

# Trade My university

Are student fees being misspent or should those who complain just 'get over it'? CARMEN GRAY reports on the furore over university advertising.

The New Zealand Union of Students' Associations is outraged that universities are spending more than ever on advertising and marketing – but those behind the campaigns say they are more effective than students like to admit.

Public tertiary institutions together spent more than \$28 million on advertising and marketing last year. This was a 6 per cent increase on 2004 and more than double what was spent in 1999.

The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, the University of Auckland, and Massey University were the biggest spenders, each spending more than \$2 million on advertising.

"It is an absolute waste of money," says co-president of the NZUSA Conor Roberts.

He says this spending is pointless as marketing has little influence over students' decisions on where they are going to study.

"They don't enrol because they see a 'Get Over It' ad on TV but because of the courses offered and the quality of education provided," says Roberts. "Word of mouth and talking to people are far more important than having catchy advertising on TV."

Only 6 per cent of students in a recent NZUSA survey said their choice of university was driven mainly by advertising. Proximity to home, advice from friends and family, careers advice at school and whether an institution offered a particular course all rated more highly as influential factors.

But acting general manager of AUT University Nigel Murphy says such surveys are unable to gauge the real impact of advertising.

"People don't often admit to being influenced by ads, or don't even realise it. They'll have a whole bunch of reasons and it's hard to know what has really influenced their decision. In this modern age we know advertising does shape people's opinions," he says.

AUT University spent more than \$1 million on advertising and marketing last year. Murphy says it was money well spent, attracting enrolments and making people aware of the institution's new status as a university.

"AUT has grown this year, and a lot of that can be put down to successful marketing."

Roberts says it is not just the amount spent on advertising by New Zealand universities that is offensive, but also its lack of informative content.

"Gimmicky advertising and mass marketing campaigns are rubbish. Take that 'get over it' ad for Otago University with a bunch of rugby-heads telling us there's 5 per cent more women than men there — what the



UP FOR DEBATE: The effectiveness of university advertising is a contentious issue.

hell is that telling us about tertiary education in New Zealand?"

"Quality information is the important thing. I have no beef with institutions that spend a lot of money sending advisers into schools and communities. But wasting money on frisbees and drink bottles isn't going to give them that information. It's just branding."

But Doug Standring, corporate communications manager for the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, says the point of advertising is not to tell people everything but to prompt them to find out more. And he says it works.

"On TV we only have 15 or 30 seconds, and we concentrate on getting across our key message – that distance learning lets people study wherever they live to achieve their vocational goals. Once they follow up with us, that's when we provide the information."

"When we survey our students the most common way they say they heard about us was through advertising. It's the most cost-effective way we can tell

people throughout New Zealand about us."

Murphy says advertising, while not able to provide very specific content, plays a vital role in raising the general profile of tertiary education.

"The collective marketing and advertising all the universities do promotes the value of university education, and if we're going to be a knowledge economy we need that. The risk is that if you reduce advertising, fewer people would think of going on to university."

He admits pressure to attract students is a major factor in the drive for slicker marketing.

"The reality is it is a competitive environment and we risk losing students to other, better-promoted universities if we don't put enough into advertising."

Roberts blames Government policy for pushing institutions into cut-throat competition for students, rather than encouraging them to work together.

"All the marketing is just a symp-

## Advertising: What the students say...

"Advertising did play a small role, but it was when I visited Massey with my class in seventh form for a history lecture that I started contemplating it as an option. After looking through brochures and seeing a few Massey TV ads I decided to give it a go."

Lauren Brayshaw  
Massey University

"I chose to come to Waikato because my cousins said it was a good university and it offered the papers I wanted to take. (Some universities) waste money on advertising. I know I didn't pay attention to the advertising because it wasn't that good and it didn't tell me what papers were available."

Sonny Talilotu  
University of Waikato

"Otago Uni ads advertise Dunedin as a party town and now they're having problems controlling students. It seems they attract people because of lifestyle rather than education. They didn't affect my decision at all. Universities should use that money to lower our fees rather than advertise the party lifestyle."

Rachel Paton  
University of Otago

"Advertising played a big part in helping me choose which university I went to and if I was even going to go to uni at all. I really wanted to work with youth and the advertisement attracted me straight away."

Marilyn Falemaka  
University of Auckland

"I kept hearing those cheesy Unitec ads on the radio saying 'we have architecture school, we have accounting, blah blah' and I decided to look into it. I heard you could be a student for a day, so I went along and here I am now."

Gemma Muir  
Unitec

— Qiane Corfield & Dianna Vezich

tom of how education is seen solely as a private good in New Zealand."

Minister of Tertiary Education Dr Michael Cullen says the amount of money universities are spending on marketing is "a bit over the top", and Government policy is partly to blame.

"That's what the current system that the National Party put in place has driven them to. It's a competitive system, saying get as many bums on seats as possible. Tertiary organisations have no choice but to compete for students, as increasing volume increases funding."

He says the current Government review of tertiary funding aims to ease the pressure on institutions to attract student numbers.

"The reforms will ensure less competition and encourage organisations to play to their strengths so they are not trying to be all things to all students. This should reduce the need for the level of marketing we have seen."