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Strategic Alliances in the Marketing of International Higher Education: A Framework for Enduring and Successful Outcomes

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Abstract. The article will describe how a consortium of business schools, based in one European country, and essentially direct competitors, have successfully worked together over the past 5 years on a strategic marketing alliance for the recruitment of international students. The number of strategic alliances has grown considerably in industry over the past 25 years (Meier, 2011:1) and they may be one of the primary sources of future growth (Elmuti et al. 2012: 23). However, they are not always easy to manage. They are multifaceted agreements (Arino & Reuer, 2004: 44) that are highly dependent on trust between the major stakeholders (Vlaar et al., 2007: 412). Such *cooperative competition* or *cooptition* may lead to opportunistic behaviour leading to mutual distrust (Arino et al. 2001:127) and the failure of the alliance. However, development partnerships in higher education institutions (HEIs) have many benefits such as bringing greater diversity to the classroom and responding to ranking and accreditation requirements. As the budgets of HEIs come under increasing pressure managing such alliances will thus become an important competence for their survival. Drawing from a case study and industry best practices this article offer guidelines that can be applied to similar alliances to enhance the possibility of successful outcomes.

Keywords: strategic alliances, business schools, international students, marketing, cooperative competition, diversity.

1. Introduction

As with any organization wishing to internationalize its products or services, higher education institutions (HEIs) are faced with a multitude of cultural, financial and administrative challenges. Given that HEIs are quite labor-intensive, generally have low operating margins and find it relatively difficult to achieve economies of scale, this problem is exacerbated. It often becomes difficult to justify the high cost of international travel to recruit only a few students from one country. The obvious solution is to market within a few countries that can send large numbers of students. However, this diminishes the variety of nationalities in the classroom and the overall learning experience for all those involved. Such lack of diversity has been a source of complaint from many professors faced with 'international classes' that contain only one or two nationalities.

A potential solution is for HEIs to share their costs and engage in co-branding and joint promotion of their programs. This would allow them to diversity their marketing activities into different regions and bring more diverse students into the classroom. This in turn will enhance the international learning experience for students and faculty. It has the added benefit of responding to the requirements of ranking organisations and accreditation bodies that often judge the quality of a business school by the scale and scope of its international student body.

The article will describe how a group of business schools in one European country, which are most often direct competitors, have successfully worked to together over the past 5 years on a strategic marketing alliance for the recruitment of international students to their Master's programs. From its modest beginnings, it now recruits nearly 300 students per year to a 2-year programme. This has been done without incurring the exponential costs related to international development.

Strategic alliances are defined as arrangements between two or more firms that involve the exchange, sharing, or co-development of products, technologies, or services (Gulati, 2007:1). Organisations may use such alliances to reduce costs (Elmuti et al., 2012: 16) or risks (Hitt et al., 2000: 449), develop learning (Dyer and Singh 1998: 662) or develop the core competencies that underpin a firm's competitive advantage (Hamel, 1991:83).

Within industry, the number of strategic alliances has grown considerably over the past 25 years (Meier, 2011: 1). According to a study by Accenture and quoted in Lambe et al. (2002: 141) alliances "*account for anywhere from 6% to15% of the market value of a particular company.*" That HEIs should wish then to engage in mutually beneficial cooperation is a mere reflection of the rapid development of "*alliance capitalism*" (Dunning, 1995: 461) that has taken place in companies since the 1980s. However, cooperation of this kind brings a fresh set of issues to be addressed.

Firstly, the success of such alliances is anything but guaranteed. They are multifaceted contractual agreements (Arino et Reuer, 2004: 44) that are highly dependent on trust between the major stakeholders (Vlaar et al., 2007: 412) in the face of opportunities for opportunistic behaviour leading to mutual distrust (Arino et al. 2001:127). Day (1995: 298) reports that 70% of alliances do not meet the objectives set and reduce rather than enhance the value of the participating organisations. Despite their position as educators of best practices, history has proved that business schools are by no means exempt from general market laws.

Secondly, business schools wishing to embark on joint promotion are also confronted with the problem of lack of perceived differentiation. A course in strategy or marketing is probably quite similar in nature whether it is delivered in Stockholm, Shanghai or Sydney. In fact, from a student perspective, the real difference is actually the location rather than the course itself. Universities or business schools that are working essentially in the same region have an even greater problem, since there is no real differentiating factor, other than the rankings or accreditations.

A strategic alliance to promote a group of homogenous HEIs will therefore be confronted with the inevitable tension that exists as competitors work within a logic of *cooperative competition* or *cooptition.* Finding a mission and a strategy that works for all the participants can be a real challenge. Even if this can be overcome, execution is often highly problematic. Crotts et al. (2000: 3) consider that in building alliances many organizations are guilty of adopting "*a ready-fire-aim approach to relationship development where firms create alliances to meet strategic goals without implementing the appropriate mechanisms to assure relationship survival."*

However, if such complications can be overcome resources can be deployed more efficiently and the participants can learn through their interactions with each other. The article will outline then the necessary phases to establish solid foundations of such an alliance. It will take into account the literature on strategic alliances and draw upon best practices in a variety of industries. It will give some practical insights on how such large scale and diverse projects can become successful and sustainable in the long term. Though it is understood that there in no one formula that guarantees success (Green & Keogh, 2000: 259) the article will offer some guidelines that can be applied to future initiatives of the same kind. As previously stated, many companies now believe that alliances may be the primary source of future growth since they allow firms to manage costs (Elmuti et al., 2012: 16) and risks (Hitt et al., 2000: 449) by sharing resources. This will also be the case in higher education. As the budgets of HEIs come under increasing pressure managing such alliances will thus become an important competence for the survival of many universities and business schools in the coming years.

2. A Brief Description of the Alliance

Table 1 sets out the overall strategy of the strategic alliance. It was set up in 2009 with the initial one-year commitment of 14 independent business schools from the same European country. Although these schools well established in their own domestic markets, their relative modest size (approximately 2000 students with an average overall operating budget of about 20 million euros) meant that they were having difficulties promoting their programs internationally. In short, the costs far outweighed the potential benefits. Rankings, the need for international accreditations, flat domestic demand and an overall philosophy that diversity in the classroom would give a richer learning experience were all pushing the schools to recruit more international students. Given that the business schools were self-financing and not linked to a comprehensive university it was almost impossible to generate any economies of scale when engaging in marketing overseas (by recruiting for several different faculties or departments of the same universities). Clearly, a more innovative approach was needed.

Table 1: Overall mission and strategy of the alliance

Ethos behind the creation of the strategic alliance	High cost of recruiting diverse bodies of international students. Rankings, international accreditation and intrinsic desire in schools to have such students were primary motivators.
Creation of strategic alliance	In October 2009, with the initial commitment of 14 schools in a strategic alliance. Low entry and exit costs allowing for trial period.
Mission	Coordinate international recruitment for one specific Master's program. Political difficulties in each school prevented extension to other programs in initial stages.
Guiding Principles	Quality of recruitment rather than large numbers in the beginning to ensure the establishment of a selective brand image.
Current status	250-300 students recruited each year for a 2-year Master's program for the current 6 schools of the alliance.
Future developments	Expansion of recruitment consortium to other programs. Political difficulties have been overcome due to the proven success of the project.

The initial entry cost was set at only 10 000 euros (plus the investment from personnel of each school to set up the alliance. This would cover general marketing costs (brochures, fairs etc.) and each school would communicate its international trips in a logic similar to that of *code sharing* in the airline industry. Only a one-year commitment was required of each school. Low exit costs and a small initial investment thus gave each school the possibility to test the efficiency of such a scheme with regard to their own individual strategies. The quality of students rather than quantity would be the guiding ethos. This was particularly important to communicate during the early years of the recruitment procedure when numbers were quite low.

The strategic alliance allowed for the sharing of marketing and promotion costs of the business schools involved. Although they are all essentially close competitors, they decided to create a common entrance exam. A student could apply to all of the schools at the same time (stating their order of preference) and depending on the results obtained from their written and oral entrance exam, they would get an offer from a varying number of schools within the consortium. This would also reduce financial and opportunity costs for the students whilst guaranteeing quality recruitment for the schools. Similarly, each school could promote the recruitment procedure and administer the exams during an international trip. By sharing resources, and through coordination of business trips, the schools were able to guarantee a personal interview for all of the applicants, rather than simply basing their decision on the application form alone. Similarly, this interview was the ideal time for a potential candidate to ask questions concerning what would be one of the most important decisions they would make in their lives and ensure that the choice they were making was based on accurate information.

Initial recruitment in the first few years was modest and it is here that the principle of quality became important. However, after 24 months of the project its organisation was modified with the employment of a development manager. This increased the costs significantly and as we will see, the numbers of students recruited. Also, as has been noted in Table 1, several schools left the alliance during the five years. The reasons behind this will be explained below.

3. Defining the Mission of the Alliance

Crotts et al. (2000: 3) outline five key questions that an organization should answer before it enters into an alliance: (1) Do we want to partner? (2) Do we have the ability to partner? (3) With whom do we partner? (4) How do we partner? (5) How do we sustain and renew a relationship over time?

The answer to the first question would seem to be self-evident. However, this hides the degrees to which each school wished to work within the partnership. A core group were highly committed (corresponding largely to the group that remains today). Others were more circumspect but given the low entry and exit costs prepared to experiment with the alliance in the first years.

Defining such a clear strategic position as set out by Crotts et al. (2000: 3) may seem a little idealistic in a project that has little history. However, this does not prevent the organisations from defining the central mission of the strategic alliance. Table 2 outlines some of the key questions and issues that were dealt with at the beginning of the project.

For the consortium it was decided at the outset that it would limit itself in the short term to promoting one particular programme. Other programmes were considered in initial meetings. However, given the internal political structure of most HEIs, promotion of other Master's programmes was deemed to be problematic. Each individual Master's degree is often very centrally controlled by the programme director who may even be responsible for recruitment. This would therefore have implied a great deal of bilateral negotiations before the marketing strategy had had time to bring concrete results. The schools involved also recognized that it would also add to the complexity of the project. Concentrating on one unique and reasonably homogenous programme would therefore allow the participants to focus the limited resources (financial and human) they possessed and would ensure a clear and coherent focus of the project.

Table 2: Defining the mission of the strategic alliance

Key questions concerning the creation of a strategic alliance	Increase the number of international students and generate greater diversity without incurring exponential costs. Flexibility rather than long term sustainability was the initial objective of the alliance and was crucial during the trust building phase.
Defining the general mission of the alliance	Joint promotion of a two-year Master's program. This was the most difficult program to promote abroad and therefore had low numbers of international students for all the schools.
Setting the limits of the alliance	To promote only this one program to begin with and not to offer other specialised Master's programs. This would have required a great deal of negotiation increasing the risk of failure.
Defining some key performance indicators	Numbers of desired students set by each school for the first two years. Some schools met these targets whilst others did not.

Having defined the overall mission and short to medium scope of the project a few key performance indicators were identified. The existence of simple quantitative and relevant key performance indicators would seem logical. However, measuring performance can be difficult in an alliance (Simonin, 1999: 1140) and even more so in a new venture of this kind. Indeed, with hindsight most estimates were wildly inaccurate.

Despite this it was recognised that it was unlikely that the consortium would generate a great deal of profit in the first years. The alliance members therefore decided to set a low budget. This allowed each school to assess the potential for recruitment and also gave time to develop trust within the organisation. If a budget of several hundred thousand euros had been presented it was felt that this would have been rejected by the school directors. In fact, a previous attempt to form the same strategic alliance had been made several years previously and had ended in total failure. A second failure would have had an impact on stakeholders' perception of the probability of succeeding. A fairly modest budget was established with the notion that each school would contribute as much as possible to the development of the consortium. This would be done for a one-year period giving the schools time to see if there was potential for them to develop within the consortium. Indeed, some of the returns identified by the group were thought to be long term rather than short term and more qualitative in nature (eg. group learning and cooperation).

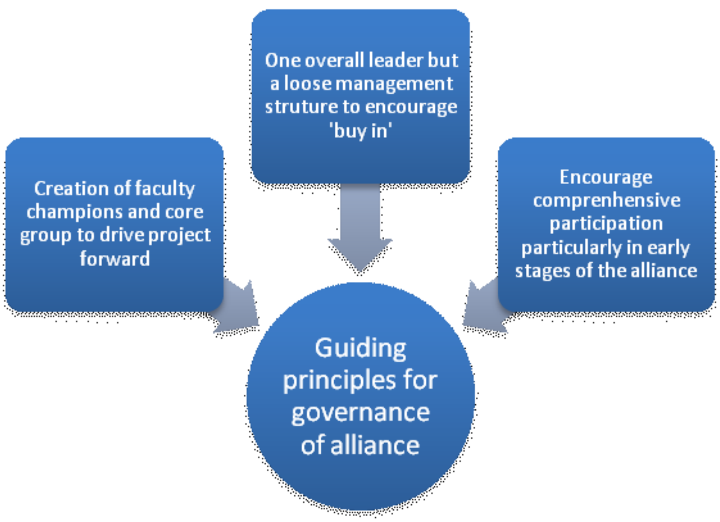
As noted there are now 6 schools within the consortium. Of the original 14, five left because of changes of governance within their schools that prevented them from staying in the alliance. Four others left because having worked within the alliance for a few years, they decided that the return on investment was too low. This left five schools from the original number and one school has joined the group in the past two years.

Having set a number of guiding principles (as opposed to very hard set rules which are often counterproductive in professional service firms such as HEIs) it was deemed that work could begin on the project. It was established that future decisions should be made in the context of promoting the overall goals of the alliance (Crotts et al., 2000: 5). As Reid et al. (2008: 587) point out, the successful pursuit of a strategic alliance requires that participants constantly remind themselves of these basic guiding principles. This was largely done in the following years.

4. Governance and Leadership

A failed attempt to set up the same strategic alliance had been made four years before the beginning of the second attempt. One of the causes of its failure had been defined as the lack of leadership for the project. De Meyer et al. (2004: 110) point out that in global projects in HEIs a "*Faculty Champion*" is often required to launch and sustain a project. In the context of a consortium-based strategic alliance, one or two people from different institutions will be vital to tie the group together and to maintain momentum in the development. From the outset then, a leader for the strategic alliance was named and a core group of 'project champions' became evident as the project moved forward in its early stages.

Diagram 1: Guiding principle in the creation of the strategic alliance



Reid at al. (2008: 582) consider that groups are best placed to attain their goals if the activities of the participants are *"conducted within a formal structure"*. However, a highly rigid form of governance for this type of alliance was deemed to have been counter-productive. Fragueiro & Thomas (2010: 56) point out that business schools, as professional service firms, are:

> "Adhocracy organisations…characterized by a dynamic external environment and decentralized internal power, and organized around teams of experts working on projects to produce novel outputs, generally in highly dynamic settings."

This requires a specific style of management. A highly directive command and control style is unlikely to work even within each school and less so in a strategic alliance that allows both for free riding and relative ease of exit.

An efficient management structure is critical for a partnership to be sustainable (Reid et al. 2008: 591). A few pilot groups were established in order to define the basic framework of the project such as promotional material, rules for recruitment, strategic zones etc. Again professional service firms such as HEIs have a very low-key management style and it is important to respect such organizational culture (Jiang et al., 2010: 1138). This is even more necessary when dealing with non-hierarchical affiliations where adherence to a project is based more on discussion and persuasion than setting hard and fast rules.

Reid et al. (2008: 591) consider that partnerships need *"a sense of equitable participation and involvement."* It is true that there is a distinct need for all the participants to feel involved. However, the question of equality becomes rather difficult since it cannot be ignored that there is never an equal distribution of perceived power within any group. Within the consortium, this was seen through the relative commitment of the different participants. It was therefore necessary at times to have one or two decision makers within the group to ensure that the vision was clearly defined.

It is necessary to underline the importance of deep-rooted commitment from senior management in the development of such a project. Day (1995: 299) claims that companies that show consistent high performance in alliance management can be identified by the capacity of senior management to give a *"non-wavering commitment to ongoing alliance."* (Day 1995: 299) Lambe, Spekman & Hunt (2002: 153) add:

> "In the face of the inevitable ups and downs of an alliance, such commitment is difficult without upper-management support."

It should be noted therefore, that the schools that were most successful within the consortium were the ones that had the strongest and most unequivocal support from the senior management of their respective schools. This is in line with the Lambe et al. (2002:152) survey of 145 alliances that concluded:

> "senior management commitment to the use of alliances has a strong effect on the development of an alliance competence, explaining 71 per cent of its variance." (para 4)

In fact, there were indeed several moments during the early days of the marketing alliance where it looked in danger of failing. This was largely due to lack of commitment by certain schools and its domino effect on other participants. Given that at those early stages, the consortium had not achieved results to pay back the initial investment such a mentality could have led to the premature end to the consortium. It was at these moments that the support of the senior management was crucial to the continuing development of the project. As Lambe, Spekman & Hunt (2002: 153) state:

> "…since the developments of an alliance competence often requires "investments" made in early "learning" alliances, the support of senior management is crucial because many of the early alliances may appear, on paper, failures." (para 3)

5. Managing Operations in the Early Development Stage

All types of strategic alliances entail negotiation by partners to overcome genuine differences in objectives (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2006: 873). *Buy in* from the participants and the development of trust were considered critical success factors for the sustainability of the alliance so time was often taken to clarify decisions and issues for development. This is even more important in professional service firms that contain highly independent participants who need to understand decisions and have even contributed to them before they are willing to adhere fully to them (Fragueiro and Thomas, 2011: 56).

One positive by-product of these meetings was the tacit knowledge that was shared by the different schools on a variety of subjects. The regular meetings also enhanced the mutual understanding and trust between the business schools. This in turn reinforced the collective learning mechanism (Liu and Russ, 1999: 675) that would later be necessary to deal with the different approaches required for new markets and ensured stronger relationships necessary during certain moments of discordance later on in the alliance (Vlaar et al., 2007: 410).

Arino and Doz (2000: 173) maintain that failure in strategic alliances occur when intermediate outcomes do not meet initial expectations. In light of this the management of the alliance sought to accomplish some rapid achievements during the early stages to enhance *buy in* and overall commitment to the project. One example of this concerns the production of promotional material for the common entrance exam. Normally, this would have involved agreement between the 14 different communications departments in the business schools. Just arranging the meeting would have been a difficult logistical exercise in itself. It was estimated by the group that a colossal amount of time would have been required to explain the specifications of the brochure to the individual schools and then achieve agreement about how it should be done. Therefore a small working group was formed and produced a reasonable product in less than six weeks. The trade off here was clear. Speed of execution was deemed to be more important than producing the perfect product. The communications departments of the various schools would no doubt have produced a brochure and website that was of a superior quality. However, the time necessary to create the document would have increased the risks of the alliance failing. Quick results also made it easier to reassure institutional stakeholders in each school that progress was being made.

6. Brand Identification

One of the first challenges of the partnership was how to distinguish a fairly homogeneous product in the international arena. In fact, the two-year Masters in International Management offered by the schools were highly similar to most students. This meant that rankings, accreditations and location were the sole real differentiators. However, the disadvantage of promoting through just these three criteria was that a few key schools would be at a significant advantage. Other schools that were lower in the rankings or did not have international accreditations such as AACSB, EQUIS, EPAS or AMBA would have difficulties in attracting students. Such situations would have negative effect on the sustainability of the consortium.

During the early stages of the project, the schools were encouraged to define distinctive criteria to attract students. For some of the schools this actually became a beneficial learning experience since they had clearly never been required to do this within the realm of their domestic market. For others, it became a very difficult challenge indeed reflecting Inkpen's (2005: 114) conclusion from his study of General Motors and Toyota:

> "Although alliances often create valuable learning opportunities, the exploitation of the opportunities is a difficult, frustrating, and often misunderstood process." (Inkpen, 2005:114).

Such difficulties are not uncommon. In their study of the Atlantic Canada Tourism Partnership[1], Reid et al. (2008: 586) found that many of the provinces struggled to relinquish what they thought to be a very distinctive brand, which was deemed to be non-existent to US tourists. The consortium was faced with a similar challenge. Many schools (some of which eventually withdrew from the project) discovered that international students did not value what they thought to be an attractive proposition. Indeed, if a Canadian province was unable to convince a potential tourist from the USA to come on a short holiday due to lack of positioning, the challenge to attract a potential international business student

1. This is a similar partnership to the one described in this article. It brought together 4 Canadian provinces that were essentially competing for the same tourists and formed a strategic alliance to share marketing and promotion costs.

(given the costs involved) became positively daunting for certain institutions. This was the major reason that 4 schools withdrew from the consortium after a few years.

7. Adapting to a Unstable and Unknown Environment

Mistilis & Daniele (2004:65) consider that alliances should be seen as evolving entities in which "*an intricate balance of inter-organizational relationships emerges, influencing and influenced by a diverse set of economic, social, and political forces*" (p.65). In short, the environment is not always stable or predictable.

As Reid et al. (2008) point out in the aforementioned *Atlantic Canada Tourism Partnership*:

> "the effectiveness of tourism marketing is highly vulnerable to non-tourism events." (p.591).

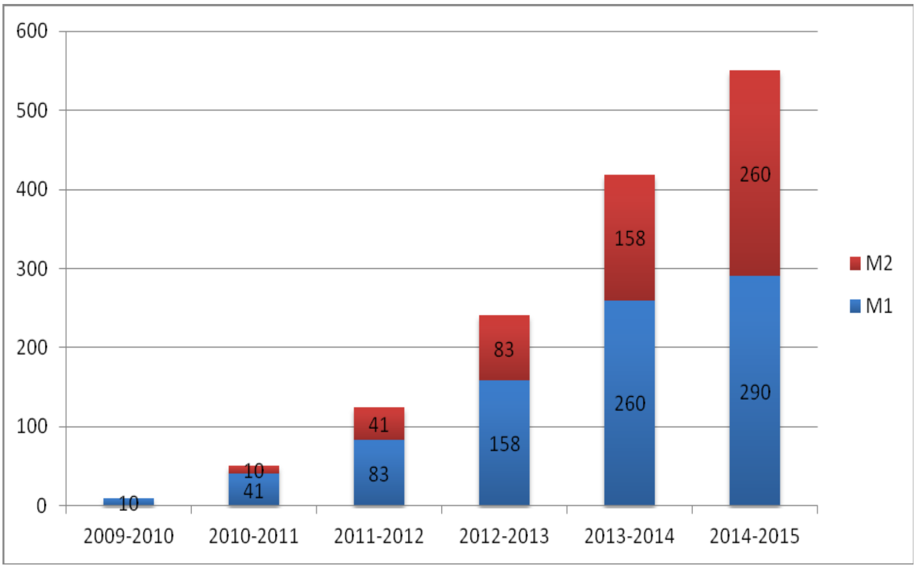
In fact, the same can be true of any project that brings together strategic business units with varied issues and political agendas. During the process several of the schools merged or went into formal alliances that *de facto* barred them from continuing with the alliance. This could have had the effect of destabilizing the group. However, since the mission of the project had been clearly defined and a good level of overall trust had been built up within the group, it was able to pursue its overall goals without being overtly disturbed. It was also during this period after 2 to 3 years that the schools were beginning to see positive results. Although this was not enough to ensure that all the members stayed in the recruitment consortium, it was enough to guarantee that the alliance stayed intact.

The strategic alliance also incurred a number of failures. Through the course of this project, several regions were explored to no avail and many local partnerships were developed that brought no tangible results. Australian and British universities that work extensively with agents estimate in private that only about 10% of their agreements bring real added value. The skill lies in successfully identifying these 10% and then managing them in a way that can be mutually beneficial.

8. Measuring Success

As with any commercial endeavour of this kind, one of the primary measures of success was the number of students that were recruited through the common entrance exam set up by the strategic alliance. It has been previously stated that numbers were small for the first two years while the schools were working on brand image and organising the procedures necessary to comply with strict internal rules and government regulations to issue visas. Once this had been achieved, a full time development manager was employed in order to promote the program more intensively and work with the international agencies that had been established. The consortium discovered during the first years that there is a certain trial and error element to this process and that 'failures' were an intrinsic part of the development.

Graph 1: Total number of students studying in schools that have been recruited through common entrance exam

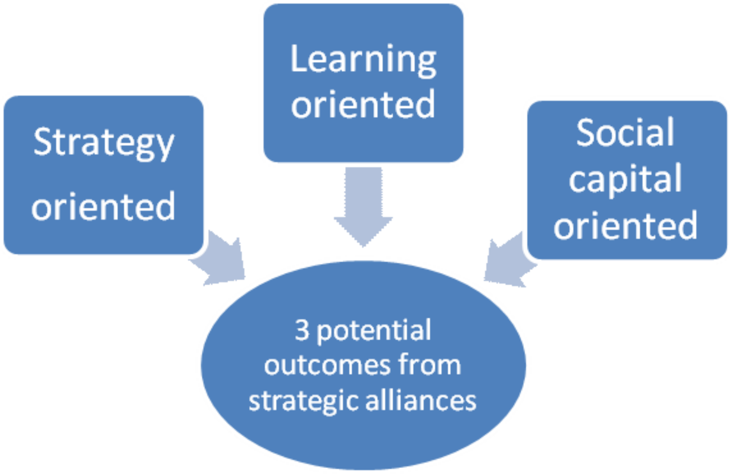


Graph 1 shows the details of the number of students recruited through the common entrance exam. The blue part of the graph represents the students recruited in any given year. The red part represents those same students that have then moved into the second year of their Master's program. Approximately 50% of applicants are accepted.

Aside from the increasing numbers of international students, other benefits of the alliance can be identified. In their study of tourism marketing partnerships, Wang and Fesenmaier (2006: 871) suggest there are three potential broad outcomes from strategic alliances. The first is strategy-oriented, in which there is more efficient use of scarce resources. The second is learning-oriented, such as learning new ways to conduct marketing. The third is social capital-oriented, such as strengthening the co-operative spirit of the partners in ways that extend beyond the explicit terms of the alliance.

The strategy-oriented aspect of the alliance has been clearly outlined. The learning aspect was a secondary benefit arising from the sharing of information and best practices during meetings. As for the development of the co-operative spirit, trust has now been built up to such an extent that the schools are anticipating widening the recruitment procedure to other programs within their schools. This would not have been possible at the outset of the alliance.

Diagram 2: Three potential broad outcomes from strategic alliances



Adapted from Wang and Fesenmaier (2006: 871)

Of course, it should be stated that the success was not shared equally by all of the initial 14 participants. Some schools found that the alliance did not ultimately benefit them. However, the creation of a loose governance structure enabled them to undertake a cost-benefit analysis at the end of every academic year. This ensured that "losses" could be minimised. Also, despite the lack of financial success for those schools, many went on to develop international recruitment structures for their individual schools, thus using the knowledge they had gained during their time with the strategic alliance.

9. Conclusion

Gray (1989:11) defines five essential characteristics for a successful alliance:

1. Stakeholders are interdependent.

2. Solutions emerge by dealing constructively with differences.

3. Joint ownership of decisions is involved.

4. Stakeholders assume collective responsibility for the future direction of the project.

5. Collaboration is an emerging process.

From what has been described in this article, the overall success of the project was based on a willing attempt to generate an atmosphere that reflected these five characteristics to give the strategic alliance a strong foundation for success. Having identified a key problem in their inability to recruit students to one program and the high relative costs, the business schools in the strategic alliance worked to ensure its success. As well as the rewards through greater numbers of more diverse students, many of the business schools stated that the process had made them intrinsically more international. The alliance had given them the impetus for change.

HEIs can therefore form rewarding alliances that synergistically combine their resources and skills (Wassmer & Dussauge, 2012: 872). The consortium found that true to previous research working together over time led to greater trust (Gulati 1995: 108), a better knowledge of the expertise of the different members Lavie et al., 2012: 1478) and new development opportunities stronger emotional links between the group members (Gulati 1995: 92).

Of course, there is no set formula in a strategic alliance which will guarantee its success on a short term basis and even less so in the long term. However, by adhering to some basic principles which relate to the motivations of the various participants and aligning this to the dynamics of personal service firms such as HEIs other groups embarking on such a project will improve considerable their chances of success.

In all this discussion of strategic alliances it should not be forgotten what is the key mission of a HEI and a business school in general; providing a quality learning environment to students that enables them to develop the skills necessary to find fulfilling employment. Given the international nature of trade today, the first real benefit of this consortium is that it brought a greater number of international students to the business schools that participated. Without that the classroom experience for students and faculty alike would have been less rich.

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