Student registrations: Some important observations

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Abstract

The University of South Africa (Unisa) offers degrees, diplomas and certificates via distance education from undergraduate to doctoral level. Tough local and foreign competition in the marketplace, more segmented target audiences as well as escalating marketing costs necessarily create a need to develop and manage a skilful marketing strategy and plan to ensure survival. In order to contribute to effective publicity and marketing for the Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa, the nature of the students' profile, demography and student registrations during the 2002 and 2003 academic years were analysed in order to come up with a more efficient marketing strategy and to improve the department's professional assistance when recruiting new students during the various registration periods. The research identified specific trends in the registration patterns of first-year, second-year, third-year as well as honours-level students during the 2002 2003 academic years within the department. For comparative purposes four other selected first-year modules' registration patterns were included in the analysis. Some possible reasons for the identified registration tendencies and trends were made and the author came up with some logical conclusions and realistic recommendations on how to improve the department 's as well as Unisa's marketing campaigns in future.

1. Introduction

Was everything in the university for sale if the price was right? With these and other provocative questions Bok (2003, x) forces his readers to reconsider the position of higher education in general and universities in specific with regard to the marketplace. However, Bok is not the first scholar to ask questions about the position of academic institutions in the marketplace of knowledge and knowledge production. Five years earlier Gibbons (1998, 50) described a university as one actor amongst several in the market of learning providers. In other words, each

university is forced by, inter alia, the competitive market of learning providers to provide the highest quality offerings of learning to prospective learners.

Unisa, widely regarded as one of the largest distance teaching universities in the world, offers a wide variety of degrees, diplomas and certificates via distance education, from undergraduate to doctoral level. Public Administration is one of several subjects offered at this university. In order to respond to the current changes brought about in South Africa by the new dispensation, the Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa during 1995 embarked on a curriculum development exercise (Clapper and Wessels 1997, 50). This new curriculum formed the basis for the development of new study material (p. 54). Each of the newly developed study materials underwent an assessment process involving internal and external role players. In an article reporting on the assessment of the new study material for the first year students, the question was asked: 'How appropriate is this new study material as means of tuition within a new learning paradigm?' (Wessels 2001, 56). After a process of thorough evaluation the article concludes that the material of module PUB101-8 'is appropriate as a means of tuition within a paradigm of lifelong learning' (p. 57). Although not publicly reported, the assessments of all the other study material of the department echoed this conclusion.

If the learning material can be regarded as competitive in the market of learning providers, what can a department such as the Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa do to enrol as many as possible students for its modules of high quality? There is no doubt that tough local and foreign competition in the marketplace, more segmented target audiences, as well as escalating marketing costs, necessarily creates a need to develop and manage a skilful marketing strategy and plan to ensure survival (Scriven 2000, 1).

The question this article tries to answer is the following: How can the Department of Public Administration and Management at Unisa improve its marketing strategy and professional assistance during the recruitment of new students during the various registration periods?

For the purpose of this study an analysis will be made of the nature of the students' profile, demography and patterns of student registrations during the 2002 and 2003 academic years. Furthermore, an overview will be given of the current marketing strategies of the department in order to identify possible areas of improvement in the light of the findings resulting from the above-mentioned analysis of the registration patterns of students. The article concludes with a few recommendations for the improvement of the existing marketing policies and strategies.

2. Nature of current marketing by the Department of Public Administration and Management

In order to facilitate improved understanding of the nature of marketing by the department, one has to take note of the meaning of marketing and some of its

secondary activities, such as advertising and publicity. For the purpose of this article marketing will be regarded as 'a planned and deliberate effort by an organisation not only to create an awareness of its products among its target audience by adopting various strategies (e.g. generating publicity in the media), but also to convince its target audience that its product or service is better than that of its competition. The overall perception or image that consumers have of an organisation's product or service will contribute to its success' (Scriven, 2000, 12). The following example may help to clarify the difference between marketing concepts such as advertising, promotions, public relations, publicity and sales:

> If we put up some advertising boards on the outside of Unisa's buildings saying 'Unisa registration ONLY possible between 2 December 2002 and 30 January 2003', that's *advertising*. If we duplicate the same advertising board on the back and sides of a Unisa bus and drive it through Pretoria, that's *promotion*. If the brakes of the bus fail and it smashes into the mayor's flower bed, that's *publicity*. If Unisa can get the mayor to accept an apology about the unfortunate incident, that's *public relations*. If Unisa suddenly experiences an increased number of students making use of the Unisa bus and registering at the Cas Van Vuuren Building, that's *sales*. (Internet 2005.)

The Department of Public Administration and Management is an active partner within the College of Economic and Management Sciences' overall marketing programmes and participates in a number of marketing ventures. Within the department the following serve as examples of its efforts to facilitate efficient and fruitful marketing for the department as well as Unisa as a whole:

1. Every assignment and/or request received from a student is answered in a punctual and speedy manner and the marked and returned assignment and/or answer is accompanied by marketing and information brochures.
2. Twice a year group discussion classes are presented at the main campus as well as at all the regional offices of Unisa. The main purposes of the group discussion classes are to establish a more direct contact with the department's students, to identify and solve possible problem areas which the students might experience with the subject content and examination preparation, to remove the distance from Unisa's distance-teaching service and to achieve the following additional objectives:

   (a) To become familiarised with the locality, accessibility and standard of facilities of Unisa's regional offices as well as that of the 'new' regional facilities inherited from the previous Technikon SA.
   (b) To bring about and keep up more effective communication with the regional office representatives, subject advisors, student registration officers and currently appointed tutors of the department.
   (c) To determine the suitability of the various facilities at the regional offices to

be used for group discussions, tutoring, promotion and recruitment of new students not only for the department, but also for Unisa in general.

(d) To identify suitable and effective placement and permanent display areas for advertisement posters, brochures and material of the department as well as other Unisa departments.

(e) To ensure that the various subject advisors and registration personnel are up-to-date and familiar with aspects such as the nature of the department's subject content, module menus, learning programmes and career possibilities.

(f) To identify nearby institutions such as public sector institutions and secondary schools that can be approached for future marketing and recruitment ventures by the department and Unisa.

(g) Also, in order to attract more students to the department's group discussions the group discussion classes are referred to as 'Lectures: important subject content and examination information' in the relevant tutorial letters.

(h) Owing to the fact that a large percentage margin of the department's students are part-time learners with work commitments, the department are undertaking an effort to 'go that extra mile'. In this regard the department facilitates most of the group discussion classes on Saturday mornings. The need for this arrangement was identified by students during previous group discussion and tutor classes.

3. All students achieving distinctions receive a letter of congratulations from the head of department.
4. From time to time the department places advertisements in selected daily and weekly newspapers and subject related magazines.
5. The department's Internet Web page is kept up to date and the Webmaster tries to establish a user-friendly and optimally accessible internet address and electronic service.
6. The department participates in the rendering of lecturers' assistance at the college's information counter on the main campus during registration periods.
7. Continuous contact and interaction with academic colleagues from other tertiary institutions as well as practitioners in the public sector is arranged through the facilitation and attendance of subject-related workshops and conferences.

In order to analyse the nature of success achieved by the department in effectively marketing its products and services (based on number of students registered), one first has to be familiar with Unisa's official student registration periods.

3. Official student registration periods

For the first registration period of the academic year 2003, the following registration dates were enforced by Unisa (Unisa 2003, 28–30):

Foreign students:

Students residing outside the borders of the Republic of South Africa could register via the Internet or by post, as follows:

- First semester and year modules: Monday 18 November 2002 to Thursday 23 January 2003
- Second semester: Monday 18 November 2002 to Monday 31 March 2003 *and* Monday 19 May 2003 to Thursday 26 June 2003.

South African students:

Registration for the 2003 academic year began on Monday 2 December 2003. The different closing dates for the first semester were as follows:

Thursday 30 January 2003:

- Students registering for modules presented in the first semester should have noted that the academic year commenced on Monday 27 January 2003 and those registering after this date did so at their own risk.
- No registrations for first-semester modules were accepted after Thursday 30 January 2003.
- Students whose application for registration were received after Thursday 30 January 2003 were only registered for the second semester and only for modules which were offered in that semester.

Thursday 27 February 2003:

- For students registering for year courses/modules, excluding registrations for first-semester modules.
- For students who wrote examinations in January/February 2003 at Unisa or another recognised tertiary institution and whose registration for study units was dependent on the results of their January/February 2003 examinations.
- No registrations were accepted after this date other than for modules offered in the second semester.

Monday 31 March 2003:

- Only students who had not yet registered for 2003 could still register, but only for modules offered in the second semester.

Registration dates for the second semester of 2003 began on Monday 2 June 2003 and closed on Thursday 3 July 2003. Foreign students could register from Monday 19 May 2003 to Thursday 26 June 2003.

4. Method of data analysis

In order to determine the nature of student registrations in the respective modules, the daily student registration statistics were obtained from the Computer Services Section at Unisa. The data for the Department of Public Administration and Management's modules PUB101-8 as representative of the first-year level, PUB201-B as representative of the second-year level, PUB301-E as representative of the third-year level and HPERSA-K as representative of the honours level, were analysed, tabled and displayed in Quattro Pro charts. Identified student registration trends were also checked against other modules (i.e. COM101-X, IOP101-M, MNB101-D and ECS101-6) with larger student numbers in Unisa.

5. Student profile

During the 2002 academic year, give or take a few numbers, in total 1564 students registered for the Public Administration first year modules, 455 students registered for the Public Administration second year modules, 223 students registered for the Public Administration third year modules, and 55 students registered for the Public Administration honours courses (Bureau for Management Information 2003). See Figure 1 for a graphical display of the student numbers for the respective modules within the department:
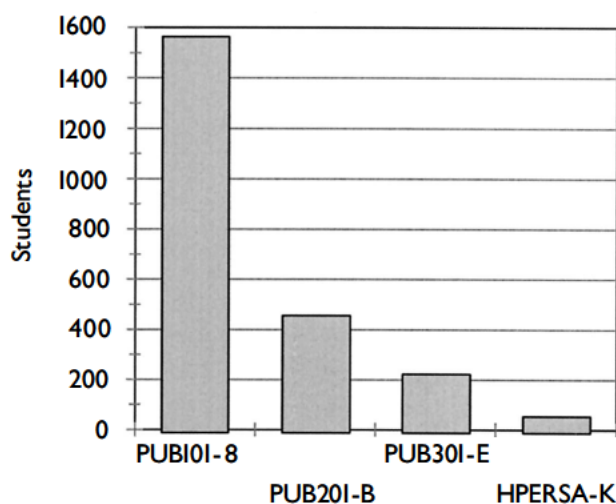

Figure I: Comparison of Ist, 2nd, 3rd and Honours level

By analysing Figures 2 to 7 on the nature of the Department of Public Administration and Management's PUB101-8 students' home and work environments, language, population group, gender, career and age, the following interesting aspects can be identified:
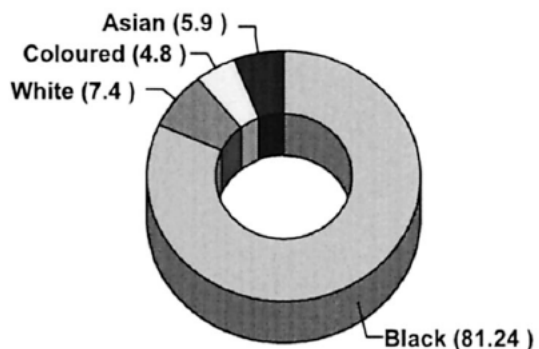
- 29 per cent of the students stay nearby Pretoria and Johannesburg
- 94,6 per cent of the students are studying in English
- 81,2 per cent of the students are black people
- 83 per cent of the students work in the public sector.
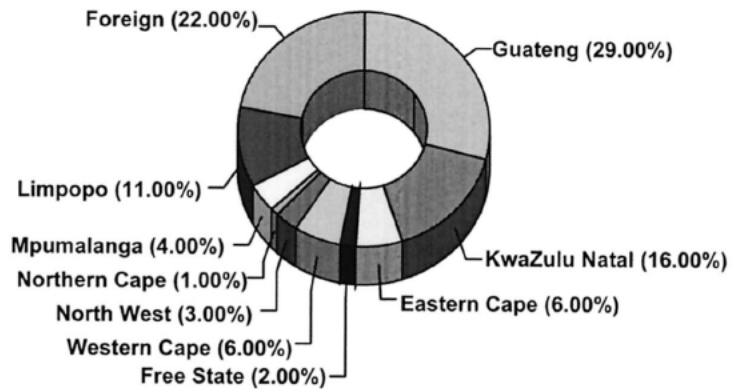
Figure 2: Places of residentship
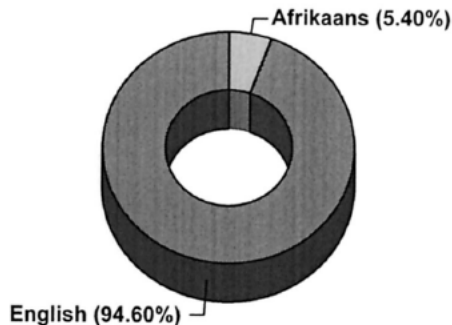
Figure 3: Language of study
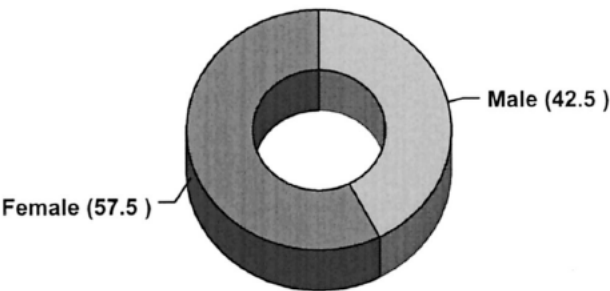

Figure 4: Population group
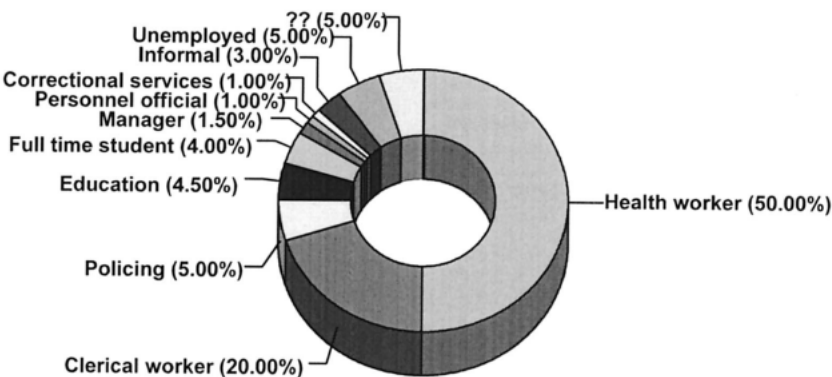
Figure 5: Gender distribution

Male (42.5)

Female (57.5)

Figure 6: Career

?? (5.00%)
Unemployed (5.00%)
Informal (3.00%)
Correctional services (1.00%)
Personnel official (1.00%)
Manager (1.50%)
Full time student (4.00%)
Education (4.50%)
Policing (5.00%)
Clerical worker (20.00%)
Health worker (50.00%)

Figure 7: Age groupings

60-64 (4)
55-59 (7)
50-54 (46)
45-49 (99)
40-44 (160)
35-39 (283)
30-34 (371)
25-29 (300)
23-24 (98)
21-22 (95)
19-20 (101)
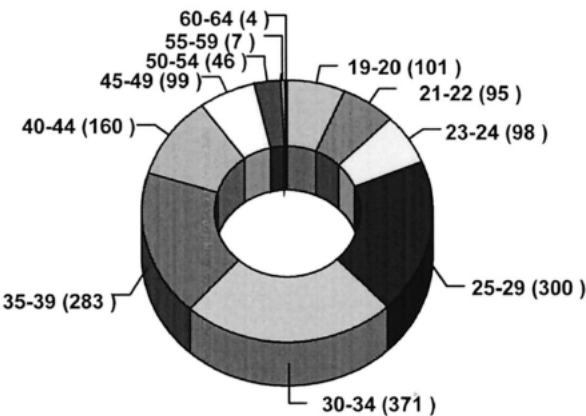
From the aforementioned graphic displays on information and statistics one can deduce that the typical first-year student in the Department is a 33-year-old black women working as a health or public service worker in a public service rendering institution in or nearby Pretoria.

6. Nature of student registrations for Public Administration and other Unisa modules

The total number of students that registered in the 2003 academic year (2 December 2002 to 29 November 2003) for the respective modules used in this analysis are as follows:

PUB101-8	1 564		COM101-X	3 662
PUB201-B	455		IOP101-M	6 019
PUB301-E	223		MNB101-D	18 608
HPERSA-K	54	(Honours course)	ECS101-6	24 304

(Bureau for Management Information 2003.)

In order to determine some trends in the nature of student registrations within the Department of Public Administration and Management and Unisa, the daily student registrations for the abovementioned modules were analysed in detail. The detailed daily student registrations of the various modules are available from the author. See Figures 8, 9 and 10 for an indication of the daily student registrations in modules PUB101-8, COM101-X and ECS101-6 for the period 2 December 2002 to 27 February 2003.

One can see that during the first month of the two-month registration period, stretching from Monday 2 December 2002 to Thursday 30 January 2003, the following student registrations took place:

- 7.0 per cent of the total number of PUB101-8 students.
- 3 per cent of the total number of PUB201-B students
- 11.2 per cent of the total number of PUB301-E students
- 7.4 per cent of the total number of HPERSA-K (Honours) students
- 7.4 per cent of the total number of COM101-X students
- 9.1 per cent of the total number of IOP101-M students
- 7.6 per cent of the total number of MNB101-D students
- 8.0 per cent of the total number of ECS101-6 students.

This very low proportion of student registrations could be due to the following reasons:

- Grade 12 learners finishing their school education who had to wait for the matric results around Friday 27 December 2002

- Unisa students who wrote examinations in October and November 2002 having to wait for the examination results to be published around Tuesday 17 December 2002
- personal funds earmarked for study purposes were used up during the December holidays
- a shortage of personal funds in general and having to wait until parents' or sponsors' next pay day on 15 or 31 January 2003.
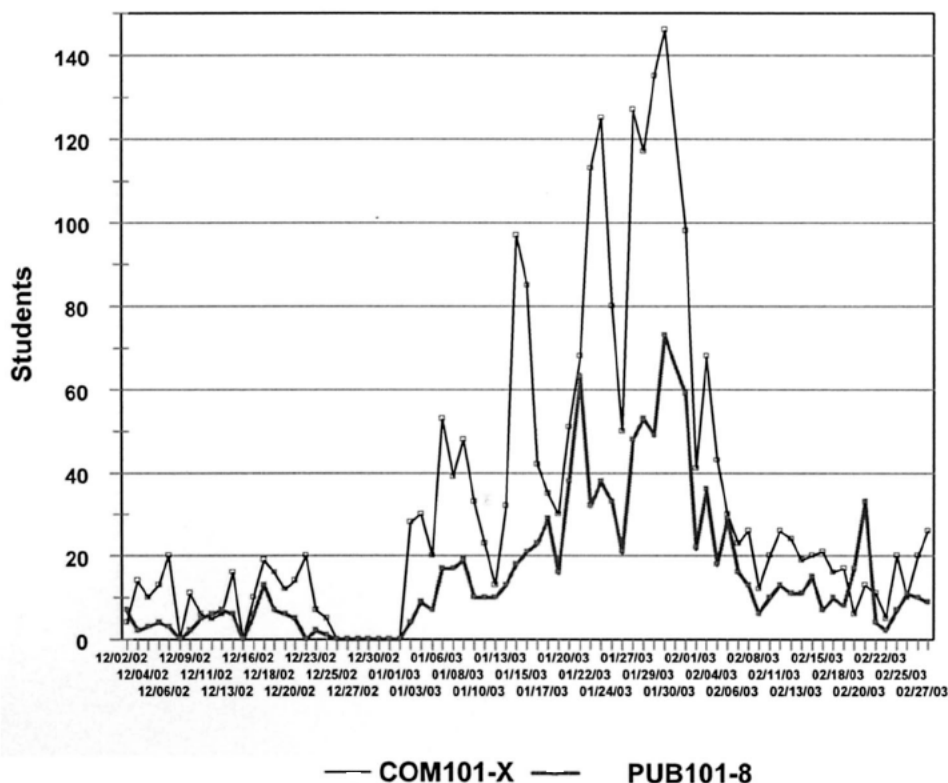
Figure 8: Daily student registrations (2 December 2002 – 27 February 2003)

Between 15 and 23 January 2003 a possible date-related rush linked to the parents' or donors' pay day on 15 January 2003 was seen, with the following percentages of student registrations:

- 16.6 per cent of the total number of PUB101-8 students
- 4.5 per cent of the total number of PUB201-B students
- 12.5 per cent of the total number of PUB301-E students
- 2.0 per cent of the total number of HPERSA-K (Honours) students
- 13.2 per cent of the total number of COM101-X students
- 12.3 per cent of the total number of ECS101-6 students.

2 December 2002 - 27 February 2003

— COM101-X — —ECS101-6
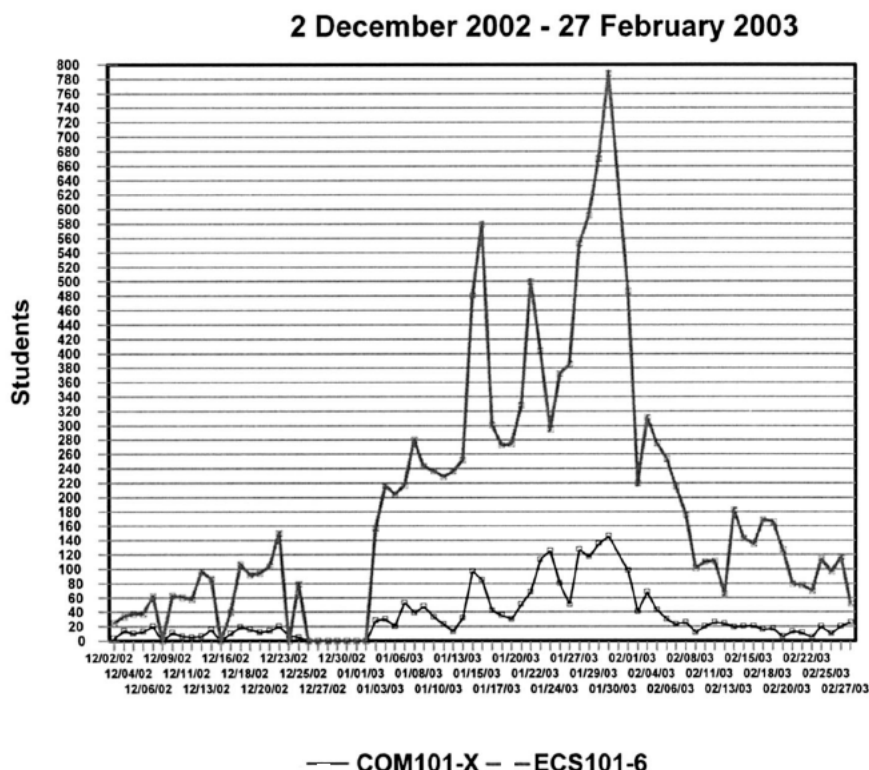
Figure 9: Daily student registrations (2 December 2002 – 27 February 2003)

During the last week of the formal registration period, coming to an end on Thursday 30 January 2003, the following percentages of students registered in 'a last rush':

- 19.4 per cent of the total number of PUB101-8 students
- 16.5 per cent of the total number of PUB201-B students
- 19.3 per cent of the total number of PUB301-E students
- 0 per cent of the total number of HPERSA-K (Honours) students
- 16.0 per cent of the total number of COM101-X students
- 16.6 per cent of the total number of IOP101-M students
- 18.3 per cent of the total number of MNB101-D students
- 13.6 per cent of the total number of ECS101-6 students.

On Friday 31 January 2003, Saturday 1 February 2003 and Monday 3 February 2003 (three days after the registration closing date) the following last rush of students registered:
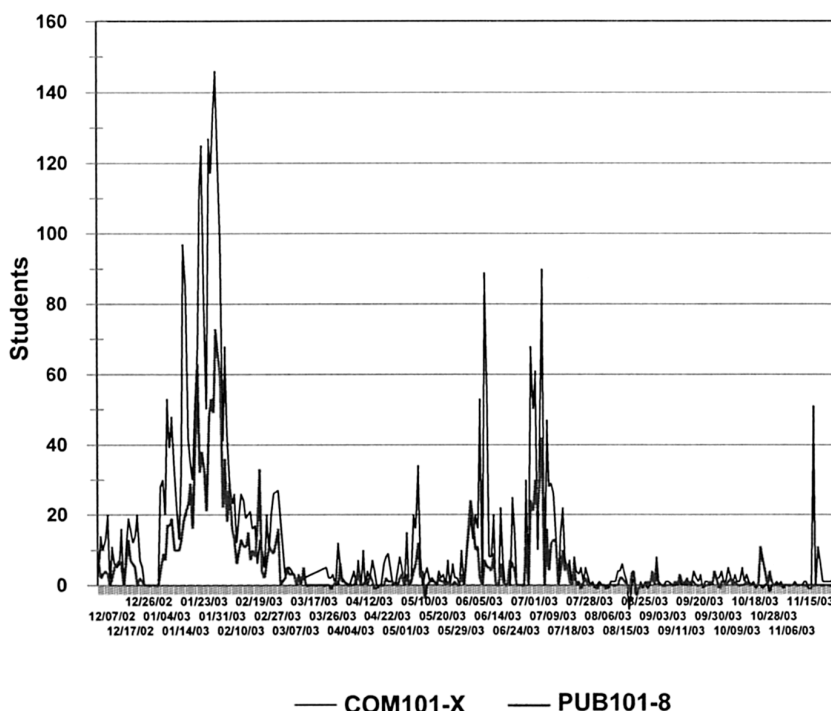
- 7.5 per cent of the total number of PUB101-8 students
- 4.4 per cent of the total number of PUB201-B students

- 8.5 per cent of the total number of PUB301-E students
- 0 per cent of the total number of HPERSA-K (Honours) students
- 5.7 per cent of the total number of COM101-X students
- 4.2 per cent of the total number of ECS101-6 students.

It is an astonishing finding that the following percentages of students only registered after the official closing date on Thursday 30 January 2003 (during February 2003 and early March 2003):

- 19.9 per cent of the total number of PUB101-8 students
- 15.6 per cent of the total number of PUB201-B students
- 16.6 per cent of the total number of PUB301-E students
- 13.0 per cent of the total number of HPERSA-K (Honours) students
- 19.3 per cent of the total number of COM101-X students
- 16.5 per cent of the total number of IOP101-M students
- 19.7 per cent of the total number of MNB101-D students
- 20.2 per cent of the total number of ECS101-6 students.

Of the total number of students registered for the 2003 academic year, the following percentages of students registered during or immediately after the first registration period (from 2 December 2002 to 15 March 2003):

Figure 10: Daily student registrations (2 December 2002 – 30 November 2003)

- 73.7 per cent of the PUB101-8 students
- 68.1 per cent of the total number of PUB201-B students
- 72.6 per cent of the total number of PUB301-E students
- 100 per cent of the total number of HPERSA-K (Honours) students
- 67.2 per cent of the total number of COM101-X students
- 71.5 per cent of the total number of IOP101-M students
- 73.8 per cent of the total number of MNB101-D students
- 69.8 per cent of the total number of ECS101-6 students.

7. Conclusion

From the aforementioned findings and observations one can conclude the following:

- The fact that the typical PUB101-8 student in the Department is a black female of approximately 33 years of age working as a health or public service worker indicates a need for a more aggressive marketing approach aimed at Grade 12 school leavers in order to increase the number of students in the younger age groups.

- Owing to financial and transport constraints the students find it difficult to enrol during December (first month of registration) and are usually dependent on their parents' or donors' salary pay-days after the 15th or the last working day of a month, especially if the last day for registration is on Thursday 30 January 2003.

- First-year students wait until the very last moment to register and therefore put themselves under immense logistical and academic stress. Maybe they are not effectively informed on their first contact with Unisa, and maybe the university Yearbook regarding first year enrolments is not clear enough on the need for, and benefits of, timely registration.

- The very low percentage (29%) of the PUB101-8 first year students proceeding to enrol for Public Administration second year modules is indicative of a possible lack of efficient recruiting and servicing of students in Public Administration.

- The employers and employees of the South African public sector are not informed about the essence of effective tertiary studies and a qualification in Public Administration.

- Late registration of students does not ease the timely development of effective marketing, lecturing and group discussion plans and programmes within the Department of Public Administration and Management and Unisa as a whole.

8. Recommendations

With reference to the aforementioned conclusive remarks the following can be recommended to bring about a change in the quality of marketing services by the Department of Public Administration and Management and Unisa:

- More efficient and personal contact by means of modern communication technology at our disposal should be deployed between Unisa and its registered students.
- The public sector institutions as well as school leavers should be informed about the essence of tertiary studies and a qualification in Public Administration.
- Intensified marketing by Unisa's marketing personnel and coordinated assistance by motivated and skilled academic personnel on especially the main campus ground and at the College's registration counter should be brought about in the periods 13 January to February and 27 June to 3 July.
- In order to accommodate late comers still depending on their parents' and sponsors' money becoming available on the last working day of a calendar month, the closing date for registrations should not be one day before the end of the month, but shifted to the end of the following week in February and July.
- An extra field space must be made available on the Unisa student registration form where the registering student can indicate the nature of the information source which informed and in the final instance induced him/her to register at Unisa. This will assist future marketing strategies.
- The registered students must be utilised as primary recruiters of more students for Unisa and should be rewarded in one way or another.
- Student Registrations (especially Undergraduate), with the assistance of Computer Services, should come up with daily student registration figures from the various registration centres for all modules and courses, and on a continuous basis make this data available to all academic departments. This will assist in bringing about more effective marketing and planning of educational services.
- Effective communication (integrated marketing communication) with all our students should be established and kept in place by, for example, congratulating them with success in the last examination and supplying them with additional information on aspects such as the menu of different modules and courses which they should make a specific selection of in their successive study term. Burnett and Moriarty in Scriven (2000, 5) define integrated marketing communication as the practice of unifying all marketing communication tools from advertising to packaging to send target audiences a consistent, persuasive message that promotes organisational goals.
- Databases of students' contact particulars should be made more accessible and the responsible lecturers must furnish the students with more flyers and information on the most suitable selection of modules and courses.

It is possible to revise or even transform the Public Administration curriculum at Unisa on a regular basis in order to keep on addressing the key issues within the subject field. The study materials should also be revised on a regular basis to be as topical as possible. The offerings of learning may be of the highest possible standard, but if they are not used by their typical target market, they will be of limited value.

This article shows that it may be possible for a university department such as the Department Public Administration and Management to increase its student numbers by improving its marketing strategy and student assistance during specifically identified registration periods.

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