Unfashionably late: Has higher education woken up to the power of data?

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On a brisk February morning in 1995, Tesco single-handedly launched the age of big data.

Its now-famous Clubcard sparked a quiet revolution in the future of relationships between businesses and consumers. As a result of its data-driven decision-making in advertising, product range, pricing, and logistics, the supermarket chain realised staggering bottom line growth, and is now one of the largest retailers in the world [1] [2].

As the UK higher education sector experiences a drop in the 18 year old demographic and ongoing competitive challenges, do Clubcard-like data insights represent a potential shelter from the storm?

Businesses driven by data strategies are nothing new. The commercial sectors have been leveraging high volumes of information for decades. Amazon's monumental growth is largely down to its personalised recommendations, directly complementing its novel business strategy.

Any university or college worth its salt is tracking and recording huge amounts of data per cycle. Applications, firm choices, insurance choices, acceptances, and open day figures are poised for interpretation, awaiting synthesis with other information – which schools drive the most students, how do different groups engage with communications, and why do first -year students choose that university?

How can you develop recruitment and retention strategies without taking a holistic view of the influencing elements? Forearmed with the geographical hotspots for applications, and a customer persona of the applicants most likely to convert, higher education marketing can be more targeted, generate a greater return on investment, and offer opportunities for automation.

Of course, it's not just a recruitment solution on offer. Colleges here and in the US have deployed successful data-driven projects to improve widening participation and boost retention (3).

At UCAS Media, we've seen a shift in both the number of higher education customers now interested in data and insight products, and the types of analysis they are requesting. This behaviour is changing fast. Those arriving first to the party are now equipped to identify and implement their competitive advantages.

It can feel that the term "big data" has been trotted out too often and has lost much of its meaning. Yes, the level of data analysis needed to drive real business impact is '"big", and can therefore seem daunting in size and scope, but don't be intimidated by the perceived investment and expertise required to launch a data strategy. Many course providers are sitting on the expertise already, in-house. It may be spread across multiple departments at the moment, but pull together those individuals from marketing, planning and admissions as a virtual project team, and you have the beginning of something special.

Avoid asking this new project team to collect and collate data at the start. Instead, guide them to answer the questions keeping you awake at night – from market share and converting applicants, to widening participation. Align the team to your most pressing need, and you will quickly discover how much imperative data is already in your organisation.

But don't assume the answers to your challenges are all in the data you have. Once you have a clear view of your position, look to add in the sector and competitor landscape, to really enrich your worldview. This will help put your situation in context, and give you clear next steps, which allow you to start to really take on the competition.

Most importantly, don't be afraid of what your data might tell you.

If we make the effort to embrace it, the future of higher education is brighter for the data available. Leaps in artificial intelligence and machine learning will only make analysis faster and more accurate, but embedding an organisational data culture starts here and now.

Align your departments, communicate the value, and identify your in-house champions.

Sander Kristel is executive director at UCAS Media

Top tips

+ Start with what you know. How successful are you at attracting and converting applicants? Which faculties show upward (and downward) trends? What insights do your student reviews and surveys give you?

+ Visualise this data. Make it graphical and easy to understand, so other areas of your business can engage, see the value, and buy in. The same data will mean different things to different departments, but the marginal gains it can provide offer improvement at the highest organisational levels.

+ Then move on to what other data you require to contextualise or complete. Are your trends representative of the market, or your locality? How will upcoming demographic changes impact you? What are your nearest competitors doing differently? Where are you currently winning?

+ Supplement the data you have with the data you need – off-the-shelf answers can make all the difference to your planning. Overlaying the free data resources provided by UCAS at the end of each cycle, will help you fill your gaps and identify where you sit on both a national and international level. If nothing else, it will grant perspective.

Sources

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