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RESEARCH ARTICLE.

The undergraduate prospectus as a marketing tool for academic libraries.

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There is widespread use of the undergraduate prospectus as a decision-making tool for prospective university students. Surveys have examined factors that affect student decision-making; none have specifically examined the use of the prospectus as a marketing tool for academic libraries. This study aimed to examine the usefulness of the prospectus as a marketing tool for academic libraries. A content analysis of twenty prospectuses was carried out to determine the portrayal of the library within them. A questionnaire was used to uncover the perceptions of prospective university students. This was distributed to 44 sixth-form students. The prospectus was identified as the most important source of information for prospective students. The library was deemed important in the prospectus in terms of decision-making, but it ranked behind other information, such as course content or entry requirements. The exposure of the library varied within prospectuses; some featured the library heavily, others excluded the library altogether. The most heavily referenced features of the library were information technology, printed and electronic resources and study space. The prospectus has potential for library marketing, increasing the exposure and highlighting the value its services. A 'best practice' policy for library marketing and promotion within prospectuses is presented.

Keywords: marketing, academic libraries, undergraduate prospectus

Introduction

This study investigates the exposure of academic libraries within the undergraduate university prospectus. The study analyses space and content relating to libraries within the prospectus, and the impact of this information on prospective students when choosing universities.

The undergraduate prospectus is a significant resource, useful in promoting services to first-year students. Libraries compete with other support services and departments for limited space within prospectuses.

Researchers have explored the impact and content of the undergraduate prospectus (Keen and Higgins, 1990; Moogan et al., 1999). However, there has not been a study focusing specifically on the representation of the library within prospectuses. This study fills a gap in the research surrounding the use of the undergraduate prospectus and its impact upon student perceptions of the university library.

Aims and objectives

This study aims to investigate the usefulness of undergraduate prospectuses as academic library marketing tools.

The objectives are to identify factors which influence the form and content of university prospectuses; to analyse the content relating to libraries; to determine the effectiveness of prospectuses in raising student awareness of libraries; to develop a 'best practice' policy for library promotion in undergraduate prospectuses.

Literature Review

Kotler (1979) and Litten (1980) observe that non-profit organisations, HE in particular, have been slow to adopt marketing practices. The need for strategic marketing was recognised in the 1980s, but didn't gather strength in universities until later that decade (Naudé and Ivy, 1999). As HE becomes more aligned with marketing concepts, students are increasingly viewed as customers, and HE becomes increasingly consumer-driven as students control their educational financing (Maringe, 2006; Broady-Preston and Preston, 1999).

Like their parent institutions, academic libraries have been slow to accept marketing processes (Adeyoyin, 2005; Koontz et al., 2006). As with universities, libraries are faced with competition (Sen, 2006). Libraries were traditionally the only reputable information provider, whereas competitors now offer services direct to students (Bell, 2002). In this competitive arena, libraries are forced to prove their worth, highlighting the quality of resources and services through marketing (Gibbons, 2001). Hose and Bhat (2007) suggest that successful libraries will be closely aligned with user needs, embracing marketing to achieve this cohesion. Academic libraries exploit this relationship for their marketing (Jordan, 1998).

Researchers have reported links between student university choice and high-quality academic facilities including the library (Price et. al., 2003; Reynolds, 2007). Reynolds (2007) also asked students for their reasons for rejecting institutions; the library was in the top-five inadequate facilities at institutions rejected by students. An earlier study (Reynolds and Cain, 2006) placed the library as the second-most important facility in the decision-making process, and the third-most important facility to see

whilst visiting campus. This evidence suggests that academic libraries can be used effectively for university promotion.

As HE has adopted a market orientation, students have been offered considerably more choice of course and institution (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999; Briggs, 2006). Armstrong and Lumsden (1999) suggest that promotional materials heavily influence student choice. Dawes and Brown (2002) found that prospectuses are the most widely consulted category of information supporting students in their choices. Other researchers found the prospectus to be a significant source of information (Moogan and Baron, 2003; Briggs, 2006; Ivy, 2008; Veloutsou et al., 2005; Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999).

The difficulty lies in selecting and maintaining appropriate information for inclusion (Stark and Hoy, 1977). Keen (1985) observes that it is necessary to publish information relevant to the target audience, and to exclude information of peripheral interest; information within the prospectus is too often focused on the needs of academic staff, reflecting their opinions and biases. Moogan and Baron (2003) observe that prospectuses are frequently recycled year to year with few amendments, often leading to inaccurate information.

The literature states that the prospectus must be well-designed and accessible to prospective students (Keen, 1985). The publication should be clearly structured, with visual signposts such as headings and colour coding. The prospectuses must be attractive and interesting in order to appeal to students, with vivid and colourful presentation (Moogan and Baron, 2003).

Alred et al. (1991) observe that design should be simply arranged, with a clear structure helping readers to locate information. Readers often scan headings before

reading documents; headings and other navigation aids should organise information (Alred et al., 1991). Users must be able to find information; otherwise they will abandon the document as useless (Rude, 1988). Schriver (1997) observes that documents must meet the needs of both readers and organisations, which can be difficult to balance.

Briggs (2006) suggests that the prospectus currently remains the most important information source for students, despite a growth in Internet use. A number of studies (Briggs, 2006; Dawes and Brown, 2002) analyse the impact of the Internet on university information sources, which has been surprisingly unpronounced.

The literature shows the importance of the well designed prospectus as a marketing tool that academic libraries could exploit.

Methodology

Introduction

A quantitative analysis of prospectus content was carried out to assess the visibility of the library within them. Content analysis was used to analyse key themes emerging regarding libraries in the prospectus, and to examine the amount of space devoted to libraries (Neuendorf, 2002). This was followed by a survey of prospective university students to gain an understanding of what they looked for in a university prospectus, and how it helped their decision making regarding university.

Content analysis

Categories for the content analysis of text and pictures were informed by the literature review. Each category was given a code e.g. PR Printed Resources.

The text in the prospectuses was coded and counted. The various features of each university prospectus were recorded e.g. space given to the library, location of the library text in the prospectus, and how the library was defined and/or named. Each of these details was a useful indicator of library visibility within the prospectuses.

The coding was supplemented by a number of other measures of library content, including an analysis of the location of this content relative to the size of the prospectus, and the indexing of library content.

A similar analysis was also performed for pictures within the prospectuses. The pictures relating to the library were analysed; those easily identifiable as library related, and those that evoked themes connected to library services. Observation of frequencies, location, and types of pictures, and which themes were visible in the pictures were noted.

Sample

The content analysis was limited to twenty prospectuses for manageability, selected from The Times Good University Guide (The Times Online, 2009), one of the most popular sources of information for students when choosing universities (Carrico, 1997). Each university was given a number, preserving the original rankings of the list. A random number generator was then used to select twenty institutions.

University (Rank in The Times list)			
Oxford (1)	Reading (32)	Swansea (48)	Derby (95)
Durham (8)	Strathclyde (35)	Bradford (49)	Abertay (100)
Bristol (10)	Queen Mary London (37)	Lampeter (70)	Wolverhampton (107)

King's College (11)	Sussex (38)	Canterbury Christ Church (80)	Thames Valley (112)
Royal Holloway (30)	Heriot-Watt (47)	Salford (83)	London South Bank (113)

Table 1. Universities selected for content analysis.

Content analysis design

Pilot test - A coding pilot test was conducted using the University of Sheffield undergraduate prospectus to validate the coding scheme and test inter-coder reliability.

Two coders analysed the same section of text. The percentage agreement was calculated using a formula: $PA_o = A / n$; PA_o is the "proportion agreement, observed", A is the total number of agreements, and n is the total number of units (Neuendorf, 2002). This produces a figure ranging from 0 to 1, where 0 denotes no agreement and 1 denotes perfect agreement. The level of agreement was .85 (85% agreement) which is acceptable (Neuendorf, 2002).

Visibility rating

A rating system was designed to measure the library's visibility within each publication. Categories from the content analysis were scored, with a possible score of 40 for each prospectus. The scores were plotted on a visibility barometer for comparison (Figure 1).

Visibility score - The visibility score comprised of analysis of textual content regarding the library; the more words, the higher score. More points were awarded if the library content was located towards the start of the prospectus as document design literature emphasizes the importance of linear reading (Lagerwerf and Bossers, 2002). Keen (1985) stresses the importance of clear indexing; therefore, more points were awarded for indexing of the library in both the front and back of the prospectus, as well as labelling on campus maps. Scores were also given for the total number of coded statements about the library.

An analysis of pictures relating to the library was also carried out. Points were awarded for the use of library pictures within the prospectus, and on the front or back covers. The percentage of library pictures from the total number of pictures was recorded, with more points for a higher percentage. The number of coded themes e.g. pictures of study space etc. within library pictures was observed, attributing one point per theme.

Visibility barometer design - The scores were marked on a barometer scale (Figure 1), designed to represent visibility, the top end of the scale denotes a high visibility score (i.e. 40), the lower end denotes a low visibility score (i.e. 0).

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was distributed to sixth-form students at Moulsham High School, about to begin the application process to university (Appendix 1). It was designed to complement evidence from the content analysis, and the literature. The school was chosen because of contacts there. A researcher was present at the school throughout the questionnaire distribution, to answer any queries.

Students were allotted a 50-minute session to complete the questionnaire; they could work at their own pace and leave at any time during the session. Students received an information sheet, the questionnaire, and were given an oral introduction to the project.

Moulsham High School is based in Chelmsford, Essex, with a Sixth Form of more than 200 students. The majority will continue into higher education. Students are supported for university applications throughout the sixth-form, with regular meetings, one-on-one interviews with staff, and the opportunity to attend higher education fairs and university open days. Prospectuses and university directories are available from the school library, and other leaflets and promotional materials are available.

Sample

Questionnaires were distributed to students in the lower-sixth, a population of 130 students. Forty-four students returned questionnaires (21 male and 23 female).

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed to examine factors for students applying for university, and to allow students to provide detail into their personal choices and opinions regarding university. Students were also asked specifically about expectations of library services.

A pilot questionnaire distributed to individuals of a similar target age, allowed for refinements to wording and navigation instructions.

Findings

Content analysis

Location of library content

Prospectuses included between 0 and 640 words relating to the library, with a mean average of 272 words per prospectus. These were located within the following quartiles of the prospectus:

First 25%	13
Second 25%	1
Third 25%	0
Last 25%	5
No mention	1

Table 2. The location of library content.

The majority of prospectuses (13) placed library content in the first quartile, whilst only 5 prospectuses placed this content in the last quartile. One prospectus made no mention of the library.

Defining and labelling of the library

The library service was defined differently within the prospectuses.

Study support	6
Learning resources	4
Information services	3
Academic services	2
Facilities	1
Essential information	1
Support services	1
Campus services	1
No mention	1

Table 3. How the library service was defined within prospectuses.

The library was most frequently defined as a ‘Study support’ service, with ‘Learning resources’ and ‘Information services’ also highly mentioned.

More than 60% (14) of prospectuses labelled the library as ‘Library’ rather than ‘Learning Centre’ (1) , ‘Information centres’ (1), or Computer centre (1). One prospectus made no mention of the library.

Library indexing

The library was more often indexed in the back of the prospectus (14) than the front (2). The library was also included on a number of campus maps. Six of the prospectuses analysed did not include a campus map. Of those that did include a map (14), the vast majority labelled the library, clearly highlighting its location

Coding of library text

The text in the prospectuses was coded for library related themes. Chart 1 shows the frequency of the categories of text.

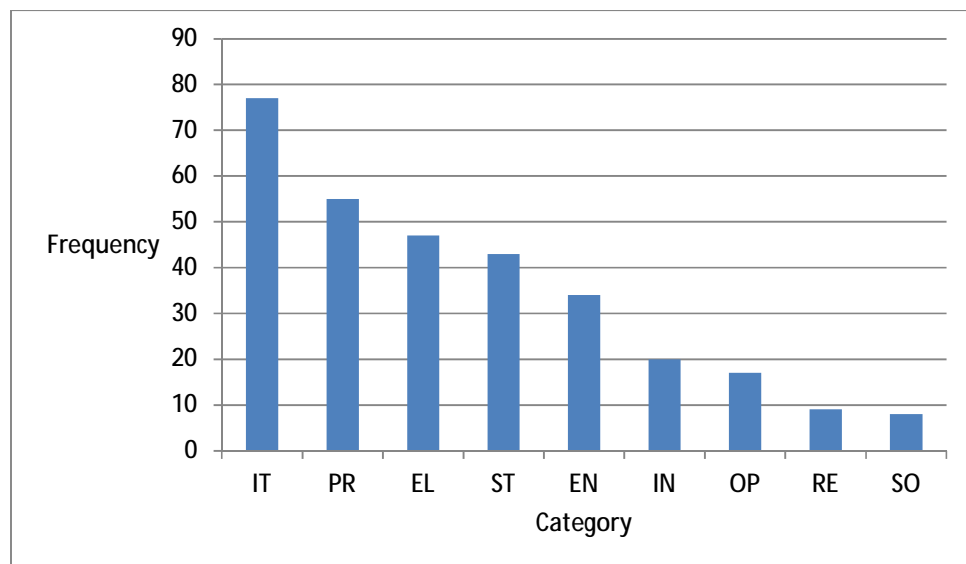


Chart 1. A graph to show frequency of coded categories of text (Key: PR = Printed resources, EL = Electronic resources, IT = Information technology, ST = Study space, SO = Social space, OP = Opening hours, EN = Enquiry services, IN = Investment, RE = Research facilities).

‘Information technology’ is the most frequent category within the text, followed by ‘Printed resources’, then ‘Electronic resources’. The least frequent categories were ‘Research facilities’ and ‘Social space’.

Pictures within the prospectuses were also analysed:

Location of library pictures

Pictures of the library were used throughout the prospectus.

	Main Library Text	Elsewhere in the prospectus	Front cover	Back cover
Yes	6	19	1	1
No	14	1	19	19

Table 4. The location of “library” picture within the prospectuses.

Six prospectuses included pictures of the library with the main section of library text.

One university did not use library pictures anywhere. One university included a picture of the library on the front and back cover.

Type of pictures

Table 5 shows the number and type of pictures used within each prospectus. Pictures are categorised as identifiable (as the library) or evocative (of the library). These have been totalled and expressed as a percentage of the total number of pictures within the prospectus.

Prospectus ID	Total pictures in prospectus	Identifiable library pictures	Evocative library pictures	Total library pictures	% of total pictures in prospectus
1	190	12	14	26	13.7
2	101	3	1	4	4

3	182	10	4	14	7.7
4	204	5	6	11	5.4
5	195	6	1	7	3.6
6	217	2	1	3	1.4
7	118	2	3	5	4.2
8	356	4	4	8	2.2
9	277	2	1	3	1.1
10	221	2	3	5	2.3
11	144	3	3	6	4.2
12	230	3	3	6	2.6
13	71	2	2	4	5.7
14	196	0	2	2	1
15	88	1	1	2	2.3
16	412	0	0	0	0
17	91	2	2	4	4.4
18	216	7	0	7	3.2
19	40	1	0	1	2.5
20	24	1	0	1	4.2
Total	3573	68	51	119	
Average	178.65	3.4	2.55	5.95	

Table 5. The frequency and type of library pictures within prospectuses. (Percentages rounded to one decimal place)

The final row of the table shows the average number of pictures of any kind per prospectus (178), as well as the average number of identifiable library pictures (three) and library evocative (two) pictures. In total, an average of 5.95 library pictures was used per prospectus. Expressed as a percentage, this approximates 3.3% of the average number of pictures used throughout the prospectuses.

Coding of library pictures

Thematic analysis of library pictures.

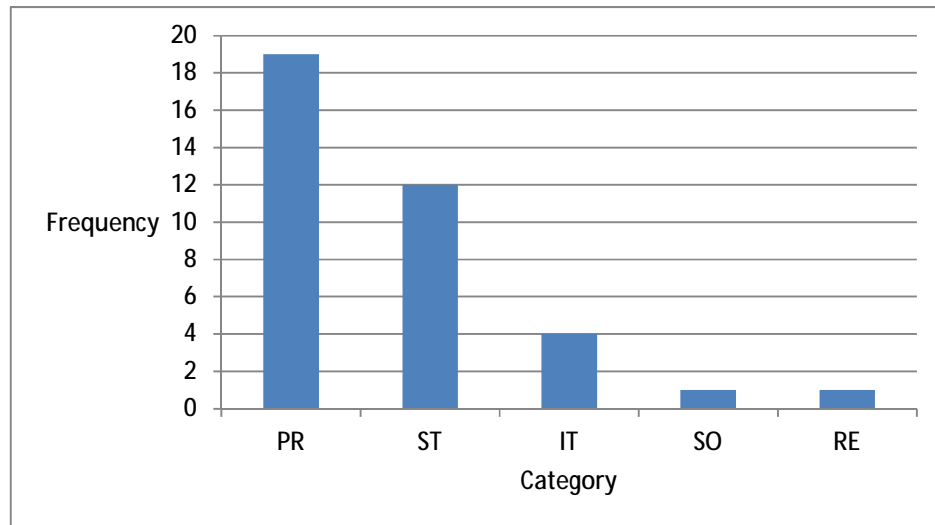


Chart 2. The frequency of themes in library pictures.

NB: The category 'EN' contained no responses and has been excluded from this graph.

Key: PR = Printed resources, IT = Information technology, ST = Study space, SO = Social space, RE = Research facilities

'Printed resources' was the most frequently observed category within pictures of the library, followed by 'Study space' and 'Information technology'. Both 'Social space' and 'Research facilities' were only observed in one prospectus.

Visibility ratings

The visibility scores i.e. how visible the library was in the prospectuses, are summarised on the visibility barometer, ranging from Derby's score of 0 to Oxford's score of 36 out of a possible 40 points.

The average visibility score was 19.1. The majority of the scores lie between ten and 30, with one outlier resting in each of the top and bottom sections of the barometer.

Figure 1. A barometer to show the library visibility score of prospectuses.



Findings from the questionnaires distributed to sixth-form students.

Students were asked to “... select the three most important criteria to short-list universities of interest”

Course content/module choice	101
Entry requirements	62
Location of university	38
Reputation of university	26
Social facilities	15
Distance from home	13
Accommodation	10
Library facilities	1

Table 6. Criteria used to short-list universities.

‘Course content / module choice’ was the most frequently selected criteria, followed by ‘Entry requirements’ and ‘Location of university’. ‘Library facilities’ were the least mentioned criteria.

Students were asked to “...select your three main sources of information about university ranked in order of importance.”

Prospectuses	114
Websites	73
Teachers	22
Parents	18
Friends	14
Advertisements and posters	7
School library	7
Careers advisers	5
Books	1
Experience	1
Higher education fairs	1
Open days	1

Table 7. The most important sources of information about university.

'Prospectuses' was the most frequently cited information source, followed by websites.

Respondents found 'Books', 'Higher education fairs' and 'Open days' less important.

Students were asked to rate the importance of sections within the university prospectus in supporting university applications.

Course content/descriptions	4.77
Admission requirements	4.55
Financial information	4.2
Library facilities	4.05
Accommodation	3.84
Careers services	3.55
Computing facilities	3.5
Sport/social facilities	3.36

Table 8. The importance to respondents of various sections of the prospectus.

Respondents gave the highest average score to 'Course content / descriptions', whereas

'Sport / social facilities' received the lowest score. The mean score is 3.98; Libraries

scoring above the mean at 4.05.

Students were asked: "Which is the most important section in supporting your choice of university? "

Course content / descriptions	27
Admission requirements	12
Financial information	2
Accommodation	1
Careers services	1
Computing facilities	1
Library facilities	0
Sport / social facilities	0

Table 9. The most important sections of the prospectus for respondents.

The most influential section in the prospectus was ‘Course content / descriptions’.

‘Library facilities’ and ‘Sport / social facilities’ received no responses.

Importance of library services

Students were asked: “How important are library services to you?”

Most respondents (29) rated library services as ‘Important’, 7 selected “very important” 8 selected “neither important or unimportant”. No respondents found library services to be either ‘Not at all important’ or ‘Mostly unimportant’.

They were then asked to rank the importance of particular library features.

Academic library features	Rank
Study space	1
Computers and technology	2
Online resources	3
Printed resources	4
Modern facilities	5
Opening hours	6
Social space	7
Enquiry services	8

Table 10. Ranking of various academic library features.

‘Study space’ and ‘Computers and technology’ were the highest ranked categories, whilst ‘Social space’ and ‘Enquiry services’ were the lowest ranked categories.

Reasons for applying to university

The students were asked what they hoped to gain from completing a university degree.

The most frequently cited reasons for going to university were to get a ***better job*** (37)

and expanding their ***subject knowledge*** (18). “To be able to get a good job and the job

I’ve always wanted to do”; “Higher knowledge in a subject I enjoy and find interesting”.

Other reasons cited were *higher salary* (9) *personal development* (9) *qualifications* (5);

promotion prospects (5); *work experience* (2); *further study* (2).

Students were asked: “What do you like or find most valuable about using a university prospectus?”

The ***‘Course selection / content’*** (31) was the most valued feature of prospectuses,

followed by details of ***‘Entry requirements’*** (15).

“The description of every course is useful because you can compare it to similar courses and different universities”

“Entry requirements are listed, so you know what grades you need to aim for.”

A ***‘Friendly / welcoming’*** (1) publication and ***‘open days’*** (1) were the least mentioned features. Other things students found to be valuable were: *“information on the local area”* (10), *“student experiences”* (8), *“clarity and reliability of information”* (7), to aid *“university selection”* (4), *“finance”* (4) *“accommodation”* (4), *“social life”* (4), *“information on facilities”* (3), *“career options”* (2).

Students were also asked: “What do you dislike or find most frustrating about using a university prospectus?”

They disliked being given “**irrelevant information**” (11) - “*I need to look at one page about a course but there’s also about 50 other pages on courses I don’t care about.*”

Students also want “**detail**” (12) - “*They could be more detailed and informative within each course’s description*”; “*Sometimes can be vague, have to ring place for more information*”.

A number of students commented specifically about the lack of detail given regarding “**entry requirements**” (7), “**open days**” (3) and “**accommodation**” information. (3). Students also didn’t like the look and feel of the prospectuses, comments on them being “**hard to use**” (4), too “**large**” (4), disliking the “**fonts**” used (2), and the “**lack of pictures**”. One student didn’t like the smell! - “*The smell and weight of them*”. Others (3) objected to the “**hard sell**” approach.

The students were also asked about the role their school played in supporting them. Students valued having the prospectuses made available through school (3). They were also positive about “**talks**” given in school (9), mock “**interviews**” (13), and the “**personal advice**” given by staff (11). Other help came from encouragement to attend “**HE fairs**” (9), and “**open days**” (2), and the usefulness of “**posters and leaflets**” (2). Students stressed the importance of the “**timeliness**” (4) of the information they received.

When asked: “*What do you think your school could do to provide more information about university?*”

Students suggested more “**external speakers**” (8) - “*Have speakers from different universities come to the school*”. Other suggestions included arranging “**open day visits**” (6), **more personalised advice** (7), “**more prospectuses**” in the school library (5), and

“more information” in the form of *“information on courses”* (3), *“examples of student applications”* (3), and *“posters and leaflets”*

The questionnaire showed that prospective students when using the prospectus as a source of information about university are most interested in the course descriptions as an aid in short-listing universities. A range of responses were received for the open-ended questions, highlighting the positive and negative features of prospectuses, as well as student requirements from their school for supporting university applications.

Discussion

Student use of the undergraduate prospectus

The prospectus is widely used by students as their most important source of information about university (Moogan and Baron, 2003). The results from the questionnaire, distributed to sixth-form students, showed that the majority of respondents valued the prospectus over other information sources, its nearest competitor being university websites. There is some suggestion in the literature that the Internet will become more important in the selection process (Dawes and Brown, 2002). These two categories were more prominent than others outscoring personal contributors such as teachers, friends and parents. The literature supports these findings also commenting on the reliability and usefulness of prospectuses (Veloutsou et al., 2004).

Regarding students likes and dislikes when using university prospectuses, the most frequent positive feature was convenient access to detailed course information. Respondents found it helpful for prospectuses to group courses together: *“The*

description of every course is useful because you can compare it to similar courses and different universities". This highlights the role of the prospectus in short-listing universities and subject choices: *"It helps you very much in the stage of cutting the universities down to a select few as it gives further information"*. Students were also interested in listings of entry requirements.

Students primarily use prospectuses for course information, allowing them to distinguish between institutions. Other factors, such as information on the local area or statements from student experiences, were also important. This confirms that prospectuses must focus on explaining course specifics to students, allowing them to make informed decisions about university.

The inclusion of vague and irrelevant information was disliked. Other negative features included the bulk of the prospectus and difficulty of navigation, and the tendency for universities to sell themselves within the prospectus. Students dislike prospectuses when they lack targeted, specific information; respondents specifically commented on the lack of admission requirements. This immediately creates a difficulty with the use of prospectuses; students require specific information to make informed decisions, but many prospectuses lack that information or obscure it within a bulky and unwieldy design. Such problems were confirmed in the literature; although students value accessible information (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999), prospectuses are often recycled with few significant changes (Moogan and Baron, 2003). Many prospectuses also prioritise image over information; focusing more on location and lifestyle (Jack,

2009), often reflecting institutional image rather than the information required by students.

Some universities (e.g. Thames Valley) have implemented personalised prospectuses which include only information relevant to the particular applicant. Such prospectuses remove the bulk and inefficiency of many prospectuses. However, many students use the prospectus as a tool in the decision-making process, needing access to broader content. Therefore, the traditional prospectus should not be entirely discounted in favour of personalised publications.

Space and content relating to the library

On average, sections relating to the library contained 272 words, ranging from no words (University of Derby) to 640 (University of Oxford). This suggests that institutions prioritise services and facilities differently.

Content relating to the library was predominantly located within the first or last quarter of the prospectus; this location facilitates finding the information about the library, as most readers will either start at the beginning of a publication or search from the rear (Lagerwerf and Bossers, 2002). The library was mainly indexed in the back of the prospectus, and only twice in the front. This reflects the general composition of prospectuses, which contain a basic contents page at the front, outlining broad sections of content, and a more detailed index of services and information at the back. The majority of libraries were also labelled on campus maps.

The library was most often labelled as a 'Study support', highlighting its role as an academic information provider. The term 'Library' was prioritised over others such as 'Information' or 'Learning centre'. The literature suggests that the library can be used as a sign of a university's quality (Breivik and Gee, 2006); if it is easily identified, the library can be used effectively for promotional and recruitment purposes.

Pictures of the library were widely used throughout prospectuses. On average 3.3% of pictures in the prospectus related to the library. When compared to the amount of space afforded to library text (approximately 0.5% of the prospectus, assuming a maximum of one page of library content within an average of 191 pages) pictures were used more frequently than text. Graphic representations of the library are therefore an important opportunity to increase the prominence of the library within the prospectus.

Coding was carried out for both text and pictures within the prospectuses. The most frequent theme within the text was 'Information technology', followed by 'Printed' and 'Electronic resources'. These results match the literature, which reports a strong focus on the availability of resources and technology in the library. Themes within library pictures, however, focused predominantly on 'Printed resources' and 'Study space'; pictures therefore reflect a well-stocked library which is academically supportive to students. The prospectuses highlight the library resources and services, which might be used to distinguish particular institutions.

The library is competing for space with a number of other services, so must neatly summarise its benefits for students within a limited area. There is potential for the library to become more involved in producing more targeted information for students. This requires close collaboration between the library and prospectus editors.

The library within the prospectus

The visibility of the library within the prospectuses varied widely. The majority of universities scored between ten and 30 from a possible 40 points, with clustering around the mid-point of the scale. This suggests that there is still opportunity to improve the exposure of the library, for example through improved indexing and greater use of pictures. Two outliers can be observed on the barometer: Oxford and Derby. The University of Oxford reported a high visibility score of 36, failing only to score points for a lack of library pictures on the front or back covers. It is not alone in this, only one prospectus used a picture of the library on its front and back covers. On the opposite end of the scale, the University of Derby failed to score any points; the library is not mentioned at any point in the Derby prospectus.

Many institutions successfully use the prospectus to promote services, including the library; others devote more space to features such as local information or student lifestyle (Jack, 2009). This might suggest that library content varies by the type and nature of the university.

The student decision-making process

Students reported a number of reasons for wishing to attend university, the most frequent of which was achieve a better job and career, "*To be able to get a good job and the job I've always wanted to do*". They were also interested in deepening subject knowledge. These expectations of university affect the choices which students will make when selecting potential institutions.

Students predominantly valued the course content and module choice at particular institutions, followed by the specific entry requirements at those universities.

This suggests that students are most interested in practical factors affecting their university applications. By contrast, facilities including the library, and social aspects of universities were chosen much less frequently. University location and reputation were also important factors, but remained overshadowed by the importance of course content.

This broadly reflects the findings from the literature, which shows that course content and university reputation are the most prominent factors influencing student decision-making. Although this study corroborates the importance of course content, entry requirements fared much better than university reputation. This discrepancy could be attributed to respondents' early progress through the decision-making process. Various sources in the literature (e.g. Moogan et al., 2001) report that different factors become important as the process continues; the important factors at this stage of respondents' applications may not mirror those in later stages. Criteria such as location and reputation might become more dominant as students begin to short-list institutions and must pick between academically similar universities.

Importance of the library in student decision-making

The library was not reported by respondents as an important factor in the decision-making process. It was the lowest-scoring criteria for *short-listing* institutions. When students were asked to rate the *importance* of various sections of the prospectus generally, the library fared better, ranking fourth for its importance to respondents, reporting a score of 4.05 out of 5. The results from this question, however, show very little distinction between different sections of the prospectus, all of which were rated above three out of five. Students are therefore influenced by various factors and information as they *prepare* university applications. This contrast is most clear when

students stated the single most important section of the prospectus; course content was by far the most frequent category. No respondents chose the library as the most important section.

When respondents were asked to outline the specific *importance of library services* to university choices, the majority replied that the library was either ‘Important’ or ‘Very important’ as a factor when choosing institutions. This suggests that students generally value the library service; similar findings occur in the literature, with students viewing the library as a particularly important university facility, but not the most important overall (Reynolds and Cain, 2006).

The library should therefore not be ignored as a potential determinant for attracting new students, but will not necessarily be a deciding factor for everyone.

The literature refers to the various stages of the student decision-making process, starting with *problem recognition* when students decide to apply for university. Then follows the *information search* phase, at which point the prospectus becomes the most important information source for students.

Student expectations of academic libraries

Student expectations of academic libraries reported in the literature informed the categories for the content analysis of the prospectuses and the questionnaires. Analysis showed that the most frequent factor was ‘Information technology’, followed by ‘Printed’ and ‘Electronic resources’. The following table compares the results of the content analysis with the results from the questionnaire:

Prospectuses are generally accurately reflecting the predominant concerns of students in their representation of academic libraries. Evidence from this study,

however, shows that more attention could be given to 'Study space' in order to reflect the primary concern of prospective university students.

School as preparation for university

Respondents were asked to summarise their satisfaction with their school's preparation for university applications. Students mainly responded positively to their school's university preparation programme. Suggested improvements included more external speakers, and arranging and attending university open days. Other suggestions included the provision of more prospectuses and other promotional and informative material.

Whilst prospectuses were the most frequently used information source, careers services ranked much lower. There is therefore, potential for expansion of careers and library involvement in university preparation, particularly given the literature's suggestion of a beneficial relationship between school and university libraries.

Conclusions

This study has investigated the current and potential impact of the university prospectus in marketing academic libraries. It confirms suggestions in the literature that students greatly value the undergraduate prospectus. Survey respondents most desired detailed information about course specifics and entry requirements for particular institutions. These criteria are potentially of greater importance at the start of the decision-making process, as students begin to short-list institutions.

Participants reported varied satisfaction with the prospectus. Many respondents appreciated the opportunity to compare courses and institutions easily and effectively prioritised over information about the university's location and reputation. Conversely,

respondents disliked the tendency for bulky publications containing irrelevant or unsatisfactory content.

The prospectus is ultimately used as a tool allowing students to differentiate between multiple institutions; it is a microcosm of the institution's courses, facilities and values, and must reflect the needs and expectations of prospective students. This study shows that prospectuses largely fulfil student requirements by providing easily accessible information on relevant services. There is, however, room for improvement, providing tailored information specific to individuals, something that can be achieved with the electronic version of the prospectus.

The undergraduate prospectus is a good tool for library marketing. The prospectus is possibly the first student encounter with information relating to the library; it has the potential to introduce the benefits of the library and highlight to students. Sixth-form respondents to this study suggested that the library was an important section of the undergraduate prospectus in terms of decision-making and short-listing universities. It was, however, overshadowed by other information, e.g. course details and entry requirements. The library is therefore not as important to students in the early phase of their applications.

Despite its potential importance, library content is extremely variable between different prospectuses; the library is very prominent in some publications, whilst completely absent from others. More could be done to highlight the visibility of the library within the prospectus, providing a succinct and accessible introduction to the services which students will find informative.

Prospectuses largely reflect the concerns of students in terms of library content. Features which students most expect from the library, such as printed resources and information technology, are prominently highlighted in the prospectus. Library content, however, is often relatively marginalised within the overall prospectus, on many occasions difficult to locate or almost completely excised from the publication. There is therefore potential for improving the exposure of the library within the prospectus. This can be achieved easily with a number of simple solutions for facilitating the inclusion and placement of library content, such as thorough indexing and abundant pictures of the library. A number of these solutions are detailed in the recommendations.

There is potential for collaboration between academic libraries and university marketing departments benefiting both parties; libraries would gain increased exposure and visibility to prospective students, whilst marketing departments would be able to exploit the potential of a successful library for future campaigns.

The library is an important service to students at different stages of the university application process, and is already used heavily within prospectus pictures. This potential can only be fully realised with the engagement and collaboration of the library and prospectus editors, working together to create a coherent document which targets and meets the needs of students.

Recommendations

For practice

'Best practice' policy to highlight the library more effectively in the undergraduate prospectus.

- Text relating to the library should be located within the first quartile of the prospectus, allowing linear readers to find the information effectively.
- The library should be defined as a study support service; it should remain labelled as the library to expedite location of the library within the prospectus.
- Thorough indexing should be used throughout the prospectus, to aid navigation.
- The library should be clearly identified on any campus maps.
- Information about the library should highlight the following features most prominently: information technology, printed resources, electronic resources and study space. These features are most important to prospective students.
- Pictures of the library should be used throughout the prospectus to increase exposure of the library.

The successful visibility of the library within the prospectus is dependent on a strong partnership with university marketing departments and prospectus contributors. These groups could work more closely together to produce a coherent and consistent document, which does more than simply update the information from previous years as students value relevant and accurate information.

There is potential for increasing the role of the school library during the university application process. There is a potentially valuable relationship between school and academic libraries which might be better exploited. Such collaboration would increase the visibility of the academic library to students about to apply for university.

For research:

The content analysis could be expanded to include more prospectuses. A more rigorous examination of these prospectuses would highlight trends and could be used to produce a more detailed visibility barometer covering a larger number of institutions.

Any future study might survey more students. This study only surveyed students at one school; research across a number of different types of schools and involving more pupils, perhaps at different stages through the university application process, would provide more detailed information about prospectus use, and the importance of the library.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire to students applying for university.

A questionnaire to determine young people's perceptions of applying for university.

By completing the questionnaire you agree to participate in this study. All responses are anonymous.

Section A

Question 1

Are you (please tick):

Male?

Female?

Question 2

Do you currently intend going to university? (Please tick one box)

Yes

No

If you answered 'No' for Question 2 there is no need to continue with this questionnaire. Thank you for agreeing to take part. If you answered 'Yes', please continue.

Question 3

From the list, select the three most important criteria which you have used to short-list universities of interest. Rank your three options in order of importance - '1' for the most important, through '3' for the least important.

Course content / module choice _____ Social facilities _____

Location of university _____ Library facilities _____

Reputation of university _____ Accommodation _____

Distance from home _____ Entry requirements _____

Other _____

Question 4

From the list, select your three main sources of information about university. Rank your three options in order of importance - '1' for the most important, through '3' for the least important of your choices.

Prospectuses _____ Friends _____

Careers advisers _____ Books _____

Teachers _____ School library _____

Parents _____ Advertisements and posters _____

Websites _____

Other _____

Question 5

For the following sections in a university prospectus, indicate how important you rate each one in terms of university applications. Rate each item on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being not at all important and 5 being very important. Circle one number on each row.

	Not at all important	Mostly unimportant	Neither important nor unimportant	Important	Very important
Course content / descriptions	1	2	3	4	5
Computing facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Library facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Sport / social facilities	1	2	3	4	5
Accommodation	1	2	3	4	5
Careers services	1	2	3	4	5
Admission requirements	1	2	3	4	5
Financial information	1	2	3	4	5

Question 6

From the options in question 5, write down in the space below which one you have found most influenced your choices of university at this stage in your applications.

Question 7

How important a factor are the resources and services available at the university library in terms of university choice? Please tick one box.

Not at all important <input type="checkbox"/>	Neither important nor unimportant <input type="checkbox"/>	Important <input type="checkbox"/>
Mostly unimportant <input type="checkbox"/>		Very important <input type="checkbox"/>

Question 8

The following list highlights typical features and services within a university library. Rank the items in priority order from 1 to 8, 1 being the highest rank and 8 the lowest.

Printed resources	_____	Social space – a place to meet	_____
Online resources	_____	Opening hours	_____
Computers and technology	_____	Enquiry services	_____
Study space – a place to work	_____	Modern facilities	_____

Section B

For each of the following questions, write a few sentences in the spaces relating to your experiences of higher education and using a university prospectus.

Question 9

What are you hoping to gain from completing a university degree?

Question 10

What do you like or find most valuable about using a university prospectus?

Question 11

What do you dislike or find most frustrating about using a university prospectus?

Question 12

How well do you feel your school has prepared you for applying for university?

Question 13

What do you think your school could do to provide more information about university?

Question 14

Is there anything else you would like to add about university in general, or more specifically about your experiences of university applications?

Thank you for completing this questionnaire.

