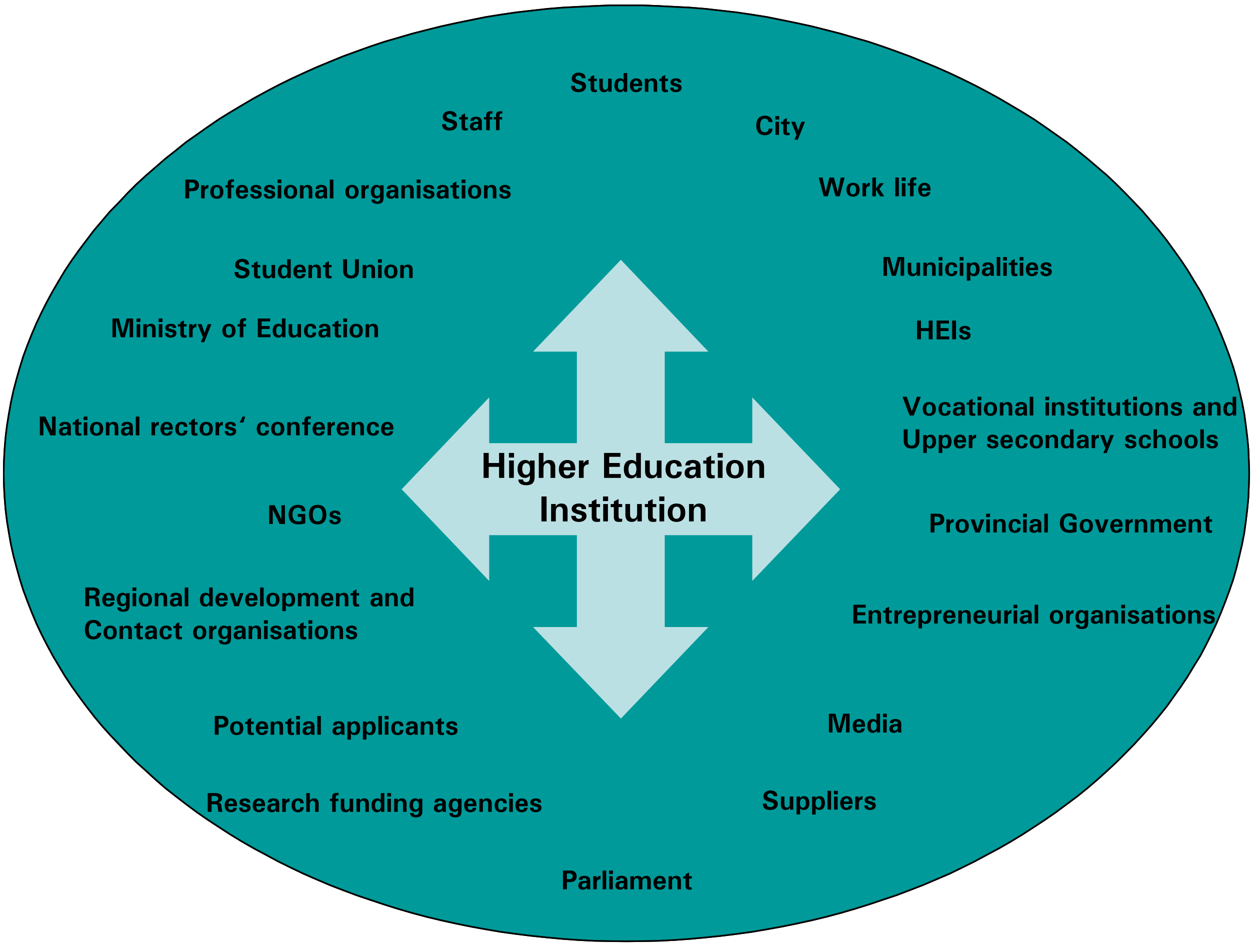

Figure 1: HEI relationships in Mode 2

The named relationships in Figure 1 could be divided into relationships between the HEI and governmental bodies, businesses, and customers. All three groups need different relationship strategies and activities. The success of the HEI is significantly determined by the quality of these contact points between the outside and inside world of the institutions. It is an absolute requirement to mange all these different levels and highly differentiated relationships in a systematic framework.

3. The Relationship Management Model

The crucial point is what higher education managers need to know about their stakeholders and how that information is used to develop a complete relationship perspective. A specific example of one stakeholder group is used below to introduce the relationship management model. As one of the key customers of HEIs, the stakeholder group of students was chosen for this exercise. The target audience contains the whole student life cycle, from first contact with a potential student until the person achieves graduate status and enters the alumni phase. The basic model includes a set of seven basic components (Winer 2001, p.91):

- a data of target audience activity
- analyses of the database

- given the analyses, decision about which target audience to target,
- tools for targeting the audience
- how to build relationships with the targeted audience
- privacy issues
- metrics for measuring the success of the relationship management programme

The creation of a target audience database file is an essential first step toward a full relationship management solution. This is the groundwork for all relationship-based activities. In the case of students, this includes student records but also involves seeking historical student contact data from the student service centre. What are the important elements? Preferably, the database should include information about the following:
Transaction – this should contain a whole study history with additional details (class attendance, study and research profiles, university activities such as sports or jobs e.g. at the institute or centre)
Student contacts – nowadays, there is an increasing number of student contact points via various channels and environments. This should not only include marks and number of semesters, but any student- or HEI-initiated contact (student request for a dormitory place or HEI invitation to a conference, etc).
Descriptive information –e.g. origin, age, etc. This is for segmentation and other data analysis purposes.
Response to communication stimuli – This part of the information file should contain information on whether or not the target person responded to a communication initiative triggered by the HEI as well as any other direct contact.

The following figure shows basic data sources:

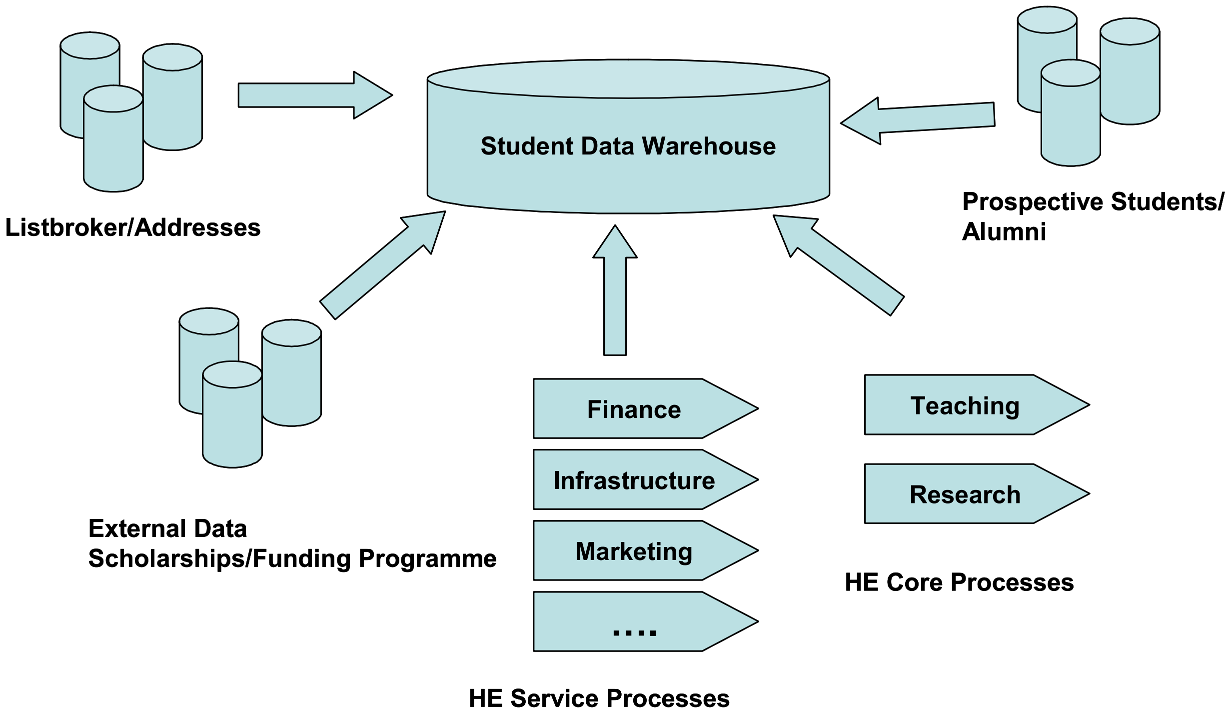

Figure 2: Student Data Warehouse

Traditionally, student databases have been analysed with the intent to define drop-out rates, average length of study, ratio of male to female, etc. If the HEI would like to play a better role in the lifelong learning (LLL) process and bring graduate students back to the HEI multiple times for more than just class reunions, then have it must also consider marketing campaigns for LLL programmes, or even use the data to develop tailored and customised programmes for job professionals. But this target audience could also be more profitably used for targeting the most appropriate alumni for sponsoring and fundraising activities. This is a change in how students are viewed; interaction with them occurs not once but several times and a lifetime student is valued through developing different common activities and exchange processes. This could lead to increasing the number of HEI services, higher study fees and increased income for the HEI, reducing marginal costs of the HEI's products and services, or reducing student acquisition costs e.g. for LLL programmes.

As an example, the Danube University Krems once had seventeen different databases. Nearly every department had its own database. A wide range of different IT solutions were found, from a single excel list to a self-developed access database, to other professional solutions. Finally – after a three-year project – the university now has a single database; all corporate units and data entities have been integrated in one large database with the same interface and programme for everyone to support the relationship between the university and its clients, students, etc.

The next step in the framework is to find the fit between HEI services and study programmes and the right customers. The main problem is that the best way to know the needs is to have direct and high frequency interaction. In this way, the HEI is able to gather the right and highest quality information. Figure 3 shows the different HEI units and their interaction "attitudes". The most important part for collecting data is the upper left quadrant. There are some disadvantages in data development in the upper right quadrant as well as the lower left quadrant. The lower right quadrant is highly dependent on the other three since the rectorate is less involved in gathering data but it is very important to have the valid and pertinent information for decision-making in strategic planning. Therefore, the rectorate should require the other units to develop a useful and effective database.

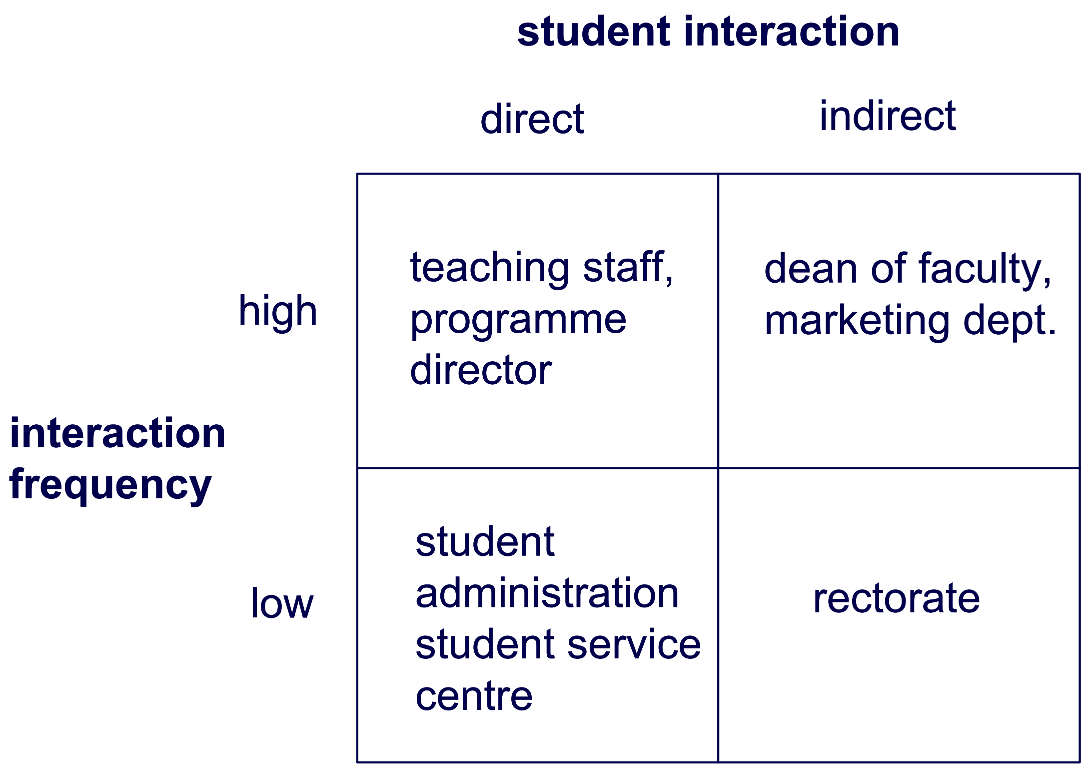

Figure 3: Student interaction matrix

In the course of finding the fit between HEI services and study programmes and the right customers requires consideration of the services and products and the customers (students, alumni, etc.). This could mean, for example, selecting a marketing activity for a newly established programme. There could be various motivations for such a selection beyond the issue of teaching, such as a new fundraising project, lobbyism, etc. The point is that if the potential target audience is not clearly identified, the actions and activities cannot be conducted in an effective and efficient way. Furthermore, even if the HEI selects the right target audience, the targeting actions are also essential. Mass marketing approaches such as television, radio, or print advertising are useful for generating awareness and achieving other communication objectives, but they are poorly-suited for relationship management because they are so impersonal. This is one of the reasons why the Danube University Krems decided to use more unconventional approaches, such as direct mailing, telemarketing, and internet marketing as a new portfolio of marketing activities. Peppers and Rogers (Peppers, Rogers 1999) have long urged business companies to begin to dialogue with their customers through these kinds of targeted approaches rather then talking “at customers with mass media”. After nearly ten years, HEIs are also discovering the possibilities of one-on-one marketing.

Of course relationships are not built and sustained solely through direct e-mailing, but rather through the types of programmes that are available, for which e-mail may be a delivery mechanism. Let us return to the idea of LLL. If the HEI would like to be a serious partner in this process, then the institution needs a retention programme as well. In this context, retention means that the HEI offers special services for students and alumni (or for other potential target audiences). This allows the HEI to increase its retention rate. At this point, the question of the relationship between product and service satisfaction and the institutional success arises. New quality management tasks in HE are examining this issue via e.g. student satisfaction with teachers and teaching programmes. It is already understood that the institution must constantly measure satisfaction levels and develop programmes that help them deliver performance beyond the expectations of the targeted audience. There are different ways to focus on retention, such as, for example, loyalty programmes (recognisable from "other sectors" such as frequent flyer programmes by airlines, etc). Customization is another a good example. Some HEIs are already addressing this by running in-house-programmes for different companies. This means that the HEI is focusing on the needs of a certain company (or companies) by offering a tailor-made programme for the company's employees. Community-building activities are another typical type of retention orientation. The best example is alumni management, and the provision of alumni network services.

The relationship management system depends upon a database of the target audience and analyses of the data for further effective targeting of marketing communications and relationship-building actions. There is an obvious connection between the ability of HEIs to better deliver services and the quantity and quality of information needed to enable this delivery. It is important to note, however, that along with the popularity of the Internet, many HEI stakeholder groups are concerned about the amount of personal information contained in databases and how the HEI uses it. Thus, the issue of privacy extends all the way through the seven steps of the framework.

The new idea of relationship-oriented HE management means that new indicators used by HE managers to measure the success of HEI services and products have to be introduced. Up to now, indicators in HE are developed mainly from an administration perspective and less from a managerial point of view. Information management and decision-making support systems are still underdeveloped. The Danube University Krems uses a software tool that measures success, e.g. by counting the response rate to a direct mailing. DUK can also measure certain specific financial data, such as the cost of student recruitment. Most of HEIs in Europe could not calculate this data. All such measures reflect an improved system for acquiring and processing internal data in order to determine how the HEI is performing at the stakeholder level.

4. Conclusion

In future, HEIs have to make better use of their relationship capital with students and alumni. If alumni are the only group considered as customers of HEIs because, as former students, they can support the university via sponsoring and other contributions, it is already too late. Instead, the alumni work has to begin when the students first make contact with the HEI, even before they begin their studies. The potential relationship with alumni can only be used if the process of forming the relationship is seen not as a purely isolated activity, but as part of a process in the sense of a full life cycle. Therefore, it is essential to shift from a knowledge- to a relationship orientation. The relationship can be better structured and used over the long term if it is oriented toward each of the various life stages of students. Analogue to this, other stakeholder relations could be managed in the same way focusing on different stages of the relationship.

Finally, the customer-oriented management is about creating framework conditions that make it possible to proactively proceed in the service processes of the HEI (Homburg, Sieben 2000, p. 490f.). It is necessary to systematically stimulate stakeholder relationships towards segment-specific strategic objectives so that the desired success and an ideal type of relationship can be assured in each stage.

The special service character of education has already been addressed more than once. Direct contact with stakholders is advantageous for achieving the objectives in each stage of the relationship. If direct contact with stakeholders is maintained, it is much easier to collect data on the stakeholders' subjective perception of the HE service. Indirect contact increases the complexity as well as the expenditure of the information exchange (Winer 2001, p. 93f). The high intensity of the relationship, particularly between students and the HEI, also makes it possible to collect data regularly and therefore to renew and adjust the relationship accordingly. The elementary categorisation of the individual stages also becomes easier. It is important that the system is understood not as a rigid conception, but as a flexible instrument for optimising the relationship between HEIs and their stakholders.

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