A good practice guide: Market Research

As UCL adapts to a changing landscape in Higher Education it is essential that innovative ideas for new programmes of study are supported by sound evidence that there is a gap within the department/Faculty/university’s portfolio, a demand amongst applicants, and that the qualification will be both recognised and welcomed for future study or employment.

It is essential that market research is initiated as early as possible in the programme design process to ensure that valuable time and resources at departmental, faculty and central levels are not wasted in developing programmes for which there is insufficient evidence of demand and appears unlikely to meet recruitment targets.

The Student Recruitment team regularly works in collaboration with Faculty colleagues to support the development of new programmes, and provide specialist research services to provide market insight. Their website explains more about the service and how to access it: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/cam/activities/market-research

Points to consider when conducting market research

- The process should start by identifying opportunities, most commonly highlighted through a gap analysis. A thorough Gap Analysis should look at whether the subject area has potential that is not yet being met through existing UCL subject offerings and should provide an indication of the possible size of the market. Where subject areas are new and innovative, this analysis should be looking at growth in interest in the subject as a whole and other indicators of possible recruitment, including qualitative evidence from enquirers, students and academics.

- Once a need has been established, it is important to develop a clear and concise rationale for the programme. Questions that should be answered include:
  - What are the broad aims and outcomes of the programme? Where will students go on to upon completion of the degree?
  - How will the programme address needs that are not currently met?
  - How will the programme differentiate itself from competitors, either existing or into the future?

- Where a new programme is moving into an existing area, there needs to be evidence of student demand. The Student Recruitment team can assist in understanding demand by identifying the size and trends of recruitment to specific programmes at UK universities.

- Where a new programme is going into completely new area this research will need to be more nuanced. The Student Recruitment team will conduct any appropriate analysis on student numbers for similar programmes, but can advise on further research into search popularity, academic papers and employment possibilities in the area. For new subjects, this research will likely take longer to conduct, so timings should be considered carefully.

- Furthermore, it is recommended qualitative research is conducted into student perspectives for innovative programmes, and we also recommend speaking to potential employers to gather feedback from them. This should be conducted in house, although the Market research and Insight team in Communications and Marketing (CAM) can provide advice and guidance.

- When looking across UCL it is essential to look not just at the programme name but also content and learning outcome, to ensure that a new programme is distinctive and not likely
to cannibalise recruitment to existing programmes. If there are overlaps with existing programmes these need to be understood, addressed and managed.

- Throughout the Market research and development processes, consideration should be given to the ideal target student, or cohorts. This will enable more directed and targeted marketing at the point of launching a programme. Recommended practice is to develop student personas which describe the shared characteristics of your target market. These could include indicators of:
  - What stage of life is the group in?
    E.g. Undergraduates straight from school, following directly on from an undergraduate degree or mid-level professionals looking to further develop skills. Understanding age and stage is key to develop some of the other distinguishing features of a persona, such a media consumption.
  - What is their primary motivation for studying on your degree?
    E.g. To get an entry-level job in the relevant field, career development, academic interest.
  - How do they consume media and conduct research?
    Can be informed in part by the age and stage, but understanding how they consume media helps to understand how to communicate and advertise to the students and ensure the right students are finding out about the degree.
  - What UK regions or countries are they coming from?
    This may be difficult to identify immediately, and is not a priority if media consumption is predominantly online, but can be helpful for face-to-face marketing, informing the relevant academic providers that may be feeders to the programme or to target marketing outside the UK.

**Other sources of help**

- UCL Careers Service maintains good relationships with a wide range of employers. Consequently, they may be able to provide advice on whether there is evidence of employer demand for graduates with the ranges of skills and knowledge the proposed programme aims to deliver. They can also provide information about the career destinations of graduates from existing UCL programmes.
- Contacts via academic networks at institutions offering a similar programme may be able to indicate the number and type of students it attracts, graduate destinations, etc. When done as information and ideas sharing this can be a helpful resource, particularly for Student Persona development, and should be treated as indicative but not precise.
- Professional contacts in industry may be able to assess the objectives and content of the programme and advise on whether graduates would be attractive to them for future employment.