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Marketing Canadian Universities

A Sociology of Institutions Perspective

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Abstract

This is a critical response to a Government of Canada study using the institutional-sociology notions of structuration, isomorphism and professionalization. The primary recommendation of three recommendations proposed in the DFAIT Study (2009) creates an international education marketing agency (IEMA) funded by the Government of Canada and international students who choose to study in Canada. This paper re-positions the primary recommendation of the DFAIT Study outside of the dominant narrative of global competition and into the sociology of institutions framework offered by DiMaggio and Powell. Using this alternative framework, major assumptions and the example of Country X from the original study are problematized. This will be of interest to critical educators, administrators and others who envision a direct international role for their institutions and Canadian universities in general.



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A study commissioned by Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and entitled *DFAIT: Best Practices on Managing the Delivery of Canadian Education Marketing* (DFAIT Study, 2009) has proposed the creation of an International Education Marketing Agency (IEMA) to market Canadian universities to prospective international students. The comparative study conducted by the Illuminate Consulting Group in California acknowledges the success Canadian universities have had in attracting international students, but suggests Canada might do better. I believe international students make an exceptional contribution to learning and research at Canadian universities, so how and why take issue with this central recommendation of the DFAIT study? In this paper, I argue the newly proposed IEMA will create the necessary conditions to meet DiMaggio and Powell's criteria for 'structuration' and further, the predictive utility of their hypotheses may be applied to anticipate certain impacts of implementing this recommendation. The DFAIT Study (2009) recommends the creation of an Ottawa based not-for-profit marketing organization that would cost the Government of Canada and international students (through a new student visa fee), approximately \$22 million Canadian dollars annually. Rather than attracting international students to Canadian universities, I suggest the new organization will primarily be concerned with other institutions. It will increase the cost of studying in Canada for international students and yoke the universities to a larger politics of international trade (Mundy, 2007; Rizvi & Lingard, 2006; Scherrer, 2007).

Background

This DFAIT Study (2009) facilitated a substantial aggregation of statistical data from countries that recruit large numbers of international students, including Canada. This approach abstracts both learner and university. In Canada for example, it does not acknowledge the history, diversity and power relations that played an integral role in establishing these universities, many of which pre-date Confederation. In selecting the nation-state as the unit of analysis – rather than the university, some valuable points of comparisons are possible, while still others are obscured. Given that education is a provincial responsibility in Canada, it is worth considering how data aggregated for comparison on a national basis subordinates and homogenizes these unique institutions into fungible commodities. Even with the growing level of commodification that surrounds international student recruitment and education, the question of what role, if any, the federal government in Canada might play is worth asking (Scherrer, 2007). There is increasing competition for international students and the revenues they generate for Canadian and other universities (ACCC, 2010; Boos-Nünning, 2004; Hahn, 2003). This paper questions what effect, if any, the proposed IEMA will have on the ability of Canadian universities to attract international students.

DFAIT Study (2009)

The DFAIT Study (2009) is a comparative review of international student recruitment and marketing practices. Canada is compared to countries such as Australia, France, Germany, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States. The DFAIT Study indicates international student enrolment in Canada increased from about 53,000 students in 2000, to more than 95,000 in 2008, but the number of international students choosing Canada did not keep pace with other countries. Canada's share went from five percent in 2000, to four-point-four percent in 2008, of all international students studying abroad. This is important because the entire rationale for the creation of the IEMA rests upon this gap in market growth. The study further states "it can be

said that this enrolment increase is due more to the strength of Canadian education rather than the quality of promotion activities” (p. 14). Once again, I share my deep conviction international students make a unique, strong and creative contribution to Canadian university campuses, and I ask how will creating the IEMA impact international students?

The DFAIT Study (2009) produced two other recommendations, the first is an online promotion initiative and the second is an integrated scholarship strategy. These both contribute to the experience of international students when they apply to study in Canada. The online promotional initiative supports prospective international students by providing a central information point conveniently accessed via the internet. Presumably, the prospective international student would no longer have to navigate three separate university websites to determine separate application procedures. A recommendation to integrate the scholarship application process would allow international students to submit one application and have it be considered for a variety of possible scholarships and awards. These two recommendations hold out the possibility of reducing the effort and cost international students invest when they explore for educational programs in Canada. However, the vast majority of space and focus of the study is dedicated to proposing the creation of an IEMA.

When international students select Canada, are they entering into a process that might be compared to a *buyer* selecting a product off the global shelf in the same way consumers buy sugar all over the World? Further, if you wished to attract more buyers of sugar to your location, would you concentrate on making certain that purchasing sugar was a pleasant experience with high quality sugar available at good prices? Or, would you focus your resources on participating in a marketing venture with the other sugar vendors in your neighbourhood to ensure they were mutually aware of each other and sugar marketing *best practices*? Not only is the practice of framing education as a commodity (i.e. sugar) of questionable utility, but a sociology of institutions perspective argues the accompanying *buyer* and *seller* paradigm does not correspond to the way institutions interact with their external environments. By positioning the recruitment of international students within an international trade framework, the DFAIT Study (2009) is able to present the creation of an IEMA as an obvious solution and only a matter of efficiency and common sense (Apple, 1993, 2006; Rizvi & Lingard, 2006). However, why not consider instead what has made Canadian universities successful in attracting international students historically? Why not survey international students in Canada and ask them why they chose to study in Canada? What about contacting international students that were accepted by Canadian universities, but are currently studying elsewhere and outside of their country of origin? For me, these questions begin to make the wisdom of creating an IEMA far less obvious and inevitable.

The framing and methodology of the DFAIT Study (2009) is dependent upon the projection of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) onto international student selection processes (Fuchs, 2001). The decision by any international student to study in Canada or elsewhere is the product of complex social processes, and the essentialism of that decision to buyer choice within a RCT framework is to be overly simplistic and to not take into account the role of social, moral and ideological commitments of decision-makers. RCT is even less well suited for projection onto the behavior of post-secondary institutions, given the competing mandates and increasingly diverse constituencies they serve (Stier & Börjesson, 2010). The ideas of DiMaggio and Powell (2007) are applied in opposition to the assumptions of RCT, and in recognition of the increasingly complex operating environments of universities and other educational institutions in Canada and elsewhere.

Structuration & Isomorphism

An important premise of this paper is the notion that an IEMA would satisfy the criteria of ‘structuration’ as proposed by DiMaggio and Powell (2007). The criterion for structuration includes increased (1) mutual awareness within the field, (2) interaction among member organizations, (3) the formation of dominant-subordinate relationships among member organizations and (4) increased information load and exchange required for membership. The DFAIT (2009) study proposes to integrate the IEMA into the “fragmented, complex and currently shaken up landscape...everyone must agree to compromises; there will be no room for dogmatic positions” (p. 15). Even without the admonishment on dogmatic positions that seems clumsy and heavy-handed at best, this comment provides insight into the vision of IEMA as a cohering and homogenizing force that is interested in developing institutional consensus, not supportive infrastructure for a diverse group of international students.

Envision the newly proposed IEMA operating as Bentham’s panopticon, where “rational techniques, and the efficiency of those techniques [are] due to a subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies” (Foucault, 1979, p. 155). The new organization becomes the recognized point of access for other organizations, and it organizes membership, events, schedules and the dissemination of information among the *field* or group of organizations. In this scenario, universities become increasingly concerned with competing for status and legitimacy with other organizations in the group. It is the IEMA who determines what constitutes *best practices* related to the recruitment of international students and how individual member institutions are performing in relation to this rubric. Through increased and self-conscious awareness of one another, greater interaction, dominant-subordinate positioning and information exchange associated with structuration, the IEMA will homogenize member activity.

DiMaggio and Powell (2007) suggest “isomorphism is a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (p. 439). In coercive isomorphism, force, persuasion or invitation is used to produce the desired common behavior. I suggest the IEMA would use a *coercive* isomorphism to establish legitimacy and acceptance, and it would have the effect of converging pressure and making participant institutions look and act more and more similar to one another. With the terms *fragmented* and *complex* fresh in mind from the description of the post-secondary landscape quoted above, it is worth considering DiMaggio and Powell’s caution that “policy makers concerned with pluralism should consider the impact of their programs on the structure of organizational fields as a whole” (p. 455). If this paper has established that structuration would occur in the *field* created by IEMA, and that participants would be subject to coercive isomorphism, then what are the implications for the professionalization that is proposed in the new IEMA?

Professionalization

Professionalization is the term used by DiMaggio and Powell (2007) in association with *normative* isomorphism. The normative component of isomorphism complements professionalization, as increasing academic preparation and specialization, a common vocabulary and shared ways of doing things become the rules of membership, and the onus is on difference – to explain itself. It is applied here to describe the organizational implications of applying culturally based expectations and norms from a central IEMA to an increasingly dependent

group of universities. The universities become dependent upon the new IEMA because it will be a new source of legitimation and status for their institutional capabilities and initiatives. As the IEMA consolidates an organizing role with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), universities may compete for status within IEMA so new opportunities and market intelligence will be directed their way. In Canada, there is a real possibility for IEMA politics to reflect rivalries and other unhelpful influences that may be defined by economic regionalism and political opportunism. In these ways, the newly proposed IEMA distracts Canadian universities from the primary goal of attracting international students.

The DFAIT (2009) study acknowledges it will take time for the IEMA perspective and agenda to gain traction, and “it will take years to create a high performance organization” (p. 148). The DFAIT study describes a role for the IEMA staff that will have among other duties, the responsibility of providing seminars and workshops for the universities to disseminate marketing best practices. The authors note it will take substantial time to “repair, rationalize and reorient” the current situation (p. 15). How *best practices* are to be determined is not clear from the DFAIT study, and whether one over-arching set of best-practices can be divined for a socially and politically heterogeneous university community remains implausible. However, it is clear from the DFAIT study (2009) whatever is being done currently - is lacking - and it will take substantial time to “repair, rationalize and reorient” (p. 15).

In a new IEMA, “reaching the suggested staffing level might require recruiting experts from outside of Canada” (p. 157). The technological proficiencies required to support the new IEMA may require “a search for such expertise outside of the education sector” (p. 157). Some of what is lacking might well be remedied by “well-informed DFAIT Trade Councillors, if possible coached by IEMA staff” (p. 150). At this stage, the ambiguous and unsubstantiated criticisms of what may currently exist are not supported by the research that has been presented, but do serve the rhetorical function of creating space for something new.

In addition to considering the DFAIT Study (2009) recommendations themselves, it is worth asking where the imperative for the creation of a new and expensive IEMA originates. The phrase ‘negative growth’ is used in the document as a rationale for advancing the recommendations, but as the numbers presented in the DFAIT Study (2009) Summary section of this report indicate, the emergency may be in *the eye of the beholder*. In the methodology section of the DFAIT Study (2009), the data acquisition, collection and comparison issues are acknowledged, and we are assured what has been used are “standard research methods and tools” (p. 21). With the possible exception of a feedback session, the Study indicates that human contact was with stakeholders (DFAIT, CMEC) and consisted of “more than 25 interviews...either through an online survey, telephone calls, or in-person” (p. 21). My sincere hope is that all of the negative comments and inferences contained in the report and levelled at the Canadian system’s ability to attract international students did not originate from those interviewed. If they did not, what and where is the data to support this criticism? In my view, both the insinuation Canadians are not capable of the new roles within the proposed IEMA, and the unsubstantiated criticism of current methods for attracting international students work in tandem to deflect serious consideration away from the dubious merit of the central recommendation.

It is important to now be able to step back from the detail of this Study, and think critically about what is being proposed. A new and expensive IEMA is proffered at the Federal government level, to provide marketing infrastructure and expertise to Canadian universities that

have been attracting large but improvable numbers of international students. The new group will have a coercive and normative isomorphic impact on the Canadian universities that will be increasingly dependent upon this organization (IEMA) to represent them internationally. By making only the most ambiguous claims about what is currently lacking at these institutions in the Study, it is very difficult to develop a reasoned argument against *improvement*. However, the real beauty of this proposal from the ICG perspective is that if the recommendation to create an IEMA is not accepted, it will always be possible to point at the *glorious* prospects of what might have been. If accepted, the creation of an IEMA will take years and a mountain of resources and consulting contracts, and may always be held up to an idealized version of what was intended, with fault accruing to the politics of implementation. How will these proposed changes enhance or reduce the experience international students will have in Canada? That is the question that has not been asked - and ironically - is beyond the scope of this discussion. The implied causal relationship between marketing activity and increased enrolment has not been questioned. (How would this recommendation be perceived if it was accepted and in two years China and India decided not to continue sending international students abroad?) The history and development of Canadian universities did not begin with the funding of this study by DFAIT. It may serve as a starting point to now ask, how will this recommendation, if implemented, affect Canadian universities?

Impact on Canadian Universities: Hypothesis A1

DiMaggio and Powell (2007) have said the value of their work is within its predictive utility, and the following is a speculative analysis of what impacts may reasonably be anticipated when applying hypothesis A1 and A3 to this situation. First, this paper has not yet conceded that a greater marketing effort alone is sufficient to increase the number of international students choosing to study in Canada, but let us agree for the sake of argument that it will, so that we may consider the logical extension of implementing the central recommendation. I am including their first Hypothesis (A1) for ease of reference. “The greater the dependence of an organization on another organization, the more similar it will become to that organization in structure, climate, and behavioral focus” (p. 448). In many organizations, private and public, marketing is accountable to the other parts of the organization (manufacturing, maintenance, operations) to ensure products and services produced by the organization are demanded by markets. This is different. Here we have a proposed organization that will be centrally responsible for marketing and by the nature of their information gathering and distribution function; it is the Canadian universities that will be dependent upon the IEMA. The proposed funding for the IEMA may be from the Federal government and fees paid by international students, but Canadian universities will still be dependent upon tuition fees paid by international students and provincial governments. In that situation, Canadian universities will need to continue to market internationally on their own and market themselves to the IEMA, increasing the effort and energy that is being spent on attracting international students, not improving their experience.

Canadian university dependency upon the IEMA will not reside as much upon the supply of *revenue-generating* international students, but on the competition among universities to be ranked highly in their areas of expertise. A culturally situated dependency may develop based upon the need for Canadian universities to receive a favorable evaluation of their own formal programs and informal marketing infrastructure, based upon criteria that may or may not be made explicit. This is the emergence of mimetic isomorphism as a response to a deliberately

constructed organizational uncertainty. Imagine representatives from Canadian universities attending their first meeting at the IEMA office. Having been told about the dismal state of their own marketing efforts in the DFAIT study, they now wish to impress upon the management of this new organization they are in reality - highly capable. When faced with uncertainty, the low-risk strategy is to mimic the behavior of those “they perceive to be more legitimate or successful” (DiMaggio & Powell, 2007, p. 444). I suggest this homogenizing desire for approval would work at both the institutional and personal level, as individuals advance not just the position of their organizations, but their own individual career aspirations or country interests. Here, the desire to fit into a social grouping without explicit rules will require an exaggerated allegiance to the observable norms of the group. Norms are not stated explicitly, so members self-police and respond in ways that mitigate risk when challenged by new situations.

By modeling the norms of inclusion, the IEMA will have the informal and formal power to sanction and exclude participant organizations in matters large and small. In this scenario, exclusion relates to perceptions of status, not just from the IEMA, but the other individuals and institutions that comprise the ‘field’ of structuration. Here, an important part of the social and political power that would accrue to IEMA would originate not in a particular sanction or exclusion, but the ongoing threat of that action and the associated social implications. In such a circumstance, will it be possible to question and guide the actions of the IEMA, or will the IEMA be the one coaching, advising and directing? Once it has been created - the IEMA will be providing leadership, but if there is to be even a superficial claim that leadership originates in a competency or capability framework, then that rationale needs to be articulated and the DFAIT Study (2009) has not done it. The marketing function is highly political, and which Canadian universities benefit in what circumstance is also political and may simply reinforce historic patterns of regional economic relations.

An important impact of this recommendation will be the way in which Canadian universities compete for status and behave within a formal or informal ranking system that makes people and institutions think about how to move forward one step, rather than ask if this is the direction in which they wish to proceed. This is what Martens called “governance by comparison” (Martens, 2007, p. 54), taken from the international level to the national level, where *performance* is decontextualized and numbers become the predominant signifier. An awareness of others being compared to you becomes important, not the proposed rationale for the comparison. The IEMA will be a political organization based in Ottawa, and it will be well positioned to ensure *trade* politics are fully represented in the recruitment of international students. For example, perhaps the government of the day believes Latin America is a more interesting focus of attention than Africa. Is it difficult to imagine scholarships or partial funding for trips may then be aligned behind the *trade* imperative? A rich tradition and I suggest a sustainable and values based Canadian involvement in Africa is displaced by a more short-term, and transaction orientated presence characterized by market affinity, that is, an allegiance that will remain only as long as the subsidy lasts.

Impact on Canadian Universities: Hypothesis A3

How does anyone know what impact the IEMA will have? Currency fluctuations may have just as much or more to do with attracting international students than any other single variable. Will the IEMA improve either the quality of education, experience or value that international students may experience if they choose to study in Canada? Is it possible the

characteristics of Canada as a country with a social contract, egalitarian aspirations and immigration possibilities is more relevant to international students than an *optimized marketing channel*? Is it possible the variables that go into a decision to study in Canada are so many, varied and complex, that shiny new marketing techniques will be inconsequential? These questions will be expanded upon in the following discussion as we explore DiMaggio and Powell's (2007) hypothesis A3: "The more uncertain the relationship between *means* and *ends* the greater the extent to which an organization will model itself after organizations it perceives to be successful" (p. 449). I suggest that marketing actions (means) do not cause ends, although they may correlate with some ends. In fact the relationship between what occurs in marketing has an ambiguous relationship that may be correlated with desired outcomes, but ultimately does not represent a causal relationship.

Given the uncertainty of a constantly changing World, Canadian universities will wish to emulate and follow the course of action set out by the newly proposed IEMA. This is because Canadian universities still have the complex challenge of doing things that will increase the probability of attracting international students to their campuses. If the IEMA is established, it will be more than just one more marketing target. The dynamic that may be established is that of many universities competing for attention, favour and approval from a newly established panoptic power – the IEMA. An important way to compete for that attention will be to ensure financial procedures, visual identity policy and promotional literature, as well as new models, ways of doing things and even vocabulary are quickly assimilated from IEMA into operations at competing institutions. Why? Because these are the things that Canadian universities may actually have some control over and rational or not, it represents a low-risk strategy to Canadian universities who are mutually aware and keenly interested in their *standing* amongst other Canadian institutions. For clarity, what has become important is not the attraction of international students, but the gain or loss of status from other Canadian universities related to their perceptions of how well a particular university has done in relation to others.

A critique of this paper might suggest it is folly to take issue with the robust application of modern marketing techniques that will be championed by the newly proposed IEMA, because for Canadian universities the priority must be attracting more and more international students and the revenues they generate (DFAIT, 2009). When framing the question of attracting international students as a sales management problem, the focus is on increasing quantity. Two implications of the quantity argument are that it is best to focus limited marketing resources on high-probability markets and the competitive need to constantly increase numbers will put pressure on entrance standards of universities. An outcome of the focus on achieving sales numbers is a reduction in the diversity of international students represented at Canadian universities as the People's Republic of China and India become obvious market targets, but what about Iran, Syria or Zimbabwe? Countries emerging from conflict, embargo or other forms of political or economic isolation are unlikely to be market priorities, yet the participation of international students from these countries may have substantial social, economic and political dividends. In my experience, Canadian universities have been very good at attracting a highly diverse group of international students – from a myriad of countries large and small, and I know my learning has been greatly enriched because of it. Country X is a country I admire very much, and this DFAIT (2009) study uses their success as a cautionary tale about the dangers of being too successful in the numbers game.

Country X Experience

Throughout the DFAIT (2009) study, Country X is held up as a leader in attracting very large numbers of international students, and countries like Canada should follow their formula for success. The revenues produced by attracting international students to Country X have had a positive impact on the economy, and they have assumed a “critical budgetary role” (p. 37). In the numbers game, Country X has “been an unabashed success story” (p. 37). According to the Country X Council for Private Education and Training (2009), each international student (including their friend and family visitors) contributes an average of \$29,070.67 CAD in funds to the Country X economy and each international student generates three-tenths of a full-time equivalent job. The same document lists Education between Ore and Gold, as Country X’s third largest export by value in 2007-2008. Is this the future for Canada proposed by the DFAIT study? If so, the recommendation to create an IEMA in Canada needs to be re-considered.

The DFAIT Study (2009) that is urging Canada to become a marketing *winner* is also clearly stating the cost of being a marketing *winner* in Country X is both a decline in the quality of domestic educational offerings, and an imminent reduction in the number of international students attracted to study in Country X. For example, Country X “without question has earned its reputation as a marketing champion, but now faces a number of issues, not least a damaged quality reputation” (p. 37). The reputational problems currently being experienced in Country X education are substantial primarily because it has been so successful at the numbers game. In addition, there has been isolated, but well-documented violence against international students in Country X that requires further study. The ideology and culture that surround numbers have their own momentum, and I suggest Canadian universities do not want to be the *unabashed success story* that Country X has paid so high a price to become.

Conclusion

This paper has used the work of DiMaggio and Powell (2007) to challenge the central recommendation of a DFAIT Study (2009) proposing the creation of an IEMA to attract international students to Canadian universities. Attracting international students to Canadian universities is critical to the vitality and quality of education that Canadians experience and it is also a matter of substantial value and importance to the Canadian economy. It is not the goal of attracting international students that I take issue with, but it is the means of achieving the goal that requires a judicious forward-looking policy direction. The proposed IEMA will be a catalyst for establishing a *field* where structuration and isomorphism will occur among universities. I have emphasized the predictive utility of DiMaggio and Powell’s hypotheses and propose that coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphic influences will distract universities from the experience of international students in Canada. I have argued that a newly proposed IEMA will increase unconstructive homogenizing and competitive influences among Canadian universities, while diverse historic and cultural origins of cherished institutions will be abstracted and diminished. There are a myriad of variables in any single decision to study in Canada, and the relationship between marketing actions and decision-making cannot be assumed. I ask if the newly proposed IEMA that will help Canadian universities play the *numbers game* - as in the case of Country X, is that a ‘made-in-Canada’ policy direction? No, I suggest a principled and long-term strategy for Canadian universities based on regional economic strengths has been

working and further research will be required before a more beneficial policy direction can be established.

This has been a forward-looking paper, and so by definition it has been somewhat tentative in any claim to see into the future. From a theoretical perspective, this same thesis could have been argued from a variety of viewpoints, but it was the opportunity to apply DiMaggio and Powell's (2007) forward-looking hypotheses in response to the recommendations put forth in the DFAIT Study that appealed to me. The attraction of international students is an important objective, but the proposed IEMA will serve universities and not the international students who choose to study in Canada. Why do the institutions I hold in such high esteem act the way they do? DiMaggio and Powell (2007) say, "societies (or elites), so it seems, are smart, while organizations are dumb" (p. 452).

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