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**BEATING AN “IMPOSSIBLE”  
RECRUITMENT TARGET:  
HOW WORKING WITH  
PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS  
CAN BENEFIT UNIVERSITIES**

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# BEATING AN “IMPOSSIBLE” RECRUITMENT TARGET: HOW WORKING WITH PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS CAN BENEFIT UNIVERSITIES

by:

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*Around the world, universities and colleges of all sorts are facing similar challenges (and opportunities) when it comes to the dramatic increase in international student mobility. GATE-Germany has commissioned eight case studies in 2011 to provide a snapshot of how certain institutions are approaching various aspects of international marketing and recruitment from using data to improve their website to creating a dedicated office for funded students from abroad. Each of the case studies reflects a particular national and international context, as well a particular moment in time; what each of these institutions will be undertaking in 10 years could very well depend on how mobility flows change – or their senior administrators! The intent of these studies was not to provide a step-by-step guide on how to do what they have each done, but to help the reader get a sense of what their colleagues are doing globally, as well as to inspire new ideas for ways to improve activities at home. We are extremely grateful for all of the interviewees who shared honestly and openly for this project, and wish everyone happy reading!*

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## INTRODUCTION

The increasing internationalization of universities has created new models for delivering education as well as increased competition to recruit the best students from around the world. Students at any level who decide to explore options outside their own countries are increasingly “subjected” to highly-sophisticated marketing and recruitment strategies as universities begin to take international student recruitment more seriously. Therefore, new institutions or programs can face serious challenges with the initial rounds of student recruitment, particularly when they have committed to attracting a diverse and talented group of students.

This case study demonstrates how **New York University** (NYU) worked with the **Institute of International Education** (IIE) to facilitate the quick and effective recruitment of an impressive inaugural class to their newly established campus in Abu Dhabi.

	New York University
<b>Type of Institution:</b>	Private, not-for-profit research university
<b>Location:</b>	Main campus is located in New York City; branch campus in Abu Dhabi
<b>Number of Students:</b>	Over 40,000 <sup>1</sup> in New York City; 309 enrolled in Abu Dhabi as of 2012 <sup>2</sup>
<b>Internationalization:</b>	NYU has the greatest number of international students of all the universities in the U.S. In 2011, the New York campus had close to 8,000 international students <sup>3</sup> from 133 countries. <sup>4</sup> Of the students enrolled for a bachelor’s degree at NYU, approximately 48% go abroad annually, the highest percentage of any American university.
<b>Web Address:</b>	www.nyu.edu; www.nyuad.edu

## BACKGROUND

New York University (NYU) is a large research university based in New York City that has taken a number of measures in recent years toward internationalization in order to ultimately position itself as a “Global Network University.” With 48% of its undergraduates going abroad per year, NYU already has the highest rate of students going abroad of any US institution of higher education. And it also ranks as the top university destination in the US for students coming from abroad with nearly 8000 international students visiting the campus in 2011.

But in the early 2000s, NYU decided to take a further step toward internationalization by opening a campus in the United Arab Emirates. The aim was to create a true US-style residential liberal arts and science college where students and faculty would enjoy the same academic standards that they do in NYC. In 2006, NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) was first opened.

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<sup>1</sup> New York University website: [www.nyu.edu/admissions/undergraduate-admissions/is-nyu-right-for-you/size.html](http://www.nyu.edu/admissions/undergraduate-admissions/is-nyu-right-for-you/size.html)

<sup>2</sup> New York University Abu Dhabi website: <http://nyuad.nyu.edu/news.events/student.profiles/>

<sup>3</sup> Institute of International Education (2011). “Top 25 Institutions Hosting International Students, 2010/11.” *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>

<sup>4</sup> New York University website: [www.nyu.edu/admissions/undergraduate-admissions/is-nyu-right-for-you/size.html](http://www.nyu.edu/admissions/undergraduate-admissions/is-nyu-right-for-you/size.html)

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NYU wished to build what they term “the world’s honors college,” an international group of students that represented a wide swath of nationalities, disciplinary interests, and socio-economic backgrounds. The student profile being sought took into account not only academic performance, but also a cultural fit: NYUAD was looking for academically qualified and globally focused candidates, who would be able to survive and thrive in the new cultural context of Abu Dhabi. The 7:1 student to professor ratio was also quite unique; ideal for students who sought a more personalized teaching approach but less attractive for those who might want to “hide” in large lecture classes.

The choice of Abu Dhabi as NYU’s first global network campus is closely aligned with the Crown Prince of the United Arab Emirates’ strategic plan to position Abu Dhabi as an “ideas capital” and a new global crossroads for cultural, educational, and artistic pursuits, beyond oil exploration, harvesting, and exportation. Abu Dhabi’s goal is to attract world-class institutions and future global leaders to study.

Although the process by which NYU Abu Dhabi came to be was not without controversy on the main NYU campus and elsewhere, students and professors enjoy the same academic freedoms on the Abu Dhabi campus as they do at NYU in New York City.

## **THE PROJECT**

Recruitment for the initial class was going to be a challenge; the college did not exist yet and students would be traveling from far away to earn a degree that had the NYU imprimatur but no established value. Time pressures were also great. The formal recruitment efforts began only eight months before applications were due and needed to move quickly and efficiently to have a chance at success.

To meet its goals, NYU decided to partner with the Institute of International Education (IIE), a large non-profit organization in the US focused on international educational exchange. IIE, which was founded in 1919, is most well-known for its role in administering flagship US-government sponsored international scholarship programs, such as the Fulbright and Gilman programs, yet it also works with a number of NGOs, companies and countries to promote exchange. Today, IIE has 18 international offices and 14 regional educational advising coordinators in a total of 19 countries, and it has developed an extensive global network of individuals and institutions.<sup>5</sup>

NYU negotiated an agreement with IIE to reach out to prospective students and high schools around the world, primarily through IIE’s global network. There were previous existing ties between NYU and IIE, but this relationship took a new scale and form.

Student recruitment proved enormously successful and the program received 9,048 applications in the first year alone. Of these, 189 were accepted at an extremely selective admissions rate of 2.1%. Equally important, the quality of the applications themselves was deemed to be as good as or better than the overall application pool for NYU as a whole.

The admissions process was “need-blind” with a commitment to providing funding for excellent students who might not otherwise have been able to attend NYUAD – or another private college. Tuition, room, and board for attending NYU in 2010-2011 topped out at nearly \$60,000.

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<sup>5</sup> Institute of International Education, [www.iie.org](http://www.iie.org)

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In the end, NYU far exceeded its goal of 100 students for the first incoming class. In 2010, 148 students from 39 countries entered NYUAD with a total of 20 majors and five multi-disciplinary concentrations. The school plans to eventually have 800 full-time students in the four-year bachelor's program, and will establish graduate programs as well.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

In getting NYUAD set up in a short period of time, partnering with IIE played a crucial role. Creating a recruitment process, including marketing collateral, just eight months before the application deadline, and then delivering it was a challenge that would have been impossible for NYU to accomplish without external assistance. By utilizing IIE's **global network**, many years of experience in scholarship management, and broader internationalization strategy expertise, NYU was able to bring the project together in a very short space of time. From an initial meeting between IIE and NYU in December 2008, the relationship (partnership), project scope, and work plan were created by April 2009.

IIE helped NYU **identify talented students** around the world who would not otherwise have had such an international opportunity. The generous allocation of scholarships and financial support for students was also a key part of IIE's involvement in bringing the project to life.

NYU and IIE started with a broad and ambitious target market: the best global talent from among all secondary school students in the world. However, rather than undertaking a mass marketing campaign or doing road shows to every college fair, a different approach was adopted. This was due largely to the fact that NYU Abu Dhabi was conceived of as an international college, which would require a global recruitment strategy right from the start.

IIE created a strategy to **work with high schools** around the globe – through headmasters, principals, guidance counselors, and college counselors – to build relationships and help NYU target under-represented groups of students. This was closely aligned with IIE's own commitment to equity and internationalization. Including national and state schools as well as private schools in student recruitment efforts was therefore considered critical.

Soon after the project was launched, IIE undertook the first outreach efforts in Beijing in April 2009. IIE developed a process by which high schools nominated candidates who they thought would be a good match for the unique environment at NYUAD.

By utilizing IIE's large **international network** to visit schools, present the NYU Abu Dhabi concept, and invite school leaders to nominate appropriate students, IIE was able to help explain the unique benefits of the new college and really engage the primary gatekeepers at the high school level. This is a distinctly different approach from simply sending out brochures to high schools and hoping that they will catch the eye of the right people.

People often speak of a "funnel" in student recruitment in which prospective students are lost every step of the way from initial inquiry to actual enrollment. In order to increase the eventual "yield," measures were taken to ensure that **each step of the process** was as effective as possible. This was achieved through one-on-one counseling by phone, email, and web-seminars, and later on, through on-site visits. This was particularly important during the offer stage, so students (and their parents) that had gone through this incredibly competitive admissions process to receive an offer could make the right decision.

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Students identified as “semi-finalists” were invited to Abu Dhabi for “candidate weekends,” with costs covered by NYU Abu Dhabi, and logistics and activities facilitated by IIE. Out of 275 semi-finalists, about 50 potential students attended these weekends (which were held throughout the year). Actually seeing and experiencing the campus helped ensure the right students finally accepted offers, and would get the most out of the unique NYU Abu Dhabi campus experience once enrolled.

The biggest challenge during the establishment phase and initial recruitment drive was to convince people that NYU Abu Dhabi was a quality institution with equal or higher admissions standards compared to other universities and to the main NYU campus. To overcome this, measures were taken to ensure that the curriculum and faculty at NYU Abu Dhabi are closely tied to NYU – and these measures were then carefully explained in all print and on-line materials, as well as in outreach efforts to high schools around the world.

As it always is for international student recruitment, the **website** was an invaluable tool in the marketing and student recruitment process. Over \$60,000 USD was allocated for its development. But most important was building relationships with schools through face-to-face outreach. Although NYU had brand equity, as a new initiative the NYU Abu Dhabi campus did not. So an initial educational effort was necessary to sell the concept to schools, educators, students, and parents.

By constructing **marketing materials** (particularly the website) in a way that clearly addressed both NYUAD’s unique offerings, as well as the primary challenges that might deter international students or other stakeholders, NYUAD could not only ensure that students would be attracted to this new program, but could also target the right students who would ultimately be successful in this specific environment.

### **CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS**

NYU’s partnership with IIE, a non-profit organization with a proven international reach to identify and recruit the right student body, was integral to the successful launch of the new campus in Abu Dhabi.

Utilizing IIE’s global network to engage high schools in the process of identifying and nominating applicants shifted the process from one in which a new institution has to convince prospective students with online or print materials or, at best, a hurried conversation at a fair to one in which students heard about NYUAD through their trusted advisors.

Carefully managing the process from initial inquiry to enrollment was equally important in ensuring that these efforts were not “wasted” on students who dropped out mid-process. By creating and executing a clear strategy quickly, NYUAD was able to exceed their initial goals and build a strong foundation for future recruitment.

Though most German universities have some experience working with DAAD to recruit international students, the lesson here might be that there may be new ways to take advantage of Germany’s (or an institution’s own) equally large international network and outreach capabilities to promote individual programs. Anecdotal evidence has shown that DAAD brochures and websites are already a primary source of prospective international students, but there are many other factors that could come into play such as the global network of the DAAD, German schools abroad, consulates, Goethe Institutes, alumni, and more.

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Although recruitment budgets were not disclosed by NYU or IIE, the kinds of activities that were undertaken indicates healthy resources the likes of which would be the envy of universities anywhere in the world. Few universities have access to a comparable level of resources, but the story is still an interesting one, particularly for new programs looking to establish a foothold in the international student market. This case shows that allocating time and, possibly, budget to reaching out to or working with the right partners might be a more effective way to recruit prospective students than spending time and money to send brochures “blindly”, particularly for a newly-established program. German universities that may not be able to compete in terms of the size of their marketing budgets can be successful by setting clear priorities, delivering clear messages, and working creatively with partners around the world.

### ***SUMMARY AND FINDINGS***

- Partner organizations can play an important role in the recruitment of prospective students if the project fits their mission.
- Educating secondary schools, counselors, parents and students involves a multifaceted marketing approach, with face-to-face outreach being extremely important.
- Both the benefits and the challenges of attracting prospective international students should be addressed in all outreach efforts.
- Creating and executing a clear and comprehensive strategy is particularly important for time-sensitive recruitment goals.
- Carefully reviewing the recruitment process to find where students are being lost in the “admissions funnel” – and taking steps to minimize this loss – is vital for improving yield.
- Providing scholarships or access to funding can help secure sought-after students in an increasingly competitive and internationalized context.

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