



## Article

# Strategic Marketing Credibility and Ethics for Sustainability in Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract:** The competition among higher education institutions (HEIs) has intensified, necessitating the adoption of effective marketing strategies to attract students while addressing ethical concerns and credibility. Despite the increasing reliance on rhetorical tactics, data-driven approaches, and persuasive communication, the role of ethical and credible marketing in student recruitment remains underexplored. This study aimed to examine the potential of ethical and credible marketing strategies to enhance student enrollment in HEIs, with a focus on Iraq. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four marketing experts from three HEIs, and a questionnaire survey was administered to 402 prospective students, yielding 390 valid responses. The findings highlight the critical importance of credible and ethical practices—such as integrity, fairness, and accuracy—in marketing for the sustainability of HEIs. Statistical analysis revealed that ethical marketing fosters trust, enhances stakeholder engagement, and supports sustainable development in education. These insights are valuable for marketing managers, policymakers, and educational leaders seeking to design effective enrollment strategies while ensuring institutional integrity and long-term growth.

**Keywords:** Ethics, Trust, Sustainable Marketing, Credibility, Strategies

**Citation:** Ali Aboudi Nehme. Strategic Marketing Credibility and Ethics for Sustainability in Higher Education Institutions. American Journal of Economics and Business Management 2024, 7(12), 1285-1303.

Received: 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct 2024

Revised: 10<sup>th</sup> Nov 2024

Accepted: 18<sup>th</sup> Des 2024

Published: 29<sup>th</sup> Des 2024



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## 1. Introduction

It is anticipated that the role of graduates in society will be determined by their specializations, as higher (education) is the highest form of education in the national education system of all countries. Consequently, the university is a critical institution that necessitates effective and efficient management, rather than a charitable institution or a company that is solely focused on financial gain. Nevertheless, the emergence of competition in the educational services sector has been facilitated by globalization. Universities engage in a competitive effort to maximize their potential and capabilities in order to attract new students. The efficacy of university management strategies in fostering high competitiveness significantly influences the ability to compete [1].

Universities are confronted with an additional challenge: students are increasingly making critical decisions when selecting a university, in addition to the escalating competition. Due to the abundance of educational alternatives available to new students, they prioritize the educational model and employment prospects upon completion of their university education. In order to prevail in the competition, the university must devise a marketing strategy [2]. In order to endure amid intense global competition, public and private universities must continue to enhance their services and quality. Consequently, the responsibilities that universities are tasked with are substantial, and in the current period

of globalization, it is imperative to establish effective management systems in order to achieve success and prosperity.

Education management is of the utmost importance, as the growth and development of educational institutions are influenced by the capacity of administrators to analyze the external environment of other institutions' competitors while considering internal competencies and strategies. These strategies must be developed to ensure that the institution wins the competition without sacrificing the essence of the competition, which is education. Education management must simultaneously address the challenges it encounters and capitalize on the opportunities that present themselves. In order to endure in the face of escalating competition, universities must establish and sustain a strong brand. The process of branding encompasses the presentation of the brand and the manner in which the environment influences the brand's perception [3].

Universities that lack a strong brand will be forgotten by consumers, specifically students. Marketing is not exclusively associated with the business sector; it has also penetrated the realm of education. Consequently, there is a necessity for marketing strategies to emphasize strategies that will encourage patronage and organization loyalty. The same principle is applicable to the caliber of students, academic programs, curricula, and the products of higher (education) institutions. Universities will be required to engage in a vigorous competition to enroll qualified local and international students, as well as to identify methods to enhance the selection rate of potential university students and the level of student enrollment. The success of this endeavor is contingent upon the strategies that universities devise in order to address this competition.

If a higher (education) institution is to consistently enroll a high number of prospective students, it must re-evaluate its marketing strategy to ensure that it is in accordance with ethical standards and credibility. This is significant because the sustainability of a higher (education) institution is primarily determined by the student body, particularly in light of the fact that the number of students is related to revenue generation, which has also become a significant component of university budgets. For instance, the enrollment of local and international students, particularly in private universities, has not been substantially impacted by the strategies employed by higher (education) institutions in Iraq to attract students, such as social media, print and online advertising, and flexible tuition fees. In Iraq, public universities have experienced a decline in government financing, which was the primary factor driving student enrollment due to their low tuition fees, which amounted to free education [4].

In addition, numerous higher (education) institutions now depend on the public speaking or communication abilities of marketing managers to present an appealing image of their institutions to potential students. Prospective students may avoid institutions that are found to be engaging in unethical practices that lack integrity, fairness, and honesty in conveying a false image, thus this action may not be able to impact the long-term sustainability of the institutions. Therefore, a sustainable marketing strategy is required to guarantee the continued existence of higher (education) institutions at the national level and sustainable student enrolment. Consequently, marketing practices should be informed by the principle of credibility, in addition to possessing the requisite business skills, such as communication. In the business value chain, the establishment of long-term sustainable marketing is contingent upon credibility.

Credibility contributes to the organization's reputation, which in turn results in increased organizational performance and recurrent product purchases. The company's existence and the marketing strategy are maintained by this repeated purchase of products. Credibility is associated with trust or honesty [5]. Consequently, it is crucial for higher (education) institutions to maintain a consistent adherence to the truth, which entails consistently fulfilling their obligations to students. Trust and honesty should serve as the foundation of the marketing strategy. The claims made in marketing should be both

truthful and reliable. The assertions made by marketers of higher (education) institutions regarding their programs, curricula, quality, and facilities should be supported by verifiable evidence. Higher (education) institutions that lack credibility are susceptible to eventual collapse, similar to any other business. Nevertheless, the collapse of any higher (education) institution can be averted by adhering to solid business and ethical principles that prioritize students in its marketing strategy [6].

## 2. Materials and Methods

### Research Problem

Increasing competition and more stringent regulatory requirements are presenting challenges to the higher (education) sector. Consequently, We acquaint higher education administrators with the notion of marketing as a method of evaluating the external environment and the higher (education) market. In order to attract students, higher (education) executives must implement a suitable strategy and a variety of strategies that incorporate marketing. The conventional perspective of colleges and universities as profitable institutions transformed when leaders in higher education began to perceive educational offerings as things and students as clients [7].

The designation "customer" may inadvertently foster the misunderstanding that a degree is merely a commodity available for purchase, especially within the context of private universities. Nevertheless, advocates argue that the student or consumer compensates for a service, and in exchange, the university offers a commensurate value proposition for that remuneration. The main goal is on building a strong academic community instead of putting a service-focused view first, has led most scholars to adopt a contrasting stance on this issue.

Marketing strategy has become an integral component of the enrollment management plan at the majority of postsecondary institutions. The development of marketing plans by university leaders that incorporate student demographics can lead to significant improvements in market share. The overarching issue in the business context was that numerous university leaders failed to implement strategic planning aimed at Attracting potential students to increase market share. The identified operations confront involved specific university advertising leaders did not possess effective strategies to motivate student enrollment in their respective programs [8].

1. What strategic elements need to be considered while creating a marketing strategy to draw in learners?
2. What are the primary challenges encountered in the recruitment of high-achieving students for degree programs?
3. In what ways can a tuition reduction or special pricing strategy draw in students?
4. How does the university's physical position help to draw in learners?
5. What strategies can be employed to effectively promote degree programs to prospective students?

### Research Objective

The objective of my research is to conduct a comprehensive literature review, which will enhance the understanding of the components of the marketing mix, the professional landscape of marketing, its application in academic settings, as well as the cultural and social dimensions, along with trends in education, work, and sustainability. We will examine contemporary recruitment and marketing strategies in higher (education), focusing on cultural factors to identify recruitment opportunities for colleges and universities. The objective is to determine the extent to which the seven elements of the marketing mix influence the enrollment efforts of higher (education) institutions targeting prospective students. The introductory segment includes marketing in higher education, comprehensive business marketing tactics, and consumer-oriented marketing methods [9].

The second section of the literature study analyses the present condition of the education system in Iraq and the frameworks implemented for student recruitment. This qualitative multiple case study conducted a SWOT analysis in conjunction with the marketing mix [10]. The SWOT analysis framework serves as a well-established tool that equips managers with structured qualitative insights. A SWOT analysis serves as a tool in order to measure the impact of a business's social media efforts. Companies use it as part of their ongoing planning process to find a competitive advantage-generating company strategy. The use of marketing mix frameworks and SWOT analysis can help managers and executives develop conceptual models that function well in academic environments.

### **Purpose of the Research**

This qualitative multi-case study aims to investigate the tactics used by university marketing executives to boost enrollment in postsecondary education programs. I conducted interviews with Iraqi university marketing specialists to find out the tactics they employ to increase their market share among potential students. The results of this investigation may generate financial advantages for institutions of higher (education). Based on the research findings," university marketing personnel may be able to increase enrollment by employing more effective marketing methods. Positive social change may result from increased recruitment and enrollment of these kids, which could raise educational standards in local communities" [11].

### **Role of the Researcher**

I have come to understand the necessity of enhancing current marketing strategies to meet the expectations of students regarding the enrollment process as a result of my experience in higher (education). Numerous prospective students were uncertain about the initiation of the admissions and other registration processes, as well as the nature of the study. Although this relationship is present, it has not been worked out, and I believe that faculty committees should be formed to do this with the registration team side by side. To avoid bias in our research, I suggest that prospective researchers exercise caution and actively listen when they are presented with substantial quantities of information by experts [12].

The researcher must demonstrate attentive listening in order to conduct case study research, In this research, I adhered to the ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of the research subjects by maintaining an audit trail of the data collected and documenting the decisions and steps taken as part of the investigation process. Independence, fairness, benevolence, and a dedication to non-harm or non-deviation are essential components of ethical research that involves individuals. These encompass the fundamental ethical principles, applications, and the distinctions between practice and research [13].

### **Research Limitations**

A qualitative research methodology was employed. This research generates descriptive data comprising written or spoken language from individuals and observable behaviors. The objective of descriptive qualitative research is to acquire comprehensive and precise information regarding marketing tactics in higher (education) (University of Kufa, Al-Mustansiriya, and Basra). This research was conducted from February 2024 to June 2024, starting from applying for a research permit, which the Assistant Dean of Al-Kadhim University College issued [14]. The research was initiated by the permit letter, which involved conducting interviews and observations with the college's higher (education) advisor, lecturers, and students. Observations are also carried out on facilities, infrastructure, and management activities that are implemented during this period.

## The theoretical aspect

### Marketing strategy

The marketing strategy is designed to target specific segments of individuals by analyzing the thought processes and behaviors of various groups. That is, the creation and execution of a (strategic) marketing strategy that is comprehensive and aligns with various theories. Depending on the service or product offered, the marketing theories and concepts outlined in the business strategy could change. Consequently, many different academic fields are considered part of marketing. Some possible examples include the marketing mix, brand equity, relationship marketing, market research, SWOT analysis, market segmentation, brand awareness, and market orientation. Additionally, these concepts are integrated into the (strategic) marketing initiatives of companies. Business achievement necessitates the establishment and implementation of an appropriate marketing strategy. Furthermore, the "development of a (strategic) marketing" plan is facilitated by the establishment of a process that delineates the various stages of the marketing process [15].

These stages encompass the following: marketing performance, product development, opportunity identification, innovation, taking advantage of opportunities, and dependent factors. Meadows, et al. Because of this, marketing success can be thought of as the way that operational efficiency, competitive orientation, organizational responsiveness, and consumer orientation in order to satisfy customer requirements. To develop products or services that meet the needs of customers. The organization must subsequently concentrate on the effective communication of how the product meets the requirements of customers and the identification of efficient marketing campaigns and distribution methods that will enable consumers to purchase the products. When a successful plan is put into practice, market share should rise. repeat consumption, and consumer satisfaction [16].

Nevertheless, certain corporate branding and marketing strategies may be perceived as in opposition to The core values of institutions of higher education. A university's branding is one of its most critical assets. In addition, branding is an essential consideration in the decision-making process of a significant number of parents and prospective students. Consequently, marketers are able to improve the university's position by establishing a robust brand. Customers and institutions frequently regard corporate identities as valuable assets. And that the quality of products and services can be influenced by corporate brand management, which can also affect consumer expectations. In the same vein, an institution's profitability can be increased and its competitive position can be improved by a well-branded product. In contrast, sales are not inherently associated with corporate brand awareness [17].

A reputable brand can elicit awareness of a product or service, regardless of whether the perception is good, negative, or neutral. Similar to business brands, university branding ought to communicate the institution's values, beliefs, and image to students. An effective brand can significantly influence parents and potential students to enroll. Nonetheless, the ultimate consumer may not invariably be the client. Nonetheless, the consumer remains an enduring customer. Thus, although a parent is not the final consumer, they simultaneously fulfill the role of a customer. A university and a comparable institution with a similar mission statement can combine to enhance brand recognition. Through the collaboration on local and regional initiatives, they may accomplish this at a significantly reduced cost compared to traditional advertising [18].

Cost-sharing, franchise advertising cost-sharing, mutual decision-making regarding expenditures, and the promotion of a generic brand are all examples of collaborative advertising. Collaborative advertising can be pursued by higher (education) institutions by promoting a distinct campus of the same university, partnering with an affiliate, and promoting a provincial-level institution or college consortium. Al Jabouri (2020, 10) In conclusion, we recommend that digital advertising be included as one of the distribution



channels. Higher (education) administrators must concentrate on acquiring the skills necessary to evaluate and execute digital marketing channels. Higher (education) marketers should endeavor to encourage positive outcomes, including graduate career advancement and employment rates, through their e-communication strategies [19].

### **Marketing strategies and attracting new students**

The success of universities in attracting students is contingent upon their ability to adapt to the growing competition among institutions. The selection of a university by students is significantly influenced by the implementation of the seven-element service marketing blend in the educational services sector. Furthermore, students' selection of universities was significantly influenced by the availability of particular courses and internet facilities. Tuition fees are a substantial factor that influences the decision of students to pursue their education at higher (education) institutions. Furthermore, the content and structure of the degree are substantial determinants of a student's decision to pursue a degree at a particular institution [20].

As a marketing strategy to attract new students, newspapers and brochures were more effective due to their perceived credibility. In the same context, the structure of the curriculum is one of the strongest elements that influences students' choice of a higher institution. Among other factors, new students consider the location and visiting the campus to be important criteria in their choice of college in terms of freedom, green spaces, and the shape of the building. All of the above are important factors for improving student recruitment.

However, Many private universities continue to report a decrease in student recruitment during the admission year. This elucidates the nature of our investigation. Little research has been conducted on the impact of credibility and ethics on marketing strategies that attract a large number of students, potentially resulting in sustainable marketing in higher (education) institutions in Iraq and the Arab world [21].

Furthermore, the factors that have been identified as contributing to student enrollment in previous studies were contingent upon the student's goals for the university prior to applying to study there. Frequently, the factors that motivated them to apply to the university were not present when they enrolled. This raises the question of ethics and credibility. Poor student retention and high student attrition rates may result from such a discrepancy between what is conveyed and what the student discovers. The aim of sustainable marketing is to enhance the demand for an organization's offerings while fostering avenues for market differentiation [22]. The marketing value is significantly enhanced when it is rooted in ethical practices and credibility, while also placing a strong emphasis on the customer's experience. The deliberate sharing of truthful information regarding a product or company, alongside the conveyance of genuine and precise data that can guide consumers towards informed decision-making, is essential for the practice of sustainability marketing. The aim is to engage students intellectually [23].

The persistence and ongoing viability of higher (education) institutions hinge on their ability to attract students; thus, it is essential for them to develop a sustainable marketing strategy that supports this aim. Considering the caliber of faculty, pedagogical approaches, evaluation methods, transparency of course objectives, alignment of the curriculum with future demands, class size, responsiveness of learning to community needs, and adherence to ethical standards of integrity, truth, and fairness as outlined in the professional code of conduct, this marketing strategy ought to focus on conveying a coherent and credible brand narrative that is honest, genuine, and trustworthy [24]. The brand narrative may also include reliable information pertaining to academic collaborations among companies, institutional partnerships, student learning experiences, scholarships, teaching and learning facilities, such as libraries, and modern scientific laboratory equipment. Institutional efficacy, excellence, value for money, and fitness for purpose are all attributes that can be attributed to each of the aforementioned indicators.

Excellence frequently denotes a consistent and dependable history of scholarship institutions' publications in scientific journals and accredited degree programs. Employment in the most prestigious organizations with competitive salaries and graduation rates that are unimpeded. Regrettably, In order to increase sales volume and acceptability, a significant number of marketers in organizations and higher (education) institutions frequently disseminate inaccurate information about their institutions and engage in unethical behavior. If the marketing strategy is based on truthful, trustworthy, and honest messages about the academic programs, faculty, and facilities, and the marketing practice is perceived as fair, accurate, and ethical. A favorable outcome for these institutions will result from consumers' high levels of trust in the institution. This implies that the student allure strategy must be based on ethical practices and credibility. This suggests that actions are only morally significant when they are universally endorsed and undertaken for the correct reason [25].

### **Credibility and Trust in Higher (education) Institutions**

Credibility is a multidimensional variable that consumers ascribe to various entities, including the company, advertising message, spokesperson, salesperson, and mediator. The efficacy of the message is contingent upon its credibility. Business success is contingent upon credibility. This is due to the fact that investments in businesses should be made in accordance with the anticipated returns in terms of increased revenues and increased consumer loyalty. The trust that consumers have in the company and the product is the foundation of this loyalty. Consumers should receive the value that marketers assert the product provides. This is known as product credibility. This, in turn, fosters consumer confidence in the organization and its merchandise. There is an intricate relationship between information and credibility. It influences consumer attitudes, intentions, and behavior.

Academic integrity is the act of adhering to the fundamental principles that should govern the procedures designed to deliver exceptional education in higher (education) institutions. Higher (education) institutions are more effectively equipped to fulfill societal expectations by incorporating these principles. These expectations encompass the development of graduates who are empowered and possess the requisite knowledge and skills to address the social, economic, and developmental requirements of their respective countries, contribute positively to technological advancement, and confront the diverse obstacles they encounter. Credibility and integrity are human values that contribute to the preservation and promotion of integrity within higher (education) institutions on a national and global scale. Nevertheless, research has demonstrated that the potential to accomplish the aforementioned goals is impeded by academic dishonesty, a pervasive issue in higher (education) institutions on a national and international scale.

These acts of dishonesty are present at every stage of the value chain of higher (education) delivery, from the admissions process to the assessment and certification of students. The credibility and integrity of higher (education) are jeopardized by these unethical practices. An organization's and its marketers' credibility is enhanced by the truthfulness and accuracy of the information they provide. According to Suleiman (2021, 23) The level of trust that a consumer has in the information being transmitted about a higher (education) institution is determined by this factor. The consumer's perception of the information communicator as possessing the necessary knowledge about the subject matter is referred to as expertise as a credibility dimension.

Consequently, the marketer of a higher (education) institution believes that new students are capable of providing candid assessments of the institution and the education industry in which it operates, based on validated data regarding its programs, facilities, and research. This generates appeal, which is an additional component of credibility. If consumers perceive that the marketing strategy is credible (Arezes et al., 2019, 456) The organization or institution will be more appealing to consumers if marketers are perceived

as demonstrating expertise, and the foundation of the organization is based on facts and figures rather than fabricated data. Marketing attractiveness is frequently defined in terms of product packaging or information delivery; however, it can be misleading if it is not intentionally supported by publicly available, accurate, and proved data regarding the marketer's claims.

### **Ethics in Higher (education) Institutions**

In our current era, ethics occupies an important place in all areas of life. Ethics has also become important in education because education is a fundamental process in human life. Therefore, ethics is a very important subject in education. Ethics should be incorporated into the educational system as a course in order to comprehend its significance. It is imperative to establish the definitions of ethics and education prior to engaging in this discussion. Ethics is the most significant and practical branch of philosophy in the present day. In general, ethics is a moral philosophy. Consequently, ethics pertains to our actions and experiences in daily life. We are accountable for all of our actions and decisions, as we have the ability to contemplate our choices. Furthermore, ethics can be defined as the examination of what is morally correct and immoral. Some of the concepts of ethics include virtue and vice, good and bad, right and wrong, justice and injustice.

Ethics is subdivided into two categories: applied ethics and theoretical ethics. Normative ethics, descriptive ethics, and convergent ethics are all components of theoretical ethics. Professional ethics are encompassed by the term "applied ethics." II. Meta-ethics, Professional Ethics, Descriptive Ethics, Normative Ethics, and Theoretical Applied Ethics (practical). Normative ethics is the examination of the criteria that determine the morality of actions. Meta-ethics pertains to the theoretical and referential significance of moral propositions. In descriptive ethics, the focus is on evidence. It investigates ethics by observing the actual decisions that moral agents make in practice. The ethical implications of both private and public affairs are the subject of applied ethics. Professional ethics is a significant subfield of applied ethics. In general, professional ethics can be defined as a set of standards or regulations that are intended to offer individuals direction in their professional lives.

Ethical regulations generally adhere to four fundamental principles:

1. Honesty,
2. Confidentiality,
3. Conflict of interest, and
4. Responsibilities. (Fuente, 2016, 57)

Ethics is a significant and expanding factor in marketing, as seen from the perspectives of both consumers and marketers. The question of whether specific marketing activities are morally permissible or illegal is the subject of marketing ethics. Organizations are confronted with ethical dilemmas as they interact with the marketplace. The correct ethical decision is not always evident. Ethics encompasses the aspects of the science of values that pertain to what is desirable or preferable to human behavior, as well as what is good and lovely. So, Ethics pertain to the prevailing norms or standards of conduct that regulate the interactions between individuals and their institutions. A breach of decorum may also be deemed unethical if it is deliberately perpetrated against another person. The inner eye allows individuals to discern the morality of their activities, functioning as a code of behavior.

It analyzes human character, behavior, and ethics, along with the contrasts between right and wrong, and virtuous and immoral conduct. It evaluates behavior against a universal benchmark and allocates either positive or negative values. Thus, ethical conduct entails behaving in a morally defensible manner. This approach stems from the conviction that a core principle of a profession is to maintain integrity by following a code of conduct agreed by its members. Professional ethics are the moral principles and ideals that govern



behavior within a certain profession, to which all members are required to conform. Ethics, in other words, is the subject of this code of conduct. Therefore, ethical behavior is the act of adhering to the established standards of conduct in the business and professional world and acting in a manner that is just, ethical, and equitable.

In order to enhance the quality of services offered to consumers, ethical principles are established. Integrity, fairness, trust, justice, and open services are critical ethical principles. Promote them. These principles are crucial for the success of a business, particularly in terms of safeguarding the organization and the company's reputation. Belkhair, 2019, (75) Institutions of higher (education) that acknowledge their ethical obligations must exhibit their sincere dedication to these principles. The practice of integrity, fairness, and fairness demonstrates that marketers in higher (education) institutions are prohibited from intentionally disseminating deceptive or misleading information, whether in writing, speech, or implied form, or from concealing any pertinent fact.

Marketers are required to uphold integrity and impartiality in all aspects of marketing, including advertising and sales promotion. This establishes public confidence. In addition to demonstrating respect and concern for the business community, ethical principles encompass equitable and honest interactions with customers. It is anticipated that ethical behavior in higher (education) institutions will prioritize the interests of students and shareholders in both the short and long term. Nevertheless, institutions will reap the rewards of acknowledging their obligations in both the short and long term. This indicates that higher (education) institutions must consider the ethical implications for their strategic planning and business objectives.

Consequently, ethical conduct transcends mere legal compliance, as one might operate within the law while yet participating in unethical actions. In any commercial sector, including education, ethics typically denotes the adherence to a globally acknowledged code of conduct to demonstrate integrity, accuracy, honesty, and impartiality in transactions. Fairness also involves exhibiting empathy towards students who are both consumers and clients. There are numerous potential repercussions of unethical behavior, which can be mitigated by acting with integrity and being honest with consumers.

An institution may be discovered if it is found to be operating illegally or in violation of regulations. In a competitive business environment, higher (education) institutions must recognize that student loyalty is crucial and is contingent upon the public's perception of the institution's fairness, trust, and honesty in its business operations. Consequently, the institution's reputation is enhanced by ethical behavior. Reputation is established through ethical conduct, including equitable dealing and trust. The business, reputation, or interests of others are adversely affected by unfairness. Al Jabouri (2023, 76).

### **Conceptual Framework for Marketing Strategies for Higher (education) and its Sustainability**

The structure of cognition may manifest as a theoretical framework or as a framework for logical reasoning. The framework succinctly outlines the theory utilized and the approach taken to tackle the research questions. The structure of reasoning is pragmatic, emerging from one or several theories or a multitude of logical inquiries. This framework will encompass research questions that can be discerned within the relevant theoretical framework and that will reveal, elucidate, and clarify viewpoints on the examined issue. In both everyday and scholarly contemplation, two elements of overarching cognition are consistently utilized. The preliminary training represents a cognitive endeavor that utilizes a broad methodology to advance toward a particular cycle. Moving from the broad to the particular. Secondly, induction, a mental process that utilizes a specific hypothesis, evolves into a broader hypothesis.

The particular is succeeded by the general. The conceptual framework is alternatively known as the overarching framework of thought. The cognitive structure serves as a declaration or interpretation of the conceptual framework employed to address problems that have been recognized or articulated. The cognitive condition is likewise understood as a fleeting interpretation of the symptoms that form the essence of the issue at hand. Some argue that the cognitive structure serves as a conceptual model that elucidates the interplay between theory and the various factors deemed significant.

The cognitive structure represents a systematic approach to reasoning, and the progression of rational thought exemplifies a hallmark of the scientific method utilized in this context. This rationale is utilized to tackle challenges within private higher (education) by augmenting the student population. This study is founded on the presence of a conceptual framework that clarifies the marketing strategy employed by the private sector.

Based on the aforementioned, it is evident that the service markets' increasing competitiveness is one of the most significant trends that simultaneously presents a threat and an opportunity. Companies are compelled to restructure their marketing strategies in order to ensure their sustainability and long-term profitability. Traditional methods of conducting business are inadequate. In markets where established competitors have failed to meet the expectations of today's demanding consumers, innovative new entrants who provide new standards of service are prospering worldwide.

In particular, students now anticipate enhanced standards of practice that are predicated on ethical behavior and credibility. Satisfying this requirement generates value for students and ensures the educational institution's ongoing survival and the continuous flow of students. It is a desperate act to attract and win pupils at all costs by making false claims about the institution's quality and standing. If an educational institution is discovered to be deceiving through dishonesty and falsification of service quality or academic program information, it is probable that students, parents, and regulatory bodies will turn against it, rendering it unsustainable.

Credibility necessitates consistently prioritizing the student's interests and ensuring that the educational institution provides accurate and reliable information regarding the strengths and weaknesses of its services and programs. Institutions are morally obligated to market themselves in accordance with their offerings. The medium and long-term sustainability of the marketing strategy and the institution as a whole are significantly influenced by marketing credibility.

Credibility will result in a high level of loyalty and reputation for the higher (education) institution. Additionally, it would augment the institution's enrollment of prospective students. A marketing strategy that is based on credibility is sustainable, as it will result in the trust and loyalty of potential students and parents to the institution. Similarly, the marketing strategy of the higher (education) institution and the integrity of the marketer would consistently attract potential students.

### **Research Method**

Different research strategies are needed for qualitative, quantitative, and hybrid methodologies, which can lead to different and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the findings. Either describing a phenomena or investigating a problem are the primary foci of a qualitative researcher. I have read up on correlational studies, experimental studies, and studies that used pre- and post-tests. Consequently, a more thorough comprehension of the phenomenon may be achieved by employing both "qualitative and quantitative methodologies". In a mixed-methods study, convergent validation is accomplished by comparing different data sources. After carefully reviewing the study, I came to the conclusion that my investigation would benefit more from a qualitative approach using a case study design.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Samples

The identification of the sampling technique, participant count, criteria for participant selection, and interview site assurance were discussed. Four marketing leaders from three higher education institutions: University of "Kufa and Al-Mustansiriya University", and University of Karbala—are the subject of a qualitative multiple case study under the direction of research design. The sample comprised marketing professionals showing notable participation in student attraction, recruiting, and marketing. Participants are chosen deliberately using criteria of being marketing executives in three different "higher education" schools in Iraq.

Four professionals committed to drawing students to postsecondary education institutions made up the case study participants. In keeping with the general research topic, the second condition was that the participant has expertise inside a marketing team in a university. The sample size depends more on the data's appropriateness than on participant count. The scope of the research corresponds with the belief that, in a case study, the sample size is not a major concern. Consequently, this study comprised only four marketing professionals working in the "higher education" sector. This qualitative multiple-case study used non-probability purposive sampling since the participants were experienced marketers in a university.

#### Case Study Tools

A semi-structured interview method was utilized to perform a qualitative case study, with the researcher acting as the principal instrument for data collection. The researcher systematically collects data and makes informed decisions throughout the data gathering and evaluation process, employing interviews that significantly shape the study's trajectory. An interview protocol was utilized. The interviewers employ a semi-structured interview guide to improve participant comfort while allowing for flexibility in the exploration of new topics. A focused interview approach, or semi-structured interview format, is employed by case study researchers to investigate participants' perspectives and insights regarding a past event or activity. The researcher may redirect questions and pursue additional information when a new topic emerges in the semi-structured or focused interview method.

A predefined list of interview questions was developed, and follow-up inquiries were incorporated based on the respondents' answers. "Investigators must assure rigour in subjective case report research by employing a strategic framework that ensures validity, reliability, verification, and transferability. To improve the reliability and accuracy of the data collection procedure, I kept a journal to contextualise concepts", hypotheses, and findings, and I took extensive notes during the interviews. I systematically arranged my papers to enable disclosure if university officials require it. I claimed that these methods allow readers to evaluate the relevance and applicability of the tools to have a thorough comprehension of the case study's elements.

#### Presentation of Findings

What tactics do university marketing directors utilise to increase student enrolment in higher education programs? This was the primary research question that directed my inquiry. I employed many data sources to tackle this subject inside my multiple case studies. I utilised semi-structured interviews and institutional document analysis to ascertain the experiences expressed by participants. I diligently documented my choices in a reflective notebook, so augmenting the credibility of my findings. After analysing and consolidating the data, I sent participants with a copy of their responses for them to evaluate my interpretation. The participants were instructed to revise the interview transcripts with additional content or corrections.

I examined the organisational materials submitted by participants and recorded notes during the interviews to confirm their accuracy. Furthermore, in order to facilitate transferability, I furnished descriptive data regarding the participants. Participants' distinct employment experiences were influenced by their personal knowledge of the population and their geographic location. Participants were employed at a variety of public universities situated in central Iraq. The study's reliability and validity were proven by the data analysis results, which comprised participant statements, audit notes detailing the data analysis process, and a reflective journal detailing the research process, including decisions and obstacles. The validation and credibility phases laid the groundwork for the data architecture needed to complete the topic identification process.

### **Elements of Marketing Strategies (Expert Opinion)**

Participants suggested considering segmentation, program of interest, program kind, geographic area, and possible student while creating a marketing campaign for new students. Define the target segment with segmentation. Target categories include recent high school graduates and working adults seeking college degrees. Academic program levels—undergraduate and graduate—define target segments. One participant said the student's interest program would also influence your marketing strategy and plan. Adjust communication, marketing, and recruitment techniques for the audience. Instructional method adds market segmentation. Participants mentioned classroom contact and online instruction. Because students are diverse, "higher education" marketing executives and managers should consider segmentation-based techniques.

Universities and colleges should aim to have student bodies that reflect their communities. Geographic location was important to all four participants. The size of the market depends on marketing leaders' local, regional, national, and international attention. To create an effective marketing, the budget should match market size. Participant 1 created student recruitment marketing campaigns. Participant 2 stated that many incoming college students prefer to reside reasonably close to family, thus simply having access to their home neighborhood is vital.

Staying near to home reduces expenses, allows students to spend time with family, and lets them keep their jobs. A university's location's value depends on its target audience. This part of the marketing strategy links well with the marketing mix variable since it shows that campus location strongly effects university enrollment but depends on the target market segment. The marketing plan also considers modern student culture. Some new students are second- or third-generation, while others are rural or elderly. Culture is the integration and comprehension of its actions and values. Depending on Iraqi and Arab culture and lifestyle.

### **Marketing Challenges for New Student Development (Expert Opinion)**

Challenges to increasing student enrollment were identified by the participants as four distinct factors. The participants identified a variety of factors, Encompassing aspects such as market size, competitive landscape, program offerings, brand recognition, brand identity, cost-effectiveness, ethical considerations, and credibility. The concluding two elements became the focal point of discourse among the quartet of participants. The Iraqi market is experiencing significant growth across the country; thus, the burgeoning student demographic offers a promising avenue in the realm of higher (education). Even though the market for college admissions may be expanding, the percentage of students enrolled may not necessarily reflect this.

Many institutions encounter the issue of overestimating the size of the market by underestimating the significance of proximity to the student's residence or place of employment. For instance, Participant 3 defined the target segment of a college as students who reside within a single radius. Participant 4 also mentioned that the most significant initial challenge for colleges was the incorrect assumption that enrollment goals and expectations should be based on a much larger regional market size. In the event of competition within the defined market boundaries of the target market segment, large

colleges with a robust brand and a diverse array of program offerings possess a substantial advantage.

Providing an academic pathway option that is consistent with a student's objectives has been more challenging for small colleges with restricted program offerings. This element emphasizes the significance of the product variable in the marketing mix. It is challenging for a prospective student to enroll if the desired product or undergraduate program is not available, as these options are often offered by competitors. The enrollment decision is also influenced by brand repute and brand awareness. The reputation rating of a university is a significant factor in the perception of the educational quality of a college by many prospective students.

In contrast, brand reputation is of secondary importance; however, brand performance and brand image are critical. Positive word of mouth and the cultivation of a robust brand can enhance the brand's image. According to Participant Four, minor colleges are hindered by their inadequate credibility. Furthermore, incoming students prioritize credibility and ethics, questioning whether they are a part of the institution. Many incoming students inquire, "Can I trust this institution to invest in my future?" when assessing a college.

Participants frequently identified affordability as a significant factor. In light of the increasing cost of education, it is imperative that prospective students are cognizant of the scholarships and financial aid packages that are available to them. Some students enroll in a two-year institution instead of a college because they are unaware that they may be eligible for additional financial aid or scholarship money, according to Participant Two. We propose the establishment of a program known as 21st Century Scholars, which would allow students to enroll in middle school, high school, and college at the same institution. This program would ensure that students adhere to specific regulations, including maintaining a drug-free status and remaining on course. The initial participant identified a lack of financial awareness as a significant obstacle, as numerous individuals disqualify themselves from this opportunity due to their belief that they are unable to afford college.

The marketing mix process variable is consistent with the practice of increasing awareness of the numerous enrollment processes, which includes the process of applying for funds. Encouraging a new student to apply to college can be achieved by establishing explicit processes and ensuring that the processes are understood. It is also crucial to prioritize the individual's career development, which encompasses the evaluation of program options, the description of courses, and prospective job opportunities. Prospective students and parents will be more informed during the enrollment process if they are provided with tools and engagement processes. An individual's decision to enroll is influenced by the cost of parallel, evening, or private education. Public universities are more cost-effective alternatives.

Nevertheless, This is the transf. Due to the fact that students who are enrolled in public universities are compelled to pay tuition fees, the transfer status of a student can have a significant impact on their capacity to attend public colleges. It is within the purview of private colleges to devise a price plan that is likely to be successful in converting prospective students into actual students. According to Participant 2, they believe that blending tactics is the most acceptable option. As an example, during certain enrollment periods, providing students with financial aid, scholarships, and tuition discounts could serve as an incentive for them to enroll in the program. For a university that charges tuition rates that are far more than those of private colleges and public universities, it is absolutely necessary for private education to be viewed as having a significantly higher value than public education. Due to the fact that students are compelled to pay tuition fees, the student's financial situation might have a significant impact on their capacity to finance public colleges. It is within the purview of private colleges to devise a price plan that is likely to be successful in converting prospective students into actual students.



According to Participant 2, they believe that blending tactics is the most acceptable option. As an example, during certain enrollment periods, providing students with financial aid, scholarships, and tuition discounts could serve as an incentive for them to enroll in the program. For a university that charges tuition rates that are far more than those of private colleges and public universities, it is absolutely necessary for private education to be viewed as having a significantly higher value than public education. The degree to which the price and marketing mix variables influence the enrollment decision process will be determined by the type of university, whether it is public or private.

#### **Physical Location and Enrollment (Expert Opinion)**

All four participants recognized the university's geography as a critical factor. These are the most significant factors for college students today, as they are burdened by full-time employment commitments, family obligations, and strong social connections to their community. Students expressed a preference for residing in close proximity to their families while attending college. Occasionally, it is crucial for individuals to maintain a sense of connection with their family and community. For others, the cost of living is a significant factor, and it may be more advantageous to remain at home. The importance of public transportation for students' commuting to college was also identified by participants, as was the appeal of access to well-paying employment while attending college. In general, colleges can gain a competitive edge by accommodating the requirements of new students, which is why marketing strategies are a critical component of the marketing mix.

#### **Most Effective Strategies (Expert Opinion)**

There is a correlation between executives using an integrated marketing approach and the effectiveness of the marketing plan. It is imperative to establish trust and establish relationships with the community in order to establish a robust brand. For instance, the establishment of robust relationships within secondary schools can facilitate the development of a nutrition program that fosters brand loyalty. Participating in prominent cultural events and festivals can facilitate the development and reinforcement of relationships with the community. There are significant benefits to the implementation of strong orientation programs that help parents and new students understand the admissions and enrollment procedure.

Organizing activities like joint conferences, high school field trips, and campus visits are good ways to give prospective students a taste of campus life and help them see themselves as enrolled students. It is worthwhile to spend time addressing the worries of families and parents during the registration process. Finally, participants identified the effective method of communicating the marketing message to new students and their families as the availability of student and alumni testimonials for sharing. The fourth motif emphasizes that a marketing plan that is effective necessitates more than a marketing mix strategy. In order to establish a comprehensive marketing strategy, it is necessary to incorporate additional marketing conceptual frameworks.

#### **Culture and Background of the Research**

Occasionally, the comprehension of student distinctions is an understudied aspect. Students in Iraq are at varying levels of education. Although a prospective student may possess a high level of education, a parent or family member may not. It is imperative to comprehend and acknowledge these distinctions when conversing with students. Consequently, the necessary level of support and the nature of the conversation will fluctuate. Universities can cultivate a trusting environment by employing staff who understand the legal ramifications of enrolling undocumented students and how to effectively manage these circumstances. In general, the presence of staff members who are culturally aware or have a comprehensive understanding of how to identify these differences can have a beneficial effect on enrollment efforts. Due to the cultural context, the marketing mix conceptual framework does not seem to be explicitly applicable to this

subject. Nevertheless, individuals who are involved in marketing emphasize the necessity of comprehending customers.

I would not suggest that the social and cultural aspects of working with specific demographics be dismantled in order to specifically target the student market. The marketing mix framework is generally disclosed in topics one through five. No discoveries in the marketing mix services model—place, pricing, product, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence—were linked to physical evidence alone. The conclusions may only apply to the three case study universities, but they could be applied elsewhere.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study underscores the pivotal role of strategic marketing credibility and ethical practices in fostering sustainability and enhancing student enrollment in higher education institutions. The findings reveal that marketing strategies aligned with ethical principles and tailored to address community needs not only bolster enrollment but also contribute to social transformation by improving educational accessibility, fostering cultural diversity, and strengthening community growth. These insights are particularly critical for addressing declining university attainment rates in Iraq and mitigating socioeconomic disparities. Universities must prioritize stakeholder engagement, community development, and the application of robust marketing frameworks to sustain institutional viability and social impact. Future research should explore the long-term effects of ethical marketing practices on institutional sustainability and assess their adaptability across diverse cultural and economic contexts to further refine strategies for global application.

Table 1. Applicability of the interviews to the marketing mix and other marketing strategy frameworks

Parts	Business	Marketing Mix Applied	"Other Marketing Frameworks"
"Elements of a (strategic )marketing Plan"	1. Segmentation based on the sort of student, preferred method (online or in-person), and degree level. 2. The market's geographic scope, whether it be local, regional, national, or international. 3. Cultural level in Iraq.	Price	"Market Segmentation"
"Marketing Challenges to Increasing Student Enrollment"	1. Market Size 2. Competition 3. Programs Provided 4. Brand Recognition and Identity 5. Cost-effectiveness	Product, Price, and Process	"Five Forces, Branding, SWOT Analysis"
"How Physical Location Affects the Likelihood of Enrollment"	1. "Public transportation " 2. Distance between residence and campus and commuting 3. Access to lucrative	Price	Not Applicable

	employment opportunities		
<b>"Promotional Channels Used"</b>	1. Fieldwork 2. Materials in Arabic and English that are printed 3. Marketing that is unconventional 4. Social media campaigns	Promotion	"Social Media Marketing, Interactive and Digital, Mobile Marketing Devices, and Other Electronic Promotional Media"
<b>"Stakeholders Involved in the Enrollment Process"</b>	1. Internal Partners: Marketing and Product Development, Current Students, Financial Accounting Officers, Registrars, Enrollment Team, Admissions Counselors, Department Chairs and Faculty 2. External Partners: School Principals, Counselors, Family and Parents, College Staff, and Community Organizations.	Process	Not Applicable
<b>"Most Effective Strategies"</b>	A comprehensive marketing strategy that encompasses the following: 1. Establishing relationships with the community 2. Robust mentoring initiatives 3. Events that take place on campus 4. The involvement of parents and family members	Process	"SWOT Analysis, Five Forces, Market Research, Brand Awareness, Market Segmentation, Market Orientation, Brand Equity, Relationship Marketing, Dominant Theory of Goods and Services"

"Source: Prepared by the researcher based on interviews and expert opinion"

### Recommendations

In order to increase awareness of the planning and implementation of marketing strategies in "higher education" institutions, I am dedicated to sharing the findings of this study with marketing experts and managers. Consequently, the mission, vision, and objectives of each university are distinct. Marketing leaders must guarantee that their marketing strategy and plan are consistent with the university's overarching objectives. Marketing professionals are encouraged to consider the subsequent action

recommendations as a starting point when formulating marketing strategies to attract students.

1. Ethical marketing practices of integrity, fairness, and soundness of decisions should be worked on in the long term to maintain the continuity of the importance and existence of the institution.
2. Marketing in "higher education" institutions should focus on the credibility of information about the "higher education" institution to potential students, and marketers should focus on sound ethical practices of integrity, fairness, and soundness of decisions to ensure the continued acceptance of students.
3. Work to understand student expectations, as well as expand the boundaries of academic research in institutional marketing.
4. In Iraq, "higher education" administrators establish policies that mandate student recruitment officers and program marketers to communicate reliable and verifiable information about their institutions and act ethically. Institutions will experience improved brand and reputation when they adhere to ethical standards and align with their stakeholders.

### **Future Recommendations**

In order to investigate the marketing strategies that universities implement to recruit students, I implemented this investigation. I recommend that further research be conducted on the subject of attracting students to college, given the importance of marketing in "higher education" and the fact that research on this topic is still in its infancy. This investigation was restricted to three distinctive institutions situated in distinct geographic regions, each with its own distinct customer base and network of contacts. As a consequence, the findings can only be applied to the broader university community in a general sense.

Initially, I suggest that a more thorough quantitative investigation be conducted. To further complement the qualitative findings and address limitations in sample size, university type, and geography, a more exhaustive quantitative study should consider the interview questions asked in this study. Second, I suggest the integration of additional frameworks, including the dominant theory of goods and services, relationship marketing. In order to provide a comprehensive perspective on potential marketing strategies in "higher education" Brand recognition, market segmentation, market orientation, and the five factors must be taken into account. Lastly, academic achievement, grades, and goals are at the individual level, but they are not taken into account by the study paradigm. Therefore, I suggest that prospective students and parents provide direct input to better understand the needs and other factors that influence future expectations and to hear the voice of the customer.

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