



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exploring the Opportunities and Challenges of Higher Education Marketing in Iraq

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In the evolving landscape of higher education, managers face a complex array of marketing opportunities and challenges that prioritize the enhancement of organizational reputation, student recruitment, and stakeholder engagement in a highly competitive and digital environment. To compete globally for students, a strategic approach to marketing is needed that emphasizes the importance of brand communications and developing a compelling value proposition for both domestic and international students. In this study, 62 published articles between 2018 and 2024 were evaluated using the software "MAXQDA2018" and thematic analysis. Digital marketing channels, industry needs for university services, and increasing demand for higher education were identified as opportunities, while financial resource provision, social and cultural challenges, marketing and communication difficulties, and organizational and management issues were recognized as challenges in higher education. Based on the opinions of 7 active higher education managers and using the AHP method, the most significant opportunity for universities is the increasing demand for higher education, and the most significant challenge is social and cultural problems at various levels of higher education in Iraq.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education marketing has become increasingly important in today's competitive educational landscape. Today, higher education institutions and colleges have increasingly recognized the necessity of using strategic marketing techniques to attract, engage, and retain students. The digital evolution of marketing has changed the way institutions connect with potential students and has made digitalization a crucial component of higher education marketing strategies. This shift emphasizes the need to establish trust and brand awareness to influence students' decision-making processes when choosing an educational institution (Mammadova, 2023). Higher education marketing is not just about promoting the institution; it also involves creating a value proposition for students by highlighting the quality of education, the institution's uniqueness, and post-graduation opportunities. This requires a comprehensive understanding of market segmentation, pricing strategies, and developing a strong brand identity that is essential for differentiating an institution in a competitive market (Barus, 2023). Furthermore, the global nature of the education sector demands an internationalization strategy to attract students from various parts of the world, focusing on brand management and expansion (Maringe, & Gibbs, 2008). Branding higher education institutions and national education systems plays a crucial role in enhancing their competitiveness in the

international market and involves a strategic process aimed at strengthening the identity and value of the education system and institutions to support their growth and respond to labor market needs (Subbarayalu, 2022). Effective marketing strategies are essential for improving the competitive position of higher education institutions in the educational services market (Mykhailyk, 2022). Relationship marketing emerges as a vital approach in this field, focusing on stakeholder engagement, partnerships, and creating shared value to strengthen growth and development in higher education (Mogaji et al., 2022). This approach emphasizes the importance of service-oriented behaviors, trust, and commitment in increasing student satisfaction and loyalty, which is essential for the success of higher education providers (John & De Villiers, 2022). The emergence of internet marketing has further expanded the scope of higher education marketing, providing cost-effective and efficient tools for global promotion. The use of corporate websites and social media platforms enables institutions to maintain their image and strengthen collaboration with students, applicants, and alumni (Beuzova et al., 2021). The marketing mix, including product, price, place, and promotion, along with physical evidence, people, and processes, plays a significant role in attracting potential students and improving internal services (Pardiyono et al., 2022). In summary, higher education marketing is essential for institutions aiming to progress in the current and future educational landscape. It requires a multifaceted approach that incorporates digitalization, relationship marketing, internationalization, and effective use of internet marketing tools. To date, numerous studies have been conducted on higher education marketing. The aim of this study is to review 62 relevant articles and extract opportunities and challenges in higher education from their content. Additionally, considering that the reviewed articles are international, the extracted opportunities and challenges will be ranked from the perspective of experienced managers active in the Iraqi higher education industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Higher education challenges in developing countries

Higher education encounters a multitude of obstacles in developing nations that impede its efficacy and expansion. One notable challenge is the insufficiency of technological infrastructure, hindering the application of blended learning and e-learning, as evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis (Brenya, 2023). Financial limitations and inadequate funding further compound these issues, constraining the access to essential resources and infrastructure required for high-quality education (Zarei & Mohammadi, 2022). Moreover, there exists a significant dearth in leadership cultivation and policy frameworks, impacting the strategic administration and globalization of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Azman et al., 2023). The proliferation of higher education, spurred by globalization, has resulted in overcrowded lecture halls and overwhelmed faculty, consequently affecting the educational and research standards (Abugre, 2018). Furthermore, the incorporation of information technology in education is still in its early phases, facing challenges such as inadequate internet connectivity and insufficient scalability to meet growing needs (Suresh & Kumaravelu, 2017). The phenomenon of brain drain, where proficient individuals migrate to developed nations, further diminishes the talent pool essential for academic and research excellence (Olo et al., 2021). Despite these hurdles, there exist avenues for enhancement through open and distance learning, which can bolster educational accessibility and contribute to economic progress. Nevertheless, this necessitates a concerted endeavor to establish explicit policies, sustainable financial planning, and community involvement to endorse higher education initiatives. HEIs must also concentrate on their core missions of education, research, and community engagement to foster socio-economic advancement and innovation. Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands a comprehensive strategy encompassing policy revision, investment in infrastructure, and global cooperation to fortify the higher education framework in developing nations (Hitimana et al., 2017).

The landscape of higher education in Iraq confronts diverse hurdles, encompassing inadequate scientific facilities, limited competence among teaching personnel, elevated student failure rates, obsolete curricula, absence of automation, deficient data governance, insufficient interdepartmental communication, and hindrances in implementing distance learning due to technological constraints and poverty (Yaseen et al., 2023; A Saeed & H Ayoub, 2022). The challenges were further intensified by the COVID-19 outbreak, prompting the adoption of e-learning to ensure educational continuity, thereby underscoring issues with remote learning technologies and platforms (Serin, 2022).

2.2 Higher education marketing

The domain of marketing within the realm of higher education is characterized by its intricate and multifaceted nature, encompassing a broad spectrum of strategic activities aimed at the promotion of educational institutions. The primary goal is to not only attract and retain students but also effectively address the diverse needs of various stakeholders, including faculty members, alumni, and donors (Canterbury, 2000). This field has witnessed significant growth primarily due to intensifying competition within the industry and the necessity for institutions to establish unique identities in a highly competitive global market environment. The effectiveness of marketing endeavors in higher education spans a wide range of activities, from detailed market research initiatives to strategic positioning efforts, and the development of comprehensive integrated marketing communication strategies. These strategies are not only comprehensive but also deeply rooted in ethical principles and practices (Chau et al., 2023).

Theoretical frameworks such as the CORD model highlight the importance of adopting marketing strategies that revolve around the curriculum. They also stress the significance of taking a holistic approach that avoids reducing education to a mere commodity. Moreover, these approaches must consider the constantly evolving market dynamics that define the higher education landscape (Canterbury, 2000). Branding emerges as a crucial element in this context, with educational institutions feeling compelled to establish strong and unique identities, along with compelling value propositions, to effectively compete on a global scale. Practical methodologies play a key role in bridging the gap between marketing theory and its practical applications, exploring aspects like market segmentation, pricing strategies, and effective brand management practices. These are often elucidated through the examination of relevant case studies (Marjanović et al., 2023). The marketing strategies implemented must be customized to align with the distinctive characteristics of educational services. This requires a thoughtful integration of transactional, relational, and spiritual dimensions within the marketing frameworks (Al-Adamat et al., 2023). Additionally, the pervasive impact of globalization and unforeseen events such as the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of flexible and innovative marketing approaches to sustain engagement levels and maintain competitiveness within the higher education sector (Krsmanovic et al., 2024). In conclusion, the development and implementation of a comprehensive and robust marketing strategy are essential imperatives for higher education institutions aiming to strengthen their competitive positions and effectively meet the evolving expectations of students and other key stakeholders (Mykhailyk, 2022).

The realm of higher education marketing in Iraq is characterized by several noteworthy gaps that are evident in the existing literature. Initially, it is apparent that there exists a notable deficiency in thorough investigations concerning the implementation and repercussions of Total Quality Management (TQM) within Iraqi higher education establishments, despite its pivotal significance in enhancing the quality and efficacy of education, as highlighted by Mhwise (2021). Furthermore, although the positive influence of strategic planning practices on academic marketing within private universities in Iraq has been established, there is a pressing need for further scholarly inquiry into the extent of these effects within public institutions and across diverse geographical regions, as emphasized by Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown (2021). The academic literature also reveals a

conspicuous absence of a robust theoretical discourse surrounding higher education marketing, a discourse that is fundamentally crucial for the formulation of meaningful marketing strategies that are tailored to the specificities of the Iraqi educational landscape, as underscored by Khudair et al. (2023). Additionally, while the various challenges confronting Iraq's higher education system, such as the presence of under-qualified teaching personnel and the deterioration of infrastructural facilities, have been extensively documented, their direct implications on marketing strategies remain largely unexplored, as articulated by Al-Shaikh (2022). The concept of Sustainable marketing, which seeks to harmonize economic, environmental, and social objectives, represents another area that demands greater attention, particularly in terms of its potential applications in enhancing the overall performance of higher education institutions in Iraq. Moreover, the aspect of branding within higher education institutions, especially concerning the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework that can be universally applied across different nations, is still at a nascent stage and necessitates a more rigorous examination, as noted by Mahmud (2013). The impact of the design and marketing of student financial aid programs on the decision-making behaviors of individuals seeking higher education, particularly those from lower-income brackets and minority groups, is yet another crucial area that has not received adequate attention within the Iraqi context, as highlighted by Fuchs et al. (2020). Finally, the competitive dynamics inherent in university branding, specifically in its application to specialized departments like teacher training, represent another gap that requires addressing to equip Iraqi universities with a competitive advantage, as observed by Ombamo (2011). Undertaking a comprehensive and methodologically sound research endeavor to address these identified gaps will undoubtedly make a substantial contribution to the advancement of effective higher education marketing strategies in Iraq.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research seeks to shed light on the numerous opportunities and challenges that shape the marketing strategies employed by higher education institutions in Iraq. Through a mixed-methods approach, a thorough review of the existing literature was first conducted to collect qualitative data, with the aim of distilling key insights and identifying patterns related to common opportunities and challenges in higher education marketing.

The literature review serves as the basic framework upon which our subsequent analysis and findings are built. Based on the literature study and interviews with experts in this field, it has been tried to discover the main factors that affect the marketing efforts of Iraqi higher education institutions. This process not only facilitates a deeper understanding of dominant dynamics, but also provides valuable ground for further research efforts. So, in the first part, 62 articles and the viewpoint of 11 experts in the field of higher education marketing and management (table 1), has been analyzed. The articles examined in this study were searched using keywords such as higher education marketing, university, postgraduate education, opportunities, and challenges of higher education.

Table 1: Interviewees identifications

Code	Specialization	Gender	Work Experience
E1	Educational Technology Consultant	Man	20
E2	Marketing and Communications Consultant in University	Man	21

E3	Human Resources Management in Educational Institution	Women	20
E4	Training Manager	Man	18
E5	Deputy of Education at the University	Man	32
E6	University Professor in International Marketing	Man	16
E7	Marketing and Branding Consultancy	Women	30
E8	University President	Man	35
E9	University Professor in Strategic Management	Women	14
E10	University Professor in Educational Management	Man	14
E11	University Professor in Science and Technology Policy Making	Man	25

After combining the insights gained from the literature, the Analytical Hierarchy Process (AHP) method has been used to systematically prioritize the identified opportunities and challenges. Recognizing the complexity inherent in decision-making processes, AHP provides a robust analytical framework that enables us to measure and rank the various factors under consideration. Using the AHP method, we aim to create a comprehensive hierarchy of priorities, thereby providing clarity and direction to stakeholders tasked with navigating the complexities of higher education marketing in Iraq.

4. RESULTS

In the present study, we sought to answer the question of what are the opportunities and challenges of higher education marketing in Iraq. For this purpose, using the theme analysis technique, we answered this question. In analyzing the codes of the articles to discover the marketing opportunities of higher education in Iraq, four main categories of codes were finally identified which is shown in Tables 2.

Table 2: Opportunities of higher education marketing in Iraq

Main themes	Sub-Themes	Sub-cods	Sources in literature and interviews
	University Marketing and Outreach	Development of information technology and increasing access to students and professionals	Ansari et al., 2022 Graves et al., 2021 Pires & Fortes, 2023 Sibanda, T., & Josua, 2022

Leveraging Digital Marketing Channels			Khilukha et al., 2020 E1, E3, E4, E5, E7, E8, E9, E11
		The role of university website features	Ghorbanzadeh et al., 2024 E11
		international virtual exchange	Sibawaihi, S., & Fernandes, V. (2023). E1
	Digital Marketing Strategies	Technological innovations, such as online learning platforms and Metaverse technology	Ansari et al., 2022 Yang wt al., 2022 Hmoud et al., 2023
		Advertising on social media	Pires, D., & Fortes, N. (2023). Perera et al., 2023 Khan et al., 2021 E2, E9
		Online learning platforms and digital resources	Graves et al., 2021 E5,E8,E9,E10
		The rapid evolution of online marketing and e-learning	Mense et al., 2018 E2, E3, E4, E6, E7, E8, E10, E11
		Internationalization	Belarbi et al., 2023 Sibawaihi & Fernandes, 2023 Ting, 2022 E3,E5
		Branding	Perera et al, 2023 Gardiana et al., 2023 Salameh et al. 2022

			Rui et al., 2023 Ghorbanzadeh & Sharbatian, 2024 E4
leveraging the opportunity to communicate with the industry and society	Opportunities available in relation to the industry	Designing educational programs to meet the needs of the local and global labor market	Roberts et al., 2023 Pocol et al., 2022 Minaev, 2022 E6, E7
		Collaborate with industry and the private sector to create job opportunities for graduates	Atta-Owusu et al., 2021 Akele & Chukwu, 2020 E2, E11
		Using local and cultural resources as educational and research tools	Nikolova & Georgiev, 2022 Karpova & Burukina, 2019 E1, E4, E10
		Using academic research and knowledge as a tool to increase capability and economic growth	De Turi, I., & Antonicelli, M., 2020 E1, E2, E4, E10
		Using higher education as a tool to promote civic and democratic values in societies	Ihsan et al., (2023) E3, E11
	Opportunities available in relation to the Society	Developing educational programs to empower the local community in the fields of natural resource management and environmental protection	Thompson et al., (2020). E4, E 5, E 6
		Using academic research and knowledge as a tool to solve social problems in developing countries	Mitlin et al., 2020 E10, E11
		The potential role of the higher education system in creating peace and stability	Esmailzadeh, 2023 Kester et al., 2022

			E1,E4,E5,E8
		The effect of higher education on increasing social mobility	Bautista et al., 2023 Yang, 2024
		The impact of higher education on reducing social inequality	Haller, 2023 E10, E11
		Integrating cultural and artistic elements into social engagement initiatives	Geagea et al., 2019 E1,E5,E8
		Having joint plans with the society and the government to solve the daily problems	Pelekh, 2020 E2,E4,E6,E9
		The importance of incorporating local cultural elements into educational tools to better engage with learners and promote a deeper understanding of different cultural heritages	Tindowen et al., 2023 Heng & Yeh , 2022 E1,E4,E5,E8
leveraging the increasing demand for higher education	Socio-economic factors	Socio-economic aspirations	OKORO, 2020 Volchik et al., 2018 E1,E4,E5,E8
		Social movements	Patel, 2023 E3
		social inequality	Brown & James, 2020
		Lack of employment opportunities	Camilleri, 2019 E1,E3,E5,E10
	Educational and demographic factors	Lack of access to quality education	Grancharova–Serbezova, 2018 Camilleri, 2019 E2,E4,E5,E9

		Globalization and competitiveness	Mense et al., 2018
		Demographic and population changes in developing countries	Salihu, 2020 E1,E4,E5



Figure 1: Opportunities of higher education marketing in Iraq

The opportunities identified in this research underscore the potential for higher education institutions in Iraq to enhance their marketing efforts and position themselves for success in a competitive landscape. By capitalizing on the increasing demand for education, fostering collaboration with industry and society, and leveraging digital marketing channels, institutions can differentiate themselves, attract top talent, and drive positive outcomes for students, stakeholders, and the broader community. According to AHP results, leveraging the increasing demand for higher education in Iraqi experts opinion is in the first priority. It means that there is an emergent educational market in Iraq. At the other hand, Cultural and Social Challenges, is the most important challenge among other ones. Maybe the traditional structure of Iraq society can make some difficulties in this way for demanders.

1. Leveraging the increasing demand for higher education: Iraq has witnessed a significant rise in the demand for higher education in recent years, driven by various socio-economic factors such as population growth, urbanization, and increasing awareness of the importance of education for personal and professional development. This presents a prime opportunity for higher education institutions to expand their outreach and attract more students. By strategically positioning themselves to meet the evolving needs and preferences of prospective students, institutions can capitalize on this growing demand. This may involve offering diverse academic programs, flexible learning options, and tailored support services to cater to a broad spectrum of learners.

2. Leveraging the opportunity to communicate with the industry and society: Higher education institutions in Iraq have the opportunity to strengthen their ties with industry partners and the broader society, fostering mutually beneficial relationships. Collaborating with industry stakeholders can enhance the relevance of academic programs, ensuring alignment with market demands and industry trends. Additionally, engaging with the community through outreach initiatives, knowledge-sharing events, and social impact projects can enhance the institution's reputation and credibility. By positioning themselves as key contributors to socio-economic development and addressing societal challenges, higher education institutions can enhance their appeal to prospective students and stakeholders alike.

3. Leveraging digital marketing channels: The proliferation of digital technology has revolutionized the way higher education institutions engage with prospective students and market their offerings. Digital marketing channels offer a cost-effective and efficient means of reaching a wide audience, transcending geographical barriers and enabling targeted communication. Higher education institutions can leverage various digital platforms such as social media, search engine optimization (SEO), email marketing, and content marketing to amplify their visibility, generate leads, and nurture relationships with prospective students. By harnessing the power of data analytics and marketing automation tools, institutions can gain valuable insights into consumer behavior and tailor their marketing strategies for maximum impact.

The opportunities of higher education marketing in Iraq are multifaceted, reflecting the country's unique challenges and the global shift towards digitalization and internationalization in education. The strategic planning practices in Iraqi private universities have shown a positive impact on academic marketing, highlighting the importance of structured approaches to enhance the visibility and appeal of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Iraq (Khudair et al., 2019). Despite the significant destruction of infrastructure and ongoing security concerns, the resilience of Iraq's higher education system, coupled with its potential role in fostering peace and stability, presents a unique opportunity for marketing the sector as a cornerstone for national development (Mahmud, 2013). The rapid evolution of online marketing and eLearning offers Iraqi HEIs the chance to expand their reach and improve their educational offerings, leveraging the global accessibility of the Internet to attract both domestic and international students (Minculete, 2013). The Global Links Program exemplifies how partnerships and social entrepreneurship can serve as innovative marketing tools, promoting economic development and educational advancements through international collaboration (Dato-on & Al-Charaakh, 2013).

Furthermore, the branding of higher education, both at the national and institutional levels, emerges as a critical strategy for distinguishing Iraqi HEIs in the competitive international market of educational services (Lowrie, 2007). The implementation of Total Quality Management (TQM) in Iraqi HEIs can significantly enhance their marketability by improving the quality of education and institutional performance, thereby attracting more students and academic affiliates (Mhwise, 2021). The diversification of portfolios and the strategic use of marketing communications are essential for HEIs to improve their corporate reputation and academic branding, attracting a wider audience of students and faculty (Camilleri, 2019). The Higher Education Marketing certificate program underscores the importance of specialized training in marketing strategies tailored to the unique needs of higher education audiences (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Moreover, international partnerships, especially those focused on peacebuilding, offer a unique marketing proposition by highlighting the role of Iraqi HEIs in fostering global collaboration and stability (Wendt et al., 2022). Lastly, the internationalization of higher education in Iraq presents an opportunity to enhance the global standing and attractiveness of Iraqi HEIs through the adoption of international curricula, standards, and collaborative programs (Mohamed, 2012). Collectively, these opportunities underscore the potential for strategic marketing to transform Iraq's higher education landscape, making it more competitive, inclusive, and globally connected.

Here are some Sample text in literature and interview:

With the rise of internet marketing tools, such as corporate websites and social media platforms, universities can efficiently promote their programs globally at a low cost (Khilukha et al., 2020).

"These days, universities are using advanced technologies to transform their marketing strategies. Integrating advanced information technology plays an essential role in increasing the reach of students and professionals alike. By harnessing the power of academic websites and online platforms, we can create an experience Create a unified user interface and facilitate efficient information dissemination and interaction." (E11)

The study of educational program competence models based on intellectual analysis of labor market professional requirements involves utilizing tools like data mining and machine learning to analyze market needs (Minaev, 2022).

Higher education positively correlates with environmental management. Developing educational programs can empower communities in natural resource management and environmental protection, enhancing sustainable practices (Thompson et al., 2020).

Alignment of educational curricula with the demands of local labor markets has become critical for us. Universities have a unique opportunity to develop programs that equip students with the skills and knowledge needed by industries, thereby increasing the employability and readiness of graduates for the professional world. (E6)

I think we should define joint programs with industry and society and thus create more dynamics between university and society. Anyway, society's problems must be solved, and who better than the university? (E9)

"Our youth are hungry to communicate with the world and be seen, and I think the university can provide them with this field" (E8)

"I think that for the growth and promotion of the country, universities should be strengthened and all social groups should be able to participate in this field " (E4).

And also four categories are discovered as challenges of higher education marketing, which is shown in Tables 3.

Table 3: The challenges of higher education marketing themes

Main themes	Subthemes	Codes	Sources in literature and interviews
Financial and Resource Challenges	Lack of financial resources and dedicated budget for marketing and advertising in higher education	Budgetary Constraints	Huebner, 2019
		Resource Allocation Challenges	E1,E4,E5,E8, E11
		Underinvestment in Marketing	
	Ensuring sufficient budget for marketing activities	Budget Allocation Strategy	Camilleri, 2021
Financial Resource Optimization		Beltyukova et al, 2020	

			E3, E5, E6
Cultural and Social Challenges	Cultural and language differences that may hinder effective communication and advertising with students	Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges	Maljichi, 2019
		Cultural Sensitivity in Marketing	E5, E7
		Language Localization Strategies	
	Traditional values, biases, and ethnocentrism	Cultural Bias in Education	Mammadova , 2023
		Ethnocentric Perspectives	E1,E4,E5,E8
	Lack of societal and cultural prioritization of higher education in some regions and communities	Societal Devaluation of Higher Education	Uddin et al., 2021
		Regional Disparities in Educational Opportunities	Zuenkova et al., 2022 E2, E6, E9
	Political and security issues that may restrict communications and advertising.	Communication Restrictions Due to Political Instability	Lomonosov et al., 2019
Security Concerns Impacting Marketing Activities		E11 Ramrathan, 2021 Roberts et al., 2023 Susanto & Septianita, 2019 E10,E11	
Social and economic welfare issues that may lead to	Socioeconomic Barriers to Higher Education Access	Mammadova, 2023 Robinson , (2023)	

	increased concerns and social problems	Social Issues Impacting Student Well-being	E2, E5, E9 Seitl, C., & Rejnö, Å. (2022)
		Community Development and Social Mobility	Story, 2023 E1, E4, E5 Mammadova, 2023 Story, 2023 Camilleri , 2019 E6, E7
Marketing and Communication Challenges	Neglect of local needs and issues that may result in lack of connection and alignment with the local market	Local Market Disconnect	Kordzaia, N. (2022). Mammadova, 2023
		Community Engagement Deficiency	Beltyukova et al, 2020 E1, E9, E10 Camilleri, 2021 E1,E4,E5,E8
	Inability to identify and attract suitable target markets and effectively communicate with them	Target Market Identification Challenges	Pardiyono et al., 2022
		Communication Strategy Inefficacy	E2, E7, E9
Neglect of students' needs and preferences and providing services and educational programs tailored to them.	Student-Centric Service Deficiency	Huebner, 2019	
	Lack of Personalization in Educational Programs	E1,E4,E5,E8, E11	

	Intense competition with other educational institutions and inability to differentiate	Competitive Differentiation Dilemma	Camilleri, 2021
		Strategic Positioning Struggles	Belyukova et al, 2020 E3, E5, E6
Organizational and Management Challenges	Lack of knowledge and skills in marketing and advertising in some universities and educational institutions.	Marketing Competency Gap	Maljichi, 2019
		Professional Development Needs	E5, E7
		Outsourcing Marketing Functions	
	Constraints in accessing human resources and professional marketing capabilities.	Human Resource Limitations	Mammadova, 2023
		Professional Marketing Capability Gap	E1,E4,E5,E8
	Infrastructural and organizational issues that may hinder effective marketing implementation.	Infrastructure Limitations	Uddin et al., 2022
Organizational Bottlenecks		E3, E5, E9	
Shortage of skilled workforce in marketing and advertising in some developing countries.	Marketing Talent Gap	Zuenkova et al., 2022	
	Capacity Building Needs	E2, E6, E9 Lomonosovet al., 2019 E11	

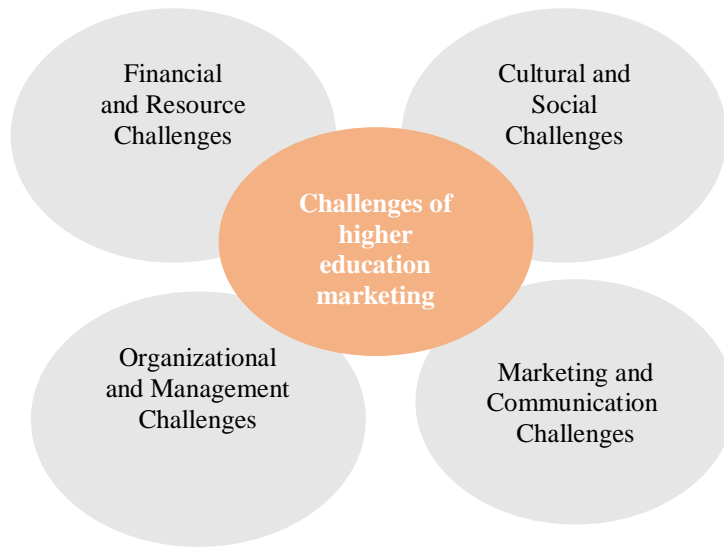


Figure 2: challenges of higher education

The challenges identified in this research underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of higher education marketing in Iraq. By addressing financial and resource constraints, navigating cultural and social dynamics, enhancing organizational effectiveness, and optimizing marketing communications, institutions can overcome barriers and unlock opportunities for growth, innovation, and impact in the dynamic higher education landscape.

Financial and Resource Challenges: Higher education institutions in Iraq often face significant financial constraints and resource limitations, which can impede their marketing efforts. Limited funding may restrict investment in marketing initiatives, technology infrastructure, faculty development, and facility upgrades, hampering the institution's ability to compete effectively. Moreover, economic instability and fluctuating government budgets further exacerbate financial challenges, making it difficult for institutions to sustain long-term strategic initiatives. To address these challenges, institutions may need to explore alternative revenue streams, pursue partnerships with private sector entities, and advocate for increased government investment in higher education.

Cultural and Social Challenges: Iraq's cultural and social landscape presents unique challenges for higher education marketing. Cultural norms and societal perceptions regarding education, gender roles, and career paths may influence enrollment patterns and student preferences. Moreover, social factors such as ethnic diversity, regional disparities, and historical tensions can complicate marketing efforts, requiring institutions to adopt culturally sensitive and inclusive messaging strategies. Addressing these challenges may entail fostering dialogue, promoting diversity and inclusion, and tailoring marketing campaigns to resonate with diverse audiences while respecting cultural sensitivities.

Organizational and Management Challenges: Higher education institutions in Iraq often grapple with organizational and management challenges that impact their marketing effectiveness. Inefficient administrative processes, bureaucratic hurdles, and hierarchical structures may hinder agility and innovation, slowing down decision-making and responsiveness to market dynamics. Additionally, leadership transitions, governance issues, and resistance to change can disrupt strategic planning and implementation efforts, undermining the institution's competitive position. To overcome these challenges, institutions may need to streamline operations, foster a culture of collaboration and innovation, and invest in leadership development and change management initiatives.

Marketing and Communication Challenges: Marketing higher education in Iraq is fraught with various communication challenges stemming from language barriers, limited access to information,

and fragmented media landscapes. Inadequate infrastructure, unreliable internet connectivity, and censorship may further constrain the reach and effectiveness of marketing campaigns, particularly in remote or conflict-affected areas. Additionally, competition for students, faculty, and research funding necessitates differentiated positioning and targeted messaging strategies to stand out in the crowded marketplace. To address these challenges, institutions may need to invest in multilingual communication strategies, leverage offline channels alongside digital platforms, and foster partnerships with local media outlets and community influencers.

Here are some examples of sentences extracted from the literature and the text of the interviews, which were the source of the secondary codes:

Higher education faces the need to increase digital marketing budgets due to shifting demographics and rising costs, aligning with the growing importance of digital advertising in the marketing mix (Huebner, 2019)

Insufficient funding is a primary issue in marketing activities in higher education institutions, hindering their effectiveness and potential for growth, as highlighted in the research (Beltyukova et al, 2020).

"We really have a financial problem. While Iraq has a good oil income, we expect the statesmen to pay more attention to higher education" (E3)

preconceived ideas, prejudices, and ethnocentrism can hinder intercultural communication, making it essential to be open to differences and variations in communication styles (Maljichi, 2019).

In the context of geopolitical instability, the phenomenon of brand disloyalty due to the "country effect" and risks associated with avoiding Russian universities' brands by foreign applicants can hinder marketing strategies (Zuenkova et al., 2022).

In the traditional Iraqi society, women who can be a productive group have not been paid enough attention, and this makes a good part of the market demand for education still potential and not exploited. (E9)

Neglecting the needs and preferences of students and failing to offer customized services and educational programs tailored to them is indeed a significant challenge in higher education marketing (Seitl & Rejnö, 2022).

We have had many periods of instability in Iraq, and this has made us unable to have enough specialized and skilled personnel (E6)

5. OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES PRIORITIES

5.1 AHP methodology:

The Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) is a method for organizing and analyzing complex decisions, using math and psychology. It was developed by Thomas L. Saaty in the 1970s and has been refined since then. It contains three parts: the ultimate goal or problem you're trying to solve, all of the possible solutions, called alternatives, and the criteria you will judge the alternatives on. AHP provides a rational framework for a needed decision by quantifying its criteria and alternative options, and for relating those elements to the overall goal.

Stakeholders compare the importance of criteria, two at a time, through pair-wise comparisons. Example, do you care about job benefits or having a short commute more, and by how much more? AHP converts these evaluations into numbers, which can be compared to all of the possible criteria. This quantifying capability distinguishes the AHP from other decision making techniques.

In the final step of the process, numerical priorities are calculated for each of the alternative options. These numbers represent the most desired solutions, based on all users' values.

5.2 Opportunities priorities

I1: leveraging the increasing demand for higher education

I2: Leveraging Digital Marketing Channels

I3: leveraging the opportunity to communicate with the industry and society

Table 6: Pairwise comparison table of higher education marketing opportunities in Iraq

	leveraging the increasing demand for higher education		Leveraging Digital Marketing Channels		leveraging the opportunity to communicate with the industry and society	
leveraging the increasing demand for higher education	1	1				
Leveraging Digital Marketing Channels	4	8	1	1		
leveraging the opportunity to communicate with the industry and society	3	8	4	6	1	1

Table 7: The weight obtained from the comparison of criteria

Indicators	I1	I2	I3			Weight
leveraging the increasing demand for higher education	0/533333	0/545	0/516			0/531639
Leveraging Digital Marketing Channels	0/266667	0/273	0/29			0/2765722
leveraging the opportunity to communicate with the industry and society	0/2	0/182	0/194			0/1917889

Table 8: The consistency rate among indicators

Indicators	Weight
leveraging the increasing demand for higher education	0/532
Leveraging Digital Marketing Channels	0/277
leveraging the opportunity to communicate with the industry and society	0/192

CI=	0/001
n=	3

The inconsistency ratio is an indicator that shows how much the pairwise comparisons are consistent with each other. Pairwise comparisons are made by experts and the results of the comparisons can be trusted if these comparisons are consistent. If the consistency rate is less than 0.1, the consistency of the comparisons is acceptable. Otherwise, the comparisons should be revised. Here, the value of the consistency index CI is equal to 0.001 and so it is acceptable.

5.3 Challenges priorities

Table 9: Pairwise comparison table of higher education marketing challenges in Iraq

	Financial and Resource Challenges		Organizational and Management Challenges		Marketing and Communication Challenges		Cultural and Social Challenges	
Financial and Resource Challenges	1	1						
Organizational and Management Challenges	9	7	1	1				
Marketing and Communication Challenges	5	8	5	9	1	1		
Cultural and Social Challenges	9	6	9	8	9	4	1	1

Table 10: The weight obtained from the comparison of criteria

	I1	I2	I3	I4			Weight
Financial and Resource Challenges	0/22672	0/225	0/241	0/222			0/228611
Organizational and Management Challenges	0/2915	0/289	0/271	0/296			0/286907
Marketing and Communication Challenges	0/1417	0/161	0/15	0/148			0/150217
Cultural and Social Challenges	0/34008	0/325	0/338	0/333			0/334265

Table 11: The consistency rate among indicators

Indicators	Weight
Financial and Resource Challenges	0/229
Organizational and Management Challenges	0/287
Marketing and Communication Challenges	0/15
Cultural and Social Challenges	0/334
CI=	0/001
n=	4

The inconsistency ratio is an indicator that shows how much the pairwise comparisons are consistent with each other. Pairwise comparisons are made by experts and the results of the comparisons can be trusted if these comparisons are consistent. If the consistency rate is less than 0.1, the consistency of the comparisons is acceptable. Otherwise, the comparisons should be revised. Here, the value of the consistency index CI is equal to 0.001 and so it is acceptable.

6. CONCLUSION

Higher education marketing presents both opportunities and challenges. Universities must strategically analyze their target markets, brand equity, and communication methods to thrive (Mammadova, 2023). The sector faces increasing competition, online education disruptions, and evolving student preferences, necessitating a strategic approach to attract students (Maringe & Gibbs, 2008). Effective marketing strategies, including segmentation, pricing, brand management, and internationalization, are crucial for universities to position themselves as attractive service providers (Khan et al., 2021). While most studies focus on segmenting students, universities must also consider diverse audiences like parents and employers in their marketing efforts (Mogaji et al., 2020). By embracing digital and traditional marketing tools, higher education institutions can navigate these challenges and leverage opportunities for growth and success.

According to the results of this research, there are 3 main categories as higher education marketing in Iraq: increasing demand for higher education, opportunity to communicate with the industry and society and digital marketing channels.

The increasing demand for higher education presents a plethora of opportunities for higher education marketing through the accentuation of the significance of branding and marketing strategies aimed at attracting and retaining students in a fiercely competitive market (Mammadova, 2023). As higher education institutions confront heightened levels of competition, the deployment of marketing technologies and strategies assumes paramount importance in fortifying their competitive standings within the realm of educational services (Judson and Taylor, 2014). The comprehension of consumer demands, the identification of target markets, and the proficient communication with stakeholders emerge as indispensable constituents of triumphant marketing endeavors in higher education, whether on a local scale or on an international platform (Mykhailyk, 2022). The trend towards marketization in higher education introduces market-driven mechanisms and prompts institutions to embrace enterprise-like accounting systems to effectively vie in the quasi-market milieu (Riccomini et al., 2021). Educational marketing empowers institutions to augment their competitiveness by customizing initiatives to cater to consumer needs and enhance the overall brand equity.

The establishment of effective communication channels with industry stakeholders and society at large has the potential to spawn myriad prospects for higher education marketing. By fostering collaborative partnerships with businesses, industries, and research establishments, higher education institutions (HEIs) can elevate their academic branding and allure students and faculty members (Camilleri, 2020). Harnessing both traditional and contemporary marketing communications can assist HEIs in showcasing their quality education and impactful research initiatives on a global scale, thereby broadening their student base through the recruitment of both domestic and international scholars (Camilleri, 2019). Gaining insights into the target market, articulating brand values cogently, and bolstering brand equity in local as well as international spheres emerge as pivotal for HEIs (Talarico, 2022). Moreover, by adeptly managing both controlled and uncontrolled modes of communication, HEIs can refine their image among stakeholders and convey their corporate identities via diverse communication avenues, encompassing both traditional and digital platforms (Mammadova, 2023). These strategic methodologies equip HEIs to navigate the escalating competition and capitalize on opportunities within challenging socio-economic landscapes.

The realm of digital marketing channels unfolds a myriad of prospects for higher education marketing by affording institutions the ability to reach a broader audience, engage with potential students at a more intimate level, and effectively promote their offerings. Through the realm of digital marketing, universities can leverage electronic media to captivate students and stakeholders, engage in interactive dialogues with them, and foster trust and brand recognition (Kusumawati, 2018). These platforms furnish universities with the means to diversify their array of programs, attract both local and international students, and cultivate collaborative partnerships with various stakeholders, thereby enriching their academic branding and competitive edge (John, 2020). Furthermore, digital marketing strategies play a pivotal role in enticing students, influencing their decision-making processes, and fostering value-laden relationships grounded on trust, dedication, and service orientation. On the whole, harnessing digital marketing channels empowers higher education institutions to adapt to the digital era, refine their marketing communications, and forge ahead in the increasingly cutthroat landscape of academia.

At the other hand, according to the results of this research, there are 4 categories for higher education marketing challenges: financial challenges, Organizational and Managerial challenges, Marketing and Communicational challenges and cultural and social challenges.

Financial challenges have a significant impact on the field of higher education marketing, compelling universities to seek out innovative approaches to generate income and cut down on expenditures (AL-Ghaswyneh, 2020; Mourao, 2010). The economic downturn experienced during the years 2008-2009 resulted in deficits in revenue, affecting both affluent private institutions and public colleges, leading to hikes in tuition fees and compromises in the standard of education provided (Geiger, 2010). The escalating expenses associated with education, in conjunction with dwindling government funding, give rise to a complex and intricate predicament for universities, underscoring the critical importance of strategic financial planning and the ability to adapt to the requirements of the market (Marshall & Marshall, 2018). Moreover, the transition towards distance learning, which has been expedited by the global health crisis, underscores the significance of implementing cost-efficient methods of educational delivery to address the evolving needs of students and keep pace with international trends (Alkubaisi & Rasool, 2020). In light of these challenges, universities are compelled to prioritize financial sustainability while concurrently enhancing their marketing strategies in order to allure students and secure their enduring prosperity within a fiercely competitive academic environment.

The challenges encountered in terms of organization and management significantly influence the domain of higher education marketing by necessitating a transformation of conventional

methodologies to align with the requisites of a progressively globalized economy (Abdelgaffar, 2021). The commercialization of higher education introduces competitiveness, compelling institutions to tailor academic programs to appeal to fee-paying students, thereby impacting the accessibility, quality, and equity in the educational sector (del Cerro Santamaría, 2020). The globalization of the university framework demands a shift in strategies to accommodate the evolving needs of stakeholders and societal anticipations, thereby presenting obstacles for university administrators amidst a volatile economic and political backdrop (Altbach et al., 2019). Furthermore, the rapid advancement of online marketing, influenced by the internet and digital technologies, offers both prospects and challenges for educational establishments to bolster their reputation, implement efficient strategies, and cater to the expectations of beneficiaries through electronic marketing in higher education (Altbach et al., 2019).

The challenges related to marketing and communication have a significant impact on higher education institutions (HEIs) on a global scale. The continuous evolution of the landscape within HEIs, which has been extensively discussed in various scholarly contexts (Rayburn et al., 2021; Camilleri, 2019), underscores the critical necessity for implementing strategic marketing approaches aimed at both attracting and retaining students, particularly amidst the backdrop of intensifying competition and evolving student behaviors. Various issues, such as the imperative for establishing sustainable brand identities, the effective communication of sustainability initiatives, and the shift towards adopting a more market-driven orientation within HEIs (del Cerro Santamaría, 2020), serve to underscore the utmost importance of effectively addressing these multifaceted challenges. In order to thrive within the fiercely competitive academic landscape and safeguard their institutional standing, HEIs must adeptly utilize contemporary marketing communication strategies, foster collaborative partnerships with key stakeholders, and actively seek to diversify their student demographics. It is evident that the deployment of strategic marketing initiatives and proficient brand communications is indispensable for HEIs as they navigate the complexities inherent within the contemporary higher education terrain, thus ensuring their long-term sustainability and enduring success (Lee & Cho, 2020).

The impact of cultural and social challenges on higher education marketing strategies is of significant importance in current academic discourse. Within the realm of higher education, the phenomenon of marketization has gained momentum, driven by factors such as competition and the imperative to attract fee-paying students who align with their specific preferences. This trend towards commercialization is particularly pronounced in countries like India, where it has had profound effects on various aspects including access, quality, equity, and the attitudes of students towards the educational process as highlighted by Tien et al. (2021). In response to these changes, universities have been compelled to adjust their operational methods by incorporating management principles and adopting corporate communication styles. This shift is reshaping the traditional socio-academic ethos of these institutions to better meet the demands of the market, as discussed by Hwang and Choi (2019).

According to the results of this research for Iraq managers the most important opportunity is leveraging the increasing demand for higher education and the most important challenge is cultural and social challenges.

7. RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Understanding the limitations of a research study is crucial for interpreting its findings accurately and assessing the generalizability and validity of its conclusions. Here are some common limitations that researchers may encounter and should acknowledge. **Sample Size and Representativeness:** One limitation of many research studies is the sample size and its representativeness. If the sample size is small or not sufficiently diverse, the findings may not be generalizable to the broader population. Additionally, the sample may not adequately represent the target population, leading to potential

biases in the results. Ethical Considerations: Ethical considerations may impose limitations on research studies, particularly in sensitive or vulnerable populations. Researchers must adhere to ethical guidelines and principles, which may restrict certain research activities or impose requirements for informed consent, confidentiality, or data protection.

Acknowledging these limitations demonstrates transparency and integrity in research reporting and encourages critical appraisal of the study's findings. Researchers should discuss how these limitations may have influenced the results and offer recommendations for addressing them in future research endeavors.

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