MEASURING THE EFFECT OF IN-COUNTRY RECRUITMENT ACTIVITIES ON FUTURE INTERNATIONAL ENROLLMENT AT A LARGE CANADIAN UNIVERSITY

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There are many recruitment methods and tactics an institution can choose to pursue diversification of international student enrollment goals. Return on investment in a choice of tactic can take up to three or more years to determine thus initial choice is vital. Just as important though is in our ability to measure the return. If we can not measure the return how do we know to continue the tactic or not? This 2-year longitudinal study measures the effect of one tactc: personal interactions that occur abroad (in-country) between campus-based recruitment staff and prospective students and school counselors in twelve countries across seven measures. Measures are compared to untouched prospective applicants and registrants from the same set of countries.

Institutional Introduction

The University of Alberta, established in 1908, is a large public research intensive university governed by a board in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, with total enrollment nearing 40,000 students taking 200 undergraduate programs and 70 master's and PhD programs in 18 faculties. Total international undergraduate enrollment is 14% as of fall 2015, or 17% including graduate students. Strategic enrollment management (SEM) is being introduced and SEM structure and dynamics occur across various units. Recruitment of international students outside Canada is conducted by University of Alberta International (a centralized unit within the university focused on internationalization); admission policy is determined by each respective faculty; and admission processing is conducted by the Office of the

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Registrar. The university recently moved from a rolling admissions model to a competitive admissions model designed to provide firmer earlier admission offers and yield higher quality students.

Research Project Introduction

In recent years it has become more and more competitive to recruit an increasing number of quality international students from diverse countries into undergraduate programs. Demand for overseas education seats grows every year worldwide as forecast in British Council's *The Future of the World's Mobile Students to 2024* (British Council, 2013, p. 13); however, so does the supply of such education opportunities as traditional source countries move toward becoming host countries (British Council, 2013, p. 22). The future of international student recruitment and enrollment will be very dynamic and rapidly changing; thus, analyses of results of chosen recruitment tactics will need to be real time. The University of Alberta recently began new undergraduate international enrollment plans to (a) increase diversity of international student enrollment and (b) increase quality of the overall international student body.

There are several methods, such as those listed in the Megha and Zhengrong (2016) report *The Next Frontier: ROI in International Student Recruitment* (2016) to attempt to achieve these goals, but how do we know what will be effective given limited resources and given immediacy of institutional goals? This research article analyzes the effectiveness of one such method: What is the effect of connections made while a campus-based recruitment staff[1] is active while visiting another country ("in-country"). Is there a true return on investment (ROI) (Langston & Scheid, 2014) in such activity that is specifically undertaken to help achieve institutional enrollment goals? It may seem obvious that meeting with and connecting with prospective students in person is an effective recruitment activity, but can it be quantitatively proven? How does it help? How *much* does it help? Can we measure the return on this investment? This article attempts to quantitatively answer these questions.

Given the cost of international recruitment travel and opportunity cost of university resources, it is important to answer these questions, especially as budgets become tighter and expectations of return on investment climb higher. This exercise in general also portrays several core SEM concepts as noted by Bontrager (2004), specifically (a) creating a data-rich environment to inform decisions and evaluate strategies; (b) generating added net revenue for the institution; and (c) improving service levels to all stakeholders (e.g., prospective students). Knowing if and when certain markets are leading to desired results helps shape and guide future recruitment travel planning and budgeting. To be thorough, results will be measured across multiple variables and points along the admissions funnel and up to the end of first-year university studies.

To work towards enhancing international diversity and quality, several markets were evaluated across several base market indicators for potential. This resulted in the targeting of a select number of markets[2] with strong signs of growth potential. The university then aligned four factors deemed influential to prospective international students: marketing and targeted social media, scholarships, priority admission processing for applications from the target markets, and in-country personal relationships built through visits to high schools, presence at education fairs, and college counselor connections. The effectiveness of the latter factor, in-country personal relationships, is the focus of this study.

Definitions

Data labels can vary from institution to institution and from country to country. Given that many data points are examined here it is important to provide label clarity for consistency across reader as to what each label refers to.

1. For purposes of simplicity here, prospective students that the University had influence over due to in-country presence are labeled *touched*. Prospective students in the same country who applied for admission but were not known to be influenced are labeled *nontouched*. Further detail is offered below.
2. *Application*—when a student applies for admission to a degree program.
3. *Admitted*—applicants who received either an early conditional or final (unconditional) offer of admission.

4. *Registered*—a new student accepts their offer and registers in classes in September (main intake term).
5. *Enrolled*—refers to both new and current students attending classes.
6. *Admit rate*—the number of applicants admitted.
7. *Yield rate*—the number of admitted students that register.
8. *Study permit*—the immigration document permitting the student to study in Canada. Students in this category are assessed full fare on tuition calculation. This is approximately similar to the concept of out-of-state fee assessments in the United States.

Research Methodology

A standard research methodology was employed to guide these research analyses, which spanned two years: September 2013 to October 2015. Figure 1 illustrates the cycle of using past results to guide future planning. This paper focuses on the results analyses step.

1. *Outreach strategy.* Two recruitment staff traveled to a total of 12 different countries to conduct recruitment activities aimed at attracting undergraduate applications for admission.
2. *Outreach tools.* Within each country the recruiters visited certain high schools to give presentations to a dedicated classroom of students (when allowed), or on a volunteer basis such as a table in the hallway at lunchtime. Names and e-mails of interested students were collected and tagged with the name of their school. Recruitment staff also attended open public fairs by setting up a booth with brochures and other promotional materials. Interested students could walk up to the booth to ask questions and take promotional materials. The recruiter would ask the student to enter her or his name on a comment card or sign-up sheet and add the school name. It was challenging to get all booth visitors to do this and if they did, they sometimes did not enter their school name or write legibly. This made cross-referencing with the final list of newly registered students (in September) difficult. Recruitment staff also engaged in other outreach activities such as counselor breakfasts or lunches, evening receptions, and participated in multicountry tours organized by the government of Canada (Imagine Canada). In these latter two cases, name collection was not always possible due to time constraints or group dynamics.
3. *Outreach frequency.* The recruiter would typically visit a country only once in the outreach timeframe. In some cases, a second visit in the early spring occurred to meet with current applicants and conduct yield events involving current alumni living in the country or to make initial contact with sophomores and juniors.
4. *Outreach and analyses timeline:*
   a. September 2013 to April 2014—recruitment staff travel.
   b. September 30, 2014—run final report of applicants and their final admission status and then tabulate the total number of applicants, admits, and registrations for the 12 countries included in this study.
   c. October to November 2014—cross-reference prospect names with applicant names. These totals are then broken into two groups. The first group counts students recruitment staff definitely "touched" during in-country recruitment activities including visits to high schools, met the students at an education fair, and through relationship-building efforts with school officials and counselors. The second group counts all other applicants from those same 12 countries (aka "nontouched" group). It is suspected that many in the nontouched group could be placed into the touched group. Presence in-country also contributes to institutional awareness, positive word-of-mouth, seeing friends choose the University of Alberta, and so on, resulting in applications from students in the same admission cycle or in future ones. Although the

Figure 1. Research Analyses Feedback Loop

main target of recruitment efforts are international applicants who would travel to campus on a study permit, the two groups were further broken down by citizenship status (study permit/Canadian and permanent resident) to see if any additional insights could be gained. The size of the data sets for Canadians and permanent residents were too small, however, to warrant analyses but are included, nonetheless.

d. December 2014—analyze initial findings, yield analyses, final entrance average calculations and compare for the touched and nontouched group (Stage 1 analyses).
e. October 2015—research and tabulate first year success indicators (completion, first-year GPA) (Stage 2 analyses) for both groups.

Data Collection Challenges

Database and technology systems at the university at the time of this study had limits in terms of completeness of international student applicant information. The University of Alberta is a Peoplesoft user, and there is no single campus-wide customer relationship management (CRM) in place. Applicant files at the time of this study were all paper-based. A new e-document management system has since been added, but it was too late in terms of the time frame of this study to impact the stated limitation.

Several challenges had to be overcome during Stage 1 analyses. The first challenge was determining the name of every applicant's school at the time of application ("last school"). Knowing where applicants are spending their senior year is vital in order to inform this study's counts of touched schools, but also guides both current outreach as well as future travel planning. The university's online application for admission asks students to select from a drop-down list the country and name of their high school or college. This step is optional, and many students do not enter this information. Students who do choose to enter this information can do so only if their school already exists in Peoplesoft; however, there are simply so many schools in the world that this online list will never be complete. If the student does not find her or his school name, she/he may leave it blank, and Peoplesoft defaults to the name of the country in which the student resides. After generating a list of all international applicants from the 12 countries in this study, we found the missing names of last schools by going to the paper file stacks and looking up each file, one by one. This step took approximately four days.

Another challenge in attempting to achieve complete data collection at the university is that, if a student applies for admission or is admitted but does not start in September, the file is destroyed after 12 months. This made analyses of 2012 and 2013 results limited to being able to count only the number of touched new registration starts because only their file with admission documents is kept, as illustrated in Table 1.

It was also challenging to tag prospects the recruiter met as a sophomore or junior. Without a CRM in place, it is challenging to keep track of names collected two or more years prior to the fall start date.

A final challenge was comparing names of students touched against the final list of applicants in fall 2014. When recruitment staff are abroad, they collect prospective student names on comment cards from school visits and fairs, sign-up sheets at school visits, or direct

Table 1. New International Undergraduate Registration Growth in Fall 2012, 2013, 2014

Study Permit (Visa) Student New Registration Growth	2012	2013	2014	2-year %
Touched registrations from ***specific*** schools	14	17	29	+107%
X 1.3 estimation factor[1]	18	22	38	+111%
Untouched registrations	15	22	20	+33%

Notes:
1. *The 1.3 Estimation Factor.* We cannot claim credit for all applications and registrations generated as some students will always find us through various means related to other University recruitment tools and efforts. Above the number of touched students we estimate an additional 30% of outcomes due to a positive image and presence built up over time, positive word-of-mouth, feeding counselor and parent networks, building counselor relationships, having met prospective students in previous years (e.g., as a gr. 10 or 11 student), and marketing/social media efforts. However, for the purpose of the data in Table 2, the touched group includes only those students that can be traced with a specific mechanism such as a completed comment card, name on an attendee list at a school visit, etc. Therefore, the results can be considered as the minimum effect, with total actual effect being some level higher than that.
2. Some cells are redacted to protect institutional data privacy.

e-mails from students who saw the recruitment staff at a recruitment event but did not or could not enter their names for some reason, such as time limits or low initial interest. For these reasons, the number of touched students cannot be entirely complete but can be considered as a baseline minimum result. An estimation factor explained above (Table 1) is used in this case, but only for one table and is listed in a separate row for clarity and data transparency.

Findings

When recruitment staff meet a prospective student or her/his counselor/official in-country and can give a personal touch, the results show that the touched group matches or outperforms the nontouched group across several measures, when compared to the assumed remaining nontouched group from the same set of countries:

1. Registration growth year over year (2012, 2013, 2014; see Table 1).

   The number of touched new registered students from the 12 countries in fall 2014 grew by 107% compared to 2012. The number of applicants from the 12 countries was consistently low in the years leading up to 2012, then started to climb once in-country visits started to occur. After 2012, the number of applicants from both touched and nontouched groups started to grow, which might indicate simply good timing to enter a market. However, the key to note here is that the number of touched applicants grew faster than the nontouched group of new registrants from the same set of countries. This latter group grew only 33% over the same two-year period. This helps avoid the counterclaim that the recruiter was coincidentally in the right place at the right time and prospects there were going to apply and register, regardless of recruiter contact and follow-up.

2. Same or higher admission averages (see Table 2).

   The average admission average of touched admitted study permit students was 88.0%, while the nontouched study permit group was slightly lower, at 87.6%. On this measure, it is surprising that the average admission average of Canadians abroad and Permanent Residents of Canada (PRs) was lower than the study permit applicants that UAlberta attracted. It is not clear why this is true, but perhaps the latter groups think they do not have to try as hard to prove themselves and gain entry to Canada because they already have status in Canada. Whatever the case, university admission standards and requirements, like at most institutions in Canada, are the same regardless of citizenship status.

3. Higher admit rates (see Table 2 and Chart 1).

   The number of applicants who receive an offer of admission is the admit rate. This rate for the touched study permit students was 54%, which was higher than the nontouched admit rate of 32%. This rate is an important sign of applicant quality and of applicant persistence to complete the application. The touched admit rate is apparently helped by the increase in attention from recruitment staff (see recruiter motivation piece below).

4. Similar yield rates (see Table 2 and Chart 1).

   The number of admitted students who decide to register in the fall is the yield rate. On this measure the rates were similar (touched = 31%; untouched = 29%).

5. Growing return on investment (see Tables 1 and 2).

   The touched group of new registrants represented a 44% higher total potential tuition revenue before expenses (33% higher after expenses) than the nontouched group of new registrants from the same set of 12 countries. This estimation is based on the assumption of 100% persistence and graduation rate after four years thus is purely the maximum potential revenue. Persistence is not 100%, of course, and will vary by institution. The maximum potential revenue came at a fixed cost in terms of staffing, resources, marketing, and scholarships. Given the fixed expense every year yet growing number of touched new registrants, this is a positive, and growing, return on investment. What is not clear or easy to determine is how many, if any, of those touched students would have applied for admission and completed their applications, regardless of in-country activity. Again, the results in Table 1 show a greater two-year rate

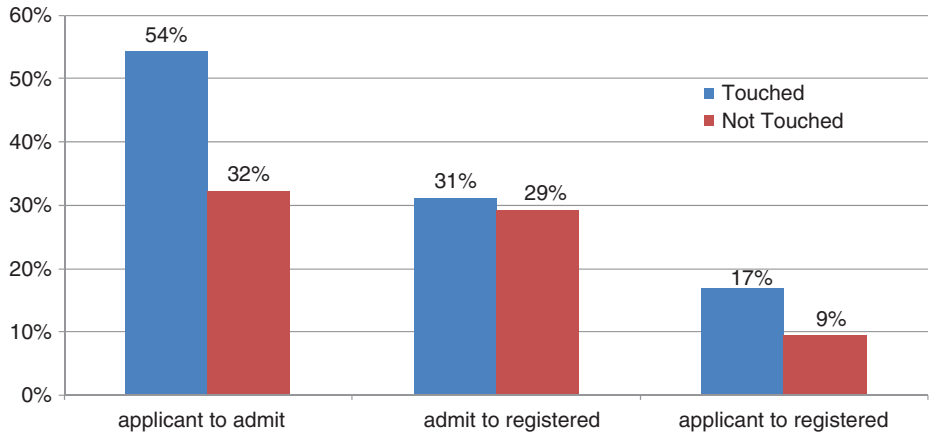
Table 2 Comparisons of In-Country Touched and Nontouched New International Undergraduate Starts (September 2014 intake; from the same set of 12 countries)

Touched - Fall 2014	Average Average of Admitted and Registered	Applicant to Admitted	Admitted to Registered	Applicant to registered	Required to Withdraw	Passed with Warning	# Who Passed 1st Year	Completion Rate	First Year Cumulative GPA*
Study Permit/Visa	88.0%	54%	31%	17%				93.1%	2.96
Canadian Citizen	83.2%	50%	27%	14%				100.0%	3.07
Permanent Resident	85.5%	40%	50%	20%				0.0%	na
Total		54%	31%	17%				90.9%	2.98
Total 4 year revenue							*on those who passed or passed with warning		
	Expenses								
	Net Revenue	$ -							

Non-Touched - Fall 2014	Average Average of Admitted and Registered	Applicant to Admitted	Admitted to Registered	Applicant to registered	Required to Withdraw	Passed with Warning	# Who Passed 1st Year	Completion Rate	First Year Cumulative GPA*
Study Permit/Visa	87.6%	32%	29%	9%				73.70%	2.87
Canadian Citizen	83.7%	24%	50%	12%				66.70%	2.20
Permanent Resident	86.0%	23%	57%	13%				50.00%	2.20
Total		30%	33%	10%				69.20%	2.69
Total 4 year revenue							*on those who passed or passed with warning		

Notes:
1. Some cells are redacted to protect institutional data confidentiality.
2. "Admitted" includes applicants who received either an early conditional of final (unconditional) offer of admission.
3. "Registered" indicates the student accepted their offer and registered in classes in September.

Chart 1. Touches In-Country Influence Greater Admit and Yield Rates



of increase in new registrants (+107%) compared to the nontouched group (+33%), so we can confidently assume that recruiter in-country activity has a more positive impact as compared to doing nothing in-country. Post-arrival survey data would help provide details to this assumption.

6. Higher first-year performance (see Table 2).

   The first-year completion rate for the touched study permit students was 93.1% compared to 73.7% for the nontouched group. This is surprising given that the entrance average for both groups was very similar. Why there is a difference at all on this measure is unclear, though perhaps the preconnection empowers the newly arriving student to feel more connected to campus in general from the start and therein a desire to persist is engendered.

7. Higher first-year GPA.

   The first-year cumulative GPA for the touched study permit students was 2.96 (out of 4.0) compared to 2.87 for the nontouched group. The difference is small but positive and still surprising given the entrance average for both groups was very similar.

Summary

The purpose of this analysis was to determine if in-country recruitment activities had an impact on enrollment and then to measure the level of impact, if any, across several factors. Greater positive impact was found in the new registration two-year growth rate, admit rate, overall yield rate (applicant to registrant), entrance average, first-year success rate, and first-year GPA. The results showed a positive impact across not just one but several measures and that the number of touched applicants and registrants is growing year over year. Both of those points help detract from the possibility that market entry was just a coincidental good timing.

Future Research

There are several further considerations and implications of these findings that would benefit from future research. For example, if one in-person touch can make a positive impact across several measures, would additional touches in the same cycle amplify any of the results and/or accelerate the growth of future intake sizes? In almost all cases, a touched student was met only once in-country by the recruitment staff for brief amounts of time ranging from five minutes to an hour. Would increasing the time spent with the prospect make a difference? Would adding a touch from an alumni living in the country have any impact? These are further areas to research.

These results would benefit from benchmarking to comparator universities. Although the results show a positive impact due to in-country recruitment, it would be useful to see how they compare to similar universities. Are the results comparable, or are they below or above the norm? Being above the norm would support continuance or an increase of the in-country recruitment activity, while being below the norm would give rise to the need to further investigate the actual

in-country practices, the level of financial aid offered, admission offer timing, amount of personal follow-up by the recruiter, and supports offered or available during the critical first year of study.

In-country touches alone are not the elusive "silver bullet" noted by Langston and Scheid (2014), nor will there ever be a singular enrollment solution, but they can be one of a combination of strategies. This study then also speaks to the authors' call for institutions to invest more heavily in internal institutional research aimed at analyzing activities for "true ROI." As noted, the authors also cite the need for dedicated CRM systems and staff support. The research conducted in this report was essentially a manual CRM process to "connect the dots." Looking forward, if new registrant growth is expected, then continue the in-country recruitment activities until enrollment targets are reached and then readjust level of tactics. In this study, the revenue generated was more than the expenses occurred, but there is always an opportunity cost that should be considered. Could a higher return on investment be found through other recruitment mechanisms? We would need a similar level of multiyear analyses on such mechanisms before we could make conclusions. In terms of the future benefit of this analysis on in-country recruitment planning, we can continually track these kinds of results, refining market choices, increasing market presence, decreasing it, or withdrawing from a market and adding a new one.

If it can be concluded that in-country recruitment touches are an effective use of institutional resources, it is worth analyzing *why* it is better. What in particular contributes to the positive impact? Is it simply the act of traveling to a prospect's country and directly or indirectly meeting in person? How much does impact depend on the format, location, and length of contact? How much time should be spent following up with each student? Why did the admit rate jump for the touched group, but the admission-to-registration rate did not vary much between the same two groups? How many years should the recruiter continue to engage the school or market in general before withdrawing or adjusting tactics? Answers to these questions can lead to even better results, more efficient use of resources, and optimal new enrollments in future intakes.

On a qualitative analysis level as to why in-country recruitment activity can be effective, further research might find that this activity leads to personal connections that can last through the admission cycle (and beyond) and that this is something the international prospective student and parent values. For example, the prospect can phone or e-mail the same recruiter with questions or status check requests. There is also the positive image given when the university made the effort to fund and send staff to go to their country. Parents of prospects particularly see this as a sign of respect and a heightened chance that that recruiter will be there for them along the admission process (or even after arrival!), thus making the applicant motivated to both apply and to persist further along the application process as the student's short list gets shorter. The recruiter needs to be careful, however, to live up to any expectations set, especially in terms of ability to follow up later, or else the applicant may have a bad application experience, or is denied, and negative word-of-mouth can spread back to the student's school and counselors. On the other hand, a positive experience will also get back to the school and student's network of connections, hopefully leading to ant trails of students becoming larger the next admission cycle. When following up with a phone call or e-mail to or from a touched student, the applicant has a preexisting connection, which leads to a warmer relationship and closer affinity to the institution before the phone or e-mail conversation even begins.

Recruiter Motivation

On the recruitment staff side, similar questions can be considered. Does having met a student abroad in a target market motivate the staff to track their students more closely and over a longer period of time? This would include communicating regularly with admissions staff (recruitment staff and admissions staff are in two distinct units in this study example). Are there factors that dampen outcomes? For example, the respective recruiter has some limits in ability to follow up in person as the admission cycle moves on. Being a recruiter can mean long stretches of time when not in the office due to travel or time off. The recruiter may not be in the office when a prospect calls or expects a fast reply from e-mail

queries. The prospective student prefers to deal with the same person throughout the admission cycle, but this is not always possible. How best can this be mitigated? An example would be through e-introduction to coworkers and assistants while avoiding giving the prospect the feeling of being passed around and unwanted.

Notes

1. This category excludes in-country agents and any other sort of third-party representative.

2. Names of countries not included in this report for confidentiality reasons. There were 12 targeted countries. China, Canada, Brazil, and the United States were not among the list of the 12 countries.

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