

Paramedicine and Social Work: Case Studies  
in Authentic Student Recruitment

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## Abstract

Selling the course experience to future students has been corporatised across the Higher Education sector. At many universities marketing and sales specialists, such as ECU's Student Recruitment Team, rather than academic staff, field prospective student enquiries. Representing courses authentically is crucial to matching future students with an appropriate course experience and career, as well as managing future students' expectations. A challenge for academics is communicating the course/career experience to university sales agents (recruiters). A challenge for recruiters is conveying an authentic course experience to future students when they have not taken a course themselves. This paper selects two ECU courses, Social Work and Paramedicine, and examines the relationship between academics and recruiters. Particular emphasis is placed on authentic representation of the course experience to future students. The 360 Degree Authenticity (360da) framework was used to examine the quality of authenticity in communication and sales techniques through convergent interviewing. Findings indicated that authentic representation of the course experience depended on a professional trust between individual academics and individual recruiters. Findings also indicated that academics and sales agents emphasised different aspects of the University to future students; but both used credibility markers such as accreditation. Academics were more focused on the career experience, recruiters were more focused on the university and course experience

**KEYWORDS:** Authenticity, Recruitment, Marketing, Sales, Paramedicine, Social Work

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### Introduction

Internationally, the Higher Education sector is experiencing corporatisation. Two realities, restrictive government funding and increased competition, require universities to respond with ever increasing sophisticated marketing and sales initiatives. Whereas previously these functions were considered an extension of an administrative role, savvy universities are employing highly-skilled professionals in the field to represent their brands to the public (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Neary & Winn, 2009). This includes professional salespeople (recruiters) to respond to front line enquiries from future students, and handle the "sale".

As a result of this the higher education sector becomes structures more like large service-focused organisations; with the same issues in terms of communication, service delivery, service quality, customer focus and operations management. The focus on this paper

## ECULTURE

is a specific aspect of the sales process: how the relationship between organisation units can affect the representation of authenticity to the customer at the point of sale.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the perspectives of product producers/deliverers (academics) and the salespeople (recruiters) in two programs where academics felt recruiters authentically represented their courses to future students, and this representation is considered an essential driver of increased applications and enrolments.

The issue of authenticity in student recruitment is important for several reasons. First, authenticity is an increasing area of interest in marketing and sales circles, with studies showing that perceptions of authenticity can lead to more effective sales, customer loyalty, higher levels of customer engagement and more effective consumer communities (Beverland, 2005; Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Liao & Ma, 2009). Second, authenticity is an aspect in human relationships that can lend meaning to interaction, developing more constructive communication (in this case between academic and recruiter, and between recruiter and consumer) (Guignon, 2002). Third, the field of sales is plagued by a stereotype for inauthenticity. This study adds to the literature which claims that delivering authenticity is an effective sales strategy (Gilmore & Pine, 2007; Schaefer & Pettijohn, 2006). Fourth, marketing studies on authenticity focus on the relationship between the firm or the brand and the customer. This study seeks to understand relationships within the firm to generate an authentic output. Finally, this study looks at an area that has not been studied extensively in the marketing, sales, or higher education literature: that is the front line of the future student enquiry process—a pivotal area for value creation and income generation within a university.

This paper examines the relationship between key academics and recruiters over several years in two programs at one university via convergent interviews. The narrative of the relationship between the two areas is explored from several perspectives. The aspects of authenticity, and how it is communicated, are examined using the 360 Degree Authenticity framework (360da) (Collins, 2013; Collins & Murphy, 2010; Collins, Watts, & Murphy, 2011). The authors of this paper generated the data as well as analysed the data, recognising that there is value in description and analysis of the events from the perspective of the actors. As the subjectivity and involvement of the analyst is a standing issue in qualitative research (Flyvbjerg, 2001), the approach of the research is to include generate a self-analysis of the data through convergent interviews and questionnaires (Rao & Perry, 2003; Reiege & Nair, 2004) and therefore enrich the data with the perspectives of those within it.

### **Methodology**

This study focuses on academic and recruitment staff working on two programs at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Western Australia. ECU, like many universities, has moved more and more toward a centralised administrative structure over the last twenty years. Originally, faculties and programs employed administrative staff to handle future student enquiries relating specifically to courses. These staff handled a variety of other administrative matters, and therefore were not professional sales personnel, nor did they have a marketing focus. A small, central university team handled general enquiries relating to admission.

A gradual process of corporate centralisation was implemented, with the latest structural shift in 2010. Currently all future student enquiries are directed Student Recruitment. Student Recruitment also coordinates future student events, inviting academics to come along and present or answer future student questions. Some programs engage in specific, extraordinary recruitment activities, such as attendance at subject-specific conferences and expos. Programs are required to have a recruiter present if admissions is going to be discussed; although programs do not always make Student Recruitment aware of these opportunities.

## ECULTURE

This kind of structure mirrors sales structures in the corporate world, where professional salespeople are the “front line” of enquiry management, lead generation and lead follow-up; while content-specific experts work with clients and are brought out with the sales team only when considered necessary to close a particularly complex deal.

One of the key contributions of the academic staff to the marketing effort is to ensure that the course information on the ECU system is up to date; so it is accurately reflected on the ECU Future Student web site and in other marketing material. Academics also meet with the Student Recruitment team at least several times per year to ensure that there is communication and data flowing between sales (Student Recruitment) and production (the Schools/Faculties).

The ECU Social Work and Paramedicine programs have experienced growth over the last five years. The Social Work undergraduate program’s enrolment numbers have doubled; Paramedicine program’s numbers have increased almost tenfold. The increase in numbers is based on a variety of environmental and internal factors. This paper will mainly only consider the factor of the relationship between key academics and recruiters.

Although the market demand for these courses is healthy, both of these courses have local competition in Western Australia. Curtin University offers both Paramedicine and Social Work. The University of Western Australia offers Social Work. In both cases, programs are on offer via online learning through universities in other states in Australia. Admission requirements for both programs are standard. No subject prerequisites are required. Both programs require practical components and therefore have limited flexibility. Both programs are popular with matured-aged students who are already working in the field and wish to have credit given for their work experience or previous qualifications. One program, Paramedicine, is offered by ECU in the Northern Territory, which required academics and recruiters to liaise with St John’s Ambulance Australia (NT).

Both Paramedicine and Social Work have unique workplace cultures, specific to those vocations, with historical foundations. The courses were selected as exemplars of academic/recruiter relationships and the ability of recruiters to represent the course authentically. Part of the reason these courses were selected was based on positive feedback from academics, recruiters and future students when advised by the recruiters in this study. It is common for students to ask “Are you a paramedic?” or “Are you a social worker?” while they were being sold on the course opportunity. No one in the Student Recruitment team has taken a Social Work or Paramedicine course.

As the analysts were also part of the study, the methodology agreed upon was convergent interviewing in iterative rounds. The first round was a standard questionnaire based on the 360da framework. The second round was an analysis of the interview responses with comments and further questions. The third round was the identification of themes as indicated in the discussion section of this paper. The final round was a shared discussion of the themes identified and conclusions of the paper.

The participants in the project were two Social Work academics who have had responsibility for course coordination over the last five years; and one Paramedicine academic who has had responsibility for coordination over the key component of its growth period, and two recruiters who worked with these academics. These academics were selected because, prior to their coordination, there were no relationships between Student Recruitment and the program, or negative relationships existed. The questionnaire had open ended questions. The first question requested a brief narrative of the working relationship between the academics in the program and student recruitment: what was the catalyst for the relationship? How did the relationship develop? What factors were at play to create a positive working relationship between the two areas?

The second part of the questionnaire addressed aspects of selling the course experience/career choice as per the 360 Degree Authenticity (360da) framework. By considering the academic/recruiter relationship and their differing perspectives toward the

## ECULTURE

future student in this way, authenticity in student recruitment was able to be addressed in several ways: recruiter-future student, academic-future student and recruiter-academic. Although the recruiter-academic relationship is the one of most interest in this paper, the other analyses deliver value as well, and will therefore be discussed in this paper.

### **Authenticity as a Driver of Heightened Value**

The notion of authenticity with its many meanings largely arose out of the modern era. Before then, authenticity mainly referred to the ability to trace something (or someone) to its origins or that its content was a valid representation its claims (Lindholm, 2008). The industrial age created a shift. Social mobility became more possible, and individuals began using forms of authentication to demonstrate they were who they claimed to be (Lindholm, 2008). Modernity started shifting societal worldview toward the notion of scientific facts and one truth. The concept of objectivity became popular and the perception that science could find the answers, and that there were answers, seemed reasonable (Hiebert, 2008). Therefore something could be empirically proven as being what it claimed to be, or not.

Throughout this time, philosophers were discussing authenticity, with conversations become more heated in the postmodern era (Hiebert, 2008). The assumptions of modernity (such as the possibility of proving something to be true) gave way to discourses and narratives about the nature of truth (Trilling, 1974). The idea of an inner truth emerged, mainly through writings by Descartes and Rousseau. This inner truth was purported as more authentic than external moral codes, social orders, or scientific “facts” (Lindholm, 2008).

Authenticity today is somewhat about origin and content (where is this object from? Does it have the features it claims to have?). However it also experiential and subjective. Blues music has been used as an example of this. Does blues music need to be performed by someone who has suffered for his/her musical career? Do they need to be African-American? Do they need to be poor? Sad? In a small blues club while performing? Or is it about the construction of the performance? The manner of performance? The song itself (Beverland, 2005; Lindholm, 2008)? Which of these factors make the performance authentic? Or is it, to some degree, all of it: the origin, context, content and audience perspective, of the performance?

### **360 Degree Authenticity (360da)**

360da was developed as a manner of addressing the different definitions of authenticity in the scholarly arena (Collins & Murphy, 2010; Collins, et al., 2011). Based on the concept of the 360 degree feedback process in Human Resources practice (Nowack, 1993), the 360da analyses a subject from various facets of authenticity, pulled from various disciplines.

Definitions of authenticity from philosophy, psychology, tourism, management, marketing, religious studies and information science are assigned to four broad categories: Objective Authenticity, Constructive Authenticity, Commercial Authenticity and Existential Authenticity. The categorisations are mainly based on previous work conducted in tourism (Wang, 1999) and marketing (Gilmore & Pine, 2007). The 360da has been used to analyse authenticity in religious contexts (Collins & Murphy, 2010), in a promotional poster campaign (Collins, et al., 2011), seeded blog promotions (Collins & Watts, 2013) and in marketing practice (Collins, 2013).

## ECULTURE

The 360da is used as a qualitative instrument, with analysts considering the case in question from the different aspects of authenticity found in the scholarly literature. The aspects are as in Table 1.

Aspect	Key Question	Relationship
Objective	Is the product experience what it claims to be?	This aspect is about verification of claims. How does the future student know the claims made by the salespeople/promotional materials of the university are accurate?
Constructive	Is the product experience consumed in a culturally appropriate context?	This aspect is about the product experience being consumed in the appropriate context. Will this course enable the future student to be a good fit for a career in the field afterwards? Will the training they receive at university be applicable in the career context? Will this course prepare them appropriately for a future career in the field?
Commercial	Is the product experience true to itself?	This aspect is about the particular brand experience compared to the brand promise, focusing on what the producer purports to be versus the product experience they can deliver. Will the course deliver on the ECU brand promise? Will the course deliver on the preconceived notions of what a university education consists of? Will the course be able to deliver on its own
Existential	Is the product experience consistent with the inner self without being constrained by it?	This aspect is about the product experience being consistent with expectations, while still being flexible enough not to seem mechanistic or robotic. From a course perspective, this is about being able to engage with the course structure content while the student and the university being flexible enough so the student feels the course is not a mechanistic experience (for example, the course being customised to their needs/wants, the customisation of mode, the ability of the academic staff to deliver relevant scholarly and practical content, etc)

**Table 1: 360da applied to selling university experiences/courses**

The 360da framework has been applied to various contexts. Table 1 focuses on the context specifically for university recruitment and was developed by the lead author of this paper and circulated for comment amongst the other authors.

A questionnaire was circulated to the participants in the study. In the questionnaire, they were asked to comment on the history of the relationship between their program and recruitment from their point of view. They were also asked to comment specifically on the different types of authenticity and how they were portrayed to the recruiter and future student (in the case of academic respondents) or to the future student (in the case of recruiters). From the analysis, some common themes emerged.

### **Themes and Discussion**

#### **Academics can be Unsure of the Corporate Resources/Processes; However this Uncertainty can be the Catalyst for a Productive Inter-Departmental Relationship**

In the case of Social Work, academics did not leverage the corporate resources at their disposal initially, due to the Program Coordinator's perceived inability of the recruiter to represent "real Social Work". Academics took on sales as part of their workload. The result was that the workload was untenable for academics. Future student requests for information did not get answered, or were answered inconsistently. Pressure was put on academics to grow the program, but reasons why attendance was falling was not considered. When a new Program Coordinator approached Student Recruitment for a perspective on why student numbers were falling, the recruiter was given another opportunity at a positive relationship with the program and outlined the data arising from the interaction with future students:

I had been tasked...with 'stopping the numbers falling and growing the student numbers' I had significant worries about how to do this, being new to the role of coordinator. I had no idea about some core functions in the University as I was also fairly new to academia myself...Other social work academics had been discussing the issue of student expectations not matching what they actually did in the curriculum... I had dealt with enough disgruntled students...to know that what students were being 'sold' was not quite what we were delivering. (Social Work academic)

After that initial meeting between the Program Coordinator and Student Recruitment, the university processes (which at that stage were able to be circumvented more easily) were reinforced. As a result communication between the two areas improved and as Social Work academics worked toward a more marketable product, recruiters were able to feed in to methods in which the product could be leveraged for further sales at no, or little cost, to the program.

Paramedicine was in a similar position after a major restructure in 2010 left them without internal administrative support to help with their sales efforts. When the academic and the recruiter came into contact, the academic found resources he needed through Student Recruitment. This leveraging of resources was the catalyst for closer relationships between this academic and Student Recruitment. The relationship deepened and has resulted in recruiters supporting academics at the coalface with industry partners and accrediting bodies.

The sense of trust between the academics and recruiters enhances the ability of academics to communicate constructively with recruiters about opportunities for growth and challenges within the team. This approach builds a "we" environment, rather than an internal "us versus them" approach. The Paramedicine academic says "I can say anything to SR [because we have built up trust]. Working with SR is always collegiate. We even travel together. We feel supported throughout the process. This is because you understand what we are trying to do [grow numbers]."

#### **Accreditation is an Advantage in Representing Authenticity to Future Students**

Course and career accreditation standards communicates to students that the university meets the requirements of the career, and that industry bodies are working in partnership with the university. Accreditation is also a tangible for the recruiters.

During the last two years the ECU Bachelor of Science (Paramedical Science) has become the only accredited paramedical degree in WA and the NT. [We recruiters] were invited to be interviewed by the accrediting panel members, with regards to how we recruit students and sell the course. (Recruiter)

## ECULTURE

Although accreditation may not be a competitive advantage in all cases, explaining the requirements of accreditation to future students gives the recruiter a sense of credibility and authority.

Accreditation also sets out industry standards and links course content to those standards, making it clearer to the recruiter and future student why the curriculum is shaped the way it is.

### **Recruiters Tend to Leverage the Consistency Between the Course and the ECU Brand Message as a Type of Commercial, Whereas Academics Tend to not Consider the Advantages of Leveraging the Brand**

Recruiters attempt to align the course experience to key messages about ECU (credibility, flexibility, relevance, and so on). This alignment demonstrates consistency between the course content and the university. Academics tend not to consider the university brand as something relevant to the authenticity of their course. For example, a recruiter's perspective on commercial authenticity in the Social Work course was to "...use ECU's reputation in health and the helping professions to position ECU as a premiere choice for this course, and other options (Curtin, UWA) as outdated, old fashioned or out of touch, as their lack of online presence may imply."

The Paramedicine academic did mention that academic engagement in industry bodies throughout the nation and the region is another way that authenticity is communicated, especially at the postgraduate level. The academic indicated that ECU as well as the program received credibility and status as an education provider in the industry through that level of engagement, which was a higher level of engagement of other universities with the program.

The academics interviewed did not discuss the ECU brand or ECU as a whole in their interview responses. This may be because recruiters find themselves consistently in a position with future students where they have to differentiate standardised product between one university and another.

### **Recruiters are More Likely to Develop a Suite of Responses for Programs for Which There is Market Demand or Unmet Market Demand**

Recruiters receive course information requests at events, by telephone, via email, via chat, via social media networks, at their offices and during visits to schools and other organisations. With over 300 courses on offer at ECU recruiters are trained with specific information on the courses for which the university receives the most requests. Course information that is rarely requested can be forwarded on to a specialist. Therefore developing a suite of responses and training is of greater urgency to recruiters for programs in demand.

Where there is unmet demand as there was for an online Social Work program before 2009, Student Recruitment meets with the program area to explore the possibility of meeting the demand.

This pressure from the future students for information creates a need for the recruiter to liaise with the academic staff and develop a relationship with them. Whereas courses that are less in demand may not create the same sense of urgency amongst the recruitment team. Academics who have goals in alignment with Student Recruitment—to grow numbers—will give more credibility to the feedback obtained by Student Recruitment.

## ECULTURE

**Academics Tend to Focus on The Future Student Being a Good Fit for the Course/Career Culture; While Recruiters Focus on a Future Student's Agency to Make That Decision for Themselves**

As academics are practitioners and exposed to the culture of the discipline and industry, they are steeped in first-hand experience of what the course/career is like. They tend to consider whether the future student would be a good fit in the overall prevailing culture of that course/career. A Social Work academic says that, "...I discuss [future] student aspirations to make a difference to their communities: student experience as a client with services themselves; meeting an inspirational social worker at some point; a need to see the world change the way it treats people; even religious beliefs." Another Social Work academic says, "...there is...a supportive process to enable students to reconstruct and re-evaluate their sense of self within the discipline of Social Work and its core values and aims."

However, recruiters are not scholars, researchers or practitioners in that career area, and therefore the course/career culture is not one they have experienced first hand. As a result they shift the burden of deciding on the "fit" of the future student for that course/career to the future student themselves. A recruiter says, "I put the onus on [the future student] to choose Social Work... Encourage them to engage in independent investigation of the field...Indicate that they need to feel empowered in their choice to engage in the course. Explicit discussion of your intent to empower them through enabling their choice results in a deeper sense of trust and a seemingly more ethical approach on behalf of ECU."

Simply put, it is easier for a Social Work academic to discuss "reconstructing a sense of self" than a recruiter to do so. The role of the recruiter and academic are complimentary, but they are not the same. It is essential for both parties to understand the difference between what each area can provide.

**Trust is Fostered by Specialisation and Communication**

The sense of trust between the individuals on the recruitment and academic teams seems to be fostered by two specific factors. First: the division of labour. Recruiters felt trusted when academics would engage with the corporate processes of the University. This included keeping University systems up to date, informing Student Recruitment of upcoming industry events, attending sales meetings, responding to emails and using data from recruitment to inform academics' decision making: "If \$15-20k is being spent on a conference for networking and recruitment, and the SR person [who attended] will feedback on the return on investment from that event," says the Paramedicine academic. This dependence on the SR team creates a sense of trust in the relationship with the academic area.

Secondly, trust is built upon the communication from the SR team flowing toward the academic area. For example, the SR team writes standardised text snippets based on the language and manner of the academics. The academic area would approve those scripts before they can be used. Likewise, after a meeting, the recruiter would email the academic with their understanding of the more technical aspects of the meeting, which the academic could revise if the content of the meeting was not clear. By doing this, the academics felt they were aware, and had approved of, what the recruiters were saying about the program on ECU's behalf. The Paramedicine academic says, "every time we had a conversation, I would get a report back saying 'This is what we are going to say...is that right?' This is how I [as an academic] knew that SR knew what we were talking about. This made SR communications with future students authentic. We [Academics] were able to be confident about what was being said and that it was right."

This resulted not only in more authentic communication with the future student, but became an edge for ECU on the sales floor. Again, from the Paramedicine academic: "We had difficulty making people understand the ways students came into the course and the

## ECULTURE

different reasons for the different courses. The key recruiters tuned into that quickly. The program then became one of the most popular [in Australia]. People flocked to us because we were able to stream people into the right courses [based on their previous experience and career goals].”

Likewise in Social Work, an understanding of the way in which Advanced Standing and Recognition of Prior Learning worked in the program, particularly for students currently in key industry organisations, became an edge when speaking to future students. “Future students felt understood and that ECU valued their previous experience; and that they wouldn’t have to take any units they didn’t have to making their course faster,” says the recruiter.

## Conclusion

Although the success of the Social Work and Paramedicine program at ECU has delivered positive outcomes and resulted in a somewhat seamless working relationship between recruitment and academic staff, there are bumps in the road.

Program Coordinators are essential to support recruiters in meeting their targets for enrolment. As personnel changes in both academic programs and the recruitment team, relationships have to be rebuilt continuously. Generally, universities do not overtly reward cooperation between departments; and therefore it is often up to the new individuals in the role to make relationships work, or not.

It should be noted that this study has limitations. The number of people interviewed was small, and the interview process was an introspective one. That is members of the team interviewed each other and notes were shared amongst the interviewees. Although this methodology has its advantages, especially in the context of convergent interviewing, it means that this study’s findings are coloured by the internal dialogues and narratives of the group more so than if the interviews were conducted by a third party.

The courses in this study were selected as exemplars partly due to the quality of the relationship between the recruiters and the academics. However, they were selected also because of the successful enrolment numbers. It should be noted that external forces had an effect on these numbers. The extent to which authenticity in the recruitment process positively affected the numbers cannot be determined by this study; however that would be an interesting area for future research.

When discussing sales or education, managing client/student expectations is incredibly important. Representing the course/university/career experience accurately at the recruitment stage can lead to retention of students as well as graduate achievements.

The role of the academic in this process is acknowledged as central and essential. Academics do not only have to be good teachers. They are scholars, advisors, counselors, industry partners, practitioners and so on. The role of recruiters, or salespeople, is less well explicated. How do recruiters represent courses ethically? How do future students regard recruiters? What leads to a satisfactory future student/recruiter encounter? Can a recruiter convey the university experience so authentically that it has a positive effect on retention? The beginning of the future student/recruiter journey would certainly commence with objective authenticity. Information that is accurate is the least a future student can expect from a recruiter. However, with positive internal relationships within the university, recruiter can deliver much more of that. Recruiters may be able to deliver an authentic glimpse of the university experience, as it will be: challenging, enriching, and life-changing.

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