

**MARKETING MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER COMPETITIVE PRESSURE: EVIDENCE FROM DEVELOPING ECONOMIES**

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**Abstract**

As competition in higher education becomes more intense, universities in developing countries are forced to take a more strategic approach to marketing. This research explores the impact of marketing approaches on institutional competitiveness, enrolment and sustainability in the face of resource limitations and market competition. Adopting a multi-method approach, the study integrates quantitative measures of enrolment trends with qualitative insights into institutional strategies and policies. Results suggest that institutions adopting data-driven, student-centred, digitally enabled marketing practices demonstrate greater visibility and resilient enrolment strategies than those following traditional administrative practices. Critical success factors are branding, digital marketing, internationalization and market relevance. Yet institutional constraints, such as non-flexible regulatory frameworks and financial constraints continue to hamper marketing strategies in many developing economies. This research builds on existing literature by introducing an integrated model of marketing management in developing countries, and provides insights for improving institutional competitiveness in a highly competitive market.

**Keywords:** higher education marketing, marketing management, competitive pressure, developing economies, student recruitment, university branding, digital marketing, institutional competitiveness, internationalization, higher education strategy.

**Introduction**

Over the past two decades, the global higher education landscape has undergone profound transformation, characterized by intensified competition, massification, and increasing market orientation. Universities have shifted from being monopolistic public institutions constrained within national borders, to becoming competitive entities seeking to win students, funding and prestigious brands. This has been especially evident in emerging markets, where the rapid growth of higher education systems and constrained public funding has increased intra-institutional competition, as well as creating both national and global competition for higher education. [3]

The growing quasi-market nature of higher education has raised the profile of marketing management. In the past, tertiary institutions leveraged their historical legacy, government funding or proximity to attract students. But today's realities - shaped by globalisation, digitalisation, and student mobility - have changed this landscape. Students are now considered sophisticated consumers who assess educational institutions in terms of quality, employability, brand and value. [5] Consequently, universities need to engage in advanced marketing practices that go beyond simple promotion, to include branding, market segmentation, positioning and relationship management.

In emerging markets, the importance of marketing management is compounded by challenges. These can be limited financial autonomy, regulatory restrictions, institutional capacity variations, and technology adoption. Meanwhile, governments in many developing countries are encouraging

the growth of higher education to stimulate economic activities and build human capital. This combination of expansion and competition means that universities must navigate complex trade-offs between access, quality and sustainability on the one hand, and competition for students and resources on the other. [8]

Digital transformation plays a pivotal role in marketing in higher education. The rise of digital channels, social media, and analytics has opened up new avenues for universities to interact with prospective students, segment their messages, and increase their international visibility. [13] Research has shown that universities that use online marketing strategies and data analytics are more likely to adapt to evolving student needs and market dynamics. [11] However, the use of these technologies is not uniform across developing countries, due to infrastructural and other financial constraints. [15]

A crucial aspect of higher education marketing is internationalization. With the growth of cross-border education, universities are increasingly competing in a global market for international students, collaborations, and research. In developing countries, internationalization is both a strategic and a capacity-building endeavour. Yet, international branding, quality management, and standardisation are critical for successful international positioning, and these are often problematic. [14]

While there is a growing appreciation of the role of marketing in higher education, much of the current literature has centred on developed economies and there has been a relative dearth of empirical studies on developing economies. This leaves a void in the understanding of how marketing strategies work in the context of resource constraints, institutional constraints and emerging markets. Moreover, there is a need to bring together different aspects of marketing, including branding, digital marketing, and stakeholder management, to develop an integrated view of marketing in the context of developing higher education.

In this context, the current study seeks to explore the impact of marketing management on improving the competitiveness of higher education institutions in developing countries. In particular, it aims to (i) examine the primary marketing strategies universities employ in response to competition, (ii) evaluate their effects on student enrolment and performance, and (iii) understand the institutional factors shaping their success. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this research offers insights into both the theory and practice of higher education marketing.

This research is important as it can provide insights to policymakers and university managers on how to develop and execute marketing strategies in constrained resource settings. In doing so, it also adds to the debate on the marketization of higher education and the place of universities in the new economy of developing countries.

### **Literature review**

The growth of marketization in higher education has sparked a significant body of research into the use of marketing management as a strategic element for improving institutional performance. Initial research viewed higher education marketing as a communication strategy aimed at student enrolment and promotion. [1] But recent studies adopt a more strategic view and see marketing as a holistic activity that incorporates branding, positioning, stakeholder management and value creation in a competitive higher education market. [3]

A key focus in the literature is the emergence of students as consumers of education services. This trend, in turn, driven by tuition fees, mobility and information, has forced universities to take a

customer perspective. [5] Kotler and Fox's pioneering educational marketing model emphasises segmentation, targeting and positioning, and the need to match institutional offerings to consumer demands. [6] Later research has broadened this view to include relationship marketing and service quality aspects, focusing on retention rather than attraction. [7]

Branding is a key factor for success in competitive higher education markets. Institutions are increasingly focusing on branding to stand out in the marketplace. Research indicates that reputation, quality perceptions and employability outcomes are important factors in student decision-making. [9] In emerging markets, where many universities lack a global brand presence, branding is even more important to build trust and attract local and international students. [10]

Another key theme is digital marketing and technological advancement. The rise of social media, search engines and data mining technologies has revolutionised university marketing practices. Research shows that virtual presence, through web pages, social media marketing, and virtual tours, increases visibility and allows for personalised communication. [11] Furthermore, data analytics helps universities to understand students' preferences and improve their marketing strategies. But the success of digital marketing depends on institutional readiness and technological infrastructure, which may not be well developed in many developing nations. [12]

Marketing management is also related to internationalization. With increasing competition for students and partnerships, universities are increasingly adopting international branding, partnerships and even marketing strategies for international markets. [13] Studies indicate that the mobility of international students is affected by aspects such as reputation, language, tuition fees, and post-graduate prospects. [14] Internationalization for developing economy universities not only improves competitiveness but also facilitates knowledge and institutional development.

Despite these progressions, research identifies several institutional factors that limit marketing outcomes in developing countries. Financial constraints limit institutions' capacity to engage in high-level marketing strategies and online platforms. [8] Regulation may also limit the autonomy of institutions, constraining them in setting prices, designing programs and promotions. [4] Further, variations in institutional quality and capacity result in competitive disparities that may disadvantage smaller and regional institutions over elite institutions.

A critical area for future research relates to the alignment of marketing strategies with institutional goals. Although numerous studies focus on specific aspects, such as branding or digital marketing, there is a gap in the literature regarding the development of integrated frameworks that integrate these elements into a holistic strategic framework, especially in developing countries. [2] Additionally, empirical evidence is scattered, with few cross-national studies and a lack of focus on the relationship between market and institutional factors.

To address these shortcomings, recent studies advocate for a more integrated and contextualised approach to marketing management in universities. This involves integrating marketing with institutional values, using data analytics, and promoting communication between academic and support units. [3] This holistic approach is crucial for higher education institutions to respond to competitive challenges while upholding academic standards and societal obligations.

In conclusion, the research highlights that marketing management has transitioned from a supporting to a strategic role in higher education. But its practice in developing countries is patchy and contingent, thus requiring more empirical and theoretical work.

### **Methodology**

This research uses a mixed-methods approach to investigate the impact of marketing management in higher education under competition in developing countries. A convergent approach is adopted, involving the simultaneous collection of quantitative and qualitative data to gain an integrated perspective of performance results and practices.

The quantitative study uses secondary data from national statistical offices, university reports and international sources (such as UNESCO, World Bank) to examine the performance of selected universities over 2015-2024. The dependent variable is student enrollment growth (annual percentage change in student intakes) The main predictors are digital marketing, brand equity, and internationalization, with control variables for size, government funding, and the economic environment.

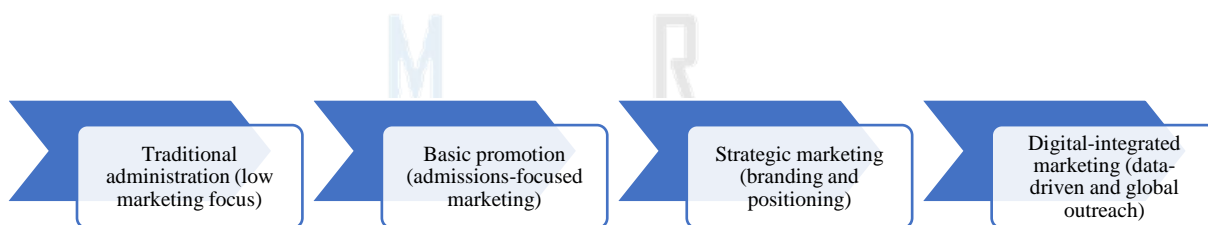
The effect of marketing variables on student performance is estimated using panel regression. Fixed effects and random effects models are considered and the Hausman test is applied to determine the preferred model. Clustered robust standard errors are used to overcome potential econometric problems. The qualitative study comprises of content analysis of websites, marketing communications and policy documents of universities to determine commonly used marketing strategies. The results are thematically analysed and combined with quantitative findings.

### Results

This section outlines the results of the qualitative analysis of institutional practices, institutional policy documents and marketing communications of higher education institutions in emerging economies. The findings centre on the identification of key marketing strategies and their effectiveness in an increasingly competitive environment.

The research identifies a shift from bureaucratic to strategic and market-oriented marketing. There is a trend towards formalised marketing roles within the university, with specific departments handling branding, communication and student engagement. This is especially true for those seeking to compete regionally or globally. But there is considerable variability, with elite universities adopting integrated marketing strategies, while others are still engaged in simple promotional practices.

The transformation of marketing practices in higher education can be conceptualized as a gradual shift from traditional administrative approaches to digitally integrated strategies, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Evolution of Marketing Practices in Higher Education**

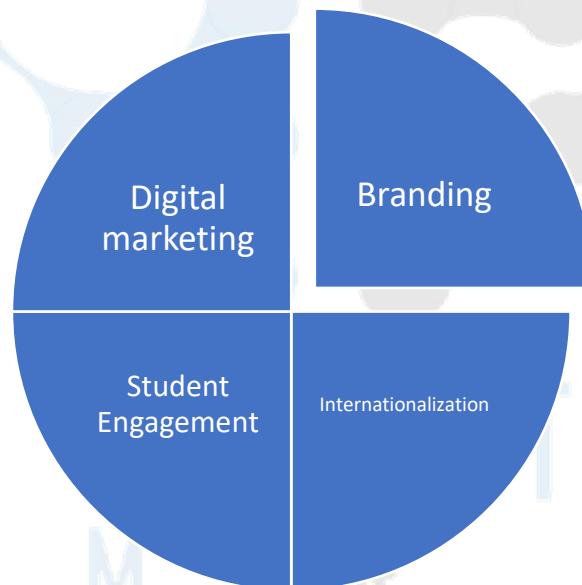
A key finding is that digital marketing is playing an increasingly significant role. Websites, social media and online advertising are actively employed by universities to engage with potential

students. Online engagement strategies like virtual tours, online advertising, and interactive media are used to increase visibility and accessibility. Universities with a strong digital presence are more likely to have higher engagement rates and a stronger relationship with prospective students.

However, there are disparities in the effectiveness of digital marketing. Limited resources, technical know-how and support restrict the capacity of some institutions to effectively use digital media. Branding is a key element of marketing. Universities highlight their distinctive selling points such as quality education, job readiness, international collaborations and facilities. Universities with well-established brands are able to stand out in crowded markets. Without clear branding strategies, universities may find it difficult to convey their unique strengths and advantages.

The study also suggests that building reputation is a long-term endeavour, with consistency in academic excellence, communication and stakeholder relationship management. Internationalization is both a goal and selling point. Universities leverage international collaborations, student exchanges, and English-medium programs to target international students and build global recognition. This approach is more prevalent among top-tier institutions, while others struggle with language, accreditation issues and global recognition.

The core dimensions of marketing management identified in this study can be integrated into a unified framework, as presented in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. Key Dimensions of Marketing Management**

While there is growing marketing practices, there are some limitations. Budget constraints limit the use of sophisticated marketing techniques and campaigns. Some regulatory frameworks limit the autonomy of institutions, further impacting program and price flexibility. Moreover, institutional capacity differences result in asymmetrical levels of competition, favouring well-endowed universities.

Finally, the findings indicate that marketing management is emerging as a critical strategic activity in higher education in developing countries. Institutions with integrated strategies that combine

online marketing, branding and internationalization show enhanced competitive strength. But these approaches are contingent on institutional capacity and commitment, and external policy settings.

Marketing Strategy	Key Activities	Observed Outcomes
Digital Marketing	Social media, websites, online ads	Increased visibility, higher engagement
Branding	Reputation building, value positioning	Stronger differentiation, trust building
Internationalization	Partnerships, foreign programs	Global exposure, diversified enrollment
Student-Centric Approach	Personalized communication, support	Improved satisfaction and retention

**Table 1. Summary of Marketing Strategies and Outcomes**

A structured summary of the key marketing strategies and their observed outcomes is presented in Table 1.

### Discussion

This study's results support the emerging view that marketing management is a key strategic area in higher education, especially in a competitive environment in developing countries. This study adds to the existing body of research by showing that marketing is not a function confined to student recruitment activities but rather a system that includes digital marketing, branding and internationalization. This reinforces the view that universities are increasingly operating as market-oriented enterprises, contextualising their strategies to meet student needs and market realities. [3] Perhaps the key finding from the results is the prominence of digital marketing. The focus on websites, social media and online communication platforms is in line with global trends in higher education marketing. [11] The results are consistent with previous research in demonstrating that digital channels help institutions to reach a broader audience, tailor messages, and improve accessibility. [12] But the selective use of digital strategies among institutions reveals a significant gap in developing countries. Some institutions are able to harness digital technologies to enhance their competitiveness, while others are hindered by inadequate resources and technical expertise. This gap implies that the digital transformation is not just a technology problem but also an institutional one.

Another critical aspect of marketing is branding. This research confirms that a distinct and coherent institutional identity plays a crucial role in differentiation in the increasingly competitive education sector. This finding is consistent with previous studies that have highlighted the importance of reputation and quality perceptions in student decision-making. [9] Crucially, the research reveals that branding in emerging markets is often used to fill the gap left by a lack of global branding, enabling institutions to communicate their quality in the absence of international rankings and

reputation. However, the findings also indicate branding efforts need to be backed by improvements in quality and student outcomes for long-term success.

The influence of internationalisation also adds to the debate. In line with previous research, internationalization is demonstrated to serve both as a strategic approach and as an institutional building process. [13] Universities which proactively engage in international programs and partnerships are likely to increase their profile and appeal, especially to globally mobile students. But the results also suggest that internationalization is not widespread and frequently constrained to a few elite institutions. Structural factors (language, regulatory, and global integration) remain as barriers to adoption.

A key contribution of this study is to show the relationship between marketing and structure. The study highlights that, unlike many studies in developed economies, the effectiveness of marketing management in developing countries is critically dependent on institutional and policy settings. Scarcity of resources limits investment in high-technology marketing instruments, and regulation may constrain pricing, program and communication strategies. This reinforces the perception that marketing effectiveness is not independent of institutional arrangements and resource constraints. [8]

Additionally, this research adds to knowledge by suggesting a more holistic approach to higher education marketing management. This study suggests that rather than viewing digital marketing, branding and internationalization as distinct elements, their integration and coordination enhances their effectiveness. This holistic view addresses limitations of existing research which tends to consider these factors more separately. [2] It also emphasises the need for coordination between marketing efforts and university goals such as academic excellence, employability and societal impact.

Pragmatically, the debate points to a number of recommendations for university managers and policymakers. First, it's important to establish marketing as a core function, with structures, resources and processes to support it, including data analytics. Second, universities should focus on building digital infrastructure and skills to improve their competitiveness in a digital world. Third, universities must build branding strategies that capture their distinctive positioning, and ensure consistency in their communication. Fifth, governments should explore reforms enhancing institutional autonomy and initiatives to build capacity, allowing universities to better adapt to competition.

In conclusion, the results show that the impact of marketing management is critical to the competitiveness of higher education institutions in developing countries. But it is moderated by a web of strategic, institutional and environmental factors. Researchers could build on this work by adding quantitative methods to a broader sample of countries, or by looking at the long-term impact of marketing strategies on academic performance and graduate satisfaction.

### **Conclusion**

This research explored the impact of marketing management in higher education in a more competitive environment, with an emphasis on emerging markets. The research shows that marketing has shifted from an administrative function to a strategic role, playing a critical role in institutional competitiveness, enrolment, and sustainability.

The research indicates that higher education institutions that embrace holistic marketing strategies, integrating digital marketing, branding, and internationalisation, are well-equipped to navigate

competitive and resource-limited environments. In particular, digital marketing now plays a vital role in increasing visibility and engagement with potential students, while effective branding helps to build differentiation and brand confidence. Globalization also enhances institutional positioning through global visibility and partnerships. But the implementation of these approaches varies and is constrained by institutional capacity, funding and regulatory frameworks.

At the same time, the research identifies structural factors that hinder the effectiveness of marketing management in developing countries. These include technology and expertise gaps and restricted institutional autonomy. This results in growing inequities among top and less-endowed universities, underlining the need for policy support and development programs.

This study adds to the body of knowledge by providing an integrated view of the marketing of higher education, with a focus on the importance of connecting marketing with institutional goals and contextual factors. It also offers actionable insights for higher education leaders and policymakers to improve institutional effectiveness in a competitive market environment.

However, the study has limitations, such as its qualitative approach and its use of proxy measures for marketing aspects. This study could be expanded by using large-scale quantitative data, comparing across countries, and exploring the long-term effects of marketing strategies on quality, graduate employability and innovation.

Overall, marketing management is no longer a luxury but a necessity for higher education in developing countries. Its deliberate use, with adequate resources and governance structures, is crucial to promoting competitiveness, adaptability and growth in an ever-globalising education environment.

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