

Securing Internal Stakeholder Buy-in for Experiential Student Recruitment Marketing: Managerial Practices in Private Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Experiential student recruitment marketing (ESRM), delivered through open days, campus tours, education fairs, school visits and virtual events, depends on people. Unlike commercial sectors that outsource experiential campaigns to agencies, higher education institutions (HEIs) stage recruitment experiences through their own academic staff, administrative personnel, student ambassadors and senior management. This paper examines how marketing professionals in private Malaysian HEIs and foreign university branch campuses secure the internal participation on which ESRM depends, and how resource conditions shape that task. The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative design. The study conducted semi-structured interviews with marketing, recruitment, admissions, and school liaison professionals from 23 purposively sampled private institutions and analysed transcripts through reflexive thematic analysis supported by NVivo. The findings show that ESRM delivery relies on academic staff for the intellectual and behavioural dimensions of the experience and on current students for its relational dimension, consistent with the part-time marketer concept. Participation is uneven and must be continually earned. Buy-in is complicated in the Malaysian setting by hierarchical organisational cultures that anchor commitment at senior management level, by the multiethnic composition of staff, and by variable contractual expectations regarding marketing participation. Scarce human and financial resources intensify the dependence on goodwill. Marketers who demonstrate the contribution of ESRM to recruitment outcomes, cultivate staff champions and recognise participation secure more reliable engagement. The paper offers practical guidance for institutional leaders on building a marketing-supportive culture and contributes a non-Western account of internal stakeholder engagement to the experiential marketing literature.

Keywords: internal stakeholders; buy-in; experiential marketing; student recruitment; higher education management; Malaysia

1. Introduction

Student recruitment is a whole-institution activity. When a prospective student attends an open day, the marketing department may organise the event, but the experience itself is delivered by lecturers giving taster classes, student ambassadors leading tours, administrative staff answering questions and senior leaders setting the tone. Experiential student recruitment marketing (ESRM) therefore has a property that distinguishes it from most commercial experiential marketing: the experience providers are internal stakeholders rather than contracted agencies or professional brand ambassadors (Doherty, 2025; Leahy, Doherty & Torres, 2022; Smilansky, 2018). Securing and sustaining their participation is a managerial problem in its own right, yet the experiential marketing literature, oriented toward agency-delivered campaigns, has little to say about it.

The problem is acute in private Malaysian higher education. The sector is crowded, competition for school leavers is intense, and marketing teams are small relative to the recruitment calendar they must service. The prospective student population is multiethnic, most SPM leavers are

minors, and public intakes are allocated through the centralised UPU system, which shapes the competitive environment for private institutions recruiting on rolling calendars. Within institutions, hierarchical organisational cultures, diverse staff compositions and variable contractual expectations complicate the mobilisation of academic colleagues for marketing work. No published study has examined how marketing professionals in this sector secure internal buy-in for ESRM or how resource conditions shape the task.

Drawing on a doctoral study of ESRM management in the private Malaysian higher education sector, this paper answers two questions: on whom does ESRM delivery depend in private Malaysian HEIs, and how do marketing professionals secure and sustain their participation under resource constraints? The paper contributes an account of internal stakeholder engagement in a non-Western higher education setting, extends the part-time marketer concept (Gummesson, 1991) to ESRM, and offers practical guidance for institutional leaders.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Experiential marketing and its delivery

Experiential marketing stages live, memorable, emotionally engaging brand encounters to influence consumer decisions (Pine & Gilmore, 1998; Schmitt, 1999; Batat, 2019). Schmitt (1999) specified five strategic experiential modules, sense, feel, think, act and relate, delivered through experience providers including events, environments and, critically, people. Practitioner guidance assumes that the people dimension is professionalised: agencies, trained brand ambassadors and event staff deliver the experience on the brand's behalf (Smilansky, 2018), and the leading implementation model likewise presumes campaign delivery through specialist resources (Leahy et al., 2022). In higher education, this assumption fails. Institutions cannot credibly outsource lectures, laboratory tasters or student life; authenticity requires that the institution's own people perform the experience.

2.2 Internal stakeholders and the part-time marketer

Gummesson (1991) coined the term part-time marketer for employees outside the marketing function whose work nonetheless shapes customer perceptions. The concept was developed further in internal marketing research, which treats employees as an audience whose commitment to the marketing strategy must be won (Brennan, Zevallos & Binney, 2003; Cambra-Fierro & Cambra-Berdun, 2016), and recent higher education studies confirm that internal marketing conditions academics' commitment to institutional goals (Asif, Fatima & Johns, 2025). Higher education marketing scholarship has long argued that successful strategy implementation requires a marketing-supportive culture extending from senior leadership to front-line staff (Chapleo, 2010; Kotler & Fox, 1995; Maringe & Gibbs, 2008), and that communicating business outcomes to employees builds motivation and adoption of strategy (Moorman & Day, 2016). What this literature has not examined is the specific dependence of experiential recruitment activity on academic and student participation, and the managerial work of securing it.

2.3 The Malaysian institutional context

Three features of the Malaysian setting bear on internal buy-in. First, organisational cultures in many institutions are hierarchical, so initiatives prosper when visibly endorsed by the vice-chancellor and senior management. Second, academic staff bodies are multiethnic, bringing varied communication styles, expectations and motivational considerations to engagement with marketing work. Third, contractual arrangements vary across private universities, university colleges and foreign branch campuses, producing uneven formal obligations to participate in recruitment activity. Combined with documented resource pressure across the sector, including constrained budgets and small marketing teams, these conditions make the Malaysian private sector a demanding environment in which to mobilise internal stakeholders for ESRM.

3. Methodology

The study adopts an interpretivist paradigm with a phenomenological ontology and a subjectivist epistemology, on the ground that the managerial work of securing buy-in is accessible through the situated accounts of those who perform it (Carson, Gilmore, Perry & Gronhaug, 2005). A qualitative design using semi-structured interviews was employed. Purposive sampling targeted marketing, student recruitment, admissions and school liaison professionals responsible for ESRM in private universities, private university colleges and foreign university branch campuses, drawn from a sampling frame compiled from the Malaysian Qualifications Register and concentrated in the Klang Valley and Selangor. Twenty-three institutions participated, with marketing function sizes from fewer than three staff to 30 and enrolments from under 5,000 to 33,000 students. Interviews of 45 to 75 minutes were conducted in person or by video conference, recorded with consent and transcribed.

Transcripts were analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) supported by NVivo, and trustworthiness was addressed through the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), an audit trail and reflexive journaling. Ethical approval was obtained from the university research ethics committee, and all data handling complied with the Personal Data Protection Act 2010. This paper reports the findings relating to internal stakeholder engagement and resources; companion analyses of planning and evaluation are reported elsewhere.

4. Findings

4.1 An institution-wide activity resting on a small team

Respondents described recruitment as an integrated, institution-wide undertaking coordinated by a small marketing function. The recruitment calendar runs nearly year-round, spanning on-campus open days and tasters, off-campus school visits, public education fairs including the Star Education Fair and MAPCU fairs, and virtual events retained after the pandemic. Marketing teams, often fewer than eight people, cannot staff this calendar alone. The volume and variety of activity, amplified by an extended student decision period, places the burden of delivery on colleagues outside the marketing function.

We haven't really reached that point yet; it feels like I'm just putting out fires all the time. Every day, I'm basically just shoveling coal into the engine. I would love to be in the boardroom, making decisions about our strategy, gazing out at the blue sky, and figuring out how to tackle things in a smarter, planned-out way. Instead, I'm just shoveling coal, and there's no space in my head for that. (HEI 4)

4.2 Reliance on academic staff

Academic staff emerged as the indispensable providers of the intellectual and behavioural dimensions of the recruitment experience. Taster lectures, programme talks, laboratory demonstrations and advice clinics require subject expertise that marketers cannot simulate, mapping onto the think and act modules of Schmitt's (1999) framework. Participation, however, was uneven. Respondents reported that engagement varied with contractual expectations, workload and individual goodwill, and that some colleagues regarded recruitment as outside their role. The part-time marketer concept (Gummesson, 1991) describes this condition precisely: the people who most shape the prospect's impression are not employed to market.

There's this idea among department heads that it's the marketing team's job to run events they support. But really, marketing is saying that we can bring people in, but we need help making the event engaging. We want faculty to put on a good show since visitors are there to learn about courses, not just snack on popcorn. What we do is just meant to boost what they should already be doing. There's definitely a bit of a disconnect. I'm not saying it doesn't work or that the gap can't be fixed, but from what I've seen, there tends to be confusion about who handles what. (HEI 5).

4.3 Staff champions, ambassadors and non-academic staff

Respondents managed unevenness by cultivating staff champions, academics who engage willingly, perform well with school-age audiences and model participation for colleagues. Current students serving as ambassadors delivered the relational dimension of the experience, offering prospects an authentic preview of student life, while administrative, facilities and admissions staff underpinned the sensory quality of campus events. Recognition mattered: respondents who publicly credited contributors, fed back outcomes and involved champions in planning reported more dependable engagement over successive cycles.

People really appreciate the role of student ambassadors, but they also see the importance of having academics around during recruitment events. Students love chatting with their peers, but they want to talk to professors too. They're looking for detailed info about the courses. Both students and staff are essential, so it's a letdown when academics can't make it to an open day. (HEI 3).

4.4 Senior management and organisational culture

In the hierarchical cultures described by respondents, sustained buy-in begins at the top. Where vice-chancellors and senior management visibly endorsed recruitment activity, attended flagship events and resourced them adequately, participation followed through the organisation; where endorsement was nominal, marketers bargained for goodwill event by event. The multiethnic composition of staff added a further managerial layer, requiring sensitivity to differing communication styles and motivators when mobilising colleagues.

This report will be shared with all the Heads of Departments (HODs) and deans so they can check out the whole campaign and see what worked well. We're doing this for two main reasons: to remind everyone of what happened and to get their support since this initiative is still ongoing. We really need their buy-in not just for the next COM period but for the whole cycle, now more than ever. I think this report makes that clear. Plus, it points out where there are challenges, so we can figure out solutions together if needed. (HEI 8).

4.5 Demonstrating value as the route to buy-in

Across institutions, respondents converged on the same diagnosis: colleagues participate when the contribution of ESRM to enrolment is demonstrable. Because systematic evaluation is constrained by data conditions in the sector, marketers often cannot produce the evidence that would ease their mobilisation task, and buy-in rests instead on relationships, recognition and senior endorsement. The buy-in problem is therefore entangled with the evaluation problem, and respondents who had even simple outcome indicators to share reported a markedly easier internal case.

If it's a digital campaign, we pretty much handle everything ourselves in marketing. But with experiential marketing, we need to get a lot more people involved from different parts of the organization and get their backing. (HEI 7).

5. Discussion and Managerial Implications

The findings extend experiential marketing scholarship by specifying what happens when the experience providers are internal. Existing models presume professionalised delivery (Leahy et al., 2022; Smilansky, 2018); in higher education, delivery runs through part-time marketers whose participation is voluntary in practice even where it is contractual in form. The Malaysian evidence adds three contextual inflections: hierarchy concentrates the leverage for buy-in at senior management level; staff diversity requires culturally attentive mobilisation; and contractual variation across a dual-sector system produces uneven baseline obligations. These inflections reshape, without overturning, the internal marketing prescription that culture and leadership carry strategy (Chapleo, 2010; Maringe & Gibbs, 2008; Moorman & Day, 2016), and they corroborate in a South East Asian setting the buy-in challenges first documented in Irish higher education (Doherty, 2025).

Five implications follow for institutional leaders and marketing managers. First, anchor ESRM in senior leadership: visible endorsement, attendance at flagship events and explicit resourcing signal that recruitment is institutional work. Second, formalise the part-time marketer role where possible, recognising recruitment contributions in workload models and appraisal rather than relying on goodwill. Third, build and look after a champions network, since peer modelling recruits participation more effectively than instruction. Fourth, invest in student ambassador programmes with selection, training and recognition, because the relational dimension of the experience is the one prospects trust most. Fifth, close the loop: report even simple outcome indicators, applications influenced, event registrations, permissions granted, back to contributors, converting participation into visible results and easing the next cycle's mobilisation.

6. Conclusion

ESRM in private Malaysian higher education is delivered by the institution's own people, and its success therefore turns on the managerial work of securing internal buy-in under resource constraints. This paper documented that work: the reliance on academic staff and student ambassadors, the cultivation of champions, the anchoring of commitment in senior management within hierarchical cultures, and the demonstration of value as the durable route to engagement. The study contributes a non-Western account of internal stakeholder engagement in experiential recruitment and practical guidance for institutional leaders. Its limitations include the focus on marketer perceptions in one national system and one metropolitan region, and a design that supports transferability rather than statistical generalisation. Future research should examine the perspectives of academic staff and student ambassadors themselves, compare public and private institutions, and test whether formal recognition of recruitment work in workload and appraisal systems improves participation and, ultimately, enrolment outcomes.

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