mastermind EUROPE

Guiding Tools

6 Managing Graduate Admission

Guiding Tool 6 – Managing Graduate Admission

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Introduction

The paradigm shift from diploma recognition towards the assessment of competency level requires a different framework to judge an applicant's qualification. When (automatic) continuation from a Bachelor into a Master's within the same discipline, the same university, or the same country is no longer standard practice, this requires an active approach to marketing and recruitment.

This Guiding Tool may seem to be addressing issues that are rather self-evident. But experience shows that what is apparently matter-of-course, and especially the consequences of implementing this paradigm shift into the university's systems and procedures, requires careful consideration. In this Guiding Tool we offer food for thought to organize the Master's admission process in order to make it as accessible as possible, especially for the preferred applicants.

The entire process consists of strongly interwoven and overlapping elements; the figure below shows this chain of contacts between the student and the university from a student's perspective, from brand marketing to alumni relations.
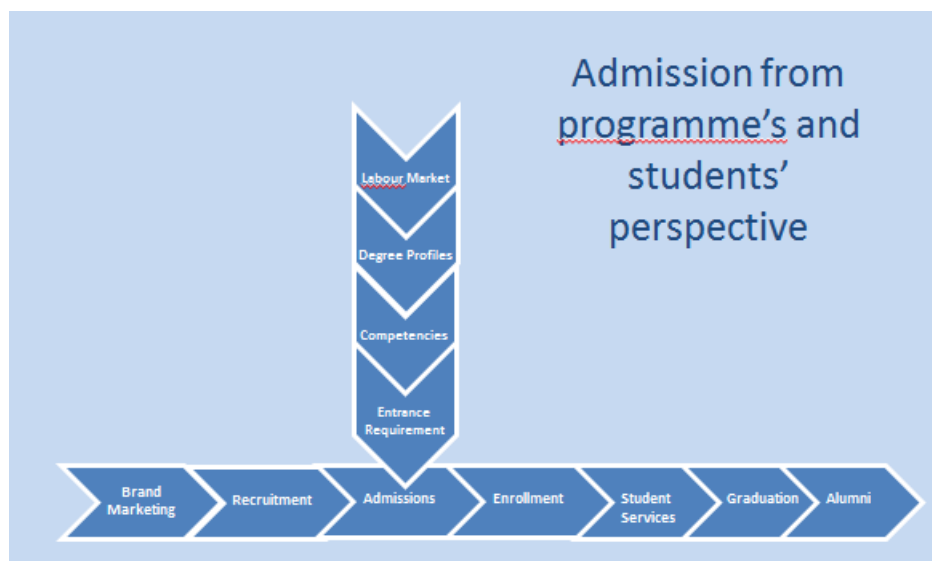
This Guiding Tool focuses on the crucial elements impacting the university's system and procedures before a student can actually be considered 'yours': (marketing and) recruitment, application, selection and finally the enrolment of the students. Currently most universities struggle to organise all four elements. And especially with their coherence.

Obviously, the notion of transparency – also mentioned in the Guiding Tools on the various selection aspects of a more competence-based admission process – plays a very important role here.

The division of labour – mentioned in the Guiding Tool on a coherent admission framework – is a crucial element. But since the possibilities to

influence that will vary in each university, this topic is only being touched upon briefly.

Please note: for the sake of clarity this Guiding Tool presents choices to be made in a somewhat uncomplicated manner. Obviously the authors are aware of the fact that contexts may differ between universities and Master's programmes, which also may lead to different 'ideal' choices than presented here.

Recruitment

It all starts with the content offerings. After having designed and developed a strong and relevant Master's programme, it is time to start recruiting students. And preferably the best students, allowing for a nicely differentiated group composition that will be interesting to work with, in high enough numbers to support the relevance of the Master's programme but at the same time numbers that will not create an unfeasible burden to administer.

The initial focus should be on putting the content into words. Whether the Master's programme is on modern history, veterinary science or theoretical physics, it will always have to distinguish itself from similar programmes elsewhere. The art of communicating this message clearly entails drawing attention to the quality of the programme, but at the same time mentioning what makes this specific programme unique. Students will search for their options in a generic way (googling on academic field), but make their choice based on the differences.

The academics have been busy designing the programme for months. And they will know exactly what it is all about, but the next challenge is to convey that to the students. It requires care and time to formulate an appealing message. And that is definitely not the same as throwing that task over the fence to the marketing specialists. Their advice is essential, but input from the content experts, especially when describing the product for sale, is very important. The experts on the content should try to express what will be obvious to them, what is expected of the students in terms of their knowledge and abilities, emphasizing where this programme differs in a positive sense from the mainstream, and finally: they will also have to indicate what the students can do specifically with this programme.

In practice the descriptions can vary from strongly recruiting texts including praises of the quality of what is on offer, to a matter-of-fact summary of the courses that are part of the Master's programme, including the amount of credits. But especially this summary is missing in many cases (or very well hidden, which comes down to the same thing). And that is a shame, because this is the information students look for specifically and that is very helpful to them when making their choice.

Nowadays most programmes offer to home and international students will present their messages in the native language and in English. What may seem to be a minor side effect, but should not be underestimated when aiming for a more diverse (international) classroom, is communicating the same message in English and in the native language of the university. It may seem unreal, but even nowadays examples can be found where especially the graduates' perspectives for the labour market seemed very different in English than in the mother tongue.

If an academic expert describes the programme in the native language, and a marketing expert will then arrange for an English version, it is quite likely that the marketing communication focus on recruitment will result in a different description of perspectives (an important sales proposition). Probably the latter being more attractive, but confusing for those applicants who speak both languages. And perhaps not entirely correct too.

Often a text describing the programme is the last bit of work to end the entire development process. But it is important to realise that the programme is being sold not on the content but on the description of the content.

Digital information is crucial. Over 90% of the students finds the programme digitally. And in most cases initially on a smart phone. Until recently information on Master's programmes was hidden deeply into university's websites. Nowadays almost every homepage offers a link to the programmes offered, and often specifically to Master's programmes. But again, the level of information provided and the tone-of-voice differs greatly. It varies from mere formal technical details, that do not always answer possible questions, to a fluent text clearly communicating what the students may need to know.

It is important to be very crystal clear on the practical details. Students will go somewhere else when those are unclear, and will not return later to find out whether the information is complete.

An experiment to evaluate this can be to take a student's position and browse through the information available online. Select a programme that is not your own but related to it. Then compare your own university's pages to a few other universities offering a similar programme in your own country, and browse through some websites of institutions in different regions in Europe. Chances are that you might not prefer the programme offered by your own university. And then you will know there is work to be done. For your colleagues, but probably also for your own programme. Alternatively, or in addition, you can ask (international) students to do the same and give their feedback

Should the university's website or Master's web pages be unsatisfactory for some (valid) reason it is important to speak up

internally – also to colleagues in other Master's programmes. Addressing this with suggestions for improvement will probably lead to the conclusion more Master's programmes share that experience; finding supporters should not be too hard. It helps to realise that the perspective of an academic, professor, researcher – or an administrator – in this respect should be combined with that of an entrepreneur: the Master's store should remain in operation.

Obviously it is crucial to attract students to your website specifically. Experts within universities will know how to work with Google adds and posting messages on Facebook. But possibly listings on one or more portals will work best; consider for instance MastersPortal, Findamaster, and/or the portal that might be offered through your National Agency.

Usually a general listing is for free, but for premium listing, click-through links, banners etcetera there will be a charge. Again, experts within the university will be able to offer advice, but it is important to stay involved – both in the initial decision-making as well as in the updating process.

Printed media should be considered with a critical approach. Advertisements in newspapers and magazines might be an ego-booster, but hardly ever lead to substantial return on investment. The costs will probably be higher than the benefits. But a booklet or brochure or other printed materials, that can be handed out at all times, also within the university itself, is important. This will also prove useful when a student has found the programme digitally – with information that might actually suffice for the student – and wants to offer the parents something in print.

Finally, offering a short course as part of a Summer or Winter School is increasingly used as a marketing and recruitment tool. It offers the students an opportunity to get to know the university, the programme and the city. And at the same time this offers the possibility to include part of the selection process. Having experienced a potential Master's candidate as a participant in such a course provides the opportunity to get to know the student's capacities quite well. Much better than by visiting all those Master's fairs in remote parts of the world.

Applications
The golden rule is simple: making it as easy as possible for both the student and the university or programme. But reality is more tricky.

Often national laws and regulations and internal rules of the university complicate the procedure. National laws and regulations will probably be impossible to change, but it may be worth your while to take a good look. A Mastermind Europe survey on this topic has shown that legal obstacles often seem much bigger and problematic in the perception of university academics and administrators than in the actual laws and

regulations. Often the law requires a well-founded and well-reasoned procedure and set of criteria, but is not so restrictive if you have that in order. And of course internal rules should be changed when they (turn out to) work counterproductive.

Some universities ask for a general application first, to see if an applying student complies with the legal conditions and is therefore admissible. Only after that step those universities ask for further information, to be used in the selection phase. This may seem very sympathetic, after all, only students up for selection will be asked to provide further information in the second round. Others will not have to do that. And indeed this is kind for the ones who are being turned down rather quickly. But on those who pass this barrier the effect can be quite different. Especially when the selection process is not running as quickly as desired, it is possible to lose a large percentage of suitable candidates. Only when the university is much higher on the student's wish-list than others that have already admitted the student it might still be possible to have the student enrol. The chance is much bigger the student will prefer to accept the invitation to enrol over the invitation to send in another large quantity of documents.

So in practice it is much better to ask the applying students to send in all the required information at once. Should (a certified copy of) the diploma not be available at the time the application process starts, a student can always send in a copy, or a statement by the university. Fraud can always be dealt with at a later stage.

With all candidates sending in all information at once, a student runs the risk of not making it through the first round, but those who do will automatically go through to the second – selective – round. The first round (based on national laws and regulations) is the same for everyone. This deals with preceding education, sometimes language skills, and a university can add elements here when deemed necessary or appropriate. The second round, or the second step in the selection process, concerns the content, and obviously the quantity and type of information needed varies per discipline. A candidate for International Law will have to send in different information than a candidate in Chemistry or Musicology. But since it is known right from the start what every programme wants to know, it can be asked for in the same round.

A two-step application process may seem more customer-oriented, but in the end it is not. A two-step approach is usually caused by the fact that different offices internally deal with different parts, and that is not something to bother a customer with.

In short, whatever the organisation behind the scenes is, it is important to present a coherent one-step application process. Behind the scenes the procedures can differ from one programme to the next, as well as the needed documents, but externally it should appear to be one smooth-running operation. And needless to say, an operation that should

also not be adjusted along the way. When an applicant is being promised to receive a decisive answer within three weeks, it won't work to send out a message after six weeks explaining a bit more time is needed. Neither to explain that the programme's 'own' bachelor students prevail on second thoughts. Nor will it work out well to aggravate language requirements in the mean time because the experience in the current year shows problems in that field.

Selection process

After students apply it is up to the university and the programme to determine whether they are admissible and whether they are the students the programme is looking for. Although the process may differ depending on whether admission is selective (only the best) or non-selective (all those who qualify), the approach to drawing the line between 'qualified' and 'non-qualified' is the first step in every selection process. And the suggestions provided below apply to both types of processes.

Two approaches, or perhaps even beliefs, to how to handle this exist. One approach is to collect and hold on to the applications, to be sure to select the best candidates just before the summer. The other approach is to admit every qualifying candidate as soon as possible, in order to prevent candidates to enrol at a competing programme.

In practice it comes down to only the very best programmes that can afford to collect applications to select the best ones in due time. For 90%, if not 99% of programmes that approach won't work. One of the consequences of selection processes is that students nowadays apply for some four – six Master's programmes on average, and will make their choice after the first three responses. The programmes belonging to the slowest half will lose the student. This makes sense looking at it from a student's perspective: students make priority lists when applying, and when a positive response from the second choice will be in while the first choice does not respond, the student will know where to put his money on, rather than running the risk of missing out on the second choice while waiting for the possibly negative response from the first.

For most programmes it will make therefore every sense to ask for all the required information at once and deal with the applications on a continuing roll on roll off basis. Many of the programmes don't do this, possibly as a result of decisions made on a central institutional level. Trying to do that differently will definitely be worth it.

As mentioned above there are two approaches to deal with the applications. The one extreme, collecting all applications and then selecting the best ones at one go, might lead to the situation in which those 'best' students have already chosen another programme. So waiting may be a very costly exercise.

In practice however also choosing for the roll on roll off approach may lead to students having to wait very long until they hear the outcome. A number of reasons can cause this. The following paragraph will mention some of these reasons, and will explain how the use of a digital system may support improvements in this area.

Digital and other systems

Faculties, departments or research groups are in charge of the content of the programmes. Communication, or – as we often say these days – marketing is the responsibility of the marketing department of the university, often in consultation with communication staff of the department concerned. The "sales" will therefore mainly be outsourced to other departments within the same university. But also the decision on acceptance or rejection is most often in the hands of more than one person or department. The first check, for instance on the value of the previous degree, or the status (or ranking) of the university that handed out this degree, is often done by an International Office, that in turn can often fall back upon a national agency where the necessary expertise is available. A second check, for instance on subject-related knowledge and skills, general academic competence, personal characteristics and traits, or language skills, will formally be done by an organisational body within the programme. Although in practice central admission offices also play an important role in the assessment of these competencies. Pilots organised as part of the Mastermind project have shown that this division of labour can be optimised where the academics articulate the required competencies or "learning incomes" clearly: then the administrative staff will know better what the academics want them to look for.
And then usually the final verdict will be given by the Master's coordinator, the full professor, or his assistant.

In short, both the process of marketing the programme and the process of recruitment and selection is potentially a relay race of actions and reactions within the institution. What would work best is to limit the number of occasions where the baton is handed over. But that requires decisions on high levels of the institution.

What can be done at least is to streamline the process together with colleagues as much as possible. A means of support, or perhaps stimulus, is the use of a digital system. Ideally a choice can be made between three alternatives. First of all to join an existing monitoring system on student progress, secondly to buy a specialised but existing system that is for sale on the market, and thirdly develop a system for this specific purpose.

The existing monitoring system of the university will be capable of (almost) everything. Usually this system will be rather complex and designed for solving all sorts of other problems than recruitment and selection. Often it will be managed on a higher level, for instance nationally, and then every alteration or addition will have to be approved

by all participating institutions. And in the worst case they will have to be paid for by the requesting party. And although this system usually is heavily promoted within the institution, it might be smart to look for an alternative to organise the part for which this system was not designed.

Buying an external system may be the solution. Also in doing this it is important to pay close attention. Most of these systems can do everything, and the developers may be keen to sell you as many modules as possible, while these systems might also not be built for the specific purpose of recruitment and selection. But very many universities today use these systems, especially (but not only) in the USA. Attached to this Guiding Tool is an overview of – randomly selected – providers. New providers enter the market frequently.

The best solution might be to have a small system built specifically for this purpose. But of course permission is required to do this together with a number of Master's programmes. This system can be built to cover the process from the very first request for information up to the actual enrolment. And those data should of course automatically feed into the university's standard monitoring system.

This solution may seem to be the most complicated one, because it requires building an entire new system. In practice the most complicated element will be convincing the university that this is the best solution. Building a simple system that should be capable of including annual additions and alterations is something that nowadays can be done easily by many.

Once the choices suggested in this Guiding Tool are considered to work well for a programme's admission process, the following step-by-step approach of how such a digital system should work can be taken:

1. The student can use a contact form to ask questions.
2. For those questions a set of FAQ and answers is developed in order to be able to answer these questions within a day.
3. The student can fill in an application form.
4. Attachments are a) the documents required by the institution, and b) the information required by the programme. All relevant documents (diplomas, transcripts, motivation letters, letters of reference, or whatever is required) will be uploaded with the application.
5. The person who performs the first check gives a 'go' or 'no go' based on the centrally required information. A 'go' means being put through to the programme, a 'no go' means a quick rejection letter to the student. A possible bottleneck might be staffing (or rather, a wide variety of tasks of which this will be just one), but not the system's efficiency.

6. The Master's coordinator or an assistant will check for the minimum requirements of the programme.
7. The person taking the final decision will do so based on the first two preliminary judgements.
8. And of course all relevant overviews will be standardised, as will be the letters sent out. But in such a way that changes can be made whenever necessary.

A small, tailor-made system will take away much of the labour needed today, but can also expose mercilessly where the biggest delay takes place. And this of course can then trigger improvements specifically at this point.

Summary

- The biggest change caused by the paradigm shift is that many Master's programmes need to be 'sold' to a selected target group, where in the past it was simply a matter of registering the department's own Bachelor students.
- A 'sellable product' needs to be described in an excellent way; recruiting, but especially very informative.
- Recruitment will be done in cooperation with the department of marketing and/or communication. But this can never be done without strong support by and input from the programme itself.
- Consider applications the moment they are received instead of waiting until more come in.
- The Master's programme will consider applications together with the International Office and possibly other. But the programme should always be in control.
- Promote the purchase or development of a simple digital application system to which changes and additions can be made annually.

Appendix
Admissions Software Products

A list of admissions software tools is provided below. Please note that the authors of this Guiding Tool do not intend to imply one tool is better than the next, nor that this overview is complete. This list was taken from http://www.capterra.com/admissions-software/; other tools exits and new ones are being developed almost by the day.

Administrative Solutions 3
by AlaQuest International

Ellucian
by Ellucian Higher Education

Embark Campus
by Embark

Admitek
by SevenM Technologies

matchly
by Nala Digital Solutions

Admittor
by Admittor

Ascend
by Symplicity

CAMS Enterprise
by Unit4

Finalsite Apply
by finalsite

3sysACADEMIC
by West Country Business Systems

Admissions Tracking
by Principle Data Systems
AMP
by ZAP Solutions

DecisionDesk
by DecisionDesk

[EduAgent CRM](#)
by Action Starter

[EESAS](#)
by Expert Technology Solutions

[EMAS Recruitment Pro](#)
by EMAS Pro

[eNROL](#)
by MIT Professional Services

[Enrollment Rx](#)
by Enrollment Rx

[HEIApply-lite](#)
by HEIApply

[Intead](#)
by Intead

[ISAS](#)
by BigChoice Group

[JICS](#)
by Jenzabar

[Lumens](#)
by Augusoft

[MatchBox](#)
by TargetX

[Naviance](#)
by Hobsons

[Online Admissions Software](#)
by Blackbaud

[Online Application Software](#)
by Simple Apply

[Slate](#)
by Technolutions

[Student Enrollment CRM](#)
by ProRetention