

“Enhancing Student Enrollments in Private Higher Education Institutions in Oman: Uncovering Effective Competitive Strategies”

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Abstract: *In recent times, the amalgamation of globalization and the integration of digital technologies have forged a notable competitive environment for private higher educational institutions globally. The escalating desire for exemplary teaching methods, research prominence, knowledge dissemination, alumni employability and community engagement has instigated a rivalry among higher education institutions, paralleling other industry. In this context, these institutions are ceaselessly exploring avenues to secure financial stability, growth, and development. Each institution aspires to entice a larger student body and the finest educators on a global scale. Consequently, with the escalation of competition, the pertinent question arises: “What kind of competitive strategy should a private higher education institution adopt to enhance its proficiency and gain an advantage in attracting a greater volume of students for enrollment?” This research paper aimed to deeply delve into the prevailing body of literature to meticulously assess competitive strategies and their potential implications within private education institutions in Oman.*

Keywords: *Competitive Strategy, Student Enrollment, Higher Education Institutions*

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I. Introduction and Literature Review

One of Oman’s economic aims is to become an education hub for the region. The government recognized the importance of investing in private higher education to realize its aim and providing conducive investment atmosphere for such institutions. The government supported private higher educational institutes (HEIs) directly and indirectly through number of Royal Decrees, Bylaws, and legislations. Thus, the wisely guided government provided opportunities for the private sector to take part in higher education. The first private HEI was established in 1994 and reached to five universities and 19 colleges to date. Currently, arrangements are made to consider mergers and collaborations to integrate several private HEIs into larger entities to be more effective and competitive.

The evolving technological, environmental, economic, and political landscapes, together with the changing learners’ learning styles and demands are posing new challenges for higher education institutions. As a result, universities and colleges have observed a decline in student enrollment over the past few years. Various research endeavors including the work of Stalinska (2020) have documented that higher education sector, akin to other industry, is currently engaged in competition striving for students, financial resources, and proficient educators. These institutions are consistently exploring ways and means for financial stability, expansion, and advancement. Each institution’s objective is to draw in a greater number of students and attract top-tier educators on a global scale.

An article that was published in Wiley, 2021 makes the case that the speed of changes in the economy, changing demographics, the surge in online educational delivery, and the worldwide impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have all influenced the dependability of conventional economic models for universities. As a result, there’s been added pressure on these institutions to harmonize their strategies. In another study by Wilkins (2020), an attempt was made to comprehend how higher education institutions differentiate themselves in an extremely competitive environment. This study also aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of utilizing strategic group analysis as a method for analyzing markets and competitors. Wilkins (2020) conducted this investigation within the higher education institutions of the United Arab Emirates, aiming to uncover their positioning strategies and competitive approaches. According to Wilkins (2020) universities perpetually engaged in competition for the most exceptional students, faculty, and resources. Nevertheless, this competitive and rivalrous dynamic has become even more prominent due to the escalating commercialization of higher education in developed countries.

Tran (2021) suggests that the atmosphere within the realm of higher education has transitioned from an emphasis on scholarly model of student achievement to an approach centered around perceiving higher education as a commodity for consumers. The results of the study conducted by Kettunen (2002) reveal that the strategies of cost leadership, differentiation, and focus, commonly recognized in the business domain, can be effectively adapted to the context of higher education. Hence, the objective of this research is to conduct a theoretical examination of strategic management with the aim of identifying strategies that can be formulated to improve the enrollment of students in private higher educational institutions.

Although numerous global studies have been conducted on the competitiveness of higher educational institutions, specific attention has been given to understanding the competitive strategies required for HEIs in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Notably, Falahat et al. (2020), Jaiswal (2021), Mahdi et al. (2019) and Reich and Ruiperez-Valiente (2019) have undertaken studies in this area. Comparatively, there exists a scarcity of research in middle eastern countries, particularly in Oman. For instance, Abduljawad (2018), Fattah et al. (2020), and Magd and Kunjumohammed (2022) have emphasized the importance of mission, vision, and value statements in relation to the performance of higher education institutions. Several research projects have explored the practices of higher education institutions in this region. This literature review primarily aims to examine the insights that can be derived from the practices of other higher educational institutions. The ensuing literature review outlines the issue, supporting evidence, and potential solutions concerning the competition among higher education institutions. This review encompasses various theories and concepts related to competitive strategies.

Theories on Competitive Strategies and Positioning

Richard et.al (2020) in their book “Organization theory & design”, outlined a pair of models aimed at devising strategies. These were Michael Porter’s competitive strategies model and Miles and Snow’s strategy typology. The authors highlighted that Michael Porter’s framework, formulated after observing numerous businesses delineated three competitive strategies: Low-cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. Conversely, the Miles and Snow typology was grounded in the notion that managers should formulate strategies aligned with that with external environment. They proposed four strategies, the prospector, the defender, the analyzer, and the reactor- for effectively navigating on the external environment. The prospector strategy involves innovation, risk-taking, seeking out new opportunities and expansion. On the other hand, the defender strategy prioritizes stability and even retrenchment. Conversely, the analyzer strategy seeks a stable core business while innovating on the periphery. In contrast, the reactor strategy is not really a strategy at all, as reactors merely respond to environmental threats and opportunities.

Wang (2014) explained the theories of competitive advantage spanning approximately fifty years in the management community’s focus. As indicated by this study, an organization attains a competitive advantage by executing actions that surpass its competitors. According to Wang (2014), during the early period, there were two predominant theories of competitive advantage: the Market-Based View (MBV) and the Resource-Based View (RBV). Subsequently, the relational view strategy gained prominence and more recently, the concept of transient advantage emerged, challenging much of the established knowledge. The author concluded that there exists significant diversity in conceptualizing strategy, and a standardized approach to describing strategies appears to be absent. The author contended that achieving a specific market position necessitates proactive measures by the firm, drawing upon its internal or relational resources.

Michael Porter’s Competitive Strategies

Porter (1990) proposed three generic strategies that can be employed individually or in combination to create a strong position over the long term. These three generic strategies (cost leadership, differentiation, and focus) offer distinct approaches for navigating competitive markets. In the study conducted by Islami et al. (2020) investigated the significance of using Porter’s generic strategies in firms that operate in competitive environments. The authors sought to elucidate the impacts of Porter’s generic strategies (low-cost strategy, differentiation strategy, and focus strategy) on firm performance. The findings of this article reveal that the three of Porter’s generic strategies play a pivotal role in enhancing firm performance. Furthermore, the empirical findings suggest that the pursuit of the differentiation strategy has a more pronounced influence on augmenting firm performance compared to two other Porter’s generic strategies. The author’s concluding remarks underscore that the adoption of Porter’s generic strategies equips firms to effectively achieve their fundamental objectives: survival, profitability, and market share expansion.

Magretta (2011), asserts that Porter’s contributions serve as the bedrock for those serious about strategizing. His groundbreaking classics, *Competitive Strategy* (1980) and *Competitive Advantage* (1985) tackle a pivotal question: why do certain companies enjoy greater profitability than others? This foundational inquiry sparked a cascade of subsequent questions. At its core, Magretta emphasizes, Porter's strategic doctrine hinges on the act of discerning what to abstain from. The absence of competition would render strategy redundant, as competitive rivalry persistently challenges a company's pursuit and retention of an advantage. The path to sustained and superior performance, as argued by the author, emerges from the pursuit of distinctiveness.

A key tool in Porter's arsenal, the renowned five forces framework, visually encapsulates the ceaseless contest for profits within any industry. It's essential to grasp that competitive advantage, per Porter's conception, transcends an organization's self-perception of proficiency. Instead, it entails forging a connection between the value generated and the methods employed across the value chain. According to Porter, competitive advantage is fundamentally tied to value creation, achieved through distinct approaches compared to rivals. In this light, Magretta affirms that competitive advantage finds its root in activities – in the deliberate selection of either divergent methods or disparate undertakings relative to competitors.

Frasineanu (2008) originated the concept of competitive advantage, attributing its inception to Michael E. Porter, who formulated it as a response to the inadequacies of the comparative advantages model in explaining contemporary economic realities. In this study, Frasinianu expounds on Porter's development of this theory, accomplished through an analysis of ten significant international trading countries over a four-year period. Porter (2011) subsequently clarified the intricate relationship between competitive advantage and competitive strategy. The terms "competitive advantage" and "sustainable competitive advantage" have since gained widespread usage. Porter's framework delineates that competitive strategy pertains to industries, while sustainable competitive advantage pertains to individual firms.

Frasineanu emphasizes that the introduction of "competitive advantage" introduced the concept of the value chain, a comprehensive framework guiding strategic thought regarding a business's activities by evaluating their relative costs and roles in differentiation. Broadly speaking, competitive advantage has concretized and operationalized strategic approaches. As underscored by this study, competitive advantage serves as the structural foundation for describing, evaluating, and understanding strategy, intertwining it with corporate behavior and the sources of competitive edge. Furthermore, in competitive markets, a firm's performance is intrinsically linked to its competitive advantage.

Tanwar (2013) expounded on the proactive and defensive nature of competitive strategies, aimed at establishing a defensible position within an industry. The author illustrates how generic strategies can enable organizations to effectively manage the five competitive forces in an industry, surpassing their counterparts. Tanwar reinforces Michael Porter's elucidation of three primary routes through which firms can attain sustainable competitive advantage: the cost leadership strategy, differentiation strategy, and focus strategy (Porter, 1985). Typically, organizations opt for a single generic strategy, though some may endeavor to pursue multiple strategies concurrently.

Competitive Strategies for Private higher education institutions

Kettunen (2002) conducted a study focused on competitive strategies within the realm of higher education. The study's outcomes underscore that the generic strategies of overall cost leadership, differentiation, and focus can be effectively adapted to the context of higher education. The author contends that these overarching strategies offer a compelling framework for guiding the strategic management of individual units within higher education institutions. Kettunen (2002) maintains that organizations failing to develop their strategies along at least one of these three directions find themselves in an exceedingly disadvantageous strategic position. Such entities are likely to experience diminished profitability and compromised quality. However, effectively executing any of these strategies demands unwavering dedication and commitment.

Miotto et al. (2020) assert that the combination of globalization, rankings, and reduced public funding has led to the emergence of a fiercely competitive setting. As indicated by this study intangible assets like reputation and legitimacy play a pivotal role in establishing an enduring competitive advantage. The findings of this study suggest that a university's reputation has a significant and positive correlation with its legitimacy in the perception of faculty members. Consequently, this research offers a strategy for achieving a lasting competitive advantage among higher education institutions.

Masserini et al. (2019) explored the potential influence of educational service quality and the university's institutional reputation on the overall contentment of students with their university experience. Additionally, the authors investigated the potential implications of these connections on student's loyalty. This study underscores that in today's progressively competitive higher education landscape, both public and private universities are strategically focusing on enhancing the quality of educational services and their institutional image. The findings of the research offer valuable insights, revealing that student satisfaction and loyalty are primarily shaped by the effectiveness of teaching, lectures, and course organization – essential aspects of the educational service. The article reaffirms the pivotal role played by the university's image, elucidating its direct and indirect impacts on student satisfaction, loyalty, and the quality of teaching and lectures.

Belyukova et al. (2020) investigated into a social phenomenon within Russian universities, specifically the marketing endeavors aimed at recruiting students on a commercial basis. The authors contend that the optimal functioning of any educational establishment hinges on the adoption of novel administrative and marketing methodologies in its management. They further assert that given the current landscape, higher education institutions must revamp their strategies due to escalating competition triggered by the proliferation of commercial educational entities. The article reaffirms the imperative nature of marketing for higher education institutions,

emphasizing its indispensability within their operations. Moreover, it highlights that educational institutions that neglect this necessity and fail to actively participate in marketing initiatives might struggle to sustain their competitiveness within the educational services market. This study serves as substantiating evidence of the competitive dynamics present among private higher education services.

Some studies delve into research concerning the Arab region, with a particular focus on the GCC. Wilkins (2020) conducted a study investigating the strategies employed by higher education institutions in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as they position themselves and compete within the market. In the mentioned article, Wilkins detailed how these institutions can effectively divide the market in a competitive higher education landscape, evaluating the value of employing strategic analysis for both market and competitor assessments. The research findings underscored the significance of program accreditation within the UAE's educational market. The study's focus was on students who shared comparable needs, desires, and demographic characteristics. This research serves as proof of the implementation of competitive strategies within private higher education institutions.

Alsharari (2018) investigated the procedure of internationalizing higher education within the United Arab Emirates. The findings indicate the significance of the UAE positioning itself as an "educational hub" within the Middle East. The study also uncovers the trend where numerous private and foreign universities in the UAE have pursued global accreditation to attract not only local but also international students. Alsharari's conclusion suggests that regional integration could offer a viable path for these countries to advance their internationalization endeavors. Rather than enforcing standardization, the focus should be on refining academic programs across various types of institutions, including state, private, and international higher education establishments. This research presents a solution for drawing both local and international students by internationalizing higher education in the United Arab Emirates.

Alhalwaki and Hamdan (2019) explore the evolution of strategies for internationalization in higher education institutions in the Kingdom of Bahrain. According to their study, several factors were identified as influencers on the successful implementation of internationalization strategies. The research underscores a disparity between strategic intent and actual implementation practices within higher education institutions.

Rana et al. (2022) presents a blueprint for the future growth and strategic positioning of higher educational institutions, which is anticipated to be reflected in their strategic plans. The authors outline strategies to achieve effective international positioning, emphasizing the need to discern crucial priorities, establish a guiding framework for addressing immediate needs, and allocate resources judiciously to enhance their global presence.

Competition among Higher Education Institutions in Oman

Mishra and Gupta (2021) undertook an examination of higher educational establishments in Oman. The authors assert that the choice of a university or college is a significant decision for all prospective higher education students, exerting influence on their dedication, study motivation, and future career opportunities. This research explores into the factors influencing students' choices of various colleges and universities throughout Oman. The study underscores the gradual growth of higher education in Oman and the mounting rivalry among existing universities and colleges both within the nation and on a global scale. The authors contend that this intensifying competition among Oman's higher education institutions is compelling them to identify sources of competitive edge and entice students from both domestic and international contexts. This study serves as testament to the competitive landscape among Oman's universities and their endeavors to attract students on both national and international fronts.

The study conducted by Abushammala et al. (2021) aimed at determining the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the private higher education sector and students in Oman. This paper illustrates the diverse strategies embraced by private higher education establishments and the level of contentment among students regarding the transition to online education during the pandemic period. The study illuminated the difficulties faced by institutions as they endeavored to sustain educational offerings through online platforms while upholding fundamental principles and ensuring educational quality. The research conducted by Abushammala et al. (2021) indicates that a considerable number of households are encountering financial hardships due to COVID-19, which subsequently impacts students in terms of the fees they can afford. This investigation serves as confirmation of the obstacles confronted by private higher education institutions within the current circumstances.

Al Fazari (2020) asserts that within the Arab States, effective management, leadership, and overall performance of higher educational institutions are contingent upon a well-structured governance framework. Al Fazari's conclusion emphasizes that governance stands as a pivotal determinant for the trajectory of higher educational institutions in Oman. He further contends that a harmonious collaboration among academic staff, students, and administration characterized by transparency and democratic participation is imperative. In contrast, this research postulates that higher educational institutions should foster national cohesion and bridge the gap between academia and industry. The author indicated that the prospects of both students and institutions hinge on the cultivation of entrepreneurial acumen, self-directed learning, competitive spirit, and innovation skills among

students. This study offers remedies for higher educational institutions to secure their competitive edge and enduring viability by enhancing governance within their establishments.

As indicated by Kooli (2019), private higher education institutions in Oman function without a distinct strategic orientation. These institutions view quality assessment initiatives as obligatory strategies established to meet accountability requirements. The author contends that the implementation of quality accreditation serves as a potent avenue for the advancement of higher educational institutions in Oman. This investigation highlights the issue of higher education institutions in Oman lacking a coherent strategic orientation in their operations.

Al-Amri et al. (2020) conducted an examination of stakeholders within Omani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), encompassing students, and discovered that students exhibited a positive inclination toward standards associated with the caliber of teaching and learning. The study's outcomes reveal that when students seek an institution, they prioritize the program, underscoring that the institution's educational strength is closely linked to the quality of education it offers. Additionally, the research underscores students' enthusiasm for opting for higher education institutions in Oman.

The investigation led by Echchabi and Al-Hajri (2018) explored the primary determinants influencing students' choices of universities in Oman. The research demonstrated that the foremost factor driving university selection is the institution's reputation, followed by the duration of studies, academic excellence, and the qualifications of the academic staff. These findings offer universities valuable insights into the pivotal aspects and attributes to emphasize, thereby enhancing their overall performance. This section offers an overview of the proposed project designed to attract students to higher education institutions in Oman. Several studies, including ones by Kunjumohammed and Magd (2022), Kooli and Abadli (2022), Mishra and Gupta (2021), Wilkins (2020), Vogel (2020), and Fattah et al. (2020), have investigated strategies of higher education institutions in both GCC countries and Oman. Nonetheless, the number of studies focusing specifically on Oman is limited.

Rajasekar and Murthy (2020) investigated the strategies employed by banks in the Sultanate of Oman to navigate challenges during times of crisis. Hammami et al. (2021) assessed diverse facets of organizational knowledge capabilities and evaluated their influence on the performance of private firms in Oman. Madbouly et al. (2020) conducted research to identify factors shaping the competitiveness of the Sultanate of Oman.

Hazzi and Hammami (2019) conducted a study within Oman's higher education sector, focusing on dimensions of organizational justice. While studies such as Magd and Kunjumohammed (2022), Kooli and Abadli (2021), Mishra and Gupta (2021), Wilkins (2020), Vogel (2020), Fattah et al. (2020), Alsharari (2018), and Abduljawad (2018) have been carried out on GCC countries, there remains a scarcity of research centered on Oman. Despite the increasing attention to competition among higher educational institutions, it is noteworthy that there is a dearth of empirical research on this topic, particularly concerning the formulation of strategies for private higher education institutions to gain a competitive edge in attracting higher student enrollment.

II. Discussion and Interpretation

The pursuit of a competitive strategy to bolstering student enrollment within private higher education institutions prompted an exploration of numerous studies, revealing the importance of incorporating Porter's generic strategies to enhance institutional performance (Islami et al., 2020). As stated by Magretta (2011), Porter's work stands as the cornerstone for anyone seriously considering strategic matters. His seminal works, "Competitive Strategy" (1980) and "Competitive Advantage" (1985), are groundbreaking contributions. The author emphasizes that Porter often emphasizes the idea that "the essence of strategy is choosing what not to do." This underscores the notion that striving for distinctiveness enables an organization to attain enduring, superior outcomes. The author reaffirms that Porter's most renowned framework, the five forces, enables us to envision the profit-based rivalry inherent in every industry. Porter's perspective revolves around generating value in a distinctive manner compared to competitors. Consequently, the author contends that competitive advantage resides in the activities an organization opts to execute differently than its rivals.

Kettunen's (2002) study, which explored the necessity of competitive approaches in higher education, found that the concepts of overall cost leadership, differentiation, and focus can be effectively employed within the higher education realm. The researcher highlighted that these general strategies offer an intriguing foundation for strategically managing divisions within higher education institutions. It was contended that organizations neglecting to cultivate any of these three strategies would find themselves in a notably disadvantageous strategic position, leading to diminished profitability and quality. Yet, the successful application of these strategies in higher education necessitates complete dedication.

The investigations carried out by Falahat et al. (2020), Jaiswal (2021), Mahdi et al. (2019), and Reich and Ruiperez-Valiente (2019) have contributed to comprehending the requisite competitive strategies applicable to higher educational institutions in the GCC countries. The outcomes of Masserini et al. (2019) study offer valuable insights, underscoring the adoption of a focused strategy by universities to enhance their reputation and the key factors influencing student satisfaction, ultimately resulting in increased student enrollment. Rana et al. (2022) emphasizes strategies for achieving effective international positioning through distinct identification of

necessities and prudent allocation of resources to bolster their global presence. The literature review evidently reveals that numerous Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) worldwide adopt diverse competitive strategies to establish uniqueness and gain a competitive edge. For instance, Fumasoli et al. (2020) contend that comprehending university strategic positioning requires uncovering the determinants underlying such positioning. Njoro (2017) emphasizes innovation, diversification, and technology adoption. Jaiswal (2021) highlights the significance of customization and a well-structured pricing model to attract student enrollment. Abduljawad (2018) underscores the importance of higher education reforms. Conversely, Cabeliza (2021) concentrates on financially sustainable marketing strategies.

In summary, based on these findings, the research indicates that Michael Porter's generic strategies hold great significance for industries dealing with competition, as they help in establishing a competitive approach to gain an advantage over competing counterparts. The remaining unexplored aspect pertains to conducting a comprehensive study encompassing all the recommended variables to formulate a strategy aimed at enhancing student enrollment in private universities.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion, the necessity of developing a robust competitive strategy within private higher education institutions to enhance student enrollment cannot be emphasized enough. A comprehensive review of literature and subsequent discussions suggest that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) possess the capability to devise competitive strategies that enhance student enrollment in private higher education establishments. Like other industries, as the educational landscape becomes progressively competitive, these institutions encounter significant challenges from their counterparts. This underscores the need for the creation of competitive strategies to ensure their ongoing progress and advancement.

Numerous research studies underscore the relevance of applying Porter's generic strategies to shape competitive approaches within the realm of higher education. By leveraging the generic strategies expounded by Michael Porter and drawing insights from existing research, these higher education institutions can craft competitive strategies that not only enhance visibility but also resonate with prospective students. In an environment where distinctiveness is pivotal, a purposeful and calculated competitive strategy becomes pivotal for achieving success. Such strategies not only tackle the challenges of student enrollment but also foster an environment of innovation and advancement.

Ultimately, the requirement for a well-crafted competitive strategy in private higher education institutions transcends being a mere strategic choice; it stands as an indispensable necessity for securing their future. Through intentional development of a competitive edge, these institutions can effectively attract, engage, and retain students, thereby ensuring their sustained growth, reputation, and influence within the dynamic domain of higher education.

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