

PROVIDING QUALITY INFORMATION SERVICES IN THE NIGERIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM REGISTRY: A COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Quality information delivery is vital to the success of an organization. This becomes most significant in the era where organizations, whether manufacturing or educational are daily engaged in competition to gain and retain a significant pool of customers. One concept that has played key role on assisting organizations to gain advantage over their competitors is the Competitive Intelligence (CI) approach. This study, using the Gaps Model of Service Quality Theory and Keiser (2002) ten steps of competitive intelligence process to argue that Nigerian Private University System Registry (NPUSR), in the midst of competitors and the desire to provide quality information service could make use of the CI approach to determine its weaknesses and potentials and subsequently employ strategies in human and materials resources to significantly improve its information service delivery to all its stakeholders. It thus proposes steps such as effective marketing of Information Services, quality staff-customer relationship, optimum and efficient use of Information Technology in quality information service delivery that could be taken by NPUSR to enhance their services delivery to reposition them in the emerging competitive market of student admission.

Keywords: *Information, quality services, competitive intelligence,*

INTRODUCTION

Competitive intelligence (CI) as a managerial focus on information and knowledge-based competition has tremendously grown since the early 1980s. Organizations are increasingly seeking to better understand how they can leverage their value and position in the marketplace. They realize that they need to explore and tap into the wealth of data and information resources that exist both within and outside their organizational domain. CI experts generally suggest that the majority of insights a company needs in order to compete more effectively can be captured from readily accessible information resources within the organization's scope - whether these are owned or outsourced, the organization has to develop the effective means and channels by which to capture, assess and use them.

The process of CI, however, has always been an inherent part of the business marketing, planning, strategy and landscape. Nevertheless, formal educational offerings in CI only have about a three-decade, mostly sporadic history. Information is one of the most integral parts of competitive intelligence. Information is also critical in education. It is through it that an educational institution relates with the public. It is, thus, a bridge between the institution and the public (parents, industries/organisations and other stake holders). Good information management practices form a foundation for sound educational practices and optimum outcomes. In this regard, Liu and Oppenheim (2006) state:

Higher education is in the business of increasing students' capability and of generating research and consultancy income. Although higher education has not hitherto been regarded as for-profit organisation, the practice of it indicates the similarity to businesslike organisation. Arguably, it is therefore necessary to introduce commercial mechanisms to the system of higher education.

Competitive intelligence, which has always been a business practice (CI) is therefore relevant to educational service provision. However, CI as a strategic option in quality information service provision in the registry of Nigerian University System, seems unexplored. Realizing that CI is an activity that can enhance or ruin the performance of institutions/organizations, public or private, large or small, global or local, it is necessary for organizations to systematically and deliberately organize themselves, empowering and assigning individuals to develop insights about their competitors and competitive environment in order to better position themselves in their marketplaces.

Broadly, CI is the systematic and ethical program used in gathering and analyzing information about one's competitor's activities and general business trends with the purpose of strategically, having foreknowledge of one's competitor's plan and to plan business strategy to curtail their plan in order to be relevant in the market. This benefits all types of organization, including profit and nonprofit enterprise, associations, sections of government etc. Hussy and Jenster (2000) affirm that many organisations give priority to CI but from anecdotal observation, educational institution have not felt they need competitive intelligence, even though they are clearly in an intensely competitive environment. However, under the impact of 'marketisation' and globalization, the character and function of higher educational institute have been quietly but significantly changed. In particular, their character has changed to one of enterprise and of technological innovation (Lui and Oppenheim, 2006).

The direct competition between different universities lies mainly in the pursuit of students, teachers and financial resources (Heist, n.d.). Lui and Oppenheim (2006) have also argued that universities that have similar size, rank and specialties, and those that are located in the same region are generally regarded as primary competitors in the provision of services to the public. This implies that universities, like main commercial organizations, need to seek ways of improving its services. Prior to the licensing of private universities in Nigeria in 1999, the universities in the country were either owned or funded by the federal or state government. The first three private universities which began operation in late 1999 were Babcock University in Ogun State, Igbenedion University in Edo State and Madonna University in Anambra State. At Present, about 80 percent of the private universities in Nigeria are located in the western states of Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo. This is due to the high commercial activities in Lagos which provides strong economic advantage and the penchant for education that western Nigeria has been known for.

Although Government owned universities have better remuneration package and very low tuition the largely unstable academic calendar, poor infrastructure, poor faculty and staff commitment which affects the quality of academic activities and degrees offered at the public universities. Most of those who can afford the high cost of private education are turning to the private universities. This situation has made it somewhat difficult for

private universities to have enough students to admit and hire competent hands in its faculties. This study, therefore, seeks to explore ways NPUS registries could improve their information service delivery, especially as it concerns students' enrollment and academic history, through a CI approach.

THE GAPS MODEL OF SERVICE QUALITY THEORY

The theory employed in this research is the "Gaps Model of Service Quality" developed in 2003 by Health and Cook. This theory is used because it explores the relationship between customer's satisfaction and quality delivery in academic service delivery which before now was only applied to industry. In this theory, an academic institution is viewed from a commercial perspective. It is assumed that the customers (students, parents, and other stakeholders) patronage of an institution largely depends on how they view its services.

Health and Cook (2003) state that in the early 1980's concerns about customer satisfaction and product services quality became emerging tides in the affairs of industry and academic. From 1985-1988, three academicians, Parasirama, Zeithmal and Berry created and refined the SERVQUAL survey instrument with the purpose of accessing/measuring service quality within an organization, from customer's stand point. They came up with a conceptual model of service quality called the "gaps model of service quality" of ten dimensions. These are: access, communication, competence, courtesy and, credibility. Others are reliability, responsiveness, security' tangibility, and understanding/knowing the customer.

These were further regrouped into five dimensions service quality:

1. Tangibles: the physical facilities, equipment and appearance of personnel.
2. Reliability: ability to perform the promised service dependable and accurately.
3. Responsiveness: willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
4. Assurance (competency, courtesy, credibility, and security were subsumed under this dimension.): knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to inspire trust and confidence.
5. Empathy (Access, communication and understanding the customer was amalgamated into this dimension). They carry the individualized attention the organisation provides its customers.

In agreement with this theory, Debowski (2003) in defining information service states that information services are aimed at achieving six key outcomes:

1. Ensuring the needs of users and the accessible information sources are suitable matched at all times.
2. Delivering those information sources to the user in a timely and appropriate fashion.
3. Ensuring that information provided is highly quality, accurate and appropriate.
4. Assisting the user in interpreting the materials if necessary.
5. Promoting user awareness of new services and information sources as they develop.
6. Providing users with individual guidance and support as they build information search and application skills.

UNIVERSITY REGISTRY SERVICES

The Academic Registry in a university is very vital to the daily operations of a university. In its description of the role of its registry, which in our view applies to others, the Leeds Metropolitan University states that its Registry

is responsible for a diverse range of activities relating to the quality assurance and standards of academic provision and the administration of students and their programmes of study. ...provide information and guidance ... to support strategic and operational planning; innovation in teaching and learning; and key government initiatives.... (Leeds Metropolitan University, 2011).

In its own perspective, the George Town University gives what one might consider a very detailed function of the role of a University Registry under four categories which are similar to Babcock University. This is presented as follows:

Provision of quality registration/records service to students: The University registry provides quality student service which says to students, "We care and we deliver", in the area of registration, tuition assessment and academic records, and to ensure the confidentiality and accuracy of student records. This provision include.

- To coordinate the Student Information System, conduct Preregistration. Completion, Registration and Drop/Add.
- Coordinate the Student Information System and new student technology initiatives for the Main Campus and across the University.
- Ensure compliance with Student Records Policy.
- Record transfer credit, advanced placement, study abroad work, thesis titles, comprehensive examination results and grade changes.
- Charge (and credit) tuition and associated fees.
- Assign and operator security profiles to Student Records users and monitor the system to prevent unauthorized access to computer records.
- Register and report grades for Consortium students.

Commitment to Transcript System: The University demonstrates commitment to thoughtful treatment of its students, past and present, through the timeliness and accuracy of the transcribing system. It does this by:

- Producing and mailing transcripts
- Storing and preserving academic records and inactive student folders
- Processing grades and producing transcripts for noncredit students
- Retaining copies of course descriptions.

Ensure conducive academic atmosphere: The University registry ensure good order and an atmosphere conducive to academic activity by producing timely and accurate statistics, class rosters, grades, certifications and other reports, and by serving as a "watch dog" for academic policies.

- Produce official student lists, reports, statistics
- Publish the Student Directory
- Validate ID cards

- Prepare CORE statistical reports
- Certify veterans and provide information concerning VA programs
- Certify student enrollment
- Process ID number changes, changes of school, name and address
- Interpret & enforce academic regulations
- Collect grades from faculty
- Record grades, produce and mail grade reports
- Produce Rank-in-class reports
- Order diplomas from tentative lists prepared by deans
- Monitor lists of graduates
- Rank undergraduates for graduation
- Organize student participation in Commencement.

Co-ordinate examination schedules/teacher evaluation: The registry produces class and examination schedules which, as much as possible, serve the needs and preferences of faculty and students and to ensure that the condition of the classrooms meets the needs of quality instruction. It also assists the faculty in its teaching through the administration of the teacher evaluation process.

- Prepare, publish, distribute class and examination schedules
- Assign classrooms: all semesters
- Reserve classrooms for special meetings, etc.
- Monitor classroom conditions
- Plan for provision of a sufficient number of technologically sophisticated and aesthetically pleasing general purpose classroom
- Plan and direct classroom improvement projects
- Administer the Teacher Evaluation System
- Plan and coordinate the Schedule of Classes to insure that all curricular needs are met while responding to the preferences of faculty and students. (Georgetown, 2011).

From the discussion above, it is clear that a university registry if well coordinated, plays significant roles in ensuring student, faculty and public satisfaction through quality academic service and information delivery. Most university registries consist of three main units namely: Admissions, Exams and Records, and General Administration. In Nigerian university system, among other functions, the registry is charged with the responsibilities summarized below:

- Manual and electronic students record management
- Online registration
- Admission into degree and non-degree programmes
- Custodian of the university rules and regulations, policies and decisions and ensure compliance of such rules, regulations, policies and decisions by both staff and students.
- Conduct/co-ordinate of examination
- Prepare graduates for National Youth Service Corps
- Secretariat for major university committees e.g. Senate, Academics congregation,

- Board of Trustees/Council, Students Disciplinary committees
- On behalf of the University liaise with other National Bodies like JAMB, NYSC, NUC, etc.

The University Registry is a place where students' records are created and kept, therefore, the information found in university registries could be classified as print and electronic documents. The information are for both staff and of students (from admission to graduation). This information consists of decisions/resolutions from the university Governing Council, Senate or Congregation on academic and welfare policies affecting students from the time of admission to an alumni status.

NIGERIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM REGISTRY AND COMPETITIVE INTELLIGENCE PROCESS

According to Johnson (1999), competitive intelligence involves gathering, analyzing and distributing intelligence about products and services of customers needs, competitors and any aspect of environment to support executives and information managers in making strategic decision for an organisation and strategically having foreknowledge of competitors plan in other to be relevant in the market. Thus the aim of CI is to enhance quality delivery of goods and services by an organization/institution to maintain its relevance and guaranty survival. Keiser (2002) identifies ten steps of competitive intelligence process. These steps are applied to NPUS registry for provision of quality information service.

Step 1: Identification of Competitors: An NPU Registry cannot monitor the activities or develop a comprehensive profile of its competitor if it is not clear as to who they are. Thus, the first step in the competitive intelligence process is to identify its competitors. As Lui and Oppenheim (2006) stated, "universities that have similar size, rank or specialties and those that are located in the same region are generally regarded as primary competitors." Following this logic, NPUS in western Nigeria and the public funded universities are competitors. For instance in Ogun State, Babcock University competitors might include Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode; Redeemers' University, Mowe, Covenant University, Otta, Crescent University, Abeokuta to mention but a few. NPUS registry needs to seek information on the service of its competitor's registry.

- What kind of services, beyond the traditional registry services, do they offer the students and stakeholders?
- What is the rational for offering the services they do?
- What methods are in use to promote their information services to the public?
- What is the feedback mechanism they have from students, graduates and other stakeholders?

Step 2: Benchmarking: Benchmarking in the competitive intelligence process would be to select criteria that will allow each NPUS registry to measure and use a standard of its operators against those of the competition. Organizations use CI to compare themselves to others and this is considered as competitive benchmarking (Lui and Oppenheim, 2006). Kahaner (1996), Crawshaw (1992) and Tyson (1992) affirm that benchmarking is one of

the most used CI processes in which an institution compares its own conditions and procedures with those of similar institutions in the same field and makes it analysis accordingly. Benchmarking typically involves:

- Knowing one's own conditions and confirming the content of benchmarking.
- Choosing the object of benchmarking.
- Collecting and analyzing data.
- Determining the objective of actions.
- Carrying out the plan and marking appropriate assessment.

Thus, NPUS needs to collect both qualitative and quantitative data about its competitors to gather information not only what its competitors are doing but why they do and do not work. What should be known about the competitors include: background, finance, products/services, facilities and personnel.

Step 3: Collecting Data about Competitors: NPUS needs to employ a variety of methods for collecting the data about competitors on how to provide quality information service. This could include.

- Conducting a formal survey or hire a competitive intelligence professional to do so.
- Visiting competitors work place (registry) to observe the way information service are being rendered.
- Visiting their web sites.
- Reading competitors' school bulletins, brochures and internal publications concerning registry services provision.
- NPUS registry staff interacting with colleagues of other universities when they meet at workshop/conferences/seminars.

Step 4: Collective Involvement: Involving the entire registry staff in gathering information about competitors is also very important in the process of ensuring quality delivery of information. By this each staff might catch the vision of competitive intelligence and better appreciate the need to create new services and improve the way in which they perform every task.

Step 5: Action Plan: Competitive intelligence is not simply an exercise: it is meant to stimulate action. Once the registry have looked at the competition, it is important as well to look at itself by asking the following questions:

- What makes a university special?
- How efficiently does the registry operate its services?
- How could a university be different from others?
- Are there risks in offering quality information services? How can that risk be manage?

Step 6: SWOT Analysis: After a full consideration of step 5 there is the need to formulate Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threat (SWOT) matrix for the university registry towards repositioning it for quality information service delivery. It is important to note that once a weakness is identified, steps can be taken to remedy it, through staff training or

whatever may be required, so that potentially it could become a strength while the real and threat perceived, can be turned to marketing opportunities. Again SWOT analysis can identify strengths that should be maintained to provide quality information services.

Step 7: Identification of Resources Needed: NPUS registries in understanding how their competitors operate in providing information services to their public need to ask: "What do each need to fill the gaps (e.g. personnel, money, time, specialised data base use of technology in service delivery etc)? What will happen to the registry if it ignores the environment in which it operates, changes in information technology?"

Step 8: Work Plan: Using the results of the competitive intelligence process, the registry should consider not only which new services it should be developed, but how to improve on the existing service operations. Some improvement projects could focus on these operational designs:

- How can coordination and responsiveness be improved?
- How can delays be eliminated?
- How can decisions be made faster?
- How can improvement on public relation be made?

Step 9: Evaluation Techniques: A university registry should set in place evaluation measures, so as to see how well the new services are doing and help develop models/strategies for better future performance.

Step 10: Continuous Monitoring of Competitors: Competitors are constantly changing what they do and how they do it. There is the need for a university registry to ensure ways of continuously monitoring the competition actions, understanding that competitive intelligence gathering is not a one-time effort. Thus, the purpose of competitive intelligence is not just to gather today's information on your competitors or to anticipate what they will do tomorrow but to use the intelligence gathered to transform one's own service point, building in the flexibility to make fast changes or changing the way in which information services are delivered.

STRATEGIES FOR QUALITY INFORMATION SERVICE DELIVERY FOR COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Upon completing the process discussed above, a university can develop ways for improving its information delivery process. Clarke (2001) proposes Porter's three strategies for a competitive advantage. These are differentiation, cost leadership and focus. By differentiation, he means products and services can be packaged or offered in some way different from that of one's competitors. Cost leadership implies producing at a lower cost to increase profit margin. Focus requires concentrating on a particular area of the market where an organization can out-perform its competitors.

From the above, it seems the best alternative to the university registry would be in differentiation. NPUS registry could seek to offer its information services to the students and other stakeholders in different ways. Adopting one of Michael Porter's generic strategies of differentiation means making your product or service in some way different from that of your competitors and that will enhance quality service delivery. Each NPUS registry in

order to have an edge over its competitors must be driven by a strategy of continuous service differentiation initiatives in offering quality information services.

Effective Marketing of Information Services: Information professionals have come to realize that in order to remain relevant and competitive, marketing information service is essential. Elliot de Sáez (2002) confirms that the core business of information services is the range of products and services that provide benefits for users and that answer user's most important needs whether for commercial intelligence, or education, leisure, recreation or social needs. That core business is information. The design of information products and services, how information might be customized, packaged and delivered is now a concern for all information professionals, whereas once it would have been an issue only for those in the commercial sectors. There is need for marketing strategy audit to enable the registry identifies how it can best grow in an increasingly competitive market place.

Igbeka (2008) expressed two major factors of marketing. These two factors are the recruitment of new customers and retention and expansion of relationship with existing ones. Thus, the essence of marketing registry information services is to attract quality students to a university. Therefore for the effective marketing of information services a university Registry needs to engage in the following strategies: (i) repackaging of admission forms, (ii) advertising of information services via its website and other web options like the Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, etc. visit some top rated high schools especially during their graduation days and participate in giving award to the best graduating students. By doing this, an NPUS Registry avails itself the opportunity of marketing its services in order to recruit excellent students for admission.

Quality in Terms of Staff-Customer Relationship: Services might be intangible, but they very often have a visible face, and a good staff - client, staff - user relationship is paramount in maintaining a quality service. Wilson, Gilligan and Howsden (1995) maintain that public relations is at its simplest, the way in which an organization manages its relations with its publics. One may ask who are the 'publics' of NPUS registries? Elliott de Sáez (2002) identifies the public as any group or body that has an actual or potential interest in or impact on, the ability of the information centre to achieve its objectives. Therefore, NPUS registry publics include all of the: students, staff, and parents/guardian, government organizations such as National Universities Commission (NUC), National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB)) employers of labour and prospective students. Further, public relations must be a continuous process involving every aspect of the organization and all members of staff at every level. A public relations policy should continually seek to satisfy clients and users needs for excellent quality services and focus staff energies on maintaining standards at a high level in user's perceptions.

An NPUS registry, if it must have a competitive advantage over its competitors, must embark on a deliberate plan and sustainable effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between the institution and its public by employing marketing managers who include public relations in their job description or designate a member or members of current staff to manage public affairs to deal with image management, issues management and crises management.

A vibrant, positive image will not be promoted by poor physical maintenance and disillusioned staff, but with committed staff even a small services can use a good public relations strategy to effect. Hence there is need for a well trained public relation officer at the registry that will relate to customers differently to bring about quality information services, an employee whose assurance of knowledge and courtesy to customer inspire trust and confidence.

Optimum and Efficient Use of Information Technology in Quality Information Service Delivery: Samways and Jones (1995) citing in Akintunde (2008) maintain that information technology is the acquisition, processing and distribution of information by micro economics system through computers and telecommunications. Information technology will enable the registry to succeed in the generation and dissemination of relevant and current information to the public. Although the use of information technology has various implications, sometimes not very palatable, yet adequate management and implementation of information technology will obviously result in more effective and efficient registry services. Therefore, in the bid to offer quality information services there is the need for an NPUS university registry to establish, where it does not exist, or maximize the use of its existing information technology/system of UMIS (university management information system) in accomplishing the following operations which essentially cover the entire student life cycle from admission to alumni:

Admission: This process identifies tracks and monitors the admission workflow, from student application until the acceptance/confirmation process. This also includes online sale of admission forms and admission screening exams.

Registration: An online registration and settlement system. Automatically all the required registration processes such as residence selection, payment, course selections and approvals are on-line. This process optimizes statistical analysis for accurate information on student enrolment.

Learning: This defines information relating to academic offering including courses, study areas (majors, minors etc). Timetable, units, classes, their activities (lecturers, tutorials etc.) and their awards.

Grading: Enables the university to create/maintain/amend/transfer assessment parameters, scores and records for students on each programme/course in the system so that student could have access to their grades online.

Graduation: Maintains a detailed searchable record of graduates. Also activation of online application/request for transcript and getting the transcript sent to designated organizations/Institutions without the graduate personally or their proxy visiting the University.

Alumni: A detailed database of Babcock university alumni with online information features.

ICT Manpower Needs: According to Clarke (2001), information within an organization may be seen as the superset which information systems and information technology are used to support. Information system then may be seen as any system which better enables information to be passed within the environment. Further, the concept of competitive advantage for information technology is an appealing one. In a common sense, it seems

obvious that if the organization can get its hands on some relevant new technology ahead of its competitors, it must gain a competitive edge. However, doubts have been cast on this concept. Clemons (1986), citing Clarke (2001) for example, follows the generic categories of Porter (cost leadership, differentiation and focus) to throw light on these issues. His view is that by concentrating on internally or externally focused applications, an organization can gain advantage by means of reduced costs or by differentiating the product or service through improved delivery time and speed of servicing customers. This however cannot be gained from information technology but only from its use, which can only be attained through human activities.

Adcock, Helms and Jih (1993) also affirm that competitive advantages do not come from information technology (IT) or information system (IS) but from the underlying management processes which make use of them. These are human activity process, and need to be seen in terms to bring about quality service. Thus, this calls for the availability of suitably qualified personnel to manage information technology at the registry ICT, manpower whose competence and credibility guarantees the security of the information being provided. Information technology is only a means of enhancing the services of registry and therefore adequate knowledge and experience in its handling can make or mar the whole efforts deployed into this venture (Akintunde, 2008).

Service Timeliness/Responses: “Time, they say is money” we are living in an information era where "just in time" delivery is the desire of every customer. Norman (2009) writing on customer service expectation states that people want what they want when they want it. They don't want something else, they don't want less than they want and they certainly don't want it at some other time. For an NPUS registry to satisfy its public as regards quality information service delivery and have an edge over its competitors, the following must implement online maximizing or the use of the university (UMIS) online system:

- Instant responses to students request through the report sequel (section) when students lodge complaints as regards registration and grade issues.
- Promptness in correspondence to parents through online contacts made available to give progress report (academic report, disciplinary report, etc.) of their wards (student).
- Time to time check/timely response to course allocation, list of students grading to ensure that no student registered against any teacher has a result pending.
- Provision for on-line transcript request and delivery.
- Improve responsiveness to on-line verification of its university graduates transcripts and certificates upon request by labour employers/institutions.
- Constantly make use of the online help desk for quick correspondence between the registry and its public.
- Issuance of certificates and transcripts to graduates on graduation day.

These online services are to eliminate delays and enable the public/customers have access to needed information without having to leave home/location at any hour of the day which in turn assist registry management for faster communication and decision making.

CONCLUSION

Quality information service delivery is essential for the survival of organizations/institutions. The use of CI in achieving this is no doubt, especially in era of intense competition by organizations/institutions to gain the confidence and patronage of the public. The need for quality information service delivery is also obvious to educational institutions, especially its registry which interfaces with the students, faculty, staff and the general public on issues of students' records. Therefore, an NPUS registry following the competitive intelligence process and strategies such as effective marketing of information, improved staff-customer relationships, increase in the usage of ICT for all its services, and effective timeliness in service delivery responses could be repositioned in the emerging competitive market sustainability.

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