



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

**Understanding Student Choice of University
and Marketing Strategies in Syrian Private
Higher Education**

by

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given wherever reference has been made to the works of others.

Abstract

The focus of this study is student choice and marketing in the private higher education sector in Syria. The literature review shows two contrasting attitudes regarding introducing marketing into education. Over the last few decades, the need for marketing has become more critical for organisational efficiency. Reasons that make marketing an important aspect in reflecting positively on an institution and the community are highlighted. The literature review concludes that the literature on marketing higher education is mainly based in Western contexts and cultures. It also highlights the paucity of literature combining strategies of marketing higher education and student choice of university, hence the focus of the study.

The study is underpinned by three research questions aiming at investigating (1) the process of student choice of university, (2) marketing strategies at private universities in Syria, and (3) the relationship between student choice of university and marketing strategies. As the research investigates two distinct areas, it is set within a composite theoretical framework which draws on the process of student choice of university, and institutional marketing strategies. The composite model combines two marketing models from the literature, 'marketing mix' and 'student choice of university'. I demonstrate how these two models complement each other, as together they form further comprehensive marketing strategies. The design of each marketing mix element is dependent on student choice analysis, and similarly understanding each step in the student choice of university is dependent on the elements of the mix.

The research was conducted in three phases. The first phase was exploratory, which served in providing initial insights into the context, improving research design, and testing the theoretical framework. The first phase involved a pilot study and interviews with students. The second phase was a survey of 335 students at three private universities in Syria, which established a basis for generalisation. In the third research phase, three in-depth case studies were conducted at three Syrian private universities. Multiple sources of data were used to understand relevant issues of these cases, which were documents, researcher diary, and

interviews with three different groups: administrative members of staff, students and parents.

The findings validate the application of the theoretical models, 'marketing mix' and 'student choice of university', in the Syrian private higher education context. Some modifications to these models are suggested due to contextual factors. The findings show that the process of student choice of university consists of five steps, being motives, information gathering, evaluating alternatives, decision implementation, and post-choice evaluation. The findings also show the marketing mix in Syria to consist of five elements, which are teaching and learning, customer centred focus, finance, branding and environment. An association between student choice of university and marketing strategies is highlighted and a composite model, the atom marketing model, is created on the basis of evidence collected. The study reveals a two-way matrix interrelationship between the two areas; it is a "push-pull" relationship, where each is influencing and shaping the other. The study contributes to knowledge in the way it researches theories from the West in a different context. It also demonstrates a detailed description of the relationship between two different marketing models.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The issue of marketing is becoming more significant as a strategic focal point of the institutional function in higher education (HE) in many contexts. With the introduction of a social market economy in Syria, in the sense of the intermediary stage between socialism and capitalism, the need to integrate marketing within an institutional function becomes more urgent. As private HE is an emerging market in Syria, there is, as yet, no published research on marketing private higher education. The focus of this study is the marketing of HE at private universities in Syria. The aim is to investigate issues regarding students' choices and preferences of private universities, with regards to marketing practices and strategies, and to examine their dynamic relationship. There is a strong need for more research combining these two areas. This introductory chapter sets the scene for the investigation by describing context and background, looking at information about Syria, its educational system, educational reforms and HE marketplace. The chapter then presents the aims and justifies the importance for this study.

My interest in this area of research arises from the point that I am a Syrian national with a professional background in private education. I worked at a private university in Syria as a teacher of English for academic purposes. My family owns and runs a private for-profit chain of adult training institutions in Damascus, Syria, and I have worked there for eight years. My duties ranged from teaching English as a Foreign Language, to administration where I was responsible for marketing related issues. The family has plans for expanding the business to provide HE. Such a background has inspired and provided me with relevant experience to conduct this study. My experience has also enabled me to recognise the

importance of this phase in HE, and need for a study in marketing private HE at this particular time.

1.2 Contextual Background

1.2.1 Background Information on Syria

Because this thesis has a potential global interest in term of marketing HE, the Syrian context requires some clarification introducing some general background information about the country to enable readers to make more sense of the context of the study. Syria is a Muslim Arab Middle Eastern country with a population of approximately 20 million, and a total area of 185,180 km² (Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics [SCBS], 2009). It is a lower-middle-income country, basically depending on agricultural exports (World Bank, 2008). There have been serious efforts to generate alternative sources for income, especially in the agricultural and mining industries. Nonetheless, the efforts seem to be insufficient as per capita income remains less than 1,570 US dollars per year (World Bank, 2008). There is a wide gap of income between urban and rural areas; the gap has been widening as the country has been suffering severe droughts over the last few years. As a result, there is significant migration within the country, with people moving from the countryside to the towns. In addition, there is a significant level of emigration, people leaving Syria to move to other countries, mainly to the Gulf Council Countries (GCC). The number of Syrians living abroad is estimated to exceed ten million, which is roughly 50% of the country's population (Ministry of Expatriates, 2010).

Syria borders Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea. It is located in one of the most severe political conflict zones in the world, and this has an implication on politico-economic policies. During the Cold War, Syria was a pro-Soviet country with a socialist administration. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria was left without political and financial support and with a negative image in the West, which added to the politico-economic pressure on the country. An example of this is the sanctions the United States exerts against Syria, preventing the transfer of any American technology and

knowledge into the country (Prados & Sharp, 2005). Such sanctions and attitudes from the West have put the country in a state of isolation in many areas, and education is no exception.

1.2.2 Change and “Reform”

Early in 2000 many educational changes and ‘reforms’ came about, following decades of limited change. This was a result of changes brought about by the new president Mr. Bashar Al-Assad when he came to power in 1999. Since then radical changes in societal structures, including education, have taken place. The new president and his wife were educated in the UK, and their experience contributed to modernisation in Syria. As the new president was relatively young, 35 years old, when he became president, there has been a shift to place more attention to younger generations in professional and educational areas.

The governing party in Syria is Al-Baath Arab Socialist Party and it has ruled the country for more than four decades. It is very important to highlight that there has been a recent tendency in the party to move away from socialism towards capitalism, which has been described as a major structural adjustment in the ideology and the system of government. Nonetheless, such a change is still un-stated; it is conducted in a gradual and surreptitious manner, because capitalism contradicts the core principles of the governing party. It is a dilemma for the party to recognise that socialism is no longer working effectively, following recent economic global change. In the last few years, Syria has been experiencing intense privatisation activities, and the introduction of ‘social market’ or even ‘free market’ economic policies (George, 2003). Much of the state business has moved to the private sector in the form of shareholding companies, especially in the field of telecommunications and public services. Such movement has now spread into the field of education as several private institutions have been licensed.

1.2.3 Educational System

Syria was occupied by the French colonial empire for 26 years and declared independence in 1946. Being an ex-French colony, or what is being called a francophonic country, has influenced the educational system. There is a centralized administrative system where the responsibility of making policies, setting goals, supervising, and financing lays completely with the Ministry of Education and its directorates. In terms of structure, formal pre-university education starts at the age of six and ends at eighteen. There are six years for primary education, three years for preparatory education, and three years for secondary education (see Figure 1.1). Education is compulsory until children reach the end of preparatory education where they have the ‘choice’ to follow different pathways. The options available are either main stream education or technical and vocational education. I use the term ‘choice’ advisedly as what usually determine students to follow a particular pathway are their scores in the third grade national preparatory exams.

The main stream secondary education is divided into two areas: scientific and literary, and the choice is left open to students where they usually choose depending on their abilities in particular subjects. However, their choice reflects the options allowed at the post-secondary education. That is to say, if a student decides to follow the literary secondary education, he/she can only apply to university departments that are literary based e.g. literature, law, or history.

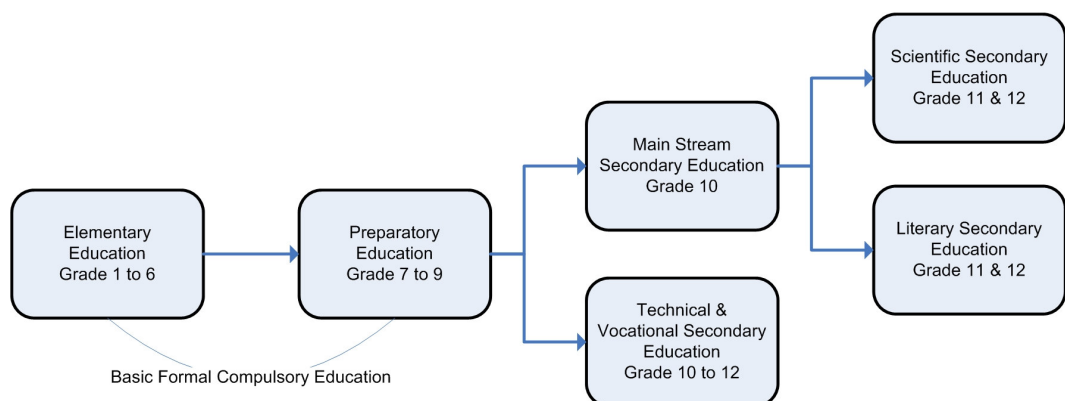


Figure 1. 1: Pre-university educational structure in Syria

By the end of the third year in the secondary education, students sit the National Secondary School Exams (NSEE), or what is known as baccalaureate exams, the results of which determine the post-secondary options available. When results are announced, the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) issues a draft of 'admission of minimum requirements' for each specialisation at each of its institutions. The requirements mainly depend on the overall NSEE score. Students apply to HE options through a 'wish-list' of programmes and institutions preferred. The procedure goes through a centralised system as the MoHE then decides the final admission requirement statement, depending on the number of applicants for each programme and institution. As there are only five public universities in Syria, the MoHE sets very challenging score requirements for admission, and this has resulted in many students following programmes or attending institutions that are not necessarily their own preferences.

1.2.4 Higher Education Marketplace

Although public universities are managed through a centralised system from the MoHE, they enjoy limited levels of decentralisation in making some decisions. Mahmoud (2001) highlights a general trend in Arab public universities being unable to meet the demand for HE, both in terms of number of applicants, and in terms of quality. This could be attributed to the point that public universities receive income predominantly from the government and very limited student fees. A student at a public university in Syria pays no more than ten Pounds Sterling a year. This seems to be insufficient in order for a university to expand and develop to cater for the growing public demand for quality HE. An area of low efficiency in Syrian public universities is exemplified in Kabbani and Salloum (2009) who highlight that the teacher/student ratio in Syrian public universities is 26/1 compared to 19/1, the average in other lower-middle-income countries. Public HE institutions are overcrowded and are not able to admit all students who wish to enrol. Damascus University which is the main public university in Syria, for example, services more than 110,000 students (TEMPUS, 2004). With this large student population, the government provides substantial financial allocation for its few HE institutions. Despite the generous level of investment into HE

compared with other sectors in education, the performance of universities is still falling below expectations (Shabban, 2010).

Over the last few years, the government has introduced ambitious initiatives and reforms throughout the whole HE system aiming at widening participation, improving quality, and most importantly alleviating financial burdens. An example of this is the introduction of three cost-sharing forms of HE where students pay part of the tuition fees, parallel education, open university, and virtual university (Kabbani & Salloum, 2009). In addition, private fee-paying HE was allowed for the first time in the country. This form of HE has been expected not only to help in the above mentioned agenda, but also to create an atmosphere of competition amongst the private and public sectors with higher sensitivity to the labour market. As part of its effort to improve the position of private HE in Syria, the MoHE has issued Article no. 36 supported with a presidential decree that allows the opening of private universities (MoHE, 2001). Such a considerable opening has drawn businesses' attention towards investing in this area.

Until recently there has never been a private university in Syria. In 2003 the MoHE licensed three private universities to open, and in 2005 six more private universities were licensed, and the number is growing each year. Private universities are not entitled to any state funding, thus they depend fully on revenues generated from student fees and other services methods, e.g. venue letting. This income covers their expenses and leaves a margin of profit for the shareholders. Mahmoud (2001) highlights that in private universities in Arab countries the desire for profit is competing with that of quality, and under such conditions most, or all, cannot or are not interested in supporting research or graduate studies, as their main concern is to increase the number of paying students and minimise costs. The role of the MoHE emerges in this regard as the higher authority controlling and insuring that quality education is being delivered.

The sudden and relatively intensive competition of private HE has been posing considerable challenges for these 'newly born' private universities. They are struggling to locate and maintain their positions within the market. One of the challenges has been

recruiting and 'selling' enough students to the different programmes offered. Private universities design, prepare and advertise their programmes, yet, in some situations, they do not attract enough students in order to run their programmes. This is most evident in programmes that are not very popular in Syria, such as nutrition and humanities. This has resulted in the cancellation of many programmes, even after some students have enrolled. This has reflected negatively on the image each university is trying to promote in the educational market.

A number of reasons are behind recruitment problems highlighted above. One of these is the lack of credibility; that is, these universities are new in the market and have not gained customer confidence or loyalty as yet. Another reason could be the public view on HE which has been free for decades. Although there is large demand for HE in the Syrian market, people are reluctant to opt for these new universities due to the high fees. This shows how the concept of free HE is changing with the introduction of private universities. Another reason is due to the competition taking place not only amongst private universities, but also between public and private ones. The relatively large number of providers, or the sudden growth in the number of providers, has been making competition strong and even aggressive. Prospective students now have, more than ever, a wider variety of providers and offers to choose from, whether public or private. They also have a wider range of alternatives to HE. For example, there are many franchised private vocational training centres that offer international certification, e.g. Cisco and Edexcel. Such situations have introduced market-led competitive forces in the field of post-secondary education in Syria, and the importance of the role of marketing has emerged. Since the essence of marketing centres on identifying and satisfying consumers needs (Dalrymple & Parsons, 1995), there has been a need for HE marketing strategies that focus on understanding the customer needs, and requirements.

1.3 The Aim of Investigation

Informed by the above mentioned context of private HE in Syria, the main aim of this study is to examine the relationship between the process of student choice of university and

marketing strategies employed by private universities in Syria. Therefore, the study critically investigates the process of student choice of private university and the reasons behind such choice; it also critically evaluates marketing strategies, policies and practices to understand how private universities market to attract prospective students. The evaluation seeks to find out whether or not these policies are matching actual practices while keeping in mind the student perception of such marketing practices.

The study is intended to provide insights that could impact on theory and institutional marketing practices and policies. Although the study is not aimed to be prescriptive, it is intended that insights provided by this investigation would offer a chance to share good institutional marketing practices and policies among HE institutions. It is also intended that it would help prospective students to make better informed decisions on selecting a private university in Syria.

The aims of the investigation are underpinned by three research questions:

1. How do prospective students act and prioritize in the private university decision making process?
2. How do private universities market to attract new students?
3. What is the relationship between student choice of university and marketing strategies portrayed by the universities?

1.4 Importance of the Study

The rationale behind this study comes from four main reasoning veins. The first concerns the timeliness of this study as it has taken place during radical changes in the Syrian HE marketplace, and the introduction of private HE, discussed above. During this particular significant stage of Syrian HE history, this study provides relevant insights into this emerging context.

Secondly, as there is paucity in literature in student choice in marketing HE (White, 2007), this study makes a contribution to this area of inquiry. This study points out the lack of research into understanding the private HE marketing in general, and in Syria in particular. There is insufficient research and literature on student choice and decision making (Maringe, 2006, 466), and marketing private HE in developing, Islamic or Arab countries. The case in Syria is more obvious as there is no published research regarding such issues. The study argues that the lack of research in Syria is due to the people responsible for marketing at the private universities being too engaged in reactive competition practices, focusing on marketing elements such as promotion and product, rather than paying attention to systematic marketing research. This study suggests that the problems universities are facing are due to the lack of understanding of customers' preferences and not reflecting such understanding on the marketing policies and strategies.

Thirdly, White (2007, 13) highlights that most research in the area of student choice have either undertaken large-scale, survey-based, cross-sectional studies or small-scale, interview-based studies. There have been only a few mixed method studies that have combined questionnaire-based surveys with individual interviews (e.g. Taylor, 1992). This study not only researches student choice in a mixed method approach, but it also reflects the findings on institutional marketing strategies. The final reason is that the study considers theories designed in the West and evaluates them in the Syrian context. This ecological evaluation reflects on theory and literature, and this provides a better insight on marketing theories.

1.5 Summary

This introductory chapter has set the background and context of the study. The contextual background has offered information about Syria, its educational system, educational reforms, and HE marketplace. Shaped by this particular context and most particularly as private HE is an emerging market, the study focuses on marketing in private HE, and student choice and preference of a private university. The chapter then ends with presenting

the aims and importance for the research. The following chapter discusses and reviews literature related to marketing in HE.

Chapter Two

Marketing Education

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a general review of marketing in HE. It starts by reflecting on the position of marketing in education. As there seems to be a lack of understanding of marketing amongst those involved in setting policy and marketing strategies in the educational context, some effort towards shared and better understanding is given. The chapter then discusses some of the key imperatives that make a university consider a market-oriented approach.

2.2 Marketing and Education

To begin, it is important to shed some light on marketing in education in general and the way it is perceived. There has been a considerable amount of debate over whether educational institutions should get involved in marketing e.g. Dirks (1998), Bartlett, *et al.* (2002), Bok (2003), and Newman *et al.* (2004). One of these arguments, for example, is over whether or not students could be considered as customers or consumers in the first place (Sharrock, 2000, 22). Attitudes opposing marketing education believe that it is not suitable to talk about this subject and it is even 'shameful' to call students 'customers' (Holbrook, 2005, 144). Others believe that the introduction of market forces into the area of education evokes feelings of concern, even mistrust, within the world of education (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). This opinion is supported by the idea that education is not to be marketed as this would create major social and economic problems (Sharrock, 2000). What these people are supporting is more obvious in countries where educational institutions are not experiencing market forces and do not have to compete, such as many of the third world countries. This case in third world countries is to be contrasted to the case in the UK and

other European countries (Agasisti & Catalano, 2006) where state intervention is at a lower level and the idea of marketing has been 'normalised' especially after the universities have had to compete for funding and more students (Bridges & Husbands, 1996; Pugsley, 2004; and Drummond, 2004).

Public higher education (HE) institutions in Syria, for example, do not need to compete as they are all managed by a tightly centralised system imposed by the Ministry of Higher Education. Such a centralised and egalitarian strategy could have some political implications or even agendas. Market forces and institutional competition might exist in the Syrian case, but only among private institutions, as public institutions are free of charge, and are already over subscribed. This raises another objection to marketing, and the introduction of market forces and 'business-style' institutions, as it reflects on social justice (Kenway, Bigun, & Fitzclarance, 1993; Marginson, 1997) in the sense that when educational institutions are regarded as businesses, they would be interested mainly in candidates who can afford to pay the fees, rather than the community as a whole. Moreover, business-style institutions would put more emphasis and concern on organisational efficiency rather than social equity (Ngok, 2007, 144).

Some of the opposing attitudes argue that since marketing places more weight on customers' needs and satisfaction, this has placed a shift in the system of accountability. When education is marketed, there would be a shift of accountability towards being measured primarily by customer satisfaction (Pierre, 1995, 71). This has created more concerns of talking about marketing in education, as it is questionable whether or not students, their parents or employers actually know what is best for education.

Another key reason for the opposing attitudes towards marketing education is underpinned by the perceived and arbitrary established misconceptions attached to the general concept of marketing. One of these is that marketing is associated with commercialism, (see Marginson, 1997, 36) where the main purpose of running the educational institution would be to make financial profits (Gerald, 2008) rather than providing education as a social service. Levy (2006, 114) challenges this opinion by arguing that marketing is present not

only in the 'for-profit' organisations, but also in the 'non-for-profit' organisations and even in charities. People who oppose marketing education feel that they have a supreme mission of educating people and that they cannot get involved with the commercial aspect and make financial profits. Bok (2003, 18) points out that scholars have deliberately chosen academia in preference to commerce and business. Nevertheless, the dilemma emerges as top administrative positions at HE institutions are usually occupied by scholars and academics. Kirp (2003) strongly criticizes these people by saying "dollars have always greased the wheel of higher education". In this prospect, the financial issues are core elements in the educational system, just like any other area of running an institution. Kirp goes further and questions:

Why do those people prefer to keep the blindfold on and pretend that they are the divine educationists? Do teachers and headteachers work for free? And where are the salaries they get coming from? ... It is important not to romanticize academia. (*ibid*, 3)

This suggests that marketing has a presence and role in educational context even though some people might have ignored it; and therefore, it is important to educate and broaden the understanding of educationalists on marketing, rather than ignoring or avoiding it.

Making a direct comparison between, for instance, a university and a business, was not common a few decades ago. Kotler and Fox (1995), however, argue that comparison is established since educational institutions educate students relying on money from tuition or other sources. They need this to cover teachers' salaries and the other expenses related to operating their programmes. Marginson (1997, 101) suggests an economic similarity in which institutions are corporations, teachers are producers, students are consumers and education systems are national and global markets. It has been noticed over the last few decades, that marketing philosophy and terms, especially marketing research, market segmentation and consumer analysis, have become more and more familiar, even used and applied in the field of education (Kenway *et al.*, 1993). Pasternak (2005, 189) argues that, in contemporary societies, HE is being marketed just like any other product or service. A student's decision to acquire advanced knowledge is, therefore, the culmination of a process of weighing cost against benefits, and this is similar to the process applied when a customer selects a product or service. There are factors influencing the reasons why

students choose to attend a particular institution of HE; these factors affect students' expectations regarding the outcomes of their studies. Maringe (2006) states that introducing fees into HE has resulted in greater 'consumerist behaviour' by applicants, because value for money would then begin to become a substantial issue in the decision making process.

There is significance in each of the opposing standpoints as introducing marketing to education has advantages and disadvantages. Despite these two opposing attitudes, I believe that introducing marketing to an educational institution improves its performance to meet local and national public needs (Brookes, 2003). There are lessons to be learned from marketing in other types of businesses when applied to education. This is more evident in institutions that enjoy self-management, such as the private universities in Syria.

2.3 Marketisation and Privatisation

Green (2004) defines marketisation as the process by which public owned organisations perform like market-oriented ones and are subject to market-forces. It imposes a shift to employing market criteria for allocating public resources and also to measure the efficiency of public service procedures and suppliers according to market criteria (Pierre, 1995). It is part of the public administration modernisation process, or what is called the 'new public management' (Agasisti & Catalano, 2006, 245) which is business-like, as well as result and customer-oriented (Pugsley, 1998).

Ngok (2007) relates marketisation to privatisation, as the latter is a type of the former. Privatisation is where the Government hands over the administration of an organisation or a certain public area to private providers (Eckel, 2007). Bartlett *et al.* (2002) sees the privatisation of education to have a serious negative impact, as it would serve mainly only certain individuals within a community. Chitty (2009) goes further to argue that privatisation poses a very real threat to the values and principles of national local systems of education. Chitty's (*ibid*) argument is supported by the point that privatising education has major socio-political implications, as education in a particular institution might only be serving private interests and not Government interests. However, I argue against this as the

Government might also be injecting certain ideologies in the national curriculum, serving its own interests and not those of the public welfare. Camilleri (2008) also criticises privatising education by saying that there are three main objectives for a private company: maintaining the bottom line for the company through continued profitability, increasing shareholders value through growth and improving market share through competition. Camilleri (*ibid*) questions if these objectives and values are reconcilable with those for HE. Ball (2009), however, does not see the privatisation of education as badly as Bartlett *et al.* (2002), Camilleri (2008), and Chitty (2009) perceive it. **Although Ball is known for his opposing attitudes to privatising education, he offers examples that some private institutions in the UK have established successful international businesses and provided substantial revenue to the country (Ball, 2009).** Tooley (2007) also offers some positive examples about private institutions in India which serves not only the wealthy communities, but also the poor. Privatisation and commercialisation of education is a result of a country's encounter with global and local issues, such as social, political and economic dynamics (Gerald, 2008). The education sector should change as political, economic, social or demographic parameters alter.

Private institutions have always been subject to market forces and competition. This, in turn, has resulted in constant effort to develop and improve. **In some contexts, for example India (Tooley, 2007), there is a perception among parents that the services offered by private institutions are of higher quality than those at public institutions.** Ehrenberg (2002) says that choosing to attend a selective private institution is a wise decision because it increases substantiality and economic returns over time.

2.4 Defining Marketing

Often there are misconceptions of the meaning of marketing. Foskett (1998, 49) highlights a considerable amount of confusion about this; Ivey and Naude (2004, 402) believe that confusion is more particular in the area of education. Misconceptions include the way this is usually approached as 'the promotional activities done by an institution in order to attract potential students and increase enrolment'. The confused understanding of marketing could

be due to the fact that educators are unclear about the concepts of business. However, Wright (1999, 2) highlights that this case of limited and confused understanding of marketing is common among many senior managers in all areas of businesses, a case that is evident not only in educational institutions. Confusion surrounding the concept of marketing suggests that it needs further elaboration and clarification.

Kotler and Armstrong (2008, 5) define marketing as a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through the creation and exchange of products/services of value with others. This definition embeds three main issues: (1) social process; the individual has needs to be satisfied, (2) managerial process in which the institution attempts to satisfy groups of individuals. This happens through (3) values exchange, simply purchasing the product/service. The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines it more comprehensively as being the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchange and satisfy individual and organisational objectives (Brassington, 2006, 7).

Putting the definition more functionally in the educational sector, marketing is the means by which institution senior managers use sustained and thorough knowledge of present and future markets to ensure that strategic planning addresses the education and training needs of the customer, cost-effectively (Further Education Funding Council., 1998). It is a management process that requires planning and analysis, resource allocation, control and investment. Together, these marketing activities provide what the customer wants (Brassington, 2006). Foskett (1999, 34) takes the concept of marketing further, by setting it as an overall philosophy for an organisation which encompasses and directs the entire business. In this prospect, marketing clarifies institutional goals, unifies strategies, and utilizes resource efficiently. All these areas are aimed at having a more satisfied customer with the educational service that is offered (Wonder & Gyure, 1991, 2).

In this study, marketing is the strategic philosophy and managerial process an institution conducts in order to meet individuals and groups needs, and requirements to increase

exchange. While some people might believe that students are the sole customers of the educational service, others believe it is not only students but also parents, prospective employers, and society as a whole, as they all benefit from the service (Ivy & Naude, 2004). This study highlights and focuses on two customer groups - students and parents.

2.5 The Rationale for Marketing

Many reasons make marketing an important aspect in reflecting positively on an institution and the community. Marketing is a strategic partner in the sense that it leads the strategic planning at an institution. That is to say, it is not possible to have effective strategic planning without marketing (Further Education Funding Council, 1998). Levy (2006) provides some examples where marketing increases an institution's financial support and subsidization e.g. it increases student enrolment and even research grants from either research organisations or industry. In addition, Bok (2003, 79, 80) draws attention to the point that strategic marketing is a vehicle that enables institutions to expand from local levels to regional or even international levels.

The issues of efficiency and effectiveness are promoted with market-oriented management strategies. Since education is expensive and usually based on state funding, there needs to be enough efficiency in usage (Witte, 2000, 18). Marketisation in education injects competition into systems (Ivy & Naude, 2004; Canterbury, 1999; Taylor & Darling, 1991) where institutions have to work and survive in a very complex, changing and turbulent environment, so that every educational provider is compelled to compete for students and funding, if it wants to survive financially (Oplatka, Foskett, & Hemsley-Brown, 2002, 420, 425).

Marketing education not only helps benefit an institution in financial gains, but also reflects positively on the individual and the community as a whole (Eckel, 2007). The positive reflection is achieved by improving the whole educational system (Levy, 2006, 116). Sallis (2002) mentions in the commercial world it is competition and survival that often drives quality improvement. In this respect, marketing would improve the quality of service

offered. In addition, marketing works on improving delivery and expansion of knowledge; even though it might be empowered by institutional financial benefits, it serves the community (Geiger, 2004). In this regard, and as marketing is expanding knowledge, it brings positive contributions to the social and economic capital (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). Similarly, Marginson (1997, 101) argues about the importance of marketing education from a national economic point of view. He states that the 'human capital theory' of education is a process of investment in future economic returns. This is to be empowered by introducing educational institutions to the marketplace.

There are many contributions in the literature on the increasing role of competition in HE and its implications, such as Ehrenburg (2002), Johnston (2003) and Ball (2009). The growth in markets and the type of provider goes hand in hand with a fiercely increased competition and the notion of survival of the fittest; something that has impacted negatively on some universities (Eckel, 2007). Through competing, performance of universities varied, and consequently views and attitudes towards each group differed. Universities endeavour to achieve better results and rank higher. Marginson (1997, 140) suggests the term 'hierarchy of institutions' in which universities compete to achieve higher and more prestigious positions. Amaral and Magalhaes (2007) believe that marketing and competition bring more benefits as they increase universities' sensitivity and responsiveness to the community. Eckel (2007) provides some examples where competition pushes universities to adapt strategies that improve their positions within the market, such as recruiting high calibre teaching staff, providing cutting-edge technology teaching aids and student facilities. Eckel believes that such strategies and investments achieve positive potential returns on better-prepared students, improved institutional quality, or the ability to leverage additional resources or opportunities. In this respect, competition would result in a higher quality of education (Agasisti & Catalano, 2006). Ehrenberg (2002), nonetheless, does not see this positive impact, since competing and improving a university's assets would be at a higher cost which would result in increasing tuition fees.

All these imperatives make educational institutions increasingly employ and even depend on marketing, in directing and managing their institutional strategies.

2.6 Summary

This chapter has reviewed literature-related marketing in HE in general. The first section has addressed attitudes regarding marketing in education. The issue of marketisation and privatisation has also been defined and discussed. The chapter then defines marketing and customers, providing a rationale for adapting marketing within the institutional administrative system. The chapter has provided definitional clarity for the study and also underpinned the importance of marketing in HE and private HE in particular. It has highlighted that marketing in HE requires further investigation, especially in non-Western HE contexts and cultures. The next chapter presents theoretical models in HE marketing which assist institutions to market strategically.

Chapter Three

Establishing a Theoretical Framework

3.1 Introduction

This chapter establishes an analytical and theoretical framework for research investigation, based on two marketing models. Firstly, the ‘marketing mix’ model, a set of controllable variables which an institution employs to shape offers to customers. Secondly, the ‘consumer/customer behaviour’ model, which portrays how customers select, buy, use and dispose of products or services to satisfy needs and desires. The chapter demonstrates how these two models complement each other, as they combine to form more comprehensive marketing strategies. The design of each marketing mix element is dependent on customer behaviour analysis. The chapter starts by discussing the marketing mix models and its elements. Following this, the rationale of synthesising both models is presented. In the final part of the chapter the consumer/customer behaviour model is discussed. The reader is reminded that the research questions have a customer as well as marketing strategy foci, and for each, a model is addressed.

3.2 Marketing Mix

The marketing mix is a marketing strategy model, with a set of controllable elements available for an institution to shape the nature of its offer to customers. It is to put the educational service offering into a number of component parts and arrange them into manageable subject areas for making strategic decisions (Palmer, 2001, 10). This model suggests that a marketing strategy consists of tools and techniques (elements) that can be identified for ease of understanding under the headings of: product, price, place, and promotion. They are also known collectively as the “4Ps” (Wright, 1999, 131). Palmer (2001, 10, 11) sets some limitations for using the marketing mix tools in the service or

education industry. These limitations stem from the nature of the educational service; it exceeds the four Ps to some other elements.

Kotler and Fox (1995) have developed a version of a marketing mix which is designed specifically for educational institutions, and which seems to address the limitations set by Palmer (*ibid*). Kotler and Fox's (1995) model depicts this marketing mix in educational context to be consisting of seven marketing tools, "7Ps": 'programme, price, place promotion, processes, physical facilities, and people' (see Figure 3.1). There are other suggestions of other elements for the marketing mix such as Ivy and Naude (2004) "7Ps" and Ivey (2008) "7Ps", 'programme, prospectus, price, prominence, people, promotion, premiums'. There are also Gray (1991) "5Ps", and Coleman (1994) "5Ps". It is noticed that all these models have similar component elements; nonetheless, they are clustered and grouped differently.



Figure 3. 1: *Kotler and Fox (1995) 7Ps Marketing Mix Model*

These seven components could have improved with more specific naming, but obviously the authors preferred that they begin all with the letter P, perhaps creating analogies to the McCarthy's (1960) "4Ps" marketing mix model. It is highlighted here that there are some other models with different naming strategies such as Ho and Hung's mix (2008) which consists of 'living, learning, reputation, economy and strategy'.

This study discusses the mix suggested by Kotler and Fox (1995) illustrated in figure 3.1. It has been decided to discuss this particular model as it encompasses all of the elements mentioned by other models. This model is also more highlighted in the literature. I briefly review this model, its elements, and how an institution could use it as a framework to rethink the components of their services. At a later stage this model is reflected on student university choice model.

3.2.1 Programme

The first element in the marketing mix is 'programme'. The issue of what programme to offer and how to structure and design it within an institutional marketing strategy has been addressed in the literature by Frumkin *et al.* (2007), Cubillo *et al.* (2006), and Hesketh and Knight (1999). An institution usually begins by identifying the programmes and services being offered and made available to the market and customers, whether they are students, companies or grants providers. An institution also questions whether this programme matches customers' needs. Universities with similar programmes will find their markets and public differentiating between them on the basis of their programmes and their quality (Kotler & Fox, 1995, 277). There is a strong relation between the programme offered and the institution, as it establishes the institution's identity. Gibbs and Knap (2002, 54) explain that such identity positions the institution in mind of its customers and determines how they will respond to what is being offered.

Hollensen (2003, 16) remarks that a marketing strategy, when appropriately implemented, results in programmes being cooperatively designed, developed, tested, piloted, provided, installed and refined. The word 'cooperatively' embeds that programmes are not to be developed historically, with the institution producing programme concept, but rather researching this with the customers, bearing in mind that it should meet their requirements and needs. Gibbs and Knapp (2002, 58) suggest steps for cooperative designing for a programme that begins by consumer needs analysis, idea generation, preliminary analysis, pre-positioning the concept, field study and finally studying consumer evaluation.

Marketing for education is more challenging in nature than marketing for other types of businesses. This challenge stems from the point that education offers professional services and customers cannot inspect a tangible product, or the programme, before purchasing (White, Martin, Stimson, & Hodge, 1991, 196). Moreover, education is an experience service as its relevant characteristics can only be effectively assessed by consumption (Amaral & Magalhaes, 2007). It is only when a student attends a study programme that he/she gets an idea about what has been 'purchased' in terms of quality. The programme does not exist until the service provider performs the service, usually in the presence of the customer, and it does not necessarily result in the ownership of any material thing (Kotler, Bloom, & Hayes, 2002, 237). For this reason, Gibbs and Knapp (2002, 54) suggest that an institution is recommended to increase tangibility of the programme offered by increasing what they describe as the 'wrapping' it is offering. They mean by 'wrapping' anything physical/tangible of the programmes; 'wrapping' includes, for example, CD-ROMs, photocopied lecture material and handouts, coursebooks, free access to the Internet, discounted materials.

3.2.2 Price

The second element of the marketing mix is 'price'. The price element, in general, is related to tuition fees offered, and any monetary related issues. Its importance to an institution stems from the fact that it reflects on revenues. Joyner (1996, quoted in Tang *et al.*, 2004) highlights that the number of universities relying on tuition as a basic revenue source is increasing. For example, an estimate impact of 1% of the price increases the profits for an organisation by 28.7% (Kotler, 1999, 99). Pricing has major influence on marketing strategies as most students and their parents are concerned about the financial implications of attending university (Connor & Institute for Employment Studies, 1999, 47; Pugsley, 2004, 125). There is detailed literature highlighting the important role of price and cost of education, such as Ahier (2000), Doti (2004), Holdsworth and Nind (2005), and Beckie (2009).

As customers are usually cost-conscious, they tend to maximise the investment of their tuition fees, while maximizing their returns (Eckel, 2007; Pasternak, 1999). Parents and students are also familiar that the actual cost of attending university varies from the posted tuition fees (i.e. true costs versus “sticker price”). With such customer awareness and sensitivity towards tuition fees, the question now is whether or not a university should set a policy that offers courses at the lowest cost possible. In fact, this is a major issue that could affect the overall image of a university as there is substantial impact on the perception of quality when being matched to price; for example, some people perceive more expensive offers to be of greater value and vice versa (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). On the other hand, an institution considers customer perception of the relation between the offer itself and the price set. In other words, a customer would question if the service offered is value for money or not. That is to say, when a university wants to set a higher cost than its competitors, it needs to be justified and this, in turn, should be explained to the public.

Among the strategies used in pricing, Kotler (1999, 101) believes that people pay more for skilled and well-regarded doctors or consultants. It is a pricing strategy in which whoever has a better offering and/or position can request a higher price. Hence, in the context of education, a student would pay a higher price for a more prestigious and well-known university. Another technique that an institution could use would be to separate or include the total cost of the package. In other words, some universities set the cost to be without any hidden extra payments or ‘indirect associated cost’ (Foskett, 1998), such as transportation or sports facilities fees, and here the customer can select.

Other strategies used are discount and scholarship offers. Universities attract potentially good students to enrol by offering financial benefits. This affects the students’ choices as they may then put more consideration into institutions with the most generous offer. Kirp (2003, 22) expresses concern of using this strategy, as it could potentially be used in an ethically problematic manner, as it could affect students’ choices on what is best for them, and such a differential pricing conveys a sense of discrimination among students with different abilities.

3.2.3 Place

This element refers to the system of delivery and channels of service distribution (Brassington, 2006, 31). That is making education available and accessible in terms of time and physio-geographical distribution of teaching and learning (Kotler & Fox, 1995). It is not restricted to the physical and geographical location of an institution, as it stretches with the help of information technology to some virtual limits. El-Khawas, (1999) for example, highlights how competition between educational institutions has encouraged to offer alternative ways of delivery or to create niche e-markets. Kotler *et al.* (2002, 10) also suggest that the 'place' of an institution includes a Website that allows customers to download information twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. With computer facilities being more readily available, the idea of location is evolving in the field of education. Many educational institutions are making use of information technology to serve their current students as well as to attract new ones. Students no longer need to be physically on campus to learn anymore. This offers more convenience, and it probably targets some specific groups of customers such as workers seeking job skilled programmes or women that care for their children or other members of family at home. 'Place' is not only restricted to an institution's way of delivery; it also relates to the convenience of an institution's location and access to the students. Ivey and Naude (2004) and Maringe (2006) relate place to the campus built-environment and residential facilities.

In planning strategically, an institution would consider the convenience and attractiveness for students in terms of place, having in mind that a marketing strategy puts a customer's needs and requirements as a primary objective. It might be that most institutions decide to operate a single location, to have students physically study there (Kotler & Fox, 1995). Other alternatives and strategies expand not only the delivery system but also the location to others; a multi-site strategy is considered (Jobber, 2004, 815, 816). One of the strategies used is to target a certain customer segment by one of the various service delivery styles: for example, distance learning, part-time evening or weekend courses.

3.2.4 Promotion

'Promotion' is an institution's ability to communicate with its markets. In fact, communication, because it is pervasive and high profile, can certainly make or break a marketing mix, and thus it needs wise and constant analysis, planning and management (Brassington, 2006, 31). There is some useful literature about university promotion such as Kelly (1989), Berger and Wallingford (1996), Armstrong and Lumsden (1999), and Harris (2009). Palmer (2001, 11) and Kelly (1989) break down promotion into four distinguished elements: advertising, sales promotion, public relations and personal selling. There are various sets of tools within each of these elements, available for an institution to use in order to communicate with its customers, such as Web-advertising, search engine optimisations (Blumenstyk, 2006), direct mail, educational show exhibits, open days or conferences.

Promotional activities are more effective when they are sustained and targeted. In other words, promotion strategies are to target continuously, and mainly potentially, prospective customers. For example, students at their third secondary school could be targeted. Targeting potential students might save some of the promotion budget. Another strategy used, which is integrated into the whole institution mission, is the use of slogans and mission statements. Queensland University of Technology's slogan, for instance, is 'a university for the real world' (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002, 74). Such slogans are mentioned and repeated frequently, and this communicates to the public a summary of what the university is about. Kotler (1999, 123) suggests that it is important for institutions to build up channels of communication with potential customers, and use marketing intelligence to gather any information that an institution would find useful. Jobber (2004, 813) distinguishes various challenges for marketing a service such as education. He suggests that the intangible element of a service may be difficult to communicate. Unlike advertising and promoting other tangible products where they show the product to the customer, it is difficult to represent quality education in an advertisement. However, an institution could use tangible cues to help customers understand and judge a service. In this way, a university could actually show its buildings and sport facilities, coursebooks or friendly staff (*ibid*). Some institutions make the mistake of promoting and advertising unreal claims about themselves

as they may hope to tempt students to enrol at their institution. Consequently, this reflects negatively on that institution, and could potentially ruin the institutional image to the public.

3.2.5 Processes

Although this element was introduced in a relatively short and quick fashion in various literature e.g. Kotler & Fox (1995), there is substantial evidence of its importance and relevance, as it relates to all of the other marketing mix elements. Processes refer to the way an institution does business, and this relates the whole administrative system to this element (Kotler *et al.*, 2002, 11). Processes are how things happen in an institution, such as the process of management, enrolment, teaching, learning, social and even sports activities. Processes may be of little concern to customers of manufactured products (Palmer, 2001, 13); nonetheless, they are of critical concern to high contact services such as education. For this reason, universities are recommended to take into consideration how their services are to be offered. For example, teaching methods and assessment system are the most evident points a prospective student enquires about (Ivy & Naude, 2004).

On a strategic level, institutions are careful about the delivery of service, and what quality controls can be built in (Brassington, 2006, 32), so that customers can be confident that there is consistency in the service offered. Inconsistency could occur, for example, with students' attitudes of various courses in the same university. It could also happen on the same course but with different lecturers. Thus, an institution is to establish common criteria that can guarantee consistency and maintain satisfaction. For this reason, some institutions adapt quality management systems, such as the Total Quality Management (TQM) or other franchised systems such as the ISO9000 series (Sallis, 2002).

3.2.6 People

'People' refers to all the teaching and administrative staff through which the service is delivered, and customer relations built (Kotler & Fox, 1995). People also include the

institution's current and former students. This is because prospective students tend to ask about, and check with current and former students on their views. Although Ivy and Naude (2004, 414) claim that people are not weighted to be an influential element in the mix on the part of prospective students, other researchers do not agree, e.g. Brassington (2006), Hollensen (2003), and Kotler and Fox (1995). Their views are based on the argument that education like many other services, depends on the people who perform them, as they are the ones that are delivering the service. Lovelock and Wirtz (2004, 20) suggests that direct involvement in service production means that customers evaluate the quality of employees' appearance and social skills, as well as their technical skills; and consequently this is reflected on the way the offer is judged.

In designing a marketing strategy an institution is recommended to start on developing its staff. Wright (1999, 23) believes that the success of an institution is more dependent on the attitudes, commitment and skills of the whole workforce, than on any other factor. This strategy ensures the conveying of shared beliefs and goals, that the institution is customer oriented. Other than that, the idea of building a positive relationship with customers has an influential role. Brassington (2006, 31) explains that if a customer feels comfortable with and trusts a particular provider, then competitors would find it difficult to disrupt this relationship. This is related to relationship marketing, where a university empowers a relationship with its markets. An example of this would be teachers keeping track and following-up each individual student, not only on an academic level but on many individual levels. In fact, this has great evidence reflecting on current student retention (Martinez & Further Education Development Agency, 1997; Dennis, 1998). Another example is establishing alumni unions where the relationship is maintained after the service is complete.

3.2.7 Physical Facilities and Evidence

'Physical facilities', or evidence as Palmer (2001) calls it, refer to all of the physical, tangible items an institution makes available to customers ranging from brochures to the infrastructure. Physical facilities, as an element of the mix, plays a major role as it is the

means by which an institution is likely to increase the tangibility of its offering, especially with the fact that there is not usually much to be inspected before purchase (Gibbs & Knapp, 2002). In this respect, physical evidence could be coursebooks, or the furniture used and the built-environment. Marketers work together with architects and graphic designers in order to present attractive and effectively functioning facilities. Some marketers recommend an institution has a theme or culture colour, for instance, the colour green for the University of Leeds. This corporate identity colour or logo has a marketing effect on customers as such colour would remind them of that particular university.

Kotler *et al.* (2002, 11) suggest that often the most immediate clue for prospective students about a university's identity is the physical evidence of buildings and furniture. This may be the first impression prospective customers have of an institution upon visiting. Usually, the first thing they see is the built-environment and the facilities the university has. Gibbs and Knapp (2002, 55) add that the condition of the physical location contributes greatly on the image of the institution. For example, technologies used, cleanliness of rooms, carpeting, regular washroom cleaning, all this sets a context in which the individual learner comes to understand who he or she is in the context of the learning experience (*ibid*). Apart from the customers view on physical facilities, there is a positive function for them, as they support the teaching and learning process. An example of this would be the use of visual representation and information technologies to facilitate and improve learning results.

To summarise, the "7Ps" marketing mix is a possible model to direct an educational institution towards a more strategic and systematic marketing approach. An institution modifies the marketing mix to accommodate the demands expressed by customers. A marketing policy rethinks and re-engineers the way an organisation is addressing each of the marketing mix elements. The more successful it is in matching its marketing mix with expressed and latent demands in the market, the greater the possibility that customers will purchase the organisation's product now and in the future (Hollensen, 2003, 115). Maringe (2005, 145) highlights that these elements are never discrete entities; they overlap and should be considered as loosely grouped elements requiring careful blending to give a differential advantage to an institution.

The 7Ps marketing mix model is an holistic strategy model that addresses marketing issues from the part of the organisation. The question is how could the mix's elements be tested and weighted in term of importance and relevance. In other words, the "7Ps" model shows just one part of the formula for an effective marketing strategy. Hence, there is a need for a means to expose the other side of the coin, the customer, the most important element of the marketplace (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008, 128). Maringe (2006, 466) suggests that a useful way of understanding a market is to have a clear grasp of the choice and decision making process of intending applicants. Foskett *et al.* (2003) agree, and suggest that the role of marketing is important to the choice decision. An effective marketing strategy with a sound mix would not just influence the decision-making process but would also positively influence the choices made (Briggs, 2006). In highly competitive markets, understanding student choice of institution is crucial as it reflects on the institution's marketing strategies.

Wright (1999) suggests that marketing mix is called so because different customers may demand different combinations of the marketing mix elements. When the marketing mix model strategy is designed apart from understanding the customer needs and preferences, it might be more reactive and not cooperative. In fact, what seems to be missing in this model is going to be synthesised with consumer behaviour in the buyer decision-making model. This synthesis is justified by the fact that in order to achieve a better understanding of the marketing strategies and mix, and reach into an effective marketing strategy, there is an urgent need to understand customer demands, preferences and buying behaviour (see Figure 3.2). In other words, the design of each of the marketing mix elements is dependent on customer analysis (Peter & Olson, 2008, 26). It is assumed to add more coherence, relevance and depth to the firstly mentioned model.



Figure 3. 2: *Marketing Strategy Synthesis*

3.3 Student Choice

Peters and Austin (1985, 45) believe that the most important ingredient in the success of any organisation is the customer. Therefore, an organisation’s philosophy is to be based on the notion of customer sovereignty; that is, the purpose of business is to create customers, and unless a business satisfies the needs of its customers it will not, in the long run, and under normal competitive conditions, survive and prosper (Lancaster & Massingham, 1998, 35). Kotler and Fox (1995, 59) even propose that organisations, which do not respond to their customers and are not concerned about satisfying them, are bureaucratic, impersonal, rigid, anti-innovative and cannot stand up to competition.

The field of student choice, or what Kotler and Fox (1995) call “consumer buyer behaviour”, studies how individuals, groups and organisations select, buy, use and dispose of goods or services to satisfy their needs and desires and, what factors affect this behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). I highlight that this research deals with the term ‘consumers/customer behaviour’; however, it should be mentioned that the research does not deal with this term from behaviourism theory approach; rather it deals with it from a marketing viewpoint.

Researching consumer buyer behaviour could answer key marketing questions such as: what do consumers want to buy, how do they buy and why do they select a specific provider? Answering such questions could guide marketers towards more effective approaches, bearing in mind that the aim of marketing is to meet and satisfy consumer

needs and wants (Blackwell, Miniard, & Engel, 2001). Understanding consumer behaviour, for example, aids in targeting the most appropriate markets; Briggs (2006, 708) suggests that if universities are able to predict where applicants will come from, scarce resources can be focused on marketing areas that will give the highest return.

Although there is some literature concerning consumer buyer behaviour in higher education, this issue has been addressed more seriously in other types of businesses. Among the literature on models of consumer buyer behaviour, that are used in the context of education, there are Paulsen (1990), Kotler and Fox (1995), Cabrera and Nasa (2000), and Vrontis *et al.* (2007). There are also studies that have preferred not to use the term “consumer behaviour”, but rather “student choice” such as Foskett and Hesketh (1997). Similar to Foskett and Hesketh (*ibid*), in this study I use the term “student choice”. Other related studies that have used the term “student choice” have had sociological and educational perspectives, such as Ball *et al.* (2000) and White (2007). There are other studies that have addressed the issue from a psychological perspective such as Galotti (1995). The range of focus differs in each of these pieces of literature; for example, some focus on socio-economic areas such as Vrontis *et al.* (2007), others focus on cognitive and behavioural areas in decision-making such as Galotti (1995). However, all these theories have similar steps and elements, but they vary in the way they are arranged.

Bearing in mind that the student choice process is a complex series of activities, with individuals participating and acting in it differently (Litten, 1982), five steps of student choice could have been concluded from the studies highlighted above. They are needs and motives, information gathering, evaluating alternatives, decision and post-choice evaluation (see Figure 3.3). A need, or motive, is initially triggered on the part of the student. Then as the student realises that he/she wants to pursue higher education, he/she searches for information about potential providers. Then an evaluation between alternatives is established. The student then goes to enrol and ends up with an evaluation of the experience. The following section briefly reviews each of these steps.

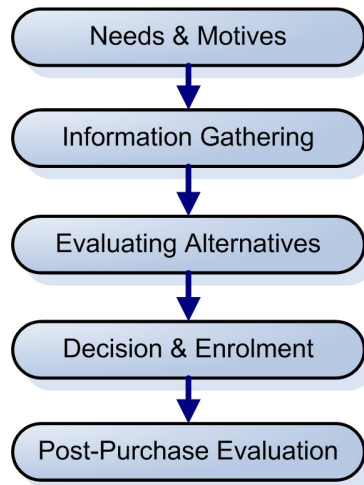


Figure 3. 3: *Student Choice Model (Adapted from the Literature)*

3.3.1 Needs and Motives

The student choice decision-making process usually starts with a realisation of a need. A need is activated when there is sufficient discrepancy between the actual and the desired state of the customer. A need arises from a perceived lack of something on the part of the customer (Van Dam, 1997, 1272). Needs realisation to attend university can be triggered through either internal or external stimuli. For example, students will realise that they need to have a university qualification as they start to consider their future professional life. However, this might contradict Paulsen's (1990, 8) suggestion. He states that before there is a need, there is an aspiration that starts in the early years of education, that might last through secondary school. In this prospect, need is not only a matter of realisation but also an aspiration that could be passed through many sources e.g. family or peers (MacDermott, Conn, & Owen, 1987; Choi, Raley, Muller & Riegle-Crumb, 2005). Corwin and Tierney (2007), Roderick *et al.* (2008), and Muller (2009), for example, highlight a great role for teachers and schools inspiring students to pursue HE. Aspiration to attend university crystallises and becomes clearer in students' minds as they approach the final secondary school year (James *et al.*, 1999, 13; Cabrera & Nasa, 2000). Research has highlighted a number of needs to motivate students to attend university (Ball *et al.*, 2000; Foskett and Hamesley-Brown, 2001; White, 2007). Students' needs and motives could vary in nature. While some students might want to attend a university for instrumental reasons (Brown &

Scase, 1994; Payne, 2003; Townsend 2003; Saiti & Prokopiadou, 2008), others might get motivated for personal intrinsic reasons, i.e. enjoyment of the subject (Collier *et al.*, 2003; Pasternak, 2005). Others might want to attend a university for a more simple reason such as wanting to be with friends (Antonio, 2004; Mullen, 2009).

Concerning students' needs, motives and aspirations to attend university, marketers try to establish the consumers' unmet or unsatisfied needs, so they are able to find ways to fulfil these needs in order to attract students to their institutions. Kotler and Fox (1995) highlight that a considerable number of educational institutions still make the mistake of predicting students' needs and design programmes that do not match those needs. An institution can design effective programmes only when it knows what a student actually wants to buy, and this can only be achieved through building communication channels with students. Marketers cannot create needs for students, they can however, activate need recognition through raising their awareness of unperceived needs or problems that could exist in the future, and they will then offer the students the best solutions (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001). Such a strategy is believed to bring more customers into the market and develop them into potential students.

3.3.2 Information

Once the need for studying at university level has been recognised, a student usually searches for information on how to satisfy this need. Students usually start the search process from their own memory of alternative institutions that might be able to satisfy their needs. Palmer (2001, 92) refers to this level of search as the internal search which is based on the student's own experience and knowledge. The amount of information gathered depends on the student's own level of need for information and involvement (Menon *et al.*, 2007). While some students might have very little information and think it is adequate, others require more, depending on their level of involvement in the decision. Menon (2004) asserts that the level of involvement is correlated to students' socio-economic background; students with lower socio-economic status are more involved in this decision. The level of involvement reflects on the information gathering process. For example, the decision to

attend university is one that the student is highly involved with, as this would impact greatly on their future life and prospects (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Hesketh & Knight, 1999, Drummond, 2004). When internal information is inadequate to base a decision on, the student begins an external search. For example, a prospective student, who does not have enough information about service providers, starts an active search through collecting information from several sources.

Kotler & Armstrong (2008) classify information sources that prospective customers usually obtain, as follows: (a) personal non-marketer controlled, e.g. family, friends, acquaintances; (b) personal marketer controlled, e.g. sales representatives; (c) non-personal non-marketer controlled, e.g. mass media; (d) non-personal marketer controlled, e.g. advertisements, prospectuses. The importance of personal sources stems from the fact that this is the starting point for a student's information gathering; they then supplement these personal information sources with non-personal sources. Studies have mentioned several sources that act as the most influential for students to collect information. Evans (1995), for example, believes that the major source of information influencing choice is an institution's own staff, through direct or phone enquiries. Taylor (1992) believes that friends' advice is the major source. James *et al.* (1999) and Foskett (2009) highlight the importance of the role of career advisers in information provision. Pimpa (2005) suggests that students prefer the family as a source of information as they offer advice. Other studies suggest a highly influential role to an institution's printed information materials (Pasternak, 2005).

Eckel (2007) mentions that there is a general lack of adequate information for students and their parents in order for them to make meaningful comparisons between universities; this is attributed to poor promotional materials designed by institutions. These materials tend to be less informative and more promotional (Armstrong & Lumsden, 1999). Often, institutions overload a prospective student with too much information, some of which may be irrelevant; this could cause what Drummond (2004) refers to as 'consumer confusion' which makes it more difficult for students to make decisions. Understanding the information gathering process has a major importance and reflection on an institution's promotional strategy (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001, 109), and it is mostly related to the

promotional element in the marketing mix. Thus, the marketer's role at this level is to discover the kind of information the student and their parents wish to know, and from what sources they collect information. Once the information sources have been identified, the marketer can begin a promotional effort to build communication channels to provide customers with more information. It is recommended that marketers attempt to motivate students to collect more information about their institutions, especially through direct visits, usually through Open Days; Moony and Robben (1997) suggest that by increasing a direct experience with the product (the institution), the opportunity to process more information will increase and lead to a more favourable evaluation.

3.3.3 Evaluation of Alternatives

Once students have gathered enough information, they usually set a list of institutions to attend (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The process of evaluating alternatives goes through narrowing down the number of choices until only one or two remain. At this level students might visit the universities they are considering, and this is related to physical evidence where a student wishes to investigate some tangible parts of the offer. In order to reach a decision a student establishes selection criteria that help to weigh up each of the providers against their priorities and values. The weight of each student's priorities and values usually differs from one another as it is individual choice. For instance, some students in Syria might value a university that uses English as a language of instruction as an advantage, while others might dislike this and prefer the mother language as a language of instruction. In other words, it is difficult to find two students with the exact same selection criteria, as this depends on the individual and on environmental influences (Blackwell *et al.*, 2001, 76). A student sees each university on their choice list enjoying one attribute or more. Galotti (1995, 463) notes that when a student evaluates a university they do not simply use a single attribute, but consider a number of attributes. She adds that a student defines various attributes and orders them in a hierarchy of importance. The student then has some concept of the ideal against which to evaluate each university. At the end of this stage the student rejects the alternative providers that do not match their criteria. What Galotti (*ibid*) suggests is interesting, yet questionable, as it seems too rational for students of this age. White

(2007) warns against models such as Erdmann (1983), Galotti (1995), Belcher Frisbee (1999), Holdsworth and Nind (2005), and Briggs (2006) which have attempted to frame students' selection criteria as they try to portray it as too rational, and ignore the non-rational side of the phenomenon.

This step is most connected to the marketing mix model as each of the attributes a student considers is to be categorised under one of the mix's elements. In other words, the attributes a student considers, are the core elements of the marketing mix which a university gives considerable effort to, in order to match students demands and expectations. Regarding 'place' for instance, do students prefer distant courses or do they prefer the conventional class method? It is crucial for marketers to understand how a student perceives and values each attribute, and to segment common trends among prospective students.

3.3.4 Decision and Purchase Implementation

The difference between this step and the previous step, is that while the former step addresses why a student has chosen 'a' particular institution, this step investigates how the student has chosen 'that' particular institution (Gorard, 1997, 63; White, 2007, 24). This level shows how students come to their final decision about which university to enrol in. It is a critical stage in the whole university choice process. The criticality of this level stems from the fact that some factors may dissuade a student from enrolling, even though a university has satisfied their criteria. A student usually has 'a feeling' of perceived risk about their decision, as there is usually a high level of involvement and risk in such decisions (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Brassington, 2006), which means they will try to obtain further information or advice about the university they are considering. For example, when prospective students go to enrol in a university they try to examine it in great detail. They may ask to see the classrooms and the books used in the course. They may even wish to meet some current students at the institution, to ask their opinions and to find out whether they are satisfied with their programmes or not (Kotler & Fox, 1995, 262).

Another very important factor that marketers pay attention to, is the staff members at the point of enrolment, which are the reception desk and the enrolment team. These people have a significant role in the marketing mix because they are the first to communicate face-to-face with the public (Stott & Parr, 1991, 14). For that reason, Dennis, (1998, 11) recommends particular attention for the enrolment staff members' training and motivation. Students usually speak with these people about their needs and whether this provider is able to satisfy them. Therefore, it is important for the enrolment team members to know what information consumers require in order to prepare them to answer.

3.3.5 Post-Purchase Evaluation

After enrolling in an institution and experiencing the service, a student usually assesses whether the service or its provider lived up to their expectations raised in the earlier stages of the process (Brassington, 2006, 109). In other words, there is a kind of comparison with their standards, judgement and opinion about the experience (Lovelock & Wirtz, 2004, 44). A student might pose some questions; for example, was it value for money, time and effort? And have they made the right decision by enrolling at that specific university? Accordingly, they establish an attitude which can either be negative leading to dissatisfaction, or positive leading to satisfaction. Kotler & Armstrong (2008, 149) note that what determines whether the customer is satisfied or dissatisfied with a purchase, is the relationship between the customer's expectations and the service perceived experience. There is much literature about post-purchase evaluation under the name of student or customer satisfaction e.g. Scott (1999); DeShields, Kara, and Kaynak, (2005); Popli (2005); Prugsamatz, Heaney, and Alpert (2007).

It is crucially important for a university to produce satisfied students. At the end, a marketing truism is 'the best advertisement is a satisfied consumer' (Kotler & Fox, 1995, 264). This means that marketing effort does not end when a student has enrolled. Having satisfied students is important for an institution for two main reasons. Firstly, a university with satisfied consumers has a higher probability of retaining its students for the following

years (Dennis, 1998). Secondly, it builds up the university's reputation and creates an indirect word-of-mouth promotional campaign (Al-Alak, 2006).

3.4 Summary

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss a theoretical framework for the research investigation based on two marketing models. The '7 Ps' marketing mix is a set of controllable elements a university uses to shape its offer to the market. The second model, student choice, studies why students pursue HE, where they get information from, how they evaluate and enrol. The chapter has proposed a synthesis of these models, because the design of each of the marketing mix elements is dependent on customer behaviour analysis. Although these two models provide a comprehensive framework for designing effective marketing strategies, both of the models have limitations. The investigation of this framework, through the research design and methodology, will be the aim of the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological aspects of the study. After posing the research questions, the research mode of enquiry used in the study is discussed and justified. The research design, sampling and access are then presented and discussed. This is followed by data collection procedures through three research phases. Analysis procedures of the data are also discussed, followed by discussions on the issue of research trustworthiness. The chapter ends with discussion on ethical considerations.

4.2 Research Questions

This study has three research questions investigating issues on marketing private higher education in Syria. The first question addresses the students, and the second question addresses the universities. The third question combines these two groups. The reader is reminded that the first two research questions address what has been described in an earlier chapter as the “two sides of a coin”. Informed by the context and theoretical framework, the research questions are further elaborated and aligned with the discussion presented in the previous chapter. This study is underpinned by three main research questions, under each there are the following sub-questions:

Question One: How do prospective students act and prioritize in the private university decision making process?

This question investigates students’ practices and perspectives on choosing a private university in Syria. It questions students’ perspectives of choice and selection with the primary objective of researching what shapes students thinking prior to attending a private

university, during the process of choosing and post event reflection on the overall decision-making process. Identifying issues related to prospective students' meanings and understandings of matters related to university choice is a core element. In respect to the student choice of university theoretical model, there are five sub-questions underpinning this question:

1. What motivates students to pursue higher education and private higher education in particular?
2. How do prospective students collect information about private universities? What sources of information do they use?
3. How and on what criteria do prospective students evaluate between available private universities?
4. How do students reach a final decision? Who and what influences their decision?
5. How do students feel about their decisions and universities after they have enrolled?

Question Two: How do private universities market to attract new students?

This question relates to issues regarding marketing strategies at private universities in Syria. The focus draws on strategies implemented by private universities to attract prospective students. In respect to the marketing mix model, there are three sub-questions underpinning this question:

1. What are the marketing elements underpinning marketing strategies in private universities?
2. Why do private universities focus on these marketing elements?
3. How do universities balance their marketing elements in relation to the market demand?

Question Three: What is the relationship between student choice of university and marketing strategies portrayed by the universities?

This question combines two previously mentioned theoretical areas in the way that it investigates the dynamic relationship between the two models. There are four sub-questions underpinning this question:

1. How do universities market to attract new students in the light of student choice?
2. What is the institutional response to prospective students' needs and requirements?
3. How do marketing strategies reflect on student choice?
4. Which elements or aspects of the marketing mix relate to which steps of student choice of university?

Reflecting on the above points, I intend to make methodological decisions based on assessing appropriate data to answer these research questions. This is discussed in the following section.

4.3 Discussion of the Two Main Paradigms of Social Research Science

There are two main paradigms in educational and social research, qualitative and quantitative. There is a long argument over which paradigm is more rigorous and valued. This debate sometimes creates a kind of segregation and dichotomy between the two paradigms (Devine and Heath, 1999); each sticking to their own beliefs and rules, ignoring or even undermining the other. However, it is noticed that each has its own strengths and weaknesses.

The quantitative paradigm is rooted in the positivistic and scientific traditions. It employs quantitative measurement and the use of statistical analysis. The most important strength for this paradigm is the power to statistically generalise findings on the whole population, which is referred to as representativeness (Sarantakos, 2004, 26). In addition, quantitative research ensures objectivity where research tools and the systematic analysis provide the findings. Bearing these advantages in mind, however, there has been criticism of quantitative research in social sciences, for example, its inability to capture the 'real' and

‘accurate’ meaning of social behaviour (Sarantakos, 2004). Human behaviour is decontextualised in the sense that events are removed from their real world. It is restricted to direct the researcher towards what is perceived by the senses as employing standardised tools. It also determines the course of study at the outset, and restricts the options of questions and responses, forcing upon respondents opinions or intentions which they might otherwise have not expressed (*ibid*).

On the other hand, qualitative research is rooted in the interpretative, naturalistic and communicative traditions. It is illuminative and interested in the cases studied, not looking particularly into generalisations. The important characteristic about this paradigm is that it is about interpreting and understanding the world, in particular cases, in their natural settings in a realistic way. Qualitative research also allows higher flexibility responding to participants and settings. Nevertheless, there are disadvantages for qualitative research, such as the subjectivity caused by the researcher, and this affects research reliability. There are also reservations regarding generalisability of findings.

Reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of each paradigm and in order to address the range of investigations in this study, the research uses a mixed paradigm that ranges through a *multiple-between-methods* means, and combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches. There have been several studies in social science that combined both approaches, such as Finch and Mason (1993), Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995), Gregson and Lowe (1994). However, White (2007) highlights the fact that there have been too few mixed method studies in the area of student choice and educational marketing (e.g. Taylor, 1992).

There are two main reasons for this study to adopt a mixed method approach. Firstly, bearing in mind the advantages each paradigm offers, it has become commonplace to reject the ‘old debate’ about relative advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative research, and instead, the virtues of combining methods are widely applauded (Devine & Heath, 1999, 14). Hantrais (2009, 109) highlights three advantages for mixed methods: complementary, triangulation and facilitation. Brannen (1992) explains the complementary

power of mixing the two paradigms. He says that each paradigm is employed in addressing different issues or aspects of the enquiry. In this proposition, the data generated from each paradigm are not generally contradictory, but rather complementary working together to offer a broader understanding of that research topic (Bryman, 1994). An example of this is the strength of the generalisability of the quantitative paradigm, and the strength of individuality of the qualitative paradigm. In this research, I seek both. Denzin (1970) comments on this point saying that such a mixed paradigm empowers the researcher's claim of validity of the conclusions. In addition, the data becomes more consistent and even replicated by the various methods leading to methodological triangulation. However, whether a mixed paradigm strategy is a complementary, triangulation or facilitation strategy, it was adopted in this study because I understand these three strategies to work in favour of the research (Brannen, 1994, 14).

Secondly, this research adopts a mixed methods approach for epistemological, logical and pragmatic reasons. Pole and Lampard (2002, 30) advocate that for research to have an open-minded approach which acknowledges the potential value of a different sort of data, 'effective research design is more about pragmatism than eclecticism'. The main reason for this position and combination is the fact that such a combination seems to be the best fit for this research. Instead of having one dimensional research strategy (either qualitative or quantitative), the research utilizes two dimensions (breadth and depth) into one, which has served in broadening its scope offering a better picture of reality (Pole & Lampard, 2002; Gorard & Taylor, 2004).

Combining approaches does have some pitfalls as it reflects on philosophical, methodological and theoretical levels (Hantrais, 2009, 116). Brannen (1992, 3) explains that although the mixed methods approach highlights the importance of choosing appropriate methods for research questions, the combination of different methods within a single piece of research raises the question of movement and shift of paradigms at the level of epistemology and theory. The research design, which has been sequential, has helped in addressing this issue. The design has put the research into three separate phases; each phase has followed a different mode and approach. The first and third phases follow a qualitative

approach, the second following a quantitative approach. Another critique against mixed methods is that it might not respect each paradigm's rigours. A key principle that I am aware of, is to ensure that rigour in the application of both quantitative and qualitative techniques has been maintained separately. I have been sensitive to the rigours of each paradigm, whether theoretical or practical, and ensured that each has been used appropriately at each phase.

4.4 Research Design

In order to answer the research questions, the study has three sequential phases (see Figure 4.1). The first phase consists of exploratory interviews with students. The exploratory phase is also supplemented with a pilot study which served in establishing links with potential universities in Syria, and providing initial insights into the context. As the research design is flexible, the exploratory phase has had substantial impact on establishing and improving research design (Davies, 2007, 37; Oppenheim, 1992, 67). The questions for the exploratory interview are suggested from the literature review, though these theories are developed in the West, which is completely different from Syria. For that reason, the pilot study has helped in formulating and developing the interview questions. The aim of this exploratory phase is to discover issues and themes about students' choice of university. The findings of the exploratory phase, the interviews with students, inform the design and questions for the questionnaire in the second research phase. Since there is paucity of literature about the issue of student university choice in the Syrian context, the exploratory phase seems crucial for providing relevant issues and questions. This research phase is phenomenological as issues are emerging from the perspectives of the respondents (de Vaus, 2002). This counters the idea of *a priori* list of questions that could be assumed by literature or researcher. In this way, the exploratory phase assures the content validity of the questions which have been employed in the survey.

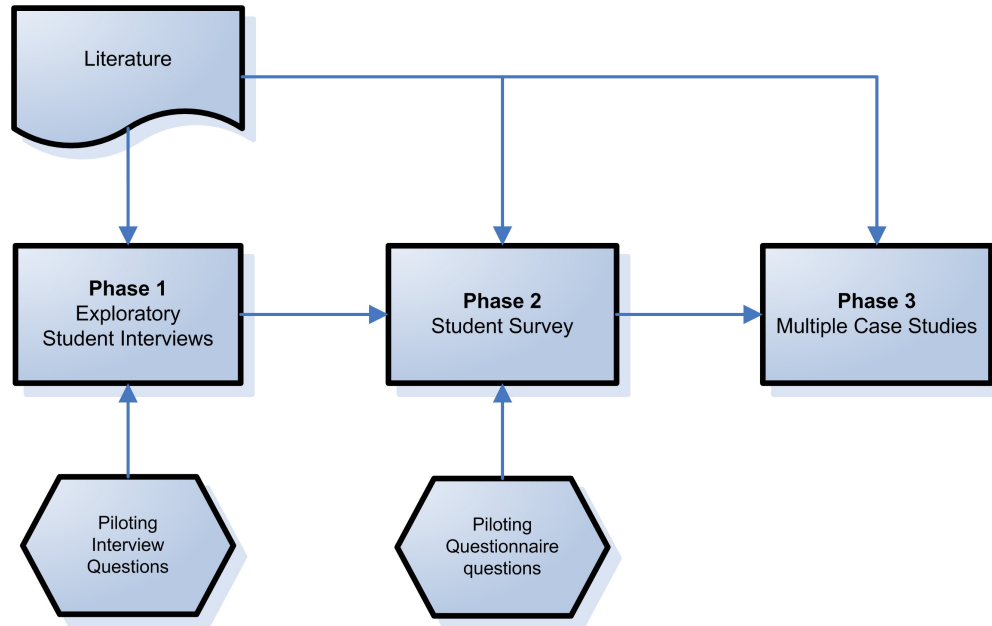


Figure 4. 1: *Research Design and Process*

The second phase of research is a survey. The function of the survey is to establish the basis for generalizable patterns based on statistical analysis of student choice of private university in Syria. As Babbie (2004, 243) recommends, this phase has employed a questionnaire to measure attitudes in a large population as it generates large amount of data in a relatively convenient way. The results of this research phase are used in the third research phase to formulate further detailed investigation into emerging themes and issues of student choice of university and marketing issues at private universities in Syria.

The third and final phase of the research is multiple case studies. It aims at following-up investigation in order to understand patterns emerging from the survey data in the second phase, and to understand marketing strategies at private universities in Syria. The research investigates three university case studies. In these three university case studies, there has been critical evaluation of their marketing strategies and practices, and the way they reflect on the students choice of university. These three case studies link the findings of the first two stages to the different institutional practical contexts. Through this research design, each phase is facilitating and leading to the next, and each phase is based on the previous

phase. In other words, each phase is feeding into the next in a logical progression and sequence.

4.5 Sampling

I followed different techniques of sampling through the research. The first step that required sampling was selecting three universities to conduct the research in. De Vaus (2002, 239) highlights that such selection requires extensive case screening before actual cases are finally selected. In order to make my selections, detailed investigation about each of the private universities was launched. This was achieved through extensive case screening of all the private universities in Syria, which was done by browsing the universities' websites, visiting a higher education exhibition in Damascus, attending a talk by the Deputy Minister about private higher education and visiting the Private Higher Education Department at the Ministry of Higher Education in Syria and having informal meetings with some of staff members there. At the exhibition I visited, I had conversations with people representing the participating universities, asking them about their universities and what was special about them. They offered me a considerable amount of promotional materials which also provided more information about those universities. With all the data provided from these sources I purposively selected three universities: Alpha University, Beta University and Gamma University; these are pseudonyms for issues of confidentiality.

Burgess (1984, 55) says that, in purposive sampling, cases may be selected for a study according to criteria established by the researcher. The case studies selection criteria were based on three variables. The first was the different and individual identity and characteristic of each university; each university was approaching the market in a different manner. University size was also another variable in selecting the universities. Size was decided by the number of the student population. Beta University was a large private university, Gamma University was medium-sized and Alpha University was a small one. Selecting the cases on size was a result of the idea that different source of universities would offer a different and wider range of issues and ideas (Crossley & Bennett, 1997). Ideas might overlap from the three cases, but there would still have been a range rather than

having the same source of university. Universities of different size might have different marketing strategies as a result of resources and financial allocation; this would enrich the data. The third criterion in case study selection was the geographical location of each of the universities; each university was located in a different region. Throughout the pilot study I interviewed a university guide publisher in Syria, asking him what universities he could suggest. He recommended the same universities I had thought of, which offered me much confidence in the selection.

The second stage requiring sampling was selecting students to be interviewed for the pilot study. The target population of the interview was the whole population of the three case study universities and six students, two from each university, were selected. Sampling the participants was done using an *ad hoc* approach. This was achieved by approaching students in the university cafeteria and asking them if they would like to be part of the research. Most of the approached students agreed to participate.

The third stage requiring sampling was the interview with students, Phase One. Since the main aim of this phase was to inform the questionnaire questions in the second phase, a saturation sampling strategy was adopted. This means including further participants stopped when interviews stopped adding substantially new ideas, ensuring that a fully comprehensive range of issues and concerns from the perspectives of students have been identified. The participants were current students at the three case study universities, yet there were not any particular systematic random selection criteria. A notice that had a brief description about the research was announced on the universities' bulletin boards to recruit participants a week earlier, and the first to contact me and express interest in participation were taken. It might be argued that by using this strategy certain categories of students might respond to the announcement. For example, students, who might have some complaints about services at the university, or students who might be pleased with their university, may have wanted to participate in the interviews. However, this has not caused a problem since these two extremes have been beneficial to the data collected by making it more diverse. In addition, the aim of this stage has been to explore and not generalise or make conclusions (Oppenheim, 1992, 68).

The fourth stage that required sampling was the survey, Phase Two. The target population for the survey were the students at private universities. It might be argued that every student finishing secondary school and thinking of studying at university might be a potential student for those universities. Therefore, the study should be aimed at including all these students. However, the argument not to do so is supported by two points. Firstly, targeting this wide group is rather impossible as the whole population is very large, and some of them are in places that might be hard to reach. Another point is that not every student finishing secondary school considers studying at a private university. In this sense, targeting the whole population finishing secondary school and planning to go to university could be a wasted effort as it would not help the aim of the study. For the purpose of strengthening the quantitative design in the second phase, probability sampling strategy has been adopted. Random sampling has been used in which the whole current student population of the three case study universities has had an equal and 'non-zero' chance of being selected to be part of the sample (see Bloor & Wood, 2006, 153). This means that the sampling frame has included the whole population of interest. Together with the random sampling technique, the study has employed a cluster sampling technique. The availability of access to students' classes has allowed conducting the questionnaire in a group-administered style, which has offered convenience in terms of time and effort (Oppenheim, 1992, 103). The universities provided tables of all running courses in the class registry records at that time. Sampling was applied with the aid of these records as the sampling frame for their populations (Robson, 2002, 241). Clusters (classes) of students have been selected randomly from the provided tables and all students of the selected classes have been surveyed. The survey has conducted about 110 questionnaires at each university.

The last phase that required sampling was selecting administrative members of staff and parents from each case study to be interviewed. For administrative members of staff, a 'key informant' sampling strategy was used. I selected four people with senior administrative positions that relate to marketing at each case study. Although I aimed to select people in the three cases that hold the exact administrative positions, which would facilitate a better comparison between cases, as data are being gathered from homogenous sources, this was

not achievable as some positions existing at one university did not exist at another. Another issue was convenience; it was difficult to arrange for an interview with these people, bearing in mind their busy and demanding jobs. In selecting the participating parents, a snowball sampling technique has been implemented. The contact people at each university referred me to potential parents. This decision was made for convenience and time restriction reasons.

4.6 Gaining Access

Gaining and negotiating access to the three selected universities was an uncomplicated process. The negotiating process was carried out very carefully as this was a sensitive issue to the universities, bearing in mind confidentiality issues and competition between private universities. Positive rapport with these universities was established as this would facilitate conducting the research. I identified the gatekeepers for approval to participate in the research and it was a decision to be made by a university president. Therefore, meetings with each of the presidents of the universities were arranged via phone calls. The process of these meetings was almost the same in each case. In the meetings the presidents were very enthusiastic about the research and said that they would like to help in any required area to make the research a success. After the meeting they sent me to a contact person to help me conduct the pilot interviews which were conducted on the same day I received the consent. All of the approached universities agreed to participate in the research.

4.7 Data Collection

The research used multiple data collection tools throughout the three phases. Burgess (1984, quoted in Brannen, 1994,) argues that researchers ought to be flexible and therefore should select a range of methods that are appropriate to the research problem under investigation. It is significant to understand that each data collection tool has its own strengths and weaknesses. In this research, points of strength and weakness of each tool were considered to eliminate any unconstructive impact. In the following part of the chapter, data collection tools in each phase are discussed in order of conduction.

4.7.1 Phase 1: Pilot Study and Exploratory Interview with Students

As there is paucity of literature and research of student choice and marketing higher education in Syria this phase uses a ‘semi-grounded theory’ approach in the sense that it does not ignore the literature that existed in the West, yet the study is aware and sensitive to the gap. This exploratory chapter was pivotal to the thesis because it informed and shaped all subsequent data collection and analysis. A key thematic element of this phase that underpins most qualitative enquiry, is the notion of openness to emergent findings, the importance of immersion in the everyday lives of respondents, and acceptance of the possibility of unanticipated outcomes that may significantly impact on the design and focus of the study (see Creswell, 1994). Senses of doubt, scepticism and criticality surrounded this phase of research due to the tentative and provisional nature of the findings; this critical doubt and scepticism acted as a catalyst for further research in later phases (see Thomas, 2009, 90). A fundamental aspect of any emergent process is the need to be reflexive, both in terms of research methods applied and in interpersonal relationships, and I have endeavoured to enact this in this first phase.

Pilot Study

A small-scale pilot study has been carried out as an initial investigation to broaden understanding obtained, reviewing literature and theory by identifying further potential ideas and themes through interviews with key participants. Keeping in mind the reflective and heuristic nature of this research, the pilot study is a means of experiencing and developing ideas, methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis (Moustakas, 1990, 9; Oppenheim, 1992, 67). In the pilot study I sought insight from a wide range of participants in order to have a broader prospective of exploration; I interviewed a marketing manager at the University of Leeds, a university guide publisher and six students.

The interviews with the Marketing Manager and the university guide publisher are aimed at obtaining insight and advice from people with marketing practical experience. Listening to experts' stories about marketing and students' choice of university, has offered an insight in the area. In the interview with the Marketing Manager, I sought his advice on two issues. The first is his view on the preliminary interview schedule with the students about choice of university, and the second is suggesting university administrative staff to interview to better understand their marketing policies. He also suggested particular questions to be asked to administrative staff. One drawback about this interview was that the Marketing Manager I interviewed did not have ideas about the Syrian context. For that purpose, I have interviewed a university guide publisher in Syria as he would have useful insights about the context of the study. Another very important aim of the interview with the publisher was to gain ideas about private universities in Syria and to propose private universities in which to conduct the research.

The interview with six students in this preliminary study aimed at reflecting on the questions that have been formulated from the literature for the exploratory interview schedule with students in the first research phase. Piloting the interview provided an opportunity to trial practical and technical aspects (Baker, 1994, 182). It helped in identifying problems and benefits associated with the interview questions; it also helped in reflecting the whole research design as it sought methodological feedback (Janesick, 1998). The pilot study has helped gain better understanding of the frame of the reference relevant to the question wording (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001, 87). It has also been important to ensure that the exploratory interview questions were as straightforward as possible. This made the answers and responses specified and focused on the research questions, (Davies, 2007, 105), and it also ensured that the questions fully offered what was needed (*ibid*, 115). Conducting this pilot study has also provided me with more experience, and trained me in interviewing techniques and communicating with participants (see Roulston *et al.*, 2003; Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

The pilot study started with an interview conducted with a Marketing Manager at the University of Leeds. A copy of the research questions, initial research design and the initial

interview questions schedule with students was previously emailed to the interviewee. This interview used a semi-structured schedule with six questions (see appendix 1). I interviewed the participant in his office. Contact with this participant was facilitated by one of my supervisors. The interview was recorded with the participant's informed consent, and notes were taken by hand, including other papers that I copied concerning the research e.g. an illustration of the theoretical models (see appendix 2). The interview was quite short (thirty minutes), as the participant mentioned that he only had limited time to offer.

He suggested corrections for the student interview schedule; the fourth interview question should contain the following prompt 'what was the most important thing to you when you applied?' He also stressed the importance of the last question, as there has usually been a gap between the reality, and what has been advertised, about universities. Moreover, he suggested placing more focus on finding influencing factors in the students' decision-making process, and finding ways of influencing them by universities. He advised to ask some questions when meeting and interviewing the marketing people in the three case universities. These questions were taken into consideration when designing the interview questions for the marketing people in the third phase of research.

Getting into the context of the study started with a meeting with a university guide publisher in Syria. I thought of this person as I was browsing the guide he published about these universities. I contacted him and arranged a meeting, which I had not originally planned to do. Therefore, I conducted an open, unstructured interview with themes of discussion to keep his views in the aimed areas. The meeting had two themes; student university choice, and potential universities. I interviewed the participant in his office and it was audio-recorded with his informed consent. Notes were also taken. The participant was very cooperative and helpful, and the interview lasted for an hour. The interview offered useful suggestions for the research, which were taken into consideration.

The pilot interview with the students schedule was constructed using the research question one in section 4.2 and taking on board themes emerging from the literature. The interview investigated the way students chose a university as well as reflecting their current views on

their choice. The interview was semi-structured with six questions that covered the areas proposed in the theoretical model (see appendix 3). Each of the questions had sub-questions, probes and prompts to help collect more data from participants. One extra question was added to the interview about the participants' views of the interview questions, and if they had any further suggestions. The interview questions were originally designed in English, then translated into Arabic (see appendix 4) as the interview had to be conducted in Arabic. I translated the interview questions into Arabic and requested a translator to translate it back into English; both English copies, the original and the translated, were compared and there were no fundamental differences (Birbili, 2000). More discussion on translation is presented in the section of trustworthiness.

The students were interviewed individually through a 'walking interview' around the campus. A 'walking interview' was a fundamental aspect as it allowed me to 'get more into the field' (Trochim, 1999) enabling me to acquire insight into the universities, as students were giving me information and showing me places at their universities. The 'walking interview' not only made them feel more comfortable, but it also was stimulating and idea-generating, as they walked me through areas, such as their unions or playing fields (Emmel & Clark, 2008). The interviews were long conversations as students were encouraged to express freely and at length their opinions and beliefs. The interviews were recorded with the participants' informed consent. With the 'walking interview' technique, a recording device was attached to the participant for clarity of voice. Notes were taken sometimes on the paper on which the interview questions were written as this helped in making notes on the questions. Each of the interviews lasted an average of forty-five minutes.

Piloting the interview suggested that some questions and props needed some corrections and modifications, as they could be unclear or misleading to the participants. Some questions were entirely omitted for their fatuous nature. Question three and question four seemed similar and repetitive. Therefore, the third question was changed to the following 'Did you have a list of options (universities)? If yes, how many universities did you have on your list and what were the differences?' A prop was added to question one, which is 'Were there any other purposes?' The third prop of the second question needed to contain

'why'. Finally, when the participants were asked their opinions of the interview, they suggested some very interesting questions that could be added. 'Was it value for money?' was a suggested prop to be added to the sixth question. All corrections were added to the second modified version of the interview questions used in the first research phase (see appendix 5).

Exploratory Interview with Students

As phase one is exploratory and heuristic in nature, investigating students' perspectives of choice and selection with the primary objective of understanding what shapes student thinking prior to attending a private university, during the process, and post event reflection on the overall decision-making process. This implies that this phase is aimed at developing ideas rather than gathering facts and statistics. It is concerned with trying to understand how students think and feel about the above mentioned issues (Oppenheim, 1992, 67). Unstructured and semi-structured interview tools are recommended for exploratory research (Robson, 2002). The semi-structured interview allows the conversation to flow comparatively freely and tends to steer in such a way that the researcher introduces specific questions when the opportunity arises (Clark-Carter, 1997, 6). Semi-structured interviews with twenty-four students, eight at each university, were conducted to facilitate the identification of themes and issues echoing participant's understanding and beliefs of matters related to choice of universities. Supplementary interviews, as conversations with students (Burgess, 1984), and observations were also employed to help offer a better understanding of the structure and essence of the experience (Adler & Adler, 1998).

Choosing to begin with semi-structured interviews has offered opportunities to engage more with the participants, enabling me to probe more information, and clarify some points (Cohen *et al.*, 2000, 267). Misunderstanding was reduced for participants, as well as for myself, because of the conversational explanatory power the interview method offers (Briggs, 1986). These semi-structured questions have covered points of theory and pilot study and have improved the opportunity of exploring the possibilities of new ideas. The

interview questions have been formulated in a way that stimulated the participants to tell their story of how they enrolled at university and to recall what happened at that time.

The interviews were conducted individually and face-to-face with current students at the selected universities, and were voice recorded to ensure not to miss any of the mentioned points, allowing me to focus more on the conversation and to probe further into some issues. In this respect, I was a 'participating listener' rather than a recorder (Davies, 1997, 146). Although it would have been more beneficial to conduct these interviews similarly to the way they were conducted in the pilot study, as 'walking interviews', they were held in designated rooms instead. It was decided not to conduct the interviews in a walking style as there were some drawbacks to that technique. The major drawback being the noisy setting which affected the quality of the sound recording, as the participants and I were outdoors which made it hard to listen back to the recordings at the analysis stage. Another drawback was embarrassment that prevented some students to agree to walk the campus with me. Two of the participating universities allocated a room for the interviews, usually an empty classroom. At the third university the interviews were conducted in a senior administrative member of staff's office at his insistence, although he offered to leave me alone with each participant. This sometimes made the participants nervous. The interviews were also sometimes interrupted by a phone ringing; this affected the flow continuity of ideas (Bell, 1987, 75), but was dealt with by allowing more time for the interviews.

Previous to initiating the interview, I allowed a friendly general conversation with each participant; this was longer with the interviews conducted at the senior administrative member of staff's office, as such setting was felt as threatening or intimidating (Oppenheim, 1992, 69). I dressed casually on interview days, jeans and a T-shirt, to be similar to the students. I also made them aware that I am a student myself, so that they felt I was one of them, 'part of the group' (Davies, 1997, 137), and not a staff member or a teacher. Participants were also allowed to ask any question they thought relevant to the research. These techniques were used to establish trust and rapport and ensure the participants felt more comfortable in the interview, and freer to talk and express their views. The interview timings were set in a way that was convenient to the participants, not

to make them miss their lectures, and were arranged on two days at each university, as I had to travel there.

Although the interview questions were a predetermined set of open-ended questions, and organised in a way that ensured consistency of the data flow, flexibility and progressive focusing were allowed in the interview schedule (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983). For example, through the interviews some further questions emerged that were added to the schedule. The wording of the interviews was constructed in a sensitive manner that avoided causing any embarrassment or cultural inconvenience to the participants. The interview schedule is presented in Appendix 5. The questions centred on the following points:

- Reasons and motives that made the students pursue higher education, in general and private higher education, in particular.
- What the students did after deciding to pursue higher education.
- How the students knew and gained information about private universities.
- How the students evaluated and chose which university to attend.
- How satisfied or unsatisfied the students felt about the universities they enrolled at and the decisions they made.

4.7.2 Phase 2: The Survey

Rationale for Survey Approach

The research includes a survey questionnaire for the potential benefits it provides. The large amount of data it offers in a relatively cheap and quick way makes it a convenient approach for the study. In addition, when the questionnaire survey is conducted in a standardised and objective manner, more confidence is added in generalising the findings. A questionnaire survey is also easy to standardise, as similar procedures could be carried out on conduction. In the earlier research phase, it was found that some students felt it inconvenient to express their views to me in interviews; it is what Robson (2002) calls the presence of the researcher. This has created some concerns about the quality of the data, and therefore, the

questionnaire survey approach has also acted in a way to improve quality of the data in the sense that it offered anonymity of participants (Oppenheim, 1992). The questionnaire survey approach also provides convenience of data analysis and reduces researcher bias in presenting the findings (Schaw, 2000). Nonetheless, the questionnaire survey does have drawbacks, which have been taken into consideration.

Piloting the Questionnaire

Piloting has helped not only with the wording of questions but also with procedural matters, such as the design of a letter of introduction, ordering of question sequences and reduction of non-response rate (Johnson, 1994, 39; Oppenheim, 1992, 47). Although this process has been costly and time consuming, it has served in developing a design that has targeted the aimed points and prevented later problems (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

The questionnaire was piloted at one of the participating universities (see appendix 6 for a pilot questionnaire). This meant that the participants were similar to those on which the main questionnaire was conducted. Choosing to conduct the pilot questionnaire at this particular university was a convenience matter, as it was the closest to where I stayed over the period of data collection. I also knew some colleagues at this institution that would help me in administering the questionnaire. A colleague volunteered to provide her class for the pilot questionnaire to be conducted. The class had twenty-two students that were of a range of years and disciplines as this class was English for Academic Purposes. The session lasted for 95 minutes. The teacher accompanied me for the first few minutes as she introduced me to the students. Participants were asked if they wished to participate in the pilot questionnaire, and none refused to participate.

A procedure similar to the original questionnaire conduction plan was carried out. Students were timed on completing the questionnaire and it was completed in an average of seventeen minutes, and a range of seven minutes between the first and the last to finish. After the students finished, a group discussion about the questionnaire was held (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, 179; Fowler, 2009, 124); where students expressed their views. They

provided considerable suggestions that were taken into consideration in producing the final version. Finally, the data emerging from the piloted questionnaire were excluded from the whole sample survey results, as this would contaminate the research data (Peat *et al.*, 2001).

The Questionnaire Design

Substantial periods of time for the construction, revision and refinement of the questionnaire were dedicated to improve the questionnaire design. Some advice was sought from colleagues and a graphic designer. Cohen *et al.* (2000, 246) say a good questionnaire: (a) is clear on its purpose; (b) is clear on what needs to be included or covered in order to meet the purpose; (c) is exhaustive in its coverage of the elements of inclusion; (d) asks the most appropriate kind of questions; (e) elicits the most appropriate kind of data to answer the research purposes and sub-questions; (f) asks for empirical data. These points were taken into consideration in designing the questionnaire.

The questionnaire is designed on insight obtained from the exploratory research phase and literature; this has served in ensuring that all questions have been explicitly relevant to the research enquiry. The questionnaire is organised into sections, each with a title that relates to the central purpose. The questions move from generalised areas of interest to a more specific set of features about which direct data is gathered. The questionnaire contains closed questions for the purpose of generating statistical data; open-ended questions are also included in order to leave it open for more ideas to emerge, bearing in mind the potential for generating qualitative data. Open-ended questions also helped in preventing the questionnaire of having an *a priori* list of items (Schuman & Presser, 1981, 80).

The questionnaire utilises mainly the 7-point semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957) on which respondents indicated their attitudes and opinions between two extreme choices. This strategy has helped draw conclusions about the weight and role of each factor affecting student choice. Although Gorard (2003, 103) does not recommend the use of 7-point scale attitude measurement as it could create trouble and confusion both to the respondent and the researcher, such a scale has provided a greater scope of precision

of attitude measurement (Oppenheim, 1992, 60). There were some issues that could not be asked in this style of question. Therefore, the questionnaire made use of some other question types to compliment those of 7-point semantic differential. The questionnaire had 100 items/questions; of which ninety were on 7-point semantic differential, four open-ended, three “yes/no” and three offered a list of selections. Although mixing types of questions was not recommended as it would be more difficult at the data analysis stage, this strategy has pragmatic reasons, as different question formats have offered better ways of obtaining the required data (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998).

The first section of the questionnaire asks about the reasons students choose to attend university in general, rather than their choice of a particular institution. The questionnaire starts with this as it is the first decision students have to make in the process, i.e. whether to study at university or not in the first place. This section comprises one question (Q.1) with thirteen items representing a list of individual, social, and environmental influences and motives on which participants measure their attitudes. Participants are asked to rate each of these items, ranging from (1) irrelevant to (7) relevant. This question includes an open-ended question in case participants have an unlisted motive. Section Two of the questionnaire consists of two questions (Q2 & Q3). Question Two evaluates sources of information respondents use in order to gain knowledge about the potential private universities. The participants are asked to rate a list of sources of information from which they have gained information, ranging from (1) insignificant to (7) significant. The question also includes an open-ended question for the participants in case they have used any other sources that are not listed. The final part of this question (Q2) asks the participants to name the source of information they prefer, and found the most useful. Q3 asks students to rate how they feel about the adequacy of the information collected.

Section Three investigates selection criteria and it includes three questions (Q4, Q5, & Q6). Question Four evaluates the importance of various issues which students take into consideration when choosing a private university. Participants are asked to rate a list of 37 criteria that they used to select a university, ranging from (1) unimportant to (7) important. The question also includes an open-ended question for participants in case they took into

consideration any other criteria not listed. Q4 is a “yes/no” question asking respondents if they had other options and alternatives to the university they enrolled at. Q5 asks how many universities respondents have visited before enrolment.

The fourth section includes six questions and investigates students reaching the final decision and the enrolment process. Q7, Q8, and Q10 provide a list of people for the respondents to choose from. These people might have been involved with the students in their decision. Q9 and Q11 are “yes/no” questions. The final question in this section, Q12, has five items, and is on 7-point scale ranging from (1) false to (7) true. Section Five investigates post-choice reflections and students’ views and attitudes on their decisions and the universities they enrolled at. This section investigates current state unlike earlier sections requiring respondents to recall past incidents. There are two questions in this section, Q13 and Q14. In Q13, respondents are provided with three statements and asked to rate them on a 7-point scale ranging from (1) false to (7) true. Q14 investigates respondents’ attitudes and satisfaction on certain issues on a 7-point scale, ranging from (1) unsatisfied to (7) satisfied.

The questionnaire is designed in Arabic, and I made sure students’ own words were used in the questions (simple language), (see appendix 7 for questionnaire in Arabic and appendix 8 for an Arabic-to-English translation). The format is easy to follow and aimed at keeping the participants attention to the end of the questionnaire (Schuman & Presser, 1981).

Administration

Administering the questionnaire followed a standardised, consistent format and procedure in order to facilitate replication; this also facilitated testing the findings to evaluate reliability. As it is potentially important to have a high rate of responses (Verma & Mallick, 1999, 118), the questionnaire was group-administered in classes, and I was in attendance for various reasons. Being there, talking to students and asking them to participate in the research offered an opportunity to establish a rapport with them, explaining the purpose of the study and the meaning of items that may not be clear (Best & Kahn, 2006). It also

encouraged the respondents to complete the questionnaire, as they were prompted to take the task of completing it seriously (Al-Rabani, 2002, 78). Being there and interacting face-to-face with the students also served in creating the best environment for applying the tool.

4.7.3 Phase 3: Case Study

There are some advantages that make case study approach the best to answer the research questions number two (see section 4.2). Yin (2003, 7) says the choice of a research strategy or tool is mostly related to the research question itself, and “How” questions likely to be answered by case studies. Moreover, this approach provides flexibility in defining relevant data collection strategies. It offers deep and detailed insights into the cases. Case study design allows me to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, not only for an individual life cycle but also for organisational and managerial processes (Hakim, 2000; Yin, 2003). Nonetheless, case studies are not intended to study entire units of analysis, rather they intend to focus on particular issues in these units of analysis related to the research questions (de Vaus, 2001). As the case study relies on a multiple source and method of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion (Yin, *ibid*), the case studies have gathered evidence through field observation, documentary analysis and interviews (see Figure 4.2).

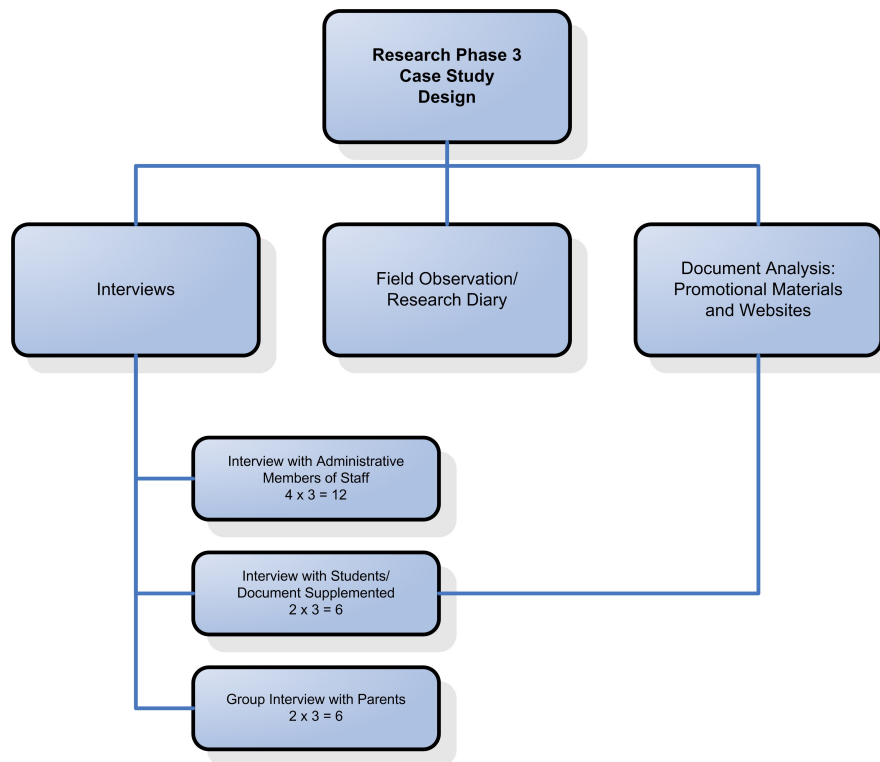


Figure 4. 2: *Case Study Design*

Field Observation

It is argued that all social research is a form of participant observation, because it is not possible to study the social world without being a part of it (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1998, 111). Based on this assumption, it is believed that participant observer is not a researcher technique but a mode of ‘being-in-the-world’ characteristic. It is also assumed that human-as-instrument is the way to answer the complexity of a problem, and this is to be achieved by ‘indwelling’ within these complexities (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, 27). Cohen *et al.* (2000, 305) assert that such beliefs enable the researcher to understand the context of incidents, to be open-ended and inductive, to see things that might otherwise be unconsciously missed, to discover areas that participants might not feel free to talk about in interview situations, and to move beyond perception-based data. Having these issues and benefits in mind, observation has been a consistent part throughout the whole research period.

From the beginning of the data collection process, I was looking for information and incidents that could improve my understanding of issues related to the cases. This was more evident as I first visited the universities; I needed to obtain an insight into their practices, cultures and contexts. I observed much of the day-to-day university life and recorded notes into a research diary, noting detailed information about events and behaviours of individual or group daily lives (Silberstein & Scott, 1991). As it was difficult to recall accurately these events and behaviours later at the stage of reporting findings, the research diary was a good method to overcome such a problem. One other major advantage of the research diary was the help it offered to overcome the problems associated with collecting sensitive information by other methods, such as the interview (Corti, 1993).

I gained many useful views about how these universities function in relation to the research questions. I witnessed many incidents that also indicated how the universities approached and dealt with their students and members of staff. I was not only observing incidents, but also the universities location, neighbourhood, environment and facilities. The research diary contained detailed descriptions of the incidents witnessed or places seen. I was keen not to take notes in front of others as this might have created a sense of unease, and consequently reflect on the quality of the data. Sometimes, for example, notes were recorded in the diary after they took place. I then went back afterwards to record notes about these conversations.

Documentary Analysis

The second method used in the case study design is documentary analysis. Two categories of documents were included: a university's promotional literature and website. Such documents are information-rich data sources and often loaded with an institution's cultural values and self-image. In addition, they are important to the study as they are the channels by which a university communicates to the public and prospective students. For this particular reason, these documents were used as supplementary tools in interviews with students; more on this issue is discussed later in the student interview section. Documentary analysis in a case study provided a means of comparison among the three university cases

but and in the cases themselves. In other words, there was a comparison between a university's promotional publications and data collected through other sources.

Interviews

The third method of data collection in the case study is the interview. Three different interview schedules were conducted with three different groups; students, administrative members of staff and parents.

The interviews with students offered a chance to investigate the students' perspective in each case study. They also offered a chance of follow-up investigation in order to gain a more detailed, and deeper understanding and explanation of particular patterns emerging from earlier research phases. Six students, two from each university, were chosen randomly from each university through provided tables. It was originally planned to be a semi-structured interview following a similar procedure to the interviews conducted in Phase One; however, as the research progressed it was decided to be rather unstructured yet supplemented with document materials to guide the interview and help stimulate responses. The reason for this decision is highlighted by the major role of the Internet and promotional materials in students' decisions. In each interview, the student and I browsed the document materials, and I elicited attitudes and opinions about several issues there. In process, it was more like a 'think-aloud-interview' technique (Davis & De Maio, 1993). Getting the students to interpret the documents shows a shift towards a more collaborative and participative mode of research informed primarily by the critique of a hierarchal and expert (researcher) driven system of enquiry (Johnson & Weller, 2001). With some probes and encouragement, the respondents were lead to brainstorming where the respondents were in control.

When the interviews were conducted, it was noticed that the students were instantly attracted to the photographs on the provided documents which were well-illustrated and this required considering insights from visual research methods. In this respect, it is not only about how the verbal content is interpreted by participants, but also the visual. Prosser and

Loxley (2008) highlight the importance of considering visual methods in social research as we are living in “increasingly visually saturated cultures”, and visual productions are usually inscriptions of reality. Another issue that urged this procedure is that as visual productions (the promotional literature and websites) are consumed in a particular context, they inform of this particular context under investigation. Conducting the interview in this style enabled deeper investigation than a ‘words-alone’ interview style would do. Photograph and document elicitation helped and aided students in recalling and remembering issues that happened when they chose a university.

In recording these interviews, ‘Snagit9’ computer software was used which facilitated audio and video recording of the computer screen on which the websites were browsed. This was a key strategy as it was very important to retrieve the website pages on which the participants were commenting. The software could not help, nonetheless, when the participants were commenting on printed documents. Therefore, when comments were made on printed materials, I made notes to help me remember later on in the analysis phase.

The interview with administrative people aimed at investigating their views on the universities policies and practices regarding the issues under investigation. The link between the data emerging from these interviews and other sources would match what a university is aiming to be, administrative people’ views, and how it is being perceived by the other groups, students and parents. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees’ offices, audio-recorded and lasted an average of 54 minutes. The interview schedule had eight questions with probes and prompts which were basically derived from the theoretical framework and earlier research phases and investigating marketing approaches and practices (see appendix 9 and appendix 10 for into-Arabic-translated version).

The group interview with parents was not in the original case study design; however, the findings in Phase One and Two indicted a key role for parents in the university decision making process. This has suggested a design that could include the parents group in the investigation. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed. The interview schedule has six questions with props and prompts which basically derived from the theoretical

framework and earlier research phases. The questions investigate their roles and views about the university selected (see appendix 11 and appendix 12 for into-Arabic-translated version). I arranged for the group interviews to be conducted at the parents' homes. I met parents alone, away from the students, to ensure that they would speak freely without thinking of what their child would hear, or causing them any embarrassment. In group interviews, the parents were present; however, in three interviews out of six, the mothers were mostly silent. After informing the participants about this research and its aims and receiving their informed consent to participate, I audio recorded the interviews. The interviews lasted sixty-five minutes on average.

4.8 Data Analysis

4.8.1 Interviews

This section presents the analysis procedures of the data collected in all interviews in the study. Interviews have been conducted with three distinct groups or respondents. Similar data analysis procedures were conducted with all three groups. Data management is a major issue as there is a large volume of data. Therefore, data are organised in an efficient, flexible and secure system (Lee & Fielding, 2004). There were three universities that data were collected from; each university was a distinct source. Inside each of these sources data also emerged from three groups; students, administrative people and parents; each created a different category.

The interviews were not transcribed in a full-verbatim version. The decision not to transcribe the interviews was a result of the large amount of data generated from the research, fifty-six interviews, which would have consequently created very high volume of work to be carried at (Lee & Fielding, 2004, 533). Instead of full transcribing, each interview was summarised into transcript sheets. These summaries were written after listening to each interview five times. Notes taken into summaries were timed for ease of retrieval. The summaries were later revisited and read to enhance the understanding of issues under investigation. Throughout the analysis, and as it was decided not to have full-

verbatim transcription, the audio recordings were also revisited many times, especially for quoting. I translated the quotes into English and asked a colleague to translate the quotes back into Arabic, there were no major differences in the two versions.

It has been argued that there is no 'cut-and-dried' method of qualitative data analysis for every social research (Robson, 2002, 473; Davies, 1997); however, available methods provided some guidance to be considered. The qualitative analysis in this research considered mainly the Miles and Huberman (1994) method which drew attention to three actions of analysis: data reduction, data display and drawing/verifying conclusions. As the interviews were semi-structured, the interview questions were used as the initial outline for codes categorisation which later established the analytical framework (Robson, 1993). Within each categorisation and theme, several sub-themes emerged and created patterns which were also categorised and coded accordingly. The analysis was conducted in the transcripts summaries mentioned earlier on several sheets, with several colour highlighter pens and symbols in order to refine the data. A different colour highlighter was used for each sub-theme for ease of visual analysis, and retrieval of the data. The analysis also made use of marginal comments and memos. These sheets were pinned up on a wall enabling me to scan across all interviews of each research phase and case. Murphy (1992, 109) says although this seems to be a 'clumsy and time-consuming' method, it provides a much clearer picture for issues under investigation. Numeric analysis, namely frequencies, was also implemented in the analysis of the interview data.

4.8.2 Questionnaires

Preceding the questionnaire by an exploratory phase made the data analysis much easier and more organised. This was also facilitated through the questionnaire design that had been divided into section areas, each section covering one theme. Gorard (2003, 102) suggests a good question design is the key to easy survey analysis. Although the questionnaire had two open-ended questions, not much data were generated; this was a result of the questionnaire being extensive. However, the emerging data were taken into consideration in the analysis. Each of the questionnaires was coded with a serial number in

order to identify the university it was collected from. Few questionnaires (four) were duly returned with identical answers; they were excluded from the sample. A code book (Oppenheim, 1992, 263) containing the text of the original questionnaire, variable allocation document and the coding frames was assembled before the data entry phase for ease of analysis.

The study made use of computer software, the Statistical Packing for the Social Science (SPSS) to help analysing the data. SPSS helped in conducting statistical procedure components and also in producing tables and figures. The analyses were initially simple descriptive statistics based on mean and variance to understand the difference and weight of each of the factors under scrutiny. Computations of mean average and standard deviation are used to summarise the numbers. The use of the standard deviation is aimed at providing an idea of how representative the mean is, and how varied the responses are (Fink, 1995). One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) mean test was conducted to compare the data generated from different universities. Gorard (2003) and Best and Kahn (2006) recommend the use of the ANOVA test to compare between groups over other tests, such as the *t-test* or *chi-square* test, as it provides significance comparison between more than two groups in a single operation. Hence, the ANOVA test was conducted as there were three universities, and to determine if there were any significant differences.

4.8.3 Case Studies

Conducting the case studies data collection and analysis have followed a sequential design (de Vaus, 2001), which helped in building a progressive understanding about the issues under investigation. In each case study, although the analysis of each group was conducted separately, the data and findings were triangulated and presented in thematic categorization of aspects for ease of comparative analysis between cases. Theoretical insights provided basis to present the findings in a comparative style in the three cases. I connected pieces of evidence from different source groups to the whole case study stressing meaningful relationships and explanations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The analysis and presentation initially followed an *idiographic* style to maintain each case's individuality and peculiarity

(de Vaus, 2001). As the three cases were brought together for comparative analysis, a *nomothetic* style to reach theoretical generalizations was used. A separate chapter synthesizes the findings from the three cases.

4.9 Trustworthiness of Findings

Validity and reliability are two salient topics that reflect on the importance of the research, because constructs in social theory are often ambiguous, diffuse and not directly observable (Neuman, 1991, 178). Neuman adds that perfect validity and reliability are virtually impossible; however, I ensured that certain procedures and actions were taken to guarantee optimum possible validity and reliability.

Validity is the extent to which an instrument measures what it claims to measure, and this was achieved by establishing relationships between research tools and the phenomenon under investigation. Certain techniques and strategies were implemented to control all possible factors threatening validity to ensure research rigours.

Internal validity was improved by research design that investigated different aspects of the phenomenon and from different perspectives. As the design was progressively and reflectively developed, it allowed flexibility of modifications to include all major aspects and sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Preparation, exploration and piloting also empowered the research internal validity (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Content validity was also ensured; items in all of the research tools represent the entire range of possible items of the phenomenon investigated (Neuman, 1991, 183). This was achieved by the use of piloting (Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001) and exploratory strategies (Creswell, 1994). Items were not posed based on the researcher's opinion or literature. Randomisation of research samples in stage one and two empowered the external validity and **this enabled the findings to be generalizable to the three universities** (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003).

As translation-related decisions have direct impact on the validity of the research and its reports, three techniques were used to eliminate possible drawbacks: back-translation, consultation and collaboration, and pre-testing and piloting (Birbili, 2000). All the research tools and reported findings were translated back into English and Arabic; both English copies, original and translated, were compared and there were no fundamental differences. Colleagues mastering both languages were also consulted to develop and compare versions. Pre-testing and piloting also helped in developing research tools. This helped in the Arabic language as the tools were used in this language.

Corroboration and triangulation via data comparison was facilitated as the research addressed the same phenomenon from different perspectives and with different research tools (Silverman, 2000, 177). For example, data from interviews with students were compared with data from the questionnaire. Also, data from different sources were compared against each other; for example, data from student and parents. Such a strategy of comparison helped with corroborating and validating the data interpretations.

Concerning reliability, special care and attention was given in planning, consistency and stability of sampling, fieldwork, data recording, analysis, interpretation and opportunity for all perspectives (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003, 272). This was supported by the rich and detailed description of the research design and procedure presented earlier in the chapter, something that can facilitate reliability of research findings. In the case studies, I ensured to replicate and follow the exact same data collection procedure in each case (de Vaus, 2001).

4.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues and considerations are becoming a major interest and concern in social sciences and education. The nature of social and educational research in general investigates people's lives and privacy makes these areas highly sensitive (Baker, 1999, 430). There has been some debate in literature over this issue as it has impacted profoundly on research (Manson, 1996; Silverman, 2000; Neuman, 1991; Baker, 1999). Some of the debate has been over the point that being subject to research guidelines could hinder the

quality of research and consequently this would result in hindering knowledge. However, for the protection of both the researcher and the researched, many research organisations have published guidelines that researchers have to compel to, such as the SRA (2003) and the BERA (2004).

All aspects that may raise ethical questions were considered prior to carrying out the research. Ethical issues were of major importance and sensitivity in this research in particular; they were a source of perplexity. This was a result of the research having to compel to different sources of ethical guidelines, and these guidelines were sometimes contradicting. The research was conducted in Syria; which meant that this research should conform to the research ethical guidelines published by the Syrian Ministry of Higher Education. Moreover, this research was conducted at independent universities, each having its own code of ethics. Add to this that this study was prepared in the United Kingdom, this meant that it also had to compel to the British research ethical guidelines, BERA 2004. In fact, there is paucity in the literature on such kind of challenge or ethical disparity in different contexts. The major difference stems from the fact that Islam is state-sanctioned, and has a great influence in the Syrian community (Kruckeberg, 1995). For example, it is unreligious for a male to be alone in the same room with a female that is not family related. This, of course, had its implications on the kind of participants; the very religious females might have been reluctant, or did not participate, in the research. This brought up some philosophical considerations of what was ethical or not. Was it what all people see as good (ethical) or bad (unethical), and this meant that all nations' codes of ethics shared common main guidelines (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), or was it what a group/culture/religion of people see as "good" or "bad"? Kruckeberg (1995) argues about ethics in different cultures and the issue of commonality of ethicality and the dilemma arising from this issue. Kruckeberg (*ibid*) highlights an example; he says that due to differences in people's practices and perception of democracy in the Middle East, people enjoy less freedom to express personal ideas. This could have an impact on the quality of research. The research attempted to use philosophical methods to identify the morally correct course of action in various contexts. Moreover, careful study of these different sources of ethical guidelines

was conducted not to face any later contradiction. A summary of the research ethical principles in this research follows.

Issues of academic honesty and integrity have been taken into consideration. The research does not have any form of fabrication of data and findings and conscious bias either in the data collection or the interpretation processes. The research findings are validated through a rigorous process of analysis and reporting. The research is also free of any form of plagiarism or illegal use of any of sources. The sources and ideas that have been used in this research have been credited and reported accordingly under the academic guideline conventions. The issue of impartiality was also considered in the sense that my independent position has already been stated earlier, and views of respondents have been reported without any bias to any group.

Strategies for ensuring the protection of subjects and institutions were implemented. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants were dealt with. All participants were ensured that their names, and any other information that could reveal their identities, were to be made anonymous. This made the participants (students, parents and administrative staff) feel comfortable and talk freely and deeply in certain areas. This issue was more important for administrative staff as what they said might reflect negatively on their careers. Anonymity was ensured on an institutional level as well. Therefore, the research used pseudonyms for the universities; some of the information that could reveal their identities was changed, or not mentioned in the research. This issue, of course, had implications on the quality of the findings presented; however, it was important to hide the identity of these universities due to confidentiality and issues of market competition.

Another strategy for ensuring the protection of subjects and institutions was ensuring voluntary participation and informed consent. A university voluntary participation and informed consent was sought first (Neuman, 1991; Baker, 1999). In the meeting with the gatekeepers at each university, the universities' presidents, I explained the research aims and purposes. I assured them the research complied with the research practice ethics guidelines. They were offered a written informed consent which included detailed research

design. Two university presidents asked to inspect the research data collection tools, so I provided them with copies of the interview schedules and the questionnaire. Clearly, they wanted to ensure that there was no question they might find inconvenient to be asked at their universities. They were interested in the research as they thought that it would reflect positively on their institutions in understanding the students' choices and the market. One of the university presidents asked me to report the research briefings to him. The universities' consents were printed and signed. I was also issued a document from each university asking for cooperation in conducting this research; however, I never used these documents, as they might have negative impressions and reflections of the participants feeling towards me and the research (Silverman, 2000, 198).

In all interviews, participants were told about the research purpose and that they had the right to reject answering any question. They were also told that they were free to withdraw from the interview at any time and that the information obtained would be confidential and anonymous. The interviewees' informed consents were unwritten; however, they were audio-recorded at the beginning of each interview. In the survey, on the other hand, and as the participants were collected in a cluster/group (class) technique, this required firstly access into the classes. It could seem inconvenient interrupting the class with the survey; therefore, this was done only after getting the class teachers' consent at an earlier stage. When I was in the class, I told the students about the purpose of the survey and the research and that they had the right not to participate, withdraw at any time, or not answer any questions they might feel intimidating. They were also told that the data collected were anonymous. All of this was also provided on each of the questionnaires (see appendix 7).

4.11 Summary

This chapter has presented and discussed the methodological issues of the study. The chapter started by discussing and elaborating the research questions. The research adopts a mixed method approach for pragmatic and fit-for-purpose reasons. The research design has also been presented to be flexible consisting of three sequential stages. The chapter has also discussed sampling and access. A detailed description on methods of data collection in each

research phase has also been provided. Data analysis techniques have also been presented. The chapter then discusses issues of validity and reliability. The final section discusses ethical considerations surrounding this research.

The following six chapters present and analyse the research findings. Chapter Five is dedicated to research Phase One presenting the findings from the exploratory interviews with students. Chapter Six is dedicated to research Phase Two and discusses the findings from the survey with students. Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine present the findings from the three case studies; each chapter discusses a case study in an idiographic approach. Chapter Ten brings the findings from the three case studies together in a nomothetic approach. I finally remark that all chapters presenting and discussing the findings provide a detailed description of reality, which comes from a belief in what Kress and Hodge (1979, 22) say that “showing less means knowing less. And seeing less means thinking less”.

Chapter Five

Phase One: Initial Findings from Interviews with Students

5.1 Introduction

Data were collected to facilitate the identification of issues reflecting participant's meanings, and understandings of matters, related to choice of universities by semi-structured interviews with 24 students. There were eight students in each of the three private universities participating in the research.

This chapter focuses on student perspectives of choice and selection with the primary objective of understanding what shapes student thinking prior to attending a private university, during the process of choosing an institution and post event reflection on the overall decision-making process. Hence, the primary theme is 'what shapes students choices' which is considered in terms of four sub-themes: 'University or no university'; 'what shapes student's decision making processes'; 'critical events' and 'post university choice reflections'.

5.2 University or No University

Understanding student perspectives of choice and selection and what shapes their thinking prior to attending a private university started with the first notion of whether or not to attend university. This emergent sub-theme comprised issues related to university aspirations and needs. It was found from the interviews that participants had, to some extent, aspired to study at university long before they enrolled. Aspiration started normally during primary or preparatory school years. Although participants had aspired to study at university, it was learnt that they had not given much thought to what major they would choose. Participants showed appreciation and admired educated people that they had come

across throughout their lives, possibly because those people had greater social and financial roles. Students felt that they were encouraged by their families, which generally, had university educated parent/s. The participants mentioned that through school years, especially as they approached the final secondary school year, the idea of going to university was crystallising and becoming clearer to them. Participants highlighted various reasons that made them study at university. A combination of individual and environmental influences triggered such reasons which were grouped as follows: future career and security, social issues, personal development and subject interest and 'other reasons'. A detailed presentation of each of the highlighted reasons follows.

5.2.1 Future Career and Security

When participants responded to the interview question concerning reasons that made them study at university, they placed a particularly strong emphasis on future career. They felt that a university education and qualification would lead to a better future career. It was noteworthy that almost all of the participants, 22 out of 24, were consistent in mentioning future career whenever asked about their reasons for enrolling at university. Upon further investigation into the reasons behind this great emphasis, it was observed that work and future career issues could play vital roles in the participants' perception of their future lives. In addition, it was noticed that studying at university was assumed to improve job prospects and employability. Participant five (P5 hereafter) commented, "no one can find a job nowadays without a university qualification". The participants mentioned many jobs and careers that they planned to do in the future. These jobs were mainly medical and administrative, requiring a university education. They were conceived to be the 'good' jobs. Education was not only believed to improve employability, but also believed to offer better future earnings. This could be attributed to the nature of the job acquired with a university qualification. P6 elaborated, "you can't be on the top of the ladder in a company without a university degree... it is those on the top of the ladder that make real good money". P10 added, "I have all my life been dreaming of studying a major that could provide me good earnings". This suggested further investigation into identifying the most desired, or the

most financially well-rewarding jobs, as it would affect the enrolment at a certain programme of study.

The relationship between future career and security was more or less established as participants thought that a 'good' career would provide more security; the term 'security' had both financial and materialistic connotations. Without a university education, it would be difficult for students to find a job that provided a comfortable standard of living. This issue was more frequently mentioned by female participants as females were normally more dependent on their parents or husbands. I did not include the issue of gender in the survey as gender variances were not significant to the main objective of the research. P14 said about the previously mentioned issue:

A university degree is a secure future. University is the first step towards learning things that would help a person in the future. Education is security. Here in Syria, if you do not have university education, life is going to be very hard for you...University education also makes you aware of what is happening around you, and this makes you more able to protect yourself. Life is becoming more like a jungle where survival is for the fittest (Interview: Participant 14).

In addition, students expected that a 'good' job would make them monetarily self-sufficient and not having to depend on their parents; P17 explained:

It is really important to me to work and make my own money. I don't want to spend my life taking pocket money from my parents or maybe husband... Independence, which is reached by having a job, makes me feel that I have achieved something important (Interview: Participant 17).

Two students (P1 & P9) gave the 'future career' issue a social dimension, as these students were expected to help, or take over, their parents' businesses after finishing their university education. For example, P1 was studying Pharmacy as he was expected to help his father at their pharmacy shop. It is common in Syria for children to help and take over their parents' businesses. This in turn, shed light on the idea that future career and security issues also have some social or familial dimensions, and this in turn led to the second section, namely social issues. A general conclusion about future job and security issues could be the significance of instrumental and pragmatic considerations in attending university.

5.2.2 Social Issues

Students (18 cases) were generally keen on mentioning issues and needs of social dimensions. The social issues were considerably various, but they basically centred on four sub-section headings: family, belonging, friends and social networking and achieving a good social position. The 'family' topic was prominently represented by parents and their level of involvement, which varied amongst different families. A considerably strong influence from parents on the decision process was felt, as if they were holding the 'steering wheel' in many cases. Upon further investigation into the issue, I understood that this could be attributed to a number of reasons; the major reason being the fact parents are the fee payers. Another possible noteworthy reason that could have given them such a role was that of cultural dimension, where parents, in particular the father, have a strong influence, and even control over other family members. For example, in the words of P12 who unhappily said:

My results were good enough to get me accepted at the Agricultural Engineering Faculty at the University of Damascus, but not the Architecture Faculty which my parents wanted... They made me put down that opportunity and come here (a private university) and study Architecture (Interview: Participant 12).

P14 had another case; he complained, "My parents forced me to study at university". In a similar case P16 said, "There was no way I could avoid studying at university. Both my parents are engineers; it would be shameful to them and to the whole family not to". Participants felt that their parents used strategies of persuasion to make them accept their choice of attending university, even to make them choose a specific programme. Nonetheless, this was not the case with every student.

The second social issue is 'belonging'. It could be inferred from the data that attending university was a means of providing more of a sense of belonging, as well as social comparability. For example, many of the participants (18 cases) came from university educated families, and therefore, they wanted to attend university to be like their family members. P15 explained, "All my family members went to university, I cannot be the only one that broke this routine... I don't want to be the black sheep". Some students complained that they were forced by their parents to follow in their footsteps. The concept

of 'belonging' sometimes exceeded the boundaries of the family to the local community. P13 explained, "I am from Salami Town; ... this forces me to pursue the same path of studying at university... Salami is a town where most of its adults are university educated". Three participants expressed that there was a sense of competition among family members comparing their study opportunities with those of other family members. P24 explained, "Families in my town boast about the number of university educated members they have... a person who has five kids, that are all doctors, for example, is going to be well-respected... we can't be out of this culture".

It could be assumed that students whose parents had a university qualification would be more likely to follow in their parents' footsteps and study at university. This might have influenced student choice in different ways. For example, the parents' job was likely to influence students' aspirations or need to study, possibly as they had seen the success of their parent/s professionally, and had aspired to be like them. This, in turn, encouraged students to go for suitable education that could guarantee the opportunity to obtain this success. Another example about parents' jobs and careers has been mentioned earlier in the 'future career and security' section, where children were expected to work with their parents. In addition, families with a tradition of attending university could have created expectations that their children would also attend. In such a 'domestic culture' (P11), children might strive to meet their parents' expectations, or simply follow the routine that their parents had followed, as was the case that P16 mentioned earlier. Conversely, this issue was not consistent with all participants. For example, P24 highlighted, "My parents haven't attended university; they have always been encouraging me to go to university and become a medical doctor...deep inside, I could feel that they were trying to achieve what they have missed through me". In this example, the participants' parents were not university educated, but they still had academic expectations of their children, so as to compensate for their own academic inadequacy. In fact, all these issues that suggested a major role for parents in the student choice process, made me place more attention and focus on parents in the following research phases.

Another emergent social subsection is 'friends and social networking'. Students expressed that university might be a good, healthy environment to meet new people, and make new friends, and generally network socially. P20 explained:

Meeting new people is very important to me; by meeting and knowing people I will learn more skills. I want to learn about other cultures and about other communities... it is important for a person to know many people around in his/her own community. It is very important for the future. These people can always be good help... I believe I can get this at university (Interview: Participant 20).

A university environment was expected to be more sophisticated and diverse than a school environment, leading participants to assume that they could meet and socialise with different types of people at university, as school was described as 'small and limited'.

Some students went to university as they wanted to follow their friends after the end of secondary school. This area was probed and it was found that peers and friends may have created and fulfilled a desire to go to university, not only for the sake of being like their friends, but also to be with them. It was a type of 'self-to-the-peer' comparability, or even group reaction mentality. P22 explained, "I wanted to be like my peers and friends at high school, all of them were planning to go to university... why would I be the only one dropped out. I did not want to be less than any of them". In fact, this raised the issue that students could have decided to go to university because they were trying to be like others in their communities, and in this prospect, belong to it, as was discussed earlier.

Another noted social subsection, which could be related to esteem, was 'achieving a good social position'. P21 explained, "When you get a good career and a good or important post, it would lead you to a good and important social position... Every person tries to get the best social position". This issue was explored further in order to understand their meaning of 'social position', and a relation between the issue of 'social position' and the earlier mentioned issue of 'future career' was understood. In other words, a good career might provide more social respect. Furthermore, it was inferred from the students' views that people with no university education were categorized as 'second-class', while 'first-class' people were university educated. This posed some question to explore the bases by which they discriminated between the two groups. P22 explained, "Our society nowadays does not

look in a nice way at uneducated people. (The reference here is to university educated people)... People look at a person when he/she goes to university as a well-educated person as he/she has the knowledge”. P9 added, “It is the way people look at you. If you are university educated they look at you in a different way...with more respect”. A sense of pride was felt by the students talking to me, as they were referring to themselves as belonging to the educated, first-class group. The examples cited above also shed some light on how students perceived themselves, and the concepts of gaining higher education qualification.

5.2.3 Personal Development and Subject Interest

Participants mentioned issues related to the enjoyment of studying, and interest in self betterment. They believed that university was a source of knowledge and education that would help to empower and develop them. These were described as positive reflections and outcomes of higher education, and they were thought to make the students excel in their future daily lives. In addition, students conceived that university education would make them understand life more clearly. P12 expressed some of his expectations by the following: “The knowledge I get at university is very important. Every piece of information I learn there is going to reflect and benefit me in the future. I believe this is the whole point of education; the higher I go in education the better I will do in future life”. From this quote, and four others, I understood that there was some kind of expectation on the part of the students about university education, and this suggested the question of whether or not these expectations were found in the education received. In other words, there could be some discrepancy between students’ expectations and reality. This suggested that further investigation was required in the following phases at the proximity of what was offered and the students’ expectations, as this reflected how they thought about their decisions. More detailed discussion is dedicated to this issue at a later stage in this chapter, post university choice reflections.

In the first instance it was understood that the knowledge and education that students were referring to, would basically be the academic; however, the more I started to acquire views

I realised that students appreciated more the knowledge they would get from the whole experience. University experience was believed to contribute to their self betterment as they would learn from many sources, other than formal sources. P16 explained “A person’s character and personality transforms through university. They become stronger in their personality... This comes as a result of meeting new people and being in many real-life situations”. P24 added an interesting point regarding social communications skills and personal development saying,

I have only attended boys’ schools. As a result, I felt that I couldn’t talk to girls, because I haven’t been in the same environment with them... At university it is different... I think I need to develop myself more in this social and communication area (Interview: Participant 24).

With further inquiry into this issue, though not all of the participants felt comfortable talking about this, it was found that most schools in Syria were single sex, as it is a Muslim country. This suggested that university could be the first opportunity where males and females interact, socialise or even network. Most references to this issue were indirect by participants, particularly females; this is a cultural issue as it could be considered inappropriate for people, more particularly females, to discuss such issues of mixing with the opposite sex. A sense of embarrassment from P22 was felt, and she stated:

I remember the first time I came to university; I was just visiting and still in my second secondary school. I was really amazed; ... the way boys and girls used to talk and help each other... It was really nice... They even used to study and do assignments together (Interview: Participant 22).

She only said this after I had reassured her that our conversation would be confidential, and her name would be withheld.

The issue of intrinsic interest in the subject also emerged as a motivator, or a reason for studying at university. It was realised that students’ interests in a subject area also influenced their choices of specific programmes to pursue. Four of the participants claimed that they were studying at university just to gain general knowledge, and the reference here was academic. P3 said, “I decided to go to university for my love of knowledge in general. I love to know about things related to research and science”. Six participants were more specific in the area they were interested in. For instance, P14 said, “I love interior design...

I wanted to know more about it”. P8 added, “I have always had engineering as a hobby”. The source of this interest and passion for subjects were not very clear to the students themselves. Nonetheless, personal beliefs, family, peers and media were among the possible sources. For instance, P4 mentioned, “I loved this area (Pharmacy), as I felt I could help people with it. I love helping people in need”. Others might have gained interest in the subject as a result of exposure to the content of that programme. P17 explained, “I first knew about Business Administration from my cousin, I once went to her house and saw her university books... I was at secondary school then. I read one of these books and really loved to study in that area”. P5 was more reflective about the content of what he wanted to study; he said, “I had an extended look at the books and the content of Dentistry, Pharmacy and Medicine I even compared them together. I loved Dentistry most”. It would be significant for the research at a later phase to carry out further investigations to gain further insight about what creates such interest in different programmes.

5.2.4 Other Reasons

Some other issues also emerged from the interview data to motivate students to pursue higher education such as the feeling of ‘achievement’ and self-esteem. Thirteen students assumed that by going through higher education successfully they would feel that they had achieved something important for their self-esteem. It was that through achieving and succeeding in what has been called a ‘demanding stage’ of their lives, it would give them a feeling of self-contentment. This also proved to themselves and to others that they were competent enough to study at university. P9 explained, “Getting to university is becoming a dream nowadays...because of the extremely hard National Secondary School Exam”. This suggested that students could already have felt that they had achieved something significant by passing the general National Secondary School Exams (NSSE), and they might have wanted to take this a step further by studying at university. P17 commented:

I will feel that I achieved something important. Even if I do not get a job that requires such a degree, I will not bother... what matters to me is that by going successfully through university I will have achieved something important to myself... This is the most important thing to me (Interview: Participant 17).

This also suggested that participants looked at the process of getting through higher education as a challenge that they wanted to undertake, or as P21 puts it, “university is a challenge for me, and I want to prove to myself that I am up to it”.

Students also believed that studying at university would reflect on their ‘individuality’. This issue emerged from participants’ beliefs that a university qualification and education would make them different to either their family members or their peers and friends. P15 justified her choice of going to university, “I wanted to study because this would make me different and distinct from others around me”. This issue was not clear and required further and closer scrutiny; it was understood that this kind of distinction might be gained from the programme the students were studying. P15 explained, “...I even wanted to study a programme that not many people study for that reason”. P11 added “university makes you more distinct and independent, I wanted to study a major that none of my parents or family members did because I wanted to be myself... My parents are both engineers... all my aunts studied English Literature... I wanted to be something else”.

It was also discovered that students wanted to study at university to experience what some referred to as the ‘fun’ part of university life. Twenty-one of the participants had heard stories about the entertainment at university, from those already attending university. They may also feel this as a result to what they had seen on television, especially American movies and how they portray ‘college life’. The activities and events mentioned by students were those usually held by the student unions such as trips, concerts and tournaments. This, in turn, might have inspired in them, a desire to be part of this kind of life. P7 said:

I used to see this through my brother and his friends... His life was so much different from the one he used to have when he was at secondary school, he did not have to wake up early and wear uniform. He has a lot of friends and they do a lot of fun things together... I really wanted to be like that (Interview: Participant 7).

Another example was P22; she visited a university when she was at secondary school with her cousin. She described her experience on this visit:

It is really different to the environment we had at school. It was more fun. I could see this on the way students, boys and girls were chatting in the cafeteria... She, my cousin, told me that they have a lot

of fun in the parties and trips they do... We never do these at school... This makes you feel that you are mature (Interview: Participant 22).

After having explored possible issues that made students consider attending university, the chapter moves on to discuss the second sub-theme, issues that shaped students' decision-making about choice of university.

5.3 What Shapes the Decision Making Process

Issues that shape the decision making process were featured themes to understand student perspectives of choice and selection, and what shapes the students thinking prior to attending a private university. These issues were particularly varied and were relative to many personal, psychological, societal and institutional factors. The data of this sub-theme is presented under two areas; information and criteria.

5.3.1 Information

Information was a major factor in understanding student perspectives of choice and selection. Collecting information about universities was the initial stage in the process of decision making. Participants mentioned issues related to information, and how they thought these issues might have affected their choices. The information gathering process started towards the end of secondary school, and became more intense after students had sat the NSSE. This could be a result of what many parents thought, that this could be distracting students from studying for exams. In some cases, information gathering processes started much earlier than towards the end of secondary school. However, unintentionally, as the students said that they knew about some private universities earlier. For instance, P8 said, "I heard about private higher education years ago. All my classmates also knew about it... it was important to us because we, hopeless students... I mean those not very good at studies, did not have to worry about not scoring in the NSSE". This suggested that under-achieving students could have thought more about private higher education, as they had known earlier that they would not be accepted at public university. This issue has further exploration in the third phase. However, there were no student who

did not know about private higher education, even before deciding to pursue university. Although private higher education is a relatively new form of institution in Syria, not only prospective students but many other people have already heard about it and gathered some information. The above mentioned notions suggest that information could be grouped into two areas, advertently/consciously collected and inadvertently/subconsciously collected. This section explores the possible sources of information and their significance in shaping students' decisions. The sources are grouped under four sections: friends and relatives, direct inquiry, media and 'other sources'.

Friends and Relatives

When starting exploration into sources of information, friends and relatives were promptly identified by nineteen respondents. This suggested a more influential or dominant role of these sources. Their role expanded to *help* the participants in gathering information. In other words, all family members were to some extent involved in the process, and this gave me the impression that the whole family was part of this decision, not only the student. When initially thinking about the family as a source of information, or aid in information gathering, it was expected that parents and siblings would be the main people involved. However, this was not the case; as it extended to relatives such as uncles, aunts, cousins and even grandparents in some cases. For example, P23 said, "My aunt called the university on the phone and asked about the requirements... later my uncle asked the people in the administration office". I investigated reasons for these relatives undertaking this role, and several were found. For example, in the case of P23, his parents were abroad and he was living with his grandparents (as guardians), and they felt that he was not mature enough to obtain the correct information about various universities. In other cases (seven respondents), such as P8, his aunt had a major role in the information gathering process, as her son had enrolled in a private university a year previously. This gave P8 and his parents the assumption that this aunt had all the 'correct' and 'required' information. He said:

My cousin was the first in the family to enrol at a private university. He is a year older than me... my aunt really did a lot of investigations about the universities. I was lucky that I came the following year because she passed us all the information she had... what really helped her was her brother in

law; he was a lecturer at a university. He gave her a lot of information about private universities (Interview: Participant 8).

This was more like a social network that shares information resources for the good of youngsters. When the participant was asked if he ever contacted any university himself to gain information, he replied, “No, I did not, but I am sure my parents did”. This showed again the major role for parents and enforced the suggestion to have more investigation towards family and parents in later phases.

Family friends also contributed in gathering or offering information. This could have been achieved either directly through asking them for advice, or indirectly through general social conversations. P3 explained the latter saying:

Private education and the new universities are becoming a social talk... my mother and her friends have been in many social conversations about this... One of her friend had her son attend a private university, and she was talking about how good it was... this makes a person aware of many general ideas about private higher education and even specific ones about some of the universities (Interview: Participant 3).

In such an informal social meeting, people could have shared many ideas about private higher education and this provided the participant with some information. In direct cases (two respondents), where participants were seeking advice, they approached their family friends who they felt were successful in their careers; they may have looked at these people as mentors. In other cases (six respondents), participants sought advice from their family friends that were related to academia, and most particularly university lecturers. They were questioned about the reason, and the role of such people, and P21 explained, “My father knew a person that works in the private higher education, and he recommended us some universities and warned us against others... we took what he said... He knows about all these universities; it is *his* job”. These participants felt that people with an academic profession had definite ideas about private universities.

Participants’ own friends and peers also emerged as sources of information. However, the nature of information gained from this source was more informal. Eighteen participants mentioned that they had friends who had more information about potential universities, and

the processes of application, than themselves. These friends were usually older and most likely had some experience either in higher education in general, or private higher education in particular. In two cases participants mentioned that they had many friends in private higher education who gave them much detail about the universities, and they believed that this source had the most influence on their decisions. P22 said that she received useful information from her friend that took her on a campus tour. Peers also contributed in information provision. Students of the same class were discussing through, informal conversations, the issue of private universities especially at the third secondary class when talking about post-secondary school options.

A strong emphasis on the 'friends and peers' source of information was felt which made me investigate possible reasons. P19 explained, "I asked my peers because I believe that I could communicate best with them. I will understand them and they will understand me in my questions... It is that we speak the same language". It was sensed from this quote that the participant might be not very comfortable asking particular questions to any other source of information but her peers/friends. P2 highlighted another reason, saying "I asked my friends, who were older than me, as they had real experience with the private universities... They can tell me what the universities are like from the inside". Similarly, P3 stressed the idea of direct experience of friends with universities. He said, "The most important source is my friends that had experience in private universities... they tell realities, and they are objective". However, it was not understood why they would be objective in the information they gave. This might be a feeling of trust on the part of the participant of her friends and what they told.

Relatives and friends were seen as a major influence because they were trusted. It was evident that participants showed levels of trustworthiness in the judgements about universities from their relatives and friends. This suggested a main influence for these sources in the decision making process. P23 explained, "I started to collect information about five universities. My father's friends told me that three of these five were not good, so I dropped them from the list. They said these three universities were very bad". I asked the participant about the reason that they were 'bad', and he said "I did not know, but this is

what my father's friend said. These people are highly trusted, and I believe everything they said". All this suggested that more emphases on these sources on later research phases. The issue of trustworthiness was raised again in the following section, direct inquiry.

Direct Inquiry

Information sources that participants interacted in verbally, asked further questions, and represented the universities were called 'direct inquiry'. These sources were university visits, phone enquiries and exhibitions; each of which had advantages and disadvantages for participants. These sources could have shared the advantage that participants found answers there to most of their questions. This is to be compared with other sources where they could not interact and follow specific details. These information sources could have shared the idea that participants thought that information gained from the providers was the most accurate and factual, at least from the universities' perspective. This raised again, the issue of trustworthiness. A kind of doubt, or even mistrust, towards private universities and the information provided by them was felt. P19 said, "We should ask for information from someone we trust and this means of course *not* the university administration people". I asked the participant the reason and she replied "It is to their advantage/benefit that we enrol there so that their business prospers. We should ask someone that does not have any benefit of us going to any specific university". Similarly, P12 argued, "A university would give you the picture they want, not what is real". This suggested that there was a general attitude against private universities, or even businesses, that they were mainly after financial profits.

Twenty-two participants had contacted universities by telephone to enquire at some point. When they made phone contact, they had already had information about the university they were enquiring about. In some cases, phone enquiries were to confirm what they had already heard. In this prospect, they were checking the ideas they already had. It was not only participants who used this source of information, but also their families. Enquires made over the phone were generally about available programmes and university requirements. Participants may have favoured this source for convenience, as they did not

have to travel to universities personally. This source should be given more detailed investigation as other alternatives of distance sources, such as the Internet or post, were described as weak.

It was learned that students had visited some exhibitions that helped them to gather information. Eight respondents reported attending such exhibitions. These exhibitions mostly specialised in education or higher education, and usually held in five-star hotels. A question could be posed regarding the reasons of holding these exhibitions in such luxurious venues. Students mentioned exhibitions in two main cities in the country, Damascus and Aleppo. It was also highlighted by the respondent that not all Syrian universities participated in such exhibitions, an observation worthy of further investigation in the third phase of research from the perspective of the universities themselves. Two participants pointed out that some of the universities participated in exhibitions held abroad. P10, for example, was a Syrian who used to live in Kuwait with her parents until she finished secondary school, and she wanted to go to university in Syria. She mentioned that she and her father attended an educational exhibition in Kuwait. She found just one private Syrian university participating. She mentioned that she received helpful information there. Exhibitions could have had a strong influence over that student, as she enrolled in that very university. A possible advantage of exhibitions was that they provided convenience as they gathered many providers in the same area, and participants could collect an extensive amount of information about various universities in one day. Therefore, I decided to attend one of these exhibitions at a later phase to learn more about what exactly happens there.

Participants also gained information through direct university visits. Students preferred this source as it was *visual* proof of what they had heard earlier from other sources. P 11 said:

I only believe what I see. I prefer this source because of the power of the visual evidence...When things and information are being told by others; they would be changed, usually amplified. So, a person should go there and get the information from the major source...this is the best (Interview: Participant 11).

Similarly, P1 argued, “All other sources I used were not good enough to satisfy my curiosity. I could feel very uncomfortable and worried... I had to visit the universities and see with my own eyes”. Other participants preferred this source because of its face-to-face communication, as it would support understanding the ‘detailed’ information. During visits, students gained information not only from direct questions to the recruitment teams, but also from other sources such as printed advertising materials, current students and academic staff. A more critical role to this source than others in the decision-making process is felt; the issue of university visits is discussed in more detail at a later stage in this chapter, namely, critical events.

Media

Press advertising, printed promotional materials, street billboards, and the Internet were highlighted sources of information categorized under media. Students mentioned that they acquired information through press, specifically newspaper advertisements. Advertising was also carried out in distributing promotional materials such as full-colour brochures and prospectuses. Street billboards contributed in providing information, especially in relation to programmes available and university contact details. Participants felt that media reflected what the universities wanted potential students to know and think about them. This again raised the issue of trust in sources of information. Responses were mixed when participants were asked about the impact of these sources on their decisions. P19 said, “When I was seeing X university’s advertisements in the streets on billboards and on the many newspapers, it supported my opinion that it was a good university. I felt that this was the right decision to make”. P21 had a different point of view; he argued:

I tracked universities advertisements on the newspapers. I looked at their headlines... I looked at the majors available. I honestly thought about how these advertisements looked... What caught my attention was that X University did not have any advertisement, not in any newspaper. This made me curious, so I asked a marketing lecturer in this university about the reason, and he said that this university was more mature than to be advertised in that commercial way... This, in turn, made me think seriously about enrolling at this university (Interview: Participant 21).

Participants pointed out that some universities were more concerned with advertising than others. These sources of information were more institutionally controlled than other sources

such as relatives and friends. This suggested further investigation in the third research phase with the universities' administrative staff to understand their advertising and promotional strategies. It would be beneficial to the research to study the messages that universities try to deliver and communicate through these sources as it was indicated to influence their choices.

Moving to the Internet, I did not expect it to play such a significant role in the information gathering process. This is due the fact that the Internet was relatively newly introduced in the country and the low number of the Internet users, 17.44% (ITU, 2008). Besides, internet access is not as easy and convenient as it was in other developed countries. P1 said, for instance, "I had to waste three hours to get a few websites; the Internet service was really poor and slow". Although participants faced many difficulties in browsing websites that might have helped them, they preferred this medium. Nineteen students reported using the Internet to acquire information which was an 'active' information search through browsing the universities sites considering the place and time conveniences. P11 mentioned that she browsed private university websites whilst abroad in Kuwait. Other than that, I expected parents, or older generations, not to use this medium due to ICT incompetency or even illiteracy; nonetheless, the initial findings suggested that my assumption was not correct, as four participants mentioned that their parents, or even grandparents, used the Internet to help gather information about universities.

The general feeling about media as an information source was that they were poor in providing adequate information. For example, some of the university websites or brochures did not mention basic enquiries for participants, the tuition fees or accommodation. P16 complained:

When I browsed the website to know about the university, I did not get the information I wanted such as the teaching systems, teaching staff, and accommodation options. I had to come to the university myself to get answers to my questions. The website was not good enough (Interview: Participant 16).

P23 said, "I read a lot of information in the universities websites, brochures, and advertisements; I could not find a reason that made me enrol at any of them... These

materials were too basic". Six participants believed that some of these materials were commercially designed, only aimed at advertising, while they should have been more informative. Students reported that other universities did not have websites and had only a few brochures instead. Nonetheless, this state of neglect for media as source of information proposed further investigation on the part of institutions.

Other than that, the design and visual representation of these materials had some significance in the process. For instance, P1 and P22 saw photos on websites and liked what they saw in the pictures of the universities. Further investigation will be carried out in the third phase to how students perceived these materials and ways to improve the content, graphic design and visual representation of these materials.

Other Sources

Participants highlighted other sources of information that were grouped under this category. These sources are agents' visits, and Department of Private Higher Education. Two respondents (P17 & P18) mentioned that they had gained information about private universities through agents' visit to their schools at the third secondary school. P18 said:

An agent from X University came to our school in Kassaa area [a wealthy residential area in Damascus]... I think he was doing this visit to other schools as well. The person was very convincing. My friends and I were fascinated by what he said. We asked him many questions. I think some of my class mates were just asking more questions to make time pass and avoid the class... The session was 45 minutes. He started explaining about the majors available, the tuition fees, scholarships, work opportunities at the university, sport and many other issues... We all liked this way, and the person himself was really very nice... He gave us brochures. I think all other universities should do the same and visit schools (Interview: Participant 18).

This source of information could be added to the direct enquiry sources as students were given a chance to interact with the university's agent, as their spokesperson.

Through seven interviews, a new and unanticipated source of information emerged. This was the Private Education Office, or contacts with official people at the Ministry of Higher Education. When investigating into the reason behind this source, it was found that participants felt that they needed an official opinion about the various private universities.

This again raised the issue of trust, and uncertainty about private education. P24 argued, “This is not a game; we needed to know more about these universities. We did not want to know what they wanted us to know. We want to know what the Government know about them”. P18 added “what my dad wanted to know was that if the degree I was getting would be accredited by the Government. I do not want to waste five years of my life and end up with an unaccredited degree. We could know these things from the Ministry itself”. Participants mentioned a surprising issue which was the people in the Private Education Office, or official people at the Ministry of Higher Education, told them that some of the universities were really unaccredited. This poses the question of whether or not this is true, and if so, then it could be perceived as a kind of favourism on the part of the Ministry directing and influencing prospective students’ decisions.

5.3.2 Criteria for University Selection

As the previous section investigated the possible sources of information participants used to reach decisions, this section investigates information the participants wanted to know and the issues that mattered to them in their selections. These issues mattered most in the decision-making process as they were the criteria on which the university selection was based. There were a wide range of issues that participants said that they had taken into consideration when selecting a university. The criteria were categorized into six groups: teaching, administrative, convenience, informal reputation, social and economic issues.

Teaching Issues

Issues about teaching and learning were most dominant in the participants’ criteria. A ‘good teaching system’ was a frequent expression used by participants (twenty cases) to indicate a ‘good university’; exploring further, it was understood that ‘good teaching’ was the teaching staff’s abilities and skills to deliver knowledge. This could be thought of as an individual issue in delivering knowledge. In other words, one teacher might be a ‘good deliverer of knowledge’ while others might not. However, participants felt this could be a common trend among the whole staff at certain universities. For instance, P19 said, “I

heard that teaching is not that good at X University as the students could not understand the lectures”. I asked the participant if she thought that this may range and differ from one teacher to the other, she replied:

Yes, but many of my friends and relatives said this about X University... I think the reason is related to the teaching styles in different universities. At Y University, teachers care most about making students understand and comprehend the content (Interview: Participant 19).

P4 added, “Some universities teach in the old style as they expect students to memorize extracts of books by heart, while others want the students to understand rather than memorize”. ‘Good teaching’ required a certain number of students per class, as well as the university to provide good teaching aids and facilities. I address this issue later in this chapter. For other students (five participants), ‘serious teaching’ was conceived as ‘good teaching’. One student explained:

I was asking about the teaching at this university, I wanted to know if it was serious enough, I was worried that I would go there and study for four years of my life and not get the real knowledge... My worry was that at private universities students might not be working hard as they pay money and they are expected to pass easily (Interview: Participant 21).

Again, this relates to the attitude towards private education which reinforces the suggestion for the need of further investigation towards that issue.

‘Good teaching’ also relates to the language of instruction. It was noticed that participants preferred universities that taught in a foreign language, and English was the most preferred. I enquired about the reasons behind this and came up with different possible answers. P10 said “I wanted to study in English because I wanted to travel abroad after graduation to work, I would need to speak English well for that”. P18 wanted to pursue his higher education in the West and he needed a good level of foreign language for that as well. It was also understood that being competent in a foreign language is becoming an essential requirement in the professional world of business, and this made students pursue such choices. It should be highlighted here that all the participants interviewed came from universities that were mainly using English as a language of instruction, and this might suggest that some other students might not prefer English or any other foreign language to be the language of instruction. This was understood as some participants expressed

concerns about English being difficult to learn and even adding a 'heavier' load to their studies.

Respondents also considered teaching staff in their selections. Teachers and lecturers had played a role as they were the main deliverers of the educational service. Participants said that they preferred a university that had 'good teaching staff'; this was also referred to as 'good reputation teaching staff'. With further enquiry, it was understood that this meant that teaching staff were to be of a certain quality. Among such qualities, the following were observed: holding Western higher qualifications, having international experience and ability to communicate with students in a friendly manner. The latter could have a stronger impact. Six participants from one of the universities were consistent in highlighting that they liked having foreign teaching staff; however, the reason was still unclear, and maybe this is worth further investigation on a later phase.

Issues relating to subjects and modules were also discovered. Nine participants mentioned that they considered the availability of majors as a critical factor. A student explained:

I was really confused in the selection... I wanted to go to X University as many of my school mates went there and because it was not very far from where I lived with my family, but it did not have the major I wanted... I had to choose Y University, though it was very far from home, for that reason (Interview: Participant 24).

P3 added, "I wanted to study Medicine, and I had to select this university because it is the only private one in Syria that had this major". It was realized that not all private universities had many programmes available. Upon further investigation into this issue, it was found that there were some universities with only four programmes. This may be attributed to the fact that these universities are relatively new; however, this issue will be investigated in a later research phase. Limited availability of majors at private universities had considerably contributed to narrowing down potential options for the students.

Three students mentioned course details, such as subjects or modules taught, as significant in their selections. They compared subjects taught in similar majors across private universities, and they liked subjects and modules with names that sounded modern, and not

very common in the state universities. This trend was possibly the most evident in Business Administration, where students mentioned that they liked modules that were considered 'rare' in the country. It was not clear whether students just compared the names of modules in similar majors, or if they went into detail about the module content. This led to another issue: curriculum and coursebooks, as students appreciated and favoured universities that used modern and coloured coursebooks that were published in the West. This was likely to be a result of comparing coursebooks used at state universities, which were generally single-coloured and out-dated.

Administrative Issues

There were few administrative issues that participants thought played a role in their selection. These issues were related to 'how the university was run and managed' (P21). There was a sense of worry among students that private universities might not be managed well, due to their lack of extensive experience. Questioning further to understand how respondents judged a university on the basis of whether it was 'well-managed', a range of possible answers were found. Two students made judgements by the way they were welcomed on their first visits before enrolment; one student explained:

...they had prepared for everything... there were buses to take visitors from Aleppo, and the buses were very modern and clean. We arrived there and everything was in place... They gave a presentation to the visitors... and then they invited us for lunch.... I said to myself that this university must be good because they know how to manage and do things... My father and I shared the same opinion (Interview: Participant 9).

The university visit issue is revisited later with 'critical events' sub-theme.

Other students (three) made judgements on how good a university was by how seriously and formally it was managed. The issue of "seriousness" has been discussed earlier when discussing teaching issues. Students possibly wanted universities to be managed in a formally strict and disciplined way. P18 clarified:

I excluded X university because I had heard that you do not learn there, though you get good fun... It was not serious... When I came here to this university, I asked the administration people if students are here to really learn or to have fun, I was worried that such people would reflect negatively on me. For that, the recruiting person showed me the university discipline and regulations policies, he also

showed me a list of names of students, twenty I guess, that were expelled or had disciplinary penalties for not taking the university seriously or violating the university regulations. The university refunded them and said to them (sorry we can't have you here). This meant to me that this university is really serious and not a place of fun (Interview: Participant 18).

A final emerging administrative issue is the relationship established between students and the administration. Five participants felt that they preferred a university where the administration was friendly and listened to them. The participants were expecting help from administration staff, and some of these judgements were made on the first visit to the university. This student-administration relationship also reflected on special and individual attention to students. P16 explained:

When I first came to this university, I saw the administration officer talking to the students. He was referring to them by their names. I really like it that he knew them by name. This meant a lot me; it showed a lot of care and attention to individual students (Interview: Participant 16).

Convenience Issues

Twenty-one participants highlighted issues relating to convenience that affected their decisions. For example, the distance of a university to a student's home played a major role in the selection criteria. Eight participants preferred a university that was not far from their homes. They preferred this for the convenience it could provide to live with their families, such as laundry and cooking. It also mattered from a financial point; this issue is raised again later in this chapter. In the Syrian culture students, and more particularly females, stay with their parents until they are married. For that reason a university in the same city was a priority. Other students contradicted this as they preferred to move out of their parents homes and live a more independent life. One student commented:

I wanted to move out and live alone, I wanted to go and live in Damascus, but my parents tried to find me a university that was not very far from home... I knew that it would be harder to live alone, but I believe that it could have been an opportunity for me to develop myself and become a more independent person (Interview: Participant 24).

Another issue relating to university distance from home was transportation. Private universities are located in rural areas which requires them to provide transportation to universities from major neighbouring towns or cities. This issue is investigated in the third research phase to understand the universities' policies concerning this issue.

A university's built-environment is also another convenience element in the participants' selection criteria. Built-environment has potential significance as it is the environment in which the whole educational service will be delivered. When I visited the universities, a large difference in size and number of buildings and facilities was noticed. This could be a result of the fact that they differed in size and number of students. Respondents had expectations of a certain size and shape of built-environment at a university campus, and they were inspecting this on their visits. This criterion was more effective on students' visits to campus. Another possible channel that participants used to inspect a university's built-environment is through visual representation on websites and printed coloured promotional materials. It clearly had an impact on student choice in the words of P8, he said:

When I first came here, I was first attracted by the shape of the buildings from the outside. The buildings of the university were really very beautiful. I have never seen a campus like this before, except in the West on the Television. When I got inside, it was luxurious. I got really happy and excited to see this, and I hoped to get accepted and be admitted there (Interview: Participant 8).

An interesting emerging issue was that students were possibly judging a university by the way it looked. A student shed light by saying:

I have never thought of going to X University... It is because of the buildings... When you look at them from the outside, they are just two small buildings. Y University's buildings were also small and old. I went there with a friend of mine. Although we had decided to enrol at that university, I changed my mind. I did not even bother to get inside the building and inquire about the course details... These two universities give you the impression that they are more of schools than universities... However, in Z University buildings are many and big. Such a look gives the feeling that this is a well respected and important university. A person would think the buildings took a lot of effort and money to construct, and this means that this effort would not be for something that is not good. I mean if the look is good, then the content will be good as well (Interview: Participant 23).

I shall revisit the issue of infrastructure later in the 'critical events' theme.

Some other 'convenience related criteria' also emerged. Thirteen students have taken into consideration the accommodation options offered. They wanted to ensure that a university would provide suitable accommodation. There was a wide range of preferences among the students. For instance, some students wanted accommodation to be provided by the

university on campus; some wanted private accommodation off campus, not provided by the university; others did not want accommodation at all as they were living with their families. The issue of accommodation is raised again under post-choice reflections, as it is a matter of concern for students.

Another convenience issue that emerged relates to timetable and attendance. Students wanted the timing of lectures to be convenient. A final issue related to convenience was the services offered to students. Participants highlighted various services, such as sport facilities and teams, library services, counselling and internet.

Informal Reputation

Fifteen participants placed a particularly strong emphasis on university reputation in their selection criteria. It was initially thought of in terms of research or teaching reputation, upon investigation, I found otherwise. Reputation was what people were generally saying about each university. A number of possible, significant related issues occurred. P9 clarified, and set an example about the impact of this issue on his choice; he said:

I thought I never wanted to go to X University... it is not that it is not a good one, but there are many bad rumours about its owner, Mr Y... I think he was on the newspapers with some bad news...People even say that the certificates provided at this university are not accredited (Interview: Participant 9).

This led me to another issue also related to what people were saying about universities, the national and international accreditation of qualification offered. There was a sense of worry in the students' selections that a university might not be accredited. I assumed earlier that all the private universities in Syria would be accredited nationally at least, as they were licensed and authorised by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE). This suggested further investigation into this issue with the MoHE. However, this would reflect on research design as an interview schedule should be designed for that purpose.

A university's age or name (long established reputation) had influenced the students' selections. A student mentioned:

I had many options to choose, but I chose this because it was the oldest... Some students have already graduated from it, I think... While others have had been open only for two years, so I did not want to go to a two-year-old university that might ruin my whole future (Interview: Participant 4).

Respondents thought that the older a university was the more experience it would have. It should be highlighted here that the age-range of all the universities was no more than five years. A university name was another possible issue. Eight respondents liked a university that had an 'interesting' name.

Social Issues

Some possible social issues also emerged as influencing students' choice of university. The student population size was one of these issues. Four participants, for example, preferred a university with a large student population as they assumed that this would provide them with a chance to get to know more people and make friends. Another possible reason was that larger student population universities would have a more diverse population. In contrast, two other students said that they preferred a university with a small student population. They believed that this would be a "family-like" atmosphere, and that they would receive more focussed attention from the teachers and administration. It should be highlighted that there was a significant difference in the student population between the large universities, with more than 5,000 students and the small universities with less than 400 students. A question was raised regarding the bases that determined university size; more insight about this issue is gained in the third research phase.

The 'friendly partying social environment' was one of the social issues. This environment was represented by student activities held by the student unions, such as parties, concerts, trips or sports tournaments. It was also represented by the type of social life experienced between students themselves in their relationships. Some participants said that they had heard about this, and how exciting it was during secondary school years. Others saw this themselves; for instance, P22 said:

I once visited X University... I had had a cousin that was a year older than I was and I went with her. I really loved to see the students sitting in the gardens and cafeteria of the university playing and

having fun. Boys and girls were really very friendly to each other. I really wanted to be like them... When I went to Y University, I did not really see this (Interview: Participant 22).

It was noticed that the participants that mentioned the issue of fun and social life as a motive for them to attend university, also stated this as influencing their decision of university choice. In other words, what could be a need or a desire could establish criteria. This suggested that a relationship was established between motives and criteria.

Another issue that could be related somehow to the next section, the economic issues, was the suitability and match between the student and their future peers. It was observed that there was a comparison between the student and others. I assumed that such comparison was made on a socio-economic level. A participant gave an illustration. She said:

I heard many stories about X University, I even went there once and I saw that. That university is for well-off students... I heard that if you don't wear designer clothes other students would look down on you and not talk to you and be your friend... I did not choose that university because I did not want to be less than others (Interview: Participant 19).

My initial assumption was that students would choose to attend a university with students of similar socio-economic background; however this was not the case with all participants. P14 said:

I wanted to be at a university near Damascus. It is the capital and you know it is really different. There are many people in my village who want to go and study there... I wanted to have friends from there... You really get to see and learn many new things from that (Interview: Participant 14).

Economic Issues

The final possible group of issues to influence students' choice of university were 'economic'. These issues were related basically to costs, methods of payment, and discounts offered. It was found that different private universities offered different methods of payment. For example, at some universities, the whole fee had to be paid in advance, while at other universities there were instalment options. There could be implications of such policies on students' choice with the convenience of the instalment method. P21 added another idea related to methods of payment; he said:

I hear that the Fees Office at X University is really very strict with payments. They never wait on the payments... If a student is short of a payment, they would not be allowed to sit the exams... I thought in a very negative way about that university. This really made me think that such a university is nothing but a greedy business. It does not care about education, but money and profits; I wanted to go to a university that cared more about education (Interview: Participant 21).

Discounts offered were also a possible issue to influence choice. Two participants said that they chose their university because they were offered “sibling discount” and a scholarship. It became significant to investigate universities’ strategies and policies concerning the issue of payment methods, discounts and scholarships offered, in the third research phase.

It was consistent throughout the interviews that students did not consider tuition fees as a major factor to influence their decisions. I found this surprising bearing in mind the very high tuition fees of private universities, in comparison with the average Syrian income per annum. Participants claimed that they cared more about other issues, such as the quality of education, than they did about fees. For example, P23 said, “my parents told me never to care about the fees; they said I could go to the most expensive; the only thing they cared about was that this university to be good with real education”. Such a consistency of this issue posed a number of assumptions. Tuition fees did not count as a major issue to the students themselves because they were not the real fee payers, their parents were. Therefore, investigating this issue with parents would be more appropriate. In addition, discussing personal or familial economic issues and the idea of affordability in particular might be sensitive to students. Nevertheless, I felt that these students told me that cost was not a major issue in their selections, to give me a certain image about themselves. In fact, this made me have some doubts about the quality of the data concerning this issue as there could have been social desirability bias (Fisher & Katz, 1999). However, this problem will be dealt with in the second research phase with the anonymity strategy and self-administered data collection procedures of the survey (Fowler, 2009, 109).

Under this sub-theme, ‘what shapes the decision making process’, the possible issues to shape and influence student perspectives of choice and selection, and their thinking prior to attending a private university, were presented. Various issues emerged and were grouped under two areas, information and criteria. However, going through previous issues, it was

felt that this process was critical for participants, and that there were critical events that impacted on it. As a result, the following sub-theme is dedicated to discuss this issue.

5.4 Critical Events

5.4.1 Private University: the Only Option

Through interviews a new, unanticipated and significant issue emerged; this being that students preferred to attend state universities over private universities. I then added a question to the interview schedule regarding this point. Researching further into this issue, it was understood that private higher education might be chosen as the only other alternative, when state higher education was not possible for participants. Twelve participants were not offered a place at any of the various faculties at public universities, as a result of not meeting the necessary requirements. For example, P7 complained, “I did not score very well in the National Secondary School Exam (NSSE), so I was not offered place at the state universities. I still wanted to go to university... the only option was the private ones”. In another case P14 commented, “I was thinking of re-sitting the NSSE, but I did not like that option”.

In another situation, nine students were admitted places at the state universities but not in the programmes that they wanted. P3 said sadly, “Although I scored very well in the NSSE, I could not study Medicine which was what I really wanted at the state universities... I scored 226 out of 240”. Faculties of Medicine at public universities normally admit students with scores of 235 and above. P4 added, “I was only one mark short to be admitted there; I really feel bad about this”. P9 explained the alternative, “It is easier to be admitted at the private universities... for example, you need to score 210 to be admitted at a Faculty of Pharmacy in a private university, while you need to score 230 to be admitted at a public one. It is twenty marks different”. Being admitted at Damascus University, the main public university in Syria, was described by participants as ‘almost impossible’. This gave the impression that they were forced into choosing a private university.

Questions about reasons that state universities were preferable to the private universities were raised. It might be the wide disparity in tuition fees of the two options. While tuition at public universities is almost free, private universities charge fees up to \$10,000 per academic year. Another reason for this preference is that there is a long history of public universities, and this is to be compared to the very short history of private universities. This also affected the belief in the credibility of private HE.

Public university admission is solely based on the merit of the NSSE scores. Often students complaint that this exam is too difficult. Investigating further into this issue and its implications on students' university choices, there was a general belief by students that this was 'planned by the Government'. Students felt that this was a surreptitious official policy issue carried out deliberately by the Government to make more people go to other, 'paid' alternatives to the public higher education, which was almost free. One participant said:

They are trying their best to get students to pay for education... every now and then you hear there is a new strategy by the Ministry to make students pay more money for higher education... There are many examples such as the Open Universities, Parallel Education, Expatriate Education and the Virtual University (Interview: Student).

This participant explained that Parallel Education was similar to the normal public university stream, and students would be admitted to Parallel Education with 3 to 6 marks less in the NSSE. However, they had to pay roughly \$2,000 per annum. This was believed to be a very high fee to be charged by a public university with the Syrian per capita income being \$1,570 (World Bank, 2008).

In three other cases, private university was apparently the only solution for students who had lived abroad and had not sat the NSSE. These students also had difficulties in getting admitted to public universities. P10 said, "I used to live in Kuwait, and I finished secondary school over there... this made it very hard for me to be admitted to state universities in Syria though I scored well". Meeting the public university requirements for such students was even more difficult than those with the NSSE. Some participants mentioned that students coming from abroad received special treatment in public university admission. P11 explained:

Students that used to live abroad have special treatment at the admission and selection for public universities. We are given different criteria and advantages to the students that lived in Syria... For example, we can be admitted with 5 to 10% less marks in the final secondary school exams... Nonetheless, it was still very competitive and hard to get a place there (Interview: Participant 11).

Prior to the establishment of private higher education, most cases that were not admitted to public universities dropped out of higher education, or travelled abroad to pursue higher education. P11 commented, “When I first wanted to enrol at university, there was no private higher education in Syria. I went to Lebanon to enrol at a university there”. Even when private education was available, six participants considered the possibility of travelling abroad to pursue higher education. Countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Germany and the UK were possible destinations. P5 said, “As I was not admitted to the public universities... I was planning to travel to Jordan, but my parents did not like it as they thought I was too young”.

5.4.2 Critical Decision

Some unanticipated events had a critical impact on the students’ process of university choice. These events, possibly, changed students’ decisions at a very late stage, just prior to enrolment. Before reaching a final decision and enrolling, participants were not determined about their decisions; this could be a result to the nature of the decision itself as it was critical for students. It was more or less a decision that would have major ramifications on the participants’ major life issues such as family, career or friendship. It was described by eight students as a decision that was going to reflect on their whole future.

I questioned the level of responsibility interviewees felt about their decisions. This was probably the most critical decision they had to make. This had created a state of worry for students, which in turn might have made them more subject to occurring incidents. P21 said, “I knew that choosing a university was a very important issue, it was not a game. I don’t want to go to a university that might ruin my future”. It was the nature of the decision itself that gave this criticality and sensitivity to the whole process. Another possible reason for this was the market itself, which was described to be fragile and in a state of turbulence,

possibly because these universities were new and have not as yet established a basis of credibility to the public.

One critical event affecting the process was students' NSSE results. The results themselves and the timing of announcing them played a major role in the process. Earlier, I came across the issue that private education was an only solution for many students who were not admitted to public universities. This is based on the assumption that these students had initially planned to go to a public university. Concerning the programme chosen, it was understood that the norm is for students to enrol on the highest programme available on the 'hierarchy'. The term 'hierarchy of programmes' was mentioned by many participants, yet the meaning was unclear, and this required explanation in a latter phase. Two weeks after the announcement of the NSSE results, a table is published by the MoHE showing required marks for every major at different public faculties and universities. P24 explained:

I was planning to study Engineering at Damascus University... My family and I were shocked to see that my results were not good enough to allow me to do that, though I thought I did very well in the NSSE; some bad incidents happened in the Mathematics exam, and I lost 30 marks. This was not what I was expecting. It was only when I got the results in July that I realised I needed to consider the private university option... I have never thought about that earlier... Then, in a matter of one month, I had to find an alternative... Everything ran so fast. I even went to some universities and they told me that I could not be admitted as the engineering programme was over subscribed already (Interview: Participant 24).

In this example, as well as five others, the participants did not have adequate time to research universities to choose which would be best for them.

Among other critical events, it was realised that there were other people who had influence over students' final decisions. Students were keen to seek advice from people around them. At this level, it was advice rather than further information. Parents, friends, relatives and even people they had not met previously could have made students change their minds about which university to choose. Students sought advice and asked for help in decision-making until the last moment of their decision process at enrolment day. Interviewees were worried that they may make the wrong decision, and they did not want to take full responsibility of such a critical decision. Another possibility is that they did not feel that they were competent enough to reach to the best decision.

It was significant how the decision was more critical to some students than it was for others. 60% of interviewees visited many universities, and sometimes visited the same university more than five times in order to collect details before making their final decision. Sometimes, they were accompanied by their parents or other relatives. One participant had six people, including friends and relatives, accompanying him on his initial visits. On the other hand, some students (25%) did not visit the university they enrolled at, at all. P18 said, for example, “No, I had not gone ever, I asked my chauffeur to go there and ask for me, he told me what the required papers were and I sent them with him... I think I was too busy that summer to come and see the university before enrolling”. The issue of levels of involvement is worth further investigation in later phases.

5.4.3 The University Visit

The university visit was probably the most significant event to impact the process. It gained its significance as it was the first opportunity for students to see what they had already heard about. In other words, they had heard or collected information about a university, but this information or perception was still abstract. The visit was evidence or proof of the university’s reality. This suggested that students relied on their senses to make judgements about a university. During students’ visits, incidents occurred which had some implications to be highlighted.

Some students reported that they had to sit an admission test on the visit day in order to be accepted. It was a test of about one hour on General Knowledge and English. A question was raised about the purpose this test; which will be addressed at the third research phase to the universities’ administrative staff. Participants were generally worried about this test and their views on it could be divided into two groups. The first group (three respondents) said that they liked the idea of having an admission test. For example, P2 said, “It would not be good if anybody wanting to study Pharmacy was allowed to. There needs to be a test to see who is good enough for that... It also made me feel that I was not accepted easily there, I mean I felt I was good enough to be there”. P24 added, “I first thought that anybody who

had the money could study at a private university, but no, it is not like that. A person should be good and pass that test to be accepted”. On the other hand, the other group (six respondents) felt the test was too easy and oversimplified, and did not understand the purpose behind it. P6, for example, did not understand why he had to do that test, and he did it just because he was told to.

The performance of the recruitment and admission staff on the visit day also influenced students’ choices. Through interviews, 21 participants highlighted both the positive and negative impact of these staff on their decisions. Participants appreciated the effort of the recruiting teams when they showed a real interest in the participants.

The office was not very crowded. There was a lady; she listened to our queries and replied in a very professional way. I noticed that she was really giving advice, not just answering our questions. It was not only her, all the members of staff were really nice and friendly on the visit day (Interview: Participant 6).

Similarly, P11 said “I was planning to go and visit another university on the same day but the recruiting team did a very good job and I enrolled here... they were very nice and considerate”. On the other hand, P12 experienced a negative example; he stated:

I had to travel for four hours to get to X University, and when I got there, I went into the admission office to ask. It was very crowded. I could not find anybody to listen to me. After an hour, I managed to get to someone, and she said she thought that there was not any vacancy in the programme I wanted. I did not ask her to double-check on that; I just left back home... It was the way she was talking to me, I didn’t feel she wanted to help at all (Interview: Participant 12).

It was significant how such performance impacted on a student’s choice. Some students said that they were met and welcomed on that day by a dean of a faculty or a top executive member, which they liked as they felt well-treated by this meeting. Some universities used their own recruiting staff, and other universities used their students to help as part-time on the enrolment week. More investigations are carried out in this issue to investigate how universities function on the enrolment and visit days.

Visit day was also an opportunity to meet current students which could affect the students’ decisions. Ten participants reported that on their first visit, they approached current students to enquire about the visited university. This was discussed earlier in the

information gathering section. However, the question that had critical impact on the decision was ‘do you recommend this university?’ (P16). Whether the answer was ‘yes, or no’, it influenced, or in some cases completely changed the students’ decisions. There were two examples where participants had met current students who did not recommend that university. As a result, students went to another university. These current students were not satisfied and unhappy about the service they were receiving there, which raised the need to explore into a post-choice reflections and satisfaction theme.

5.5 Post University Choice Reflections

The idea of post university choice reflections emerged when students were asked how they felt about their decisions. Post university choice reflections investigated how students felt about their universities after they had some experience there. Considering that these participants were the pioneers to enrol and study at private universities in Syria, their views and opinions were of critical importance as has been discussed earlier. It could be argued that a satisfied student would talk positively about their university, and this would, consequently, impact on the younger student population that would need information or advice about private universities. When participants were asked how they felt about their decisions and the university, views varied. The general attitude was positive, as nineteen participants were satisfied on their choices and the services they were receiving; nonetheless, they felt that tuition fees were exaggerated. There were other concerns which are discussed later in this section. The issue of expectations was raised as participants had some expectations of what the chosen university would be like. This issue was of critical relevance to the study and needed more investigation. The relevance of understanding their perceptions and expectations about the university could be a result of the information gained whether from the media, other people’s influence, or any other source, which has raised the issue of matching recommendations and ideas, to reality.

Participants highlighted issues of concern about universities when discussing post-choice reflections. This did not imply necessarily that these issues were negative reflections on the students’ beliefs and attitudes towards their universities. Issues relating to teaching were

first raised by interviewees. An issue emerged relating to teaching, was the foreign language, English. Views were of a wide range as nineteen respondents were very satisfied about it, and four felt it was a major reason for many students to leave one university for another. Participants said that they knew many students that attended that university, and after the first year, they changed to another university, as they found it difficult to study in a foreign language.

Another issue relating to teaching is the performance of teaching staff in class. Participants mentioned that they were both satisfied and dissatisfied about methods of teaching. The teaching staff performance could have been improved by the use of audio-visual aids, up-to-date coursebooks and a convenient number of students per class. Five students had concerns, including that they were told that most of the teaching staff were of a certain quality which did not seem to be the case in reality. Similarly they were told that the number of students per class or lab were smaller than the actual numbers. I wondered how much of a negative impact these issues could have on the students' attitudes. Nonetheless, twelve participants felt that one of the most important issues making them feel that they have made the right decision was a feeling that they were getting 'good knowledge and education' that they were aiming for (P17), and this was possibly achieved through the teaching staff's work, care and attention to students as individuals.

The administrative staff's care and attention towards students as individuals had reflections on the students' attitudes towards the university. Students said that they felt this through personal communication with administrative staff at the university. One student explained:

I talk to many administrative people at the university... Even the Dean of my faculty knows me by name. They are all welcoming to any suggestion. It made me feel that I am really heard and cared about... Even when I get to the cafeteria, all the staff there is my friends... There is also Mr X in the student affairs office; he can fight for our rights. I am not saying that we, students, do not make mistakes. We do make mistakes, but also the university administration makes mistake... I said this face-to-face in a public meeting to the Dean; he really listened and appreciated my point (Interview: Participant 23).

Students also highlighted issues relating to convenience, such as accommodation, transportation, built environment, services and attendance timetables in post choice

reflections. Participants' beliefs about accommodation could possibly have changed after a decision was reached. A participant explained:

When I first applied to this university I thought that I did not want to live there. I thought that I could commute daily to where I used to live with my parents in Damascus. However, after experiencing the long time being wasted commuting, I thought I should live there. It took me like three hours to go and come back... I thought that if I lived near the university I could invest this time in studying (Interview: Participant 3).

It was noticed that some participants experienced discomfort and possibly dissatisfaction with the accommodation offered by the university, and therefore they rented privately elsewhere. This posed questions about the impact that accommodation had on the students' choice of university. Transportation was also a major concern, possibly because of the importance it played, as universities are in rural areas, and need to transport students to and from the major neighbouring towns and cities on daily bases. Infrastructure also emerged as a critical issue. One student said:

... They showed me this building, and told me that it was only a temporary one, as the new building is being constructed. This building we are in now is not built to be a university, I know that, and I think you can see that as well. They said that the new building was going to be ready next year. This was three years ago. Now I am a fourth year student, and the new building is not ready yet... I am really worried that I graduate without seeing and having classes in the new building they told me about (Interview: Participant 10).

Finally, social issues also emerged when investigating post choice reflections. It was felt that participants were looking at, or thinking about themselves in the 'new environment', and trying to see how they 'fit' (P21) into it. This was observed through interacting with their peers and possibly teachers. It was also possible that some of participants said they were happy and satisfied with the university as a result of the enjoyment they were experiencing with new friends and new 'habitat'. This 'enjoyment' could also be a result of the many student social activities held at the universities. This made me question if this area of the university, or any other, could alter their whole experience from being negative to positive. In other words, if a student was not happy or satisfied as a result of being unable to fit into this new environment, would they also hold any positive feeling about the university? This brought up the issue of validity about the data on the post choice reflection. The idea of confirmation bias (Evans, Barston, and Pollard, 1983) should also be taken into consideration in the sense that students might have said that they were satisfied

about their universities to justify their decisions to convince me (and maybe themselves) that they had made the right decision.

5.4 Summary

This exploratory phase has served the purpose of laying foundations for further detailed statistical study of student perspectives on choice and selection, focusing on considering overarching issues through the examination of survey data from a sample of twenty-four students. In particular, the data analysis of the interviews with students has offered:

- Identification of issues reflecting participants' meaning and understanding of matters related to choice of university.
- Exploration and understanding of issues about the private university market in Syria.
- Reflection on research design, in directing the enquiry and data collection in the following research phases.

The overall findings of the first research phase suggested four sub-themes that shaped students thinking prior to attending a private university during the process of choosing an institution, and post reflection on the overall decision-making process. The sub-themes were: 'university or no university', 'what shapes student decision-making process', 'critical events' and 'post university choice reflections'. The first decision that students had was whether or not to attend university and pursue higher education. Future career and security, social issues, personal development and subject interest and 'other issues' (self-esteem and achievement) shaped this decision. A particularly interesting feature of these issues was that they were acting as 'push' and 'pull' factors. Public universities were preferred over the private universities, and the private higher education was in a way an only solution to many students. In the decision making process, two distinct issues were used, information and criteria. Gathering information about universities was influenced by friends and family, direct enquiry, media and 'other issues' (current students and MoHE). Teaching, administrative, convenience, informal reputation, social and economic issues shaped the

students selection criteria. Some critical events occurred through the process of decision making; these events had an impact on the students' decisions. There was evidence that participants reflected on their choices after having made them. They measured their expectations about a university that was gained from information they collected, with the reality of the university they were experiencing.

This phase has also reflected on the research design of the third phase. Parents and the Internet were found to have a significant role in the whole process, and therefore more investigation is going to be directed towards this area in the third research phase. This phase has also contributed in constructing questions for the third phase with potential stakeholders.

It is too early to generalise from the above mentioned findings due to the exploratory purpose and nature of this research phase. Nonetheless, the emerging issues are to be reflected upon in the second research phase through the examination of survey data from a larger sample of students; this is discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Six

Phase Two: Findings from the Student Survey

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the data collected through questionnaires (see appendix 7) from students at three private universities, to identify patterns shaping prospective students' decisions regarding university selection. For ease of analysis, this chapter is arranged into five sections, each of which covers one of the themes that emerged in the exploratory phase. These general themes are:

- motives and factors that encouraged students to attend university, and obtain a degree;
- factors shaping students' decision-making, including information gathering and university evaluation and selection criteria;
- university choice decision, and enrolment;
- post-choice reflections;
- cross-case comparative analysis of the findings from the three private universities.

The findings are presented in simple descriptive statistics based on mean, variance, frequency and standard deviation to understand the difference and weight of each of the factors under scrutiny. The final section of this chapter conducts one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) mean test to compare the data generated from different universities. The statistics are provided in tables to summarise and illustrate the findings; sometimes the study makes use of frequency figures to visualise the findings.

The total number of questionnaire responses was 335. Although the questionnaire aimed at having a similar number of respondents from each university, the number of responses differed among universities due to the point that each of the classes varied in size. The

number and percentage of response return from each university, to the whole sample is summarised in Table 6.1. I highlight here that the return rate was 100%, which is due to the manner in which the questionnaire was administered.

Table 6. 1: *Response numbers and rates from each university*

University	No. of Responses	Percent
Alpha	112	33.4%
Beta	108	32.2%
Gamma	115	34.3%
Total	335	100.0%

6.2 Motives to Attend University

There were thirteen motives and factors that stimulated students to pursue higher education, which were clustered into three groups; future career and security, social motives and personal motives. A detailed presentation of each of the highlighted groups follows. Participants' ratings of these motives and factors are presented in Table 6.2.

Table 6. 2: *Summary of findings about motives and factors for attending university (Q1)*

Motives and Factors for Attending University		N	Mean	Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD	Cluster Aggregated Mean
Career & Security	Future Employment	334	5.96	2	233	12	1.46	5.90
	Secure future	332	6.25	1	264	12	1.34	
	Increased financial stability	334	5.50	4	199	21	1.60	
Social Motives	Social position	334	5.52	3	199	24	1.64	3.89
	Friends	331	3.05	13	50	162	2.05	
	Educated social environment	329	4.42	9	120	73	2.08	
	Parents decision	332	3.14	12	62	161	2.16	
	Social networking	331	3.28	11	46	141	1.92	
Experience of university life	331	3.98	10	87	91	2.03		
Personal Motives	Expanding knowledge	332	5.44	5	187	24	1.62	5.05
	Intrinsic interest	332	4.79	8	154	52	1.95	
	Personal development	328	4.87	7	146	36	1.77	
	Ambition of excellence	331	5.13	6	169	30	1.77	

6.2.1 Future Career and Security

Out of the 13 factors researched, issues that related to 'future career and security' scored highest as motives to attend university. 'Future security' scored highest with a mean attitude rating of 6.25; it was the only motive to exceed the mean value of 6. Better 'future employment opportunity' scored second, with a mean attitude rating of 5.96. 'Increased future financial stability' ranked fourth, with a mean attitude rating 5.50. This confirmed the findings from the exploratory phase in which issues related to career and security played a major role in motivating students to attend university. This also supported the point students perceived about higher education which led to better and more rewarding job opportunities. University education helped students find 'good' jobs that would provide comfortable standards of living. Increased future financial earnings and stability scored 199 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) out of the total of 335; yet it scored the highest standard deviation (1.60) among the three factors, showing more variation in responses. While increased financial stability was more important to some respondents, it was less important to others. This can be explained by the diverse economic background of the families that respondents came from at these universities, as the wealthy families might not look at higher education as a source for increasing financial stability as they may feel that they are already financially secure.

The consistency between financial security and career was noticed as they both ranked top on the list. These positive ratings also showed how important the issues of career and security were to the participants. There was also consistency between these issues and the concept of future, as they all included terms and words referring to prospects. It was noteworthy that all these three motives to attend university had pragmatic and instrumental concerns. This indicated that students had certain plans or practical expectations about future uses, benefits or rewards from obtaining a university qualification. Secure future and future employment were the two factors that scored the fewest highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2), 12 each. They also both scored the largest number of highly positive ratings (scores 6-7) 264 and 233 returns respectively. The standard deviations for these two factors

were the lowest in the entire list of motives, as shown in Table 6.2, indicating lower variation. The high rating of these factors and the low standard deviation value showed that most of the respondents in the survey appeared to be thinking well ahead as to how a university education could establish a springboard to a good career, and the added long-term security it could provide.

6.2.2 Social Motives

This cluster of motives comprised six issues all relating to the social dimension. Most of the issues in this category of motives ranked least on the list of motives, except for one, namely 'social position'. This issue scored highest in this category and ranked third among the whole list of motives with a mean attitude rating of 5.50. Table 6.2 clearly indicates that the number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) far exceeded the highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2). The issue of social position was related to the esteem and respect that respondents received, or expected to receive, from their communities. A good social position was also obtained by having a good career, which meant that this factor, though categorised under social motives, had pragmatic and instrumental dimensions as it was related to future career. The high mean attitude rating for social position factor supported the findings in the earlier research phase, relating to how important it was to the students to obtain a respected social position within their communities. Further data relating to this motive emerged in this area as it had an open question. Seven students mentioned that attending university was an issue of prestige and a certain image that they wanted people to perceive them as.

Parents' role in the decision of attending university was not major. It scored a mean attitude rating of 3.16, and rated twelfth on the list (one step before the bottom). Although this factor had 62 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7), the number of highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) considerably exceeded the former ($n = 161$). Moreover, this factor showed the highest attitude response variation amongst all motives, with a standard deviation of 2.16. This high variation showed that there were different roles and influences for parents, over such a decision in different families. The low attitude ratings for this factor in the

decision of attending university contradicts the findings of the earlier research phase, that parents were deciding that their children should attend university, as it showed students making their own decisions. There was an expectation of a higher role for family background as a student with an educated family or social environment tended to follow in their parents' or family's footsteps, and go through the same routine. Educational, social or family environment scored ninth on the list of motives with a mean attitude rating of 4.42. Seventy-three respondents weighed this factor as highly negative (scores of 1-2), and 120 respondents weighed it as highly positive (scores of 6-7). It is still not entirely clear why this data contradict the earlier interview findings. This may be justified by the point that the exploratory study is not necessarily representative.

The two separate factors of 'social networking' and 'friends' scored low and ranked eleventh and thirteenth respectively on the list of motives. Social networking, where respondents stated that university was a healthy environment to meet and make new friends, scored a mean attitude rating of 3.28. Table 2.6 showed that the number of highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) by far exceeded the highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7). This low score aligned with the low score of the 'friends', which scored lowest on the list with a mean attitude rating of 3.05. This factor, unsurprisingly, scored a high standard deviation value, 2.08. As friends were important to some people, for others they served purely as social tools and were quite separable from instrumental choices of education and future career.

The low score for these two factors, 'social networking' and 'friends', indicated that the respondents' own social networks and friends did not play a central role in motivating them to attend university. The social motives of networking and friends also related to 'experience of university life' factor, which had been described as social fun and entertaining part of university life, such as trips and concerts. This factor scored a slightly negative mean attitude rating of 3.98 as respondents attitudes varied, 87 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7), and a slightly larger number, 91, for highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2).

6.2.3 Personal Motives

Expanding knowledge was the most considerable motive in this category, scoring a mean attitude rating of 5.44 and ranking fifth on the entire list. It was noteworthy that there was a wide gap between the highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and the highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) as shown in Table 6.2. This motive also scored the lowest standard deviation value among these four motives. This can be explained by the respondents shared belief and awareness that a university was a source of valuable knowledge and education that would reflect on their lives. The high mean attitude rating highlighted the point that respondents appreciated knowledge, and realised that this would be expanded by attending university. Expanding knowledge, as a motive, reflected on the two other motives of 'personal development' and 'ambition of excellence', as knowledge would develop personality and lead to excellence.

Personal development ranked seventh with a mean attitude rating of 4.87 and 146 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and with only 36 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2). Personal development was achieved through gains students received at university. These gains were received through subject knowledge and other informal sources of knowledge. Self-development through attending university was a vehicle to reach excellence. The motive of ambition of excellence ranked sixth on the list with a mean score of 5.13 and 169 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7), with only 30 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2). Ambition of excellence created the feeling of achievement that reflected on individuality and self-esteem. The consistency between 'ambition of excellence' and 'personal development' was established, as they both scored relatively close mean values and ranked sixth and seventh respectively. They also shared the same value of standard deviation, 1.77.

Although intrinsic interest in subject area scored a relatively positive attitude rating (mean of 4.79), it ranked eighth on the whole list, and last in this category of motives. 154 respondents weighed this motive with highly positive ratings (scores 6-7), while only 52 respondents weighed it with highly negative ratings (scores 1-2). Responses were most varied in the motive of this category (standard deviation 1.95). This showed that while

intrinsic interest in a subject area motivated some students to pursue higher education out of hobby or passion for specific areas, other respondents had more instrumental motives.

Respondents were asked to identify any other factors that motivated them to pursue higher education. The response rate for the open-ended question was very low, and any responses that were given fell into groups with previously mentioned areas. Participants were either reiterating or reinforcing the factor that they most believed to motivate them or explaining it further. This applied not only to the first question but rather to all open-ended questions throughout the questionnaire. However, one further motive to pursue higher education emerged from the open-ended question; three respondents said that they were motivated to attend university because they wanted to move away from their homes where they lived with their parents. In this respect, attending university, particularly in a different city, would be an excuse for these respondents to move away and lead a more independent life.

One distinctive point about these motives and factors was the pattern of the importance ranking. Table 6.2 shows that the first category of motives comprising future employment, secure future and increased future financial stability, scored very high in the ranking, second, first, and fourth respectively, with an aggregated mean for of 5.90. Issues categorised under personal motives came second; expanding knowledge came fifth, ambition of excellence sixth, personal development seventh and intrinsic interest eighth. The aggregated mean for personal motives was 5.05. Social motives scored least; educational environment came ninth, experience at university life tenth, social networking eleventh, parents' decision twelfth and friends thirteenth; except for one social motive, namely social position which came third. The aggregated mean for social motives was 3.89. This showed consistency between the factors within each cluster.

Another important issue was that most of the motives and factors, 10 out of 13, scored more than 50 percent in the attitude rating (means of > 4.00). None of the factors scored a mean that was less than three in a scale of 7-points. This could be attributed to the idea that students might have felt that all these issues were of relevant and relative importance to them; consequently, this showed that students had a variety of motives with different

priorities to cause them pursue higher education. In other words, all the mentioned motives and factors were of certain importance to the students, yet with relative implications.

6.3 Theme 2: What Shapes the Decision Making Process

6.3.1 Information

The information gathering process was important in order to understand what shapes the process of university choice. Such a choice would reflect and impact enormously on students' futures and therefore they needed to collect as much information as they could in the time and means they had. Participants' ratings about the significance and role of the sources they had used to obtain information about potential universities are presented in Table 6.3. The findings concerning sources of information are presented in four categories: 'friends and relatives', 'direct inquiry', 'media', and 'current student/s during visit and the Department of Private Education'.

Table 6. 3: *Summary of findings about information sources (Q2)*

Information Sources	N	Mean	Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD	N of Most Useful
Friend/s	334	4.31	2	117	84	2.18	53
Relative/s	333	3.71	4	91	126	2.23	34
Telephone enquiry	334	3.43	6	92	155	2.34	14
Face-to-face enquiry	331	4.98	1	176	62	2.16	91
Current student/s during visit	334	3.60	5	89	137	2.25	18
Newspaper advertisements	334	2.59	9	45	207	2.01	5
Street billboards	334	2.40	10	37	219	1.91	3
University brochures and flyers	332	2.97	7	58	171	2.10	9
Educational exhibitions	333	2.62	8	42	213	1.99	4
Universities websites	333	3.92	3	115	124	2.42	45
Admission tutor visit	334	1.57	12	17	291	1.44	0
Department of Private Education	329	1.83	11	26	266	1.71	8

Friends and Relatives

Friends and relatives were among the most significant information sources, ranking second and fourth respectively. Although they both ranked high on the list, there was a relatively wide gap in the means of these two sources; while friends scored a mean attitude rating of 4.31, relatives scored 3.71. As shown in Table 6.3, there was a considerable difference in the highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) between these two sources. Participants' preference of what they found most useful, 53 of the respondents said that they found information from friends, 34 respondents said that relatives was the preferred source of information.

Friends and relatives were not only information providers, but they also assisted the respondents in collecting information. The circle of relatives extended to include those of many various levels of kinship. Friends included not only students' own friends and peers, but also their family friends. The high ranking of these two sources confirmed the findings from the earlier research phase, about the major role of these sources of information. This explained the idea that information collected from these sources was of higher value, and more reliable and objective, as participants had higher levels of trust in them. The high variation in responses for these two factors represented by the standard deviation (friends: 2.18, relatives: 2.23) showed a difference in views on these sources. This was a result that not many students knew people, or had relatives that had experienced private higher education, or just had information about higher education in general and private universities in particular. One important aspect about these two sources was that information was collected either directly through asking questions, or indirectly through social conversations and informal meetings. Consequently, this suggested that these two sources could have ranked higher, as respondents might have ignored the role of the indirectly collected information while answering the questionnaire.

Direct Inquiry

Sources of direct inquiry were those that represented a university through verbal communication, providing potential students with required information. This group of

information sources included four different forms, each was represented in a separate item in the question; these were telephone enquiry, educational exhibition, admissions tutors visit and face-to-face enquiry. Telephone enquiry scored a neutral importance score; it ranked sixth on the list with a mean attitude rating of 3.43. Although the mean value tends to be central, there was bias towards a negative rating for this source as 155 respondents rated it highly negative (scores of 1-2) compared to 92 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7). Only 14 respondents mentioned that this was a source that they preferred. This contradicted the findings that came from the earlier research phase as it had been reported that 22 out of 24 had contacted the university by telephone to collect information. This inconsistency could be explained as the participants might have contacted the university by telephone, yet they did not obtain the desired information. However, further investigation in the following research phase was worthwhile.

There were exhibitions that specialised in higher education, accommodating several universities on the same ground, and this provided potential students a chance to learn more about several universities in one visit. This source of information did not rank high on the list (eighth) with a mean attitude rating of 2.62. One distinctive feature about this source was the distribution of the responses (see Figure 6.1). It showed that 196 respondents had rated this source as insignificant (score of 1); the figure then dropped dramatically in score two to reach only 18 ratings. In highly positive ratings (scores 6-7), the number of responses rose to reach 63 ratings. It was assumed that respondents who rated this source as insignificant (score of 1) had not visited such exhibitions. In this respect, if the number of participants that had not visited a university was subtracted from the whole sample, this source of information could have played a more significant role in providing information that a university marketing strategy could target to promote their courses and consequently increase enrolment. This was reflected in phase one, as the participants that reported visiting these exhibitions said they found it very helpful and a convenient source of information. However, this source was not targeted by many students to obtain information. Further investigation about the reasons that these exhibitions are not so popular is worthwhile.

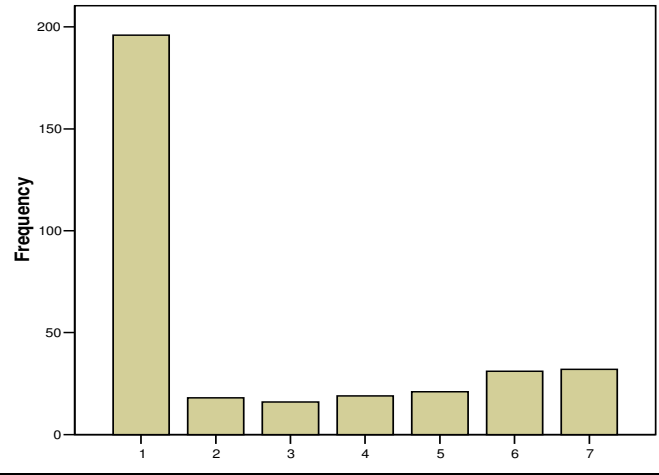


Figure 6. 1: Responses to educational exhibitions significance in gaining information

Frequency numbers of students' responses 1 to 7 are the attitude ratings on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 insignificant to 7 significant

Admission tutor visits to schools was least significant, ranking twelfth with a mean attitude rating of only 1.57. As shown in Table 6.3 the number of negative ratings (scores of 1-2) much exceeded the positive ones (scores of 6-7). This source scored the lowest value of standard deviation among the rest of the sources showing less variation and a tendency towards the highly negative ratings and low significance of this source. Unsurprisingly, none of the participants felt that this was a preferred source of information, as it was not perceived as important. The low ratings of this information source did not necessarily imply that this source was insignificant in information provision. It could have been that this source was not used by many universities to attract potential students. A possibly related source did however emerge from the open-ended question; three participants mentioned that they gained information from university agent offices in various cities rather than through admission tutors' visit to their schools. This source was unclear and required further investigation to understand what was meant by university agent offices.

The last source of information in this category was face-to-face enquiry. This form of enquiry required the students, or their information collectors, to visit the targeted university. Face-to-face enquiry was ranked first on the list, with a mean attitude rating of

4.98. Table 6.3 indicated that the highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) greatly exceeded the negative ratings (scores of 1-2). Ninety-one participants preferred this source of information. This information source being placed at the top was possibly due to the visual proof, and face-to-face communication power, that helped understanding. It indicated that despite all the modern technological aids (e.g. in facilitating online communication) students still put great emphasis on direct and personal contact; namely university administrative and academic staff, who were able to discuss issues. This could suggest more emphasis on a marketing strategy that is based on relationship facilitating individual attention.

Media

This category comprised four sources of information: newspaper advertisements, street billboards, university brochures and flyers and websites. These sources were those that universities used to promote and advertise themselves, as well as communicate and deliver certain messages to the general public and to potential students in particular. Newspaper advertisement scored low and ranked ninth on the list of information sources, with a mean attitude rating of 2.59. Street billboards scored less and ranked tenth on the list, and last in this category with a mean attitude rating of only 2.40. The wide gap between the highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and highly negative ratings (scores 1-2), 37 and 219 respectively, was noteworthy. The low ratings for these two sources of information can be attributed to the point that their aim is to promote the university name, rather than providing detailed information. Another reason could be the low or poor implementation of such tools in providing significant and relevant information. There could be some misconceptions about these sources by the advertising staff at the universities. Such a misconception was that the universities were not making sufficient effort on these sources, as they should be more informative than plain advertising.

University brochures and flyers ranked seventh with a mean of 2.97. These materials scored higher than the two earlier mentioned media sources because they were usually more detailed, providing specific pieces of information and often illustrated with photographs.

University websites scored highest in this category and third among the rest of the sources with a mean attitude rating of 3.92. This went in line with the findings of the earlier research phase regarding the highly significant role of the Internet in gathering information. An interesting point about this source was the high variation of attitudes with the highest standard deviation value of 2.42 (see Figure 6.2). The number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) was not of a wide range, 115 and 124 respectively. Response ratings (score of 1) far exceeded the rest, as respondents here may not have used the Internet to collect information.

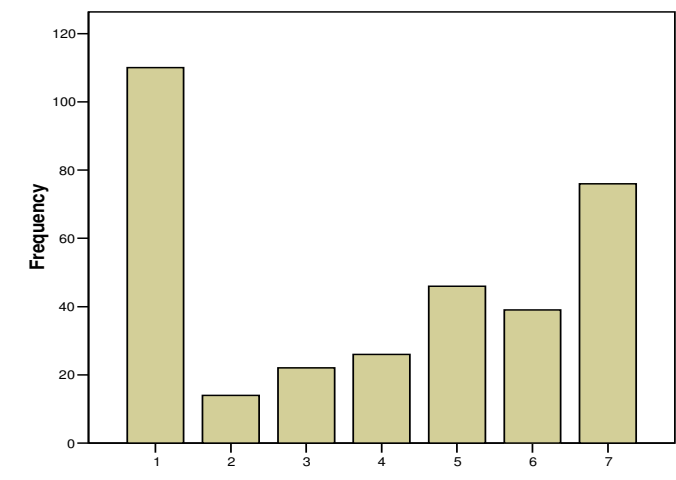


Figure 6. 2: Responses to the Internet significance in gaining information

Frequency numbers of students' responses 1 to 7 are the attitude ratings on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 insignificant to 7 significant

Current Students and Department of Private Education

Respondents reported that they approached current students, unknown to them at the visited universities to request information. This source of information was ranked fifth with a mean attitude rating of 3.60. Only eighteen students preferred this source of information. The Department of Private Education at the Ministry of Higher Education, where students sought an official source of information and opinion about private universities, scored a very low mean attitude rating of only 1.83 and ranked eleventh. There was an extreme range between the highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7), only 26, and highly negative

ratings (scores of 1-2), 266, a standard deviation of 1.71. Only eight respondents ranked this as their preferred source. These ratings can be attributed to the point that the Department of Private Education was located in the capital city, Damascus, which was inconvenient to travel to for those in remote areas, and different cities. Respondents sought verification of collected information and often advice from current students and the Department of Private Education.

The final question in this section (Q3) inspects whether students believed that collected information about universities was adequate to make informed decisions. Adequacy of information collected scored a mean attitude rating of 4.76. Responses were varied (standard deviation of 1.64), yet considerably most of them were towards the positive side of the continuum, responses of positive ratings (scores of 5-6-7) were 195 making up 58.2 percent of all the responses (see Figure 6.3).

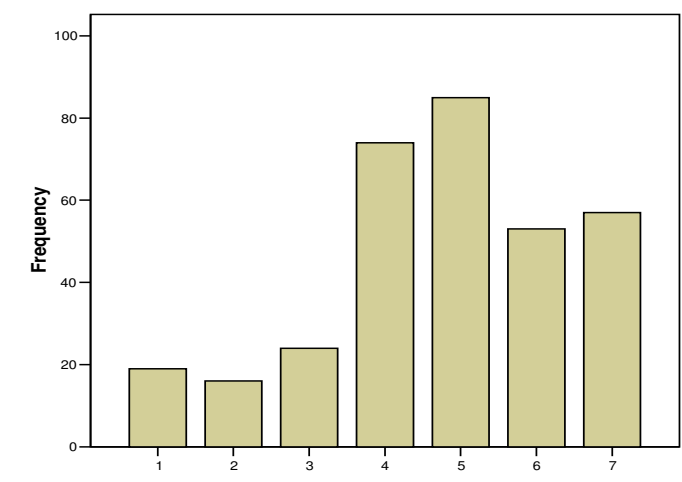


Figure 6. 3: Responses to information adequacy

Frequency numbers of students' responses 1 to 7 are the attitude ratings on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 inadequate to 7 adequate

6.3.2 University Evaluation and Selection Criteria

This section discusses issues that are relevant to participants in their university selection. These issues mattered most in the decision-making process, as they are the evaluation

criteria on which university selection is based. There is a wide range of issues that participants had taken into consideration in selection. The findings from this section are presented in six categories: teaching; administrative; convenience; informal reputation; social and economic issues.

Teaching Issues

Issues related to teaching and learning were the most various in the selection criteria. This category comprised ten issues, each represented in a separate item in this question (Q4). Participants' ratings of each of the teaching issues are presented in Table 6.4. 'Language of instruction' ranked overall second with a mean attitude rating of 5.87, and also ranked top in this category. This issue scored a considerably large number, 231 responses, of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7). The language referred to was English, as being the language of instruction at the universities under study. 'Study system', which was represented in two different systems: 'credit hour' and 'subject', ranked sixteenth with a mean attitude rating of 5.15.

Table 6. 4: Summary of findings about teaching issues in the selection criteria (Q4)

Teaching Issues	N	Mean	Overall Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
Language of instruction	335	5.87	2	231	23	1.64
Study system	329	5.15	16	171	39	1.87
Teaching methods	329	5.66	7	216	20	1.62
High calibre teachers	330	5.75	4	214	14	1.52
Foreign teaching staff	334	5.35	9	188	39	1.92
Curriculum and books	330	5.32	13	176	22	1.66
Size of class	328	4.81	21	136	40	1.78
Specialisations offered	330	5.33	11	182	28	1.73
Subjects taught in the programme	329	5.17	15	169	36	1.82
Final year abroad	329	5.71	6	222	29	1.79

Aggregated mean= 5.41

Teaching methods and styles adopted at university ranked seventh, with a mean attitude rating of 5.66. 'Teachers' calibre' (the ability to deliver knowledge, having higher qualifications, and international experience) ranked fourth, with a mean attitude rating of

5.75. 'High calibre teachers' also scored only 14 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2), the lowest in the entire list of selection criteria. These two issues, 'teaching methods' and 'high calibre teachers', scored the lowest standard deviation value, 1.62 and 1.52 respectively. This showed consistency and certainty of respondents' views about the importance of these issues. 'Foreign teaching staff' was relatively important with a mean attitude of 5.35, and ranked ninth. 'Curriculum and books' used at a university scored less and ranked thirteenth with a mean attitude rating of 5.32. This issue scored only 22 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) compared to 176 highly positive ratings (scores 6-7). Size of class did not rank highly. The issue of 'size of class' had the lowest mean in this category, and ranked twenty-first on the list, with a mean attitude rating of 4.81. 'Specialisations offered' ranked eleventh, with a mean attitude rating of 5.33. 'Subjects taught' in the programme scored a mean attitude rating of 5.17 and ranked fifteenth. The final issue in this category was the 'opportunity offered by a university to study the final year abroad'. This factor was important as it scored a mean attitude of 5.17 and ranked sixth.

The top ratings for teaching issues supports the findings from the earlier research phase as these related issues scored relatively highly. There were two issues in the top five, and five on the top ten important issues in the selection criteria. The aggregated mean of all teaching issues was 5.37, this was the top category compared to the others. This showed students awareness of the importance of teaching related issues in selecting a university. It also showed their understanding that a university is basically a place to learn and gain knowledge, rather than to socialise or engage in extra activities.

Administrative Issues

This category of issues dealt with how a university was run and managed from the students' perspective. It consisted of four issues each represented in a separate item in (Q4). The summary of administrative issues is presented in Table 6.5. This category did not score very highly overall; the aggregated mean of administrative issues was 4.95 and ranked third; there was only one issue in this category to rank in the top ten important issues overall. 'University rules and regulations' ranked eighth with a mean attitude rating of 5.39.

There were 184 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and only 23 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2). This issue also scored the lowest standard deviation in this category, 1.63. This indicated that respondents were aware of the importance of such an issue, and the major impact it would have on their experiences there. ‘University rules and regulations’ meant that respondents preferred a university that was formally regulated as they felt that this would enable them to perform better and learn more effectively. As students judged a university’s administration efficiency through the performance of their recruitment teams, this issue was added to this category. The issue of recruitment team performance scored a mean attitude rating of 4.98 and ranked nineteenth. Individual student support and help from administrative staff was a not very important issue in the selection criteria, as it scored a mean attitude rating of 4.76, and ranked twenty-third. Although the issue of ‘student-staff relationships’ ranked the least in this category, and twenty-fifth on the whole list, the mean attitude rating was positive (mean of 4.70). Moreover, as shown in Table 6.5, the number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) much exceeded the highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2).

Table 6. 5: Summary of findings about administrative issues in the selection criteria (Q4)

Administrative Issues	N	Mean	Overall Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
University rules and regulations	332	5.39	8	184	23	1.63
Friendly recruitment team	333	4.98	19	152	46	1.86
Student-staff relationships	330	4.70	25	129	53	1.89
Individual student support	331	4.76	23	129	46	1.87

Aggregated mean= 4.96

Informal Reputation

There were five issues that were related to informal reputation. The summary regarding the informal reputation selection criteria is presented in Table 6.6. A university’s general reputation was ranked twelfth (mean of 5.33). Neither ‘age of university’ or ‘interesting university name’ scored very highly with a mean attitude ratings of 4.03 and 3.75, and ranking thirty-second and thirty-fifth respectively. ‘Interesting university name’ scored the lowest number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and the highest standard deviation values on the whole list of factors (standard deviation of 2.32). This variation could be a

result of different naming strategies implemented by the universities. For example, there were some universities' names with local, international, European or American connotations, which some respondents may have liked, but others may have not. More detailed discussion will be dedicated to this issue in following chapters.

Table 6. 6: *Summary of findings about informal reputation in the selection criteria (Q4)*

Informal Reputation	N	Mean	Overall Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
University's general reputation	324	5.33	12	185	42	1.88
Age of university	332	4.03	32	109	103	2.24
Local accreditation	332	5.79	3	230	27	1.75
International accreditation	327	5.98	1	248	26	1.73
Interesting University name	331	3.75	35	96	124	2.32
Relationships with international universities	330	5.72	5	224	23	1.70

Aggregated mean= 5.10

Accreditation, whether local or international, was a very important issue for respondents. 'International accreditation' was, surprisingly, the most important issue in the selection criteria and ranked first (mean of 5.98). This factor also scored the highest number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7), 248 responses. 'Local accreditation' followed and ranked third on the whole list, with a mean attitude rating of 5.79. Such high considerations for accreditation issues were attributed to the unstable market state and the blurred opinions about universities whether local or international. In addition, none of the universities had any student graduates as yet. It would be of relevant importance for the research to conduct further investigation on students' perceptions of international and local accreditation. Apart from accreditation, the relationships a university established with international universities was among the most important issues in the criteria, something that related to a university's reputation giving it an international dimension and reputation. This factor scored a mean attitude rating of 5.72 ranking fifth.

Overall, this category of issues proved to be of high relative importance in the selection criteria, as three issues ranked in the top five most important issues on the whole list. The

aggregated mean attitude rating of this category was 5.10, and it came second after teaching issues. The role of informal reputation could be attributed to the lack of official ranking, or evaluating bodies that could provide realistic reviews to the public. This could suggest that a university could target international ranking or review, by which it could promote itself to the public.

Convenience Issues

There were seven issues under this category. Table 6.7 summarises the findings of issues related to convenience. This category of selection criteria did not score high overall; it ranked fifth with an aggregated mean of 4.47.

Table 6. 7: *Summary of findings about convenience issues in the selection criteria (Q4)*

Convenience Issues	N	Mean	Overall Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
Convenience of attendance	331	4.46	28	121	67	2.04
Student services and facilities	326	5.06	18	142	28	1.68
Accommodation options	328	3.18	36	67	150	2.17
University distance	332	4.10	30	120	103	2.31
Transportation	331	5.09	11	179	56	2.10
Built-environment	332	3.98	33	99	103	2.18
Technology in classes and labs	331	5.29	14	178	35	1.83
Classrooms' design and layout	333	4.65	26	121	55	1.89

Aggregated mean = 4.47

Convenience of attendance represented by the attendance methods and timings was of minor importance as it ranked twenty-eighth. This was the case as the majority of the students were full-time students. Services and facilities offered to the students ranked eighteenth. Although this factor scored a mid-range overall ranking, there was a major tendency towards the positive side of the continuum as it scored a mean attitude rating of 5.06. As shown in Table 6.7, there was also a large number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) compared to a much smaller number of highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2). The findings of university distance contradicted those from the earlier research phase as this issue ranked thirtieth, with a mean attitude rating of 4.10. Figure four showed that the

two highest extreme ratings (scores of 1 and 7) scored the largest number of responses (score 1 = 88, score 7 = 75); this variance could be caused by the gender of respondents, as culturally it was more acceptable for males to live away from home than it was for females. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not include a question about respondents' gender. As the students did not consider university distance to be a major negative concern in their evaluation criteria, accommodation option was thought to be of major importance. However, this issue scored very low (mean of 3.18) and ranked thirty-sixth. This meant that respondents considered other options such as private accommodation outside the university. Another issue relating to university distance, was transportation. This issue scored highest in this category, and ranked eleventh overall (mean of 5.09). Transportation, expectedly, scored high as universities were located in rural areas and needed transportation to and from neighbouring cities.

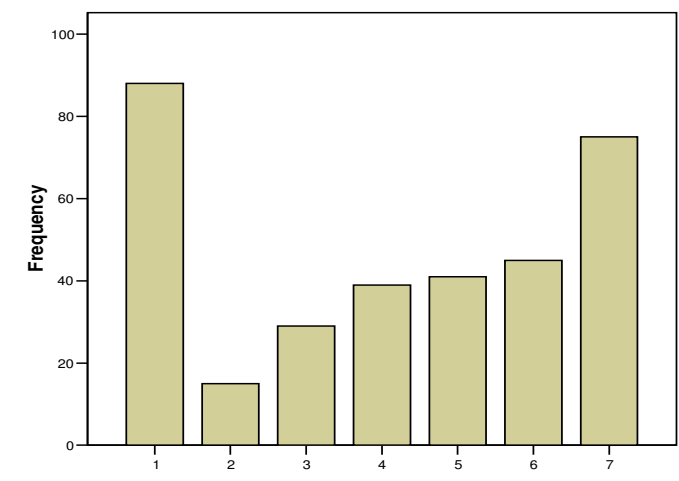


Figure 6. 4: Responses to university distance importance

Frequency numbers of students' responses 1 to 7 are the attitude ratings on a semantic differential scale ranging from 1 unimportant to 7 Important

A university's infrastructure and the 'built-environment' scored low, and ranked thirty-third with a mean attitude rating of 3.98. This contradicted the findings from the earlier research phase as there was a main focus by respondents on this issue. It seemed the interior of a university mattered more than the outside, as the classrooms' design and layout ranked twenty-sixth (mean of 4.65). There was more stress on the technologies used in classrooms

and laboratories as this issue ranked fourteenth (mean of 5.29). 53 percent (n = 178) of the whole response rated this issue as highly important (scores of 6-7).

Social Issues

This category comprised five issues; total number of students, active student union, students' socio-economic background, university social environment and friends. A summary of these issues is presented in Table 6.8. The total number of students at a university (student population), was not important and ranked thirty-fourth (mean of 3.97). 'Active student union' also ranked low (thirty-first), yet exceeded a mid-point mean attitude rating, 4.05. Although students' socio-economic background and a university's social environment ranked low overall (twenty-seventh and twenty-fourth respectively), their mean attitude ratings were towards positive positioning (means of 4.54 and 4.71 respectively). Respondents' own friends were not important to influence university selection criteria. It ranked last on the list overall (thirty-seventh) with a mean attitude rating of only 2.72. This went in line with the unimportant role of friends on a university decision. It was also noticed that all the issues in this category scored low, showing low importance and influence of issues of social dimension on respondents' university selection criteria. The aggregated mean of social issues was the lowest of all categories, 3.99.

Table 6. 8: *Summary of findings about social issues in the selection criteria (Q4)*

Social Issues	N	Mean	Overall Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
Total number of students	331	3.97	34	87	94	2.05
Active student union	332	4.05	31	93	91	2.06
Student socio-economic background	332	4.54	27	123	59	1.95
University Social environment	329	4.71	24	141	56	1.99
My friends	332	2.72	37	45	190	1.95

Aggregated mean = 3.99

Economic Issues

Tuition fees, paying in instalments, discounts offered were the economic issues in the evaluation criteria. Table 6.9 presents a summary of these issues. This category ranked

fourth, with an aggregated mean of 4.68. Tuition fees scored least in this category with a mean attitude rating of 4.39 and ranking twenty-ninth. The ability to pay fees in instalments was more important, and ranked twenty-second (mean of 4.80). Discounts offered scored highest mean, 4.85, in this category and ranked twentieth. Economic issues were not very important in university selection criteria, as none of these issues ranked in the top half of the overall criteria list. These findings supported those from the earlier research phase as there were some concerns and doubts about the quality of the data surrounding economic issues, resulting from social desirability bias. Apart from that, it was noticed that all these issues scored high standard deviation values (tuition fees: 2.20, paying in instalments: 2.19, discounts: 2.16). This showed the variation in the respondents' answers. The variation is a result of relevance and importance of economic issues, due to various economic conditions of the different family background of respondents. A student from a wealthy family might be less concerned about economic issues than a student from a family with a low or modest income.

Table 6. 9: Summary of findings about economic issues in the selection criteria (Q4)

Economic Issues	N	Mean	Overall Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
Tuition fees	329	4.39	29	119	80	2.20
Paying in instalments	334	4.80	22	163	70	2.19
Discounts	329	4.85	20	162	67	2.16

Aggregated mean = 4.68

Moving away from issues establishing criteria, there was a general question of why those students chose to attend a private university rather than a public university. Some expectations that students were forced to attend private universities having not been accepted by public universities had come into view from the earlier research phase. It was found that respondents were, to some limit, forced to attend private universities, a mean attitude rating of 4.79. There were expectations that this issue would score a higher value. A look at Figure 6.5 shows that the majority of answers were divided between the two extreme ratings (scores of 1 and 7), Nonetheless, rating score 7 (n = 152) highly exceeded

rating score 1 (n = 75), showing that the majority were forced to attend private university as they were not accepted at public university.

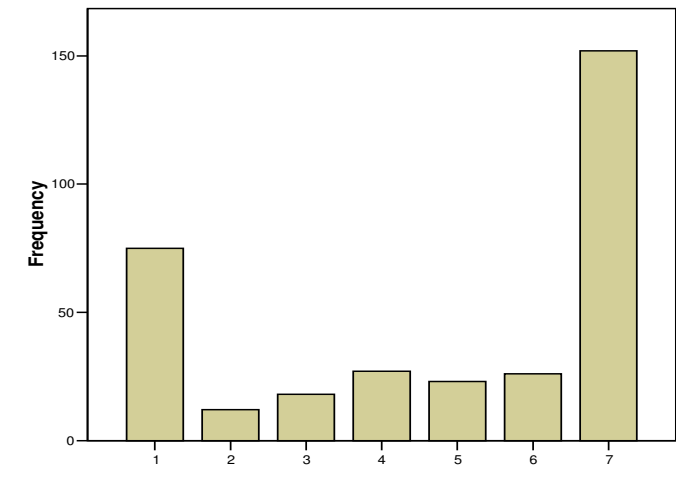


Figure 6. 5: Responses to obligation to go to private university

Frequency numbers of students' responses 1 to 7 are the attitude ratings on a semantic differential scale ranging from irrelevant to 7 relevant

There was another question of whether students were actually able to select a private university, rather than being forced to select particular ones. 101 respondents (30.3 percent) reported that they did not have any other university options, and 232 respondents (69.7 percent) reported that they did have other option/s. This indicated that the majority were really evaluating and selecting a university rather than being forced. However, choices became more limited as each of the private universities had entry requirements that prospective students needed to match, which impacted heavily on the selection criteria. Students needed first to match that criterion then consider other issues. The importance of matching university's requirements proved to be important, as it scored a mean attitude rating of 5.34. This also showed that it was not only the students who were evaluating and selecting, but that universities also had their own student selection and evaluation criteria. More investigation towards this issue is dedicated in the following chapters.

When inspecting the level of students' personal involvement in the evaluation process and the decision, 79.4 percent of the respondents reported visiting at least one university before

enrolment. The number of universities visited before enrolment is summarised in Table 6.10. This visit was part of the inspection of the chosen university students conducted. It could be understood that the university visit and the visual proof of certain aspects about it, played a major role and was even a part of the criteria and the selection process.

Table 6. 10: *Summary of findings about number of universities visited before enrolment (Q6)*

Number of Universities Visited	Frequency	Percent
0	69	20.6
1	53	15.8
2	79	23.6
3	73	21.8
4	34	10.1
5	11	3.3
6	3	.9
7	5	1.5
8	1	.3
9	1	.3
10	1	.3
Total	330	98.5
Missing	99	1.5
Total	335	100.0

6.4 University Choice Decision and Enrolment

This section aims at investigating aspects on how respondents reached their final decision on which particular university to attend, and identifies key players influencing this decision. It also investigates respondents' views about the enrolment process. 148 respondents reported that they were highly determined in their decision, choosing highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and only 48 respondents said they were 'undetermined', with highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2). 'Determination' scored a mean attitude rating of 4.88. However, although a larger number of students were determined in their decision, there was a feeling of anxiety over making an incorrect decision. 108 respondents said they were worried selecting highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7). In order to pacify this worry, there were usually a group of people, parents, relatives or friends to help and advise the students in their final decision. The role of this help group ranged between advice and influence. Q7 asked respondents to choose from a list of people (no one, parents, relatives and friends)

that they asked for advice (not information), on which university to choose. The findings from this question are summarised in Table 6.11.

Table 6. 11: *Summary of findings about sources of advice (Q7)*

Sources of Advice	Frequency	Percent
None	36	10.7
Parents	198	59.1
Relatives	27	8.1
Friends	23	6.9
Parents and Relatives	16	4.8
Parents and Friends	21	6.3
Relatives and Friends	3	.9
Parents, Relatives & Friends	11	3.3
Total	335	100.0

Q8 asked respondents to choose from a list of people (no one, parents, relatives, and friends) that had most influenced their decisions. The findings from this question are summarised in Table 6.12.

Table 6. 12: *Summary of findings about decision influencers (Q8)*

Decision Influencers	Frequency	Percent
None	93	27.8
Parents	184	54.9
Relatives	17	5.1
Friends	30	9.0
Parents and Relatives	4	1.2
Parents and Friends	5	1.5
Relatives and Friends	1	.3
Parents, Relatives & Friends	1	.3
Total	335	100.0

The parents' role in the decision was obvious in providing advice and influence, as it scored the highest in both areas. This posed the question of whether parents or students were the ones making the decision. Item three of Q12 addressed this issue asking respondents to weight on a 7-point scale whether it was their own decision, rather than their parents',

ranging from 1 false to 7 true. This issue scored a mean attitude rating of 4.89. 152 respondents selected highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and only 51 selected highly negative ones (scores of 1-2). It can be concluded from this that although there was a considerable role for parents in providing advice and some influence on decisions, it was the students' own decision ultimately.

As respondents had reached a final decision about which university to attend, they then engaged the next step in the process, to enrol. The second half of this section investigates issues regarding students' views and practices on enrolment. The participants were asked whether they personally attended on the enrolment day. This question emerged as three interviewees reported in the earlier research phase that they did not go to enrol themselves, as their parents or other relatives did this for them. In the questionnaire, 206 students said that they attended themselves, and 124 did not. However, the unexpected large number of negative responses created doubts about this question. With further investigation it was understood that this question was unclear in the writing as some students understood it to mean that they went to enrol alone, not accompanied by anyone, when it originally meant to ask if they attended the enrolment in person. Therefore, the findings from this question were discarded by the research.

The respondents were asked to identify people that accompanied them on the enrolment day, aiming at understanding the role of others in the process. A list comprising nobody, parents, relatives and friends was provided. The findings from this question are summarised in Table 6.13. The highest percentage was for parents (60.5%).

Table 6. 13: *Summary of findings about enrolment company (Q7)*

Decision Influencers	Frequency	Percent
None	93	27.8
Parents	184	54.9
Relatives	17	5.1
Friends	30	9.0
Parents and Relatives	4	1.2
Parents and Friends	5	1.5
Relatives and Friends	1	.3
Parents, Relatives & Friends	1	.3
Total	335	100.0

It was discovered in the earlier research phase that some universities had agent offices in major cities for prospective students' enquiries and even enrolment. Q11 aimed at investigating percentages of students enrolling at these offices as opposed to those doing so on campus. 88 respondents (26.3%) reported enrolling at these offices. It also was found that one of the three universities under study did not have any such offices; it was taken into consideration that this had affected the overall results. When these results emerging from this particular university were excluded, the findings were as follows: 39.5% enrolled at university agent offices, and 60.5% on campus.

Students' views about enrolment day and the enrolment staff were variable, yet generally positive. Asking participants to weigh on a 7-point scale the enrolment process straightforwardness, it scored a mean attitude rating of 4.64. Although the mean was not very high, highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) far exceeded the highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) (n = 151 and 69 respectively). 'Enrolment teams' efficiency' on enrolment day scored a mean attitude rating of 4.96, with 163 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) and 48 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2).

6.5 Post Choice Reflections

The post-choice reflections section investigated students' views and attitudes about their decisions and the universities they enrolled at. This section investigated current state unlike earlier sections requiring respondents to recall past incidents. The findings about general satisfaction are summarised in Table 6.14.

When respondents were asked whether or not a university matched their expectations, responses were neutral with a mean attitude rating of 4.01. Students' general satisfaction with the educational services also scored a neutral position, with a mean attitude rating of 4.22. Likewise, a university's advertisement genuinity scored a neutral position with a mean attitude of 4.17. However, this issue had more positive tendencies as the number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) considerably exceeded the number of highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) shown in Table 6.14.

Table 6. 14: Summary of findings about post choice reflections (Q13)

	N	Mean	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
University matched my expectations	335	4.01	81	79	1.90
Satisfied with educational services	334	4.22	90	74	1.94
Advertisement was genuine	334	4.17	102	77	1.96

The second part of this section addressed satisfaction relating to eighteen different issues; each of which was represented by a different item. The findings from this question are presented in Table 6.15.

Table 6. 15: *Summary of findings about Satisfaction about certain issues (Q14)*

	N	Mean	Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores 6-7	Highly Negative Scores 1-2	SD
Foreign Language	334	5.06	2	161	46	1.91
University rules and regulations	334	4.77	4	137	41	1.82
Student-staff relationships	330	4.27	10	100	77	1.97
Individual student support	332	3.89	15	68	84	1.86
Convenience of attendance	334	4.01	13	76	76	1.79
Study system	330	4.61	7	99	36	1.62
Academic staff class-performance	328	4.80	3	125	37	1.65
Foreign teaching staff	329	4.01	14	95	97	2.06
Curriculum and books	331	4.76	5	125	44	1.77
Size of class	329	5.15	1	163	29	1.69
Student services and facilities	331	4.65	6	139	58	1.92
Active student union	327	3.79	16	67	94	1.94
Accommodation options	135	3.28	17	20	56	1.95
Transportation	317	4.38	9	104	62	1.93
Infrastructure	328	4.52	8	121	58	1.93
Technology used in classes	330	4.11	12	74	68	1.80
University social environment	330	4.23	11	99	69	1.90
Tuition fees	333	3.13	18	37	131	1.85

Only two issues exceeded the mean attitude rating of five, size of class and foreign language. The former scored the highest mean, 5.15 and ranked first with only 29 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2). High satisfaction on size of class can be a result of the small number of students in each class at these universities. It is possible that students were comparing the size of classes to those at public universities or schools which are notorious for large classes, and known for having a negative impact on learning. Foreign language also scored high with a mean attitude rating of 5.06, and ranked second. This indicated that students were satisfied with the foreign language taught at these universities. Foreign language, namely English, is taught in intensive courses in the first year to prepare students for their education in this language. High level of satisfaction showed that these universities were placing particular importance and effort on this issue.

Twelve issues scored neutrally positive means of attitude (means of $5 >$ & >4). The highest item in this category was academic staff-performance (mean of 4.80). This can be explained by the high quality of teaching staff the private universities seek to recruit. Satisfaction of a university's strict rules and formal regulations came next with a mean attitude rating of 4.77, followed by curriculum and books (mean of 4.76), and student services and facilities (mean of 4.65). Study system, whether a credit hour system or subject system, came next (mean of 4.61). Respondents' satisfaction of a university built environment followed with a mean attitude rating of 4.52. Transportation and student-staff relationship came after (mean of 4.38 and 4.27 respectively). University social environment (mean of 4.23) and technology used in class (mean of 4.11) followed. The lowest scores in this category were for convenience of attendance and the availability of foreign teaching staff; they both scored a mean attitude rating of 4.01. However, the number of highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) exceeded the number of highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7) for the issue of foreign teaching staff availability. Ratings were equal for convenience of attendance.

Only four issues showed dissatisfaction scoring a mean attitude rating of less than four. The highest mean score in this category was for individual student support (mean of 3.89). Active student union came next with a mean attitude rating of 3.79. Accommodation offered also scored considerably lower (mean of 3.28). Only 135 respondents (40.3 percent) reported that they experienced university accommodation. Tuition fees came last with the lowest mean attitude rating of 3.13 and 131 highly negative ratings (scores of 1-2) and only 37 highly positive ratings (scores of 6-7). This proposition created some curiosity as it contradicted the question investigating the importance of tuition fees in the selection criteria.

It was taken into consideration that levels of satisfaction attitudes would differ according to varying universities. Therefore, there was a need for some cross case analysis; this was conducted in the following section.

6.6 Cross-University Comparative Analysis

The cross-university and comparative analysis was designed to highlight differences between three universities. This was achieved by testing levels of variation of data emerging from different universities to determine if there were significant differences. The comparison was based on attitude ratings from four closed questions in the questionnaire: Q2 ratings of sources of information the participant used to learn about universities, Q4 ratings of students' selection criteria, Q13 ratings of students' post-choice general satisfaction, and Q14 ratings of students' post-choice satisfaction of specific issues. Variance among the various issues in each of the questions was tested by means of one-way analysis of variance test (ANOVA).

Three varying sources of information showed significant differences (at the 0.01 levels): Face-to face enquiry (.000), street billboards (.007) and university websites (.000). The summary of the means comparison is presented in Table 6.16. The variance in the data can be explained by the fact that each university conducted different strategies to function and promote itself through these sources. For example, Alpha University scored the highest mean attitude rating in face-to-face enquiry (mean of 5.78) and street billboards (mean of 2.79). Beta University scored significantly highest ratings in university website source. This indicated success of their website in delivering information to potential students.

Table 6. 16: Summary of means comparison about sources of information (Q2)

University	Friend/s	Relative/s	Telephone enquiry	Face-to-face enquiry	Current student/s during visit	Newspaper advertisements	Street billboards	University brochures and prospectus	University exhibitions	Universities websites	Admissions tutor visit	Department of Private Education
Alpha	4.00	3.56	3.59	5.78	3.23	2.61	2.79	3.27	2.41	3.23	1.58	1.67
Beta	4.47	3.98	3.32	4.57	4.07	2.50	1.97	2.93	2.82	4.74	1.69	1.85
Gamma	4.46	3.58	3.38	4.61	3.50	2.64	2.44	2.72	2.61	3.80	1.43	1.95
Aggregated Mean	4.31	3.71	3.43	4.98	3.60	2.59	2.40	2.97	2.62	3.92	1.57	1.83
ANOVA Sig.	.180	.295	.687	.000	.018	.857	.007	.139	.397	.000	.406	.476

Moving to the selection criteria, seventeen issues showed a significant difference (at the 0.01 levels). Table 6.17 presents a summary of the means comparison with issues showing a significant difference.

The indication of significant differences in students' criteria in varying universities highlighted that each university was adapting different strategies regarding these issues. For example, 'foreign teaching staff' was most important for respondents at Alpha University as it scored the highest mean attitude rating in this issue (mean of 6.12). This could indicate that this university had particular strategies for recruiting foreign teaching staff. Another example was size of class; Beta University scored a significantly higher mean (5.27); this shows that this university has possibly adapted different strategies regarding this issue. This, in fact, has created a curiosity to find out the type of strategies used by each university regarding issues showing significant difference. Therefore, issues that showed significant variance are to be further investigated in the following research phase to gain insight into the universities' relevant marketing strategies.

Table 6. 17: Summary of means comparison about selection criteria (Q4)

University	Language of instruction	University rules and regulations	Friendly recruitment team	Student-staff relationships	Individual student support	Convenience of attendance	Study system	Teaching methods	High calibre teachers	Foreign teaching staff	Curriculum and textbooks	Size of class
Alpha	6.36	5.07	5.17	4.62	4.68	4.36	5.09	5.41	5.63	6.12	5.19	4.24
Beta	5.40	5.76	4.83	5.01	4.91	4.58	5.35	6.06	6.15	5.14	5.57	4.89
Gamma	5.83	5.35	4.93	4.50	4.68	4.43	5.01	5.54	5.49	4.82	5.20	5.27
Aggregated Mean	5.87	5.39	4.98	4.70	4.76	4.46	5.15	5.66	5.75	5.35	5.32	4.81
ANOVA Sig.	.000	.007	.383	.119	.598	.711	.379	.008	.003	.000	.170	.000

Table 6.17 continues.

University	Total number of students	Specialisations offered	Subjects taught in the programme	Age of university	University's general reputation	Local accreditation	International accreditation	Interesting University name	Relationships with intl. universities	Final year abroad	Student services and facilities	Active student union
Alpha	3.88	5.20	4.80	3.14	5.00	5.59	6.19	3.93	6.22	6.31	4.98	3.85
Beta	3.87	5.75	5.57	4.54	5.58	5.94	5.93	3.33	5.50	5.27	5.09	4.53
Gamma	4.14	5.06	5.17	4.42	5.41	5.84	5.82	3.97	5.43	5.52	5.11	3.79
Aggregated Mean	3.97	5.33	5.17	4.03	5.33	5.79	5.98	3.75	5.72	5.71	5.06	4.05
ANOVA Sig.	.538	.008	.009	.000	.067	.312	.257	.073	.001	.000	.823	.012

Table 6.17 continues.

University	Accommodation options	University distance	Transportation	Built-environment	Technology in classes and labs	Classrooms' design and layout	Students' socio-economic background	University Social environment	My friends	Tuition fees	Paying in instalments	Discounts	Entry requirement (grades)
Alpha	2.90	3.95	4.13	3.58	4.45	4.05	4.14	4.26	2.57	4.17	4.60	4.74	5.36
Beta	4.26	4.06	5.39	3.83	5.97	4.93	4.65	4.90	2.71	4.10	4.45	4.63	5.37
Gamma	2.43	4.28	5.76	4.50	5.46	4.97	4.81	4.96	2.87	4.88	5.30	5.17	5.29
Aggregated Mean	3.18	4.10	5.09	3.98	5.29	4.65	4.54	4.71	2.72	4.39	4.80	4.85	5.34
ANOVA Sig.	.000	.559	.000	.004	.000	.000	.029	.017	.519	.013	.008	.147	.923

Regarding general students' post-choice satisfaction, all three issues indicated significant differences. In matching students' expectations (.000), Beta University scored the highest mean attitude rating with a positive mean of 4.68, while Alpha University and Gamma University scored lower, with a negative mean attitude rating of 3.58 and 3.81 respectively. Concerning students' satisfaction with educational services (.000), again only Beta University had a positive attitude rating (mean of 4.95). The final issue in this question was advertisement genuinity (.000); although both Beta University and Gamma University scored positive attitude ratings, Beta University far exceeded the latter. The summary of the means comparison is presented in Table 6.18 below.

Table 6. 18: *Summary of means comparison about general students' satisfaction (Q13)*

University	University matched expectations	Satisfied with educational services	Advertisement was genuine
Alpha	3.58	3.75	3.61
Beta	4.68	4.95	4.86
Gamma	3.81	3.98	4.08
Aggregated Mean	4.01	4.22	4.17
ANOVA Sig.	.000	.000	.000

The final section relates to students' post-choice satisfaction regarding specific issues. Expectedly, the majority of issues in this question showed significance differences, 11 out of 18. Table 6.19 presents a summary of means and the significance test results. Significant differences in various areas showed that universities performance differed, and this required further investigation. A university scoring a significantly high attitude mean rating in a specific area showed a strength in that particular university in that area. For example, Beta University is the most successful university in running their student union. Similarly, a university scoring the significantly lowest mean showed weakness in a particular area.

Alpha University, for instance, has a major problem with their coursebooks and curriculum. This could suggest some ‘strength – weakness’ analysis at each university.

Table 6. 19: Summary of means comparison about students' satisfaction for specific issues (Q13)

University	Total number of students	Specialisations offered	Subjects taught in the programme	Age of university	University's general reputation	Local accreditation	International accreditation	Interesting University name	Relationships with intl. universities	Final year abroad	Student services and facilities
Alpha	3.88	5.20	4.80	3.14	5.00	5.59	6.19	3.93	6.22	6.31	4.98
Beta	3.87	5.75	5.57	4.54	5.58	5.94	5.93	3.33	5.50	5.27	5.09
Gamma	4.14	5.06	5.17	4.42	5.41	5.84	5.82	3.97	5.43	5.52	5.11
Aggregated Mean	3.97	5.33	5.17	4.03	5.33	5.79	5.98	3.75	5.72	5.71	5.06
ANOVA Sig.	.538	.008	.009	.000	.067	.312	.257	.073	.001	.000	.823

Table 6.19 continues.

University	Active student union	Foreign Language	University rules and regulations	Student-staff relationships	Individual student support	Convenience of attendance	Study system	Academic staff class-performance	Foreign teaching staff	Curriculum and textbooks
Alpha	3.85	5.27	3.96	4.36	4.07	4.12	4.36	4.35	3.93	3.97
Beta	4.53	5.06	5.65	4.33	3.77	4.25	5.11	5.24	4.45	5.63
Gamma	3.79	4.86	4.72	4.12	3.81	3.68	4.37	4.84	3.66	4.71
Aggregated Mean	4.05	5.06	4.77	4.27	3.89	4.01	4.61	4.80	4.01	4.76
ANOVA Sig.	.012	.278	.000	.627	.430	.047	.000	.000	.016	.000

Overall, the comparative analysis between the three universities pointed at significant differences in students' attitudes and perceptions of them. Such differences and variation in students' attitudes triggered curiosity about the universities' policies and practices regarding these matters. The comparative analysis established the basis on which further investigation with university key administrative people is made.

6.7 Summary and the Way Forward

This research phase investigated students' perceptions and attitudes of university decisions and selection, by means of 335 questionnaire returns from three universities. Employing such quantitative research techniques established grounds for generating statistical verification and generalisability of issues emerging in the earlier research phase. It also facilitated statistical measurements between universities. The findings in this phase were organised into five distinct sections: motives to attend university, factors shaping students' decision-making including information and evaluation criteria, decision and enrolment, post-choice reflection and cross-case comparison.

The findings indicated motives of an instrumental nature, such as future employability security, and increased financial stability had the greatest roles in motivating students to pursue higher education. The social position and prestige that a university qualification offered were also important motives. Personal issues, such as self-betterment and intrinsic interest, came second, and issues of social dimension were the least to motivate respondents. The decision to pursue higher education was mostly made by respondents, not their parents, showing their higher levels of awareness and understanding of the value of university education. Surprisingly, the findings on the role of parents in the decision to pursue higher education contradicted the findings from the earlier research phase, and this needed further investigation for the reasons.

Face-to-face enquiry was the most used, helpful and significant source of information. The major role of this source suggested further investigation with key people responsible for answering students' queries to gain further insights. These would be the enquiry and enrolment staff. Friends and relatives' role in the university decision process was not highly evident; however, it was so in information provision. The Internet and university websites were also among major sources of information. This role went in line with the findings from the earlier research phase, and reassured the importance of further investigations. Findings about telephone enquiries contradicted those ones emerging from the earlier research phase and this suggested further investigation to identify reasons. Further investigation would also be carried out in order to identify reasons behind the minor role of

admission tutor visits, Department of Private Education, street billboards and educational exhibitions in providing relevant information.

Teaching issues were most important in students' university selection criteria; language of instruction and high calibre teachers topped this category. The highly important role of teaching issues showed a university with a high standard of teaching preferable to that of a university providing good convenience facilities or financial incentives. It also showed students awareness of these factors. Issues surrounding a university's informal reputation were also important and came second. Accreditation, international and local, was highly important to the students. Although there was some speculation about the major reason behind these two issues, such as the turbulent market and the blurred views about the legality of a university, there needed to be some further investigation. Social issues were the least important in the students' evaluation criteria. Although it would be relevant to the research to further investigate how each of the universities address and manage the issues that established students' selection criteria, only issues that showed statistically significance difference would be investigated due to the relatively limited time allowed to complete this study.

Towards making the final decision about which university to choose, respondents reported levels of determination about their decisions, though they had some concerns about making an incorrect decision. Investigation would be launched to gain highlights about the sources of these concerns in the following phase. In making the final decision, although it was the students' own decision of which university to attend, parents were consistently present in providing advice and help, such as accompanying their children on the enrolment day.

Finally, students' general satisfaction about their choices and the universities they were attending was generally neutral. When specific areas were investigated, levels of satisfaction varied. While the highest levels of satisfaction were scored on foreign language and size of class, the lowest were for individual student support, active student union, accommodation options and tuition fees. There was some contradiction between the findings of tuition fees as students reported that they were not concerned about fees in their

selection and the dissatisfaction at this level; this suggested some further investigation. When conducting the analysis of variance test, levels of satisfaction significantly varied concerning eleven issues. Further investigation would cover these variances in the following research phase.

A detailed case study investigation about each of the three participating universities follows. Findings from each case study is presented in a separate chapter in an idiographic approach starting with Alpha University (presented in Chapter Seven), then Beta University (presented in Chapter Eight), and ending with Gamma University (presented in Chapter Nine). The findings from these three separate chapters will be brought together nomothetically in a dedicated chapter ten.

Chapter Seven

Phase Three: Findings from University Case Study 1

7.1 Introduction

After revealing student perspectives of university choice and selection in the two earlier research phases which constitutes the first half of the enquiry, this chapter moves on to tackle the second half of the research enquiry, which shows how universities market themselves to attract prospective students, and how they respond to issues raised by students in earlier phases. The findings in this chapter represent only one case study, Alpha University, and the findings from the other two universities are presented in the following chapters. It is chosen to present the case studies in case-by-case approach as this would highlight the uniqueness and individuality of each case. Emerging issues from the three cases would be related to each other by themes in a separate chapter drawing on points of similarities and differences.

This chapter focuses on marketing strategies at Alpha University with a primary objective of understanding the methods of attracting new applicants. There are seven aspects Alpha University employs to market itself and attract prospective students. Hence, the primary theme is ‘how Alpha University markets itself to attract prospective students’ which is considered in eight subthemes: ‘the university context’, ‘location’, ‘programme’, ‘language of instruction’, ‘communication’, ‘scholarships’, ‘university-student relationships’ and ‘international partnerships’.

7.2 The University Context

Alpha University is one of the first private universities to commence working and teaching in Syria. Although this university is one of the pioneer universities in the country to initiate

teaching, it has one of the smallest student populations in the country. The size of student population at Alpha University is determined by two factors. Firstly, according to a senior member of staff, the main reason is a limit on student numbers fixed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) according to the level of capital investment in the university. This university is established by a closed-shareholding company, and although there are a large number of shareholders (Document: University Brochure), the capital invested does not allow the university to cater for a larger number of students.

The second reason for the low student population is highlighted by another senior member of staff who believes that this has been an issue caused by an enrolment factor; the university does not receive many applicants, and this is attributed to reasons related to the university built-environment. As the university started teaching in the same year it was licensed, it decided to start teaching in a rented temporary building, which was a difficult decision for the university to make. If the university waited for its permanent structure and buildings to be completed it would not be among the pioneering universities in the country at this time. The university also wanted more capital to expand, which would have been generated from tuition fees in the coming years. Nonetheless, opening in a temporary building posed some major problems as the rented building was inadequate in size, only about 3700 m², and was not purpose-built. In fact, this rented building was formerly a hotel. This reflected negatively on the university image. One parent says about this:

I went there and saw the university; it is not a university. It is a hotel. I don't want my son to study in a hotel. I want him to study at a university. It might be okay if I wanted him to study tourism or hotel management... I know that this is just a temporary building but I don't think it is proper to be a university. A university needs auditoriums and labs not small residence room being converted into classrooms (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

A student comments on this saying:

I remember when I first applied to this university; the admission office told me that the university were going to move to another building which was much better and purpose-built, this was four years ago. I am going to graduate this year and I still study in this hotel building... This makes me really sad that I am not going to study in that new building... I also feel that the university has not been very honest with me, every year they tell us that we are moving next year (Interview: Student 1).

It should be highlighted that many other private universities also started in temporary buildings then moved to permanent facilities. However, Alpha University differed in the selection of that particular type of building, and also they were among the slowest universities to move to their permanent buildings. It was four years after their teaching initiation that they moved to their new permanent buildings. This meant that some students had taken their degrees and graduated in the temporary building. This has reflected to a great extent on the university current students' satisfaction, something that the university administrative staff members are well aware of. When investigating the reasons that the permanent building construction was so late, reasons pointed at construction difficulties.

The university has now moved to its permanent building although the construction of the buildings are still not fully completed; there is still further work to be completed and this might have some reflection on students' well-being, and health and safety. Nonetheless, from field observations, the buildings look large, modern, and purpose-built. There are many big, well-lit, air-conditioned classrooms, and laboratories that have modern equipment such as computers and overhead projectors. There are plenty of indoor and outdoor areas for students' activities and parking for staff and students. The entire campus size is about 100.000 m². A major multifaceted change in people's attitudes with this move to the permanent building was evident from interviews with both staff and students. For example, some members of the staff believe that it is only now that the university is "born". Students are also very happy with the move and believe that this will reflect positively on their learning process. Similar findings on positive reflections of the built-environment have been reported by Temple (2009).

The new buildings are well advertised with impressive visual imagery on the university website and its promotional materials; however, some of these photographs are virtual, developed on computer software indicating that the university had perhaps decided to show the buildings before they were constructed in reality to the audience. Using virtual images of the buildings on the website and promotional materials created some feeling of concern in prospective students as they thought that this might not be the reality. Sutherland and Sylvester (2000) highlight concerns using such imagery in promotion. However, there are

also plenty of real (not virtual) photographs on the website showing the new permanent building opening celebration attended by many important and influential people including the Syrian Minister of Higher Education. Showing such an influential person could ease people's concerns about the university legality and make them feel more comfortable. A senior member of staff comments on the importance of the buildings saying:

Seeing such a nice and big building would make people more comfortable that our university is a well-established one and not endangered to close like other universities... There is a private university that was shut down by the Ministry because they could not finalise their permanent buildings in the time allowed... The buildings are the most important component of a university; without a building you cannot have a university (Interview: senior member of staff).

This statement shows that the university's material representation (the building and the way it looks), not academic values or educational quality to be the core aspect of this university. After the move to the new buildings the temporary building was ignored as if the university did not want it to be remembered. There are no longer any photographs of it on the website, or any promotional material.

With the low student and staff population, the administrative structure of the university is not very complicated. There is a university council, faculty councils and eight administrative offices: admission, student affairs, public relations, international relations, human resources, accreditation, information technologies and legal affairs (see Figure 7.1). These offices normally hold no more than one staff member, except for admissions and information technology.

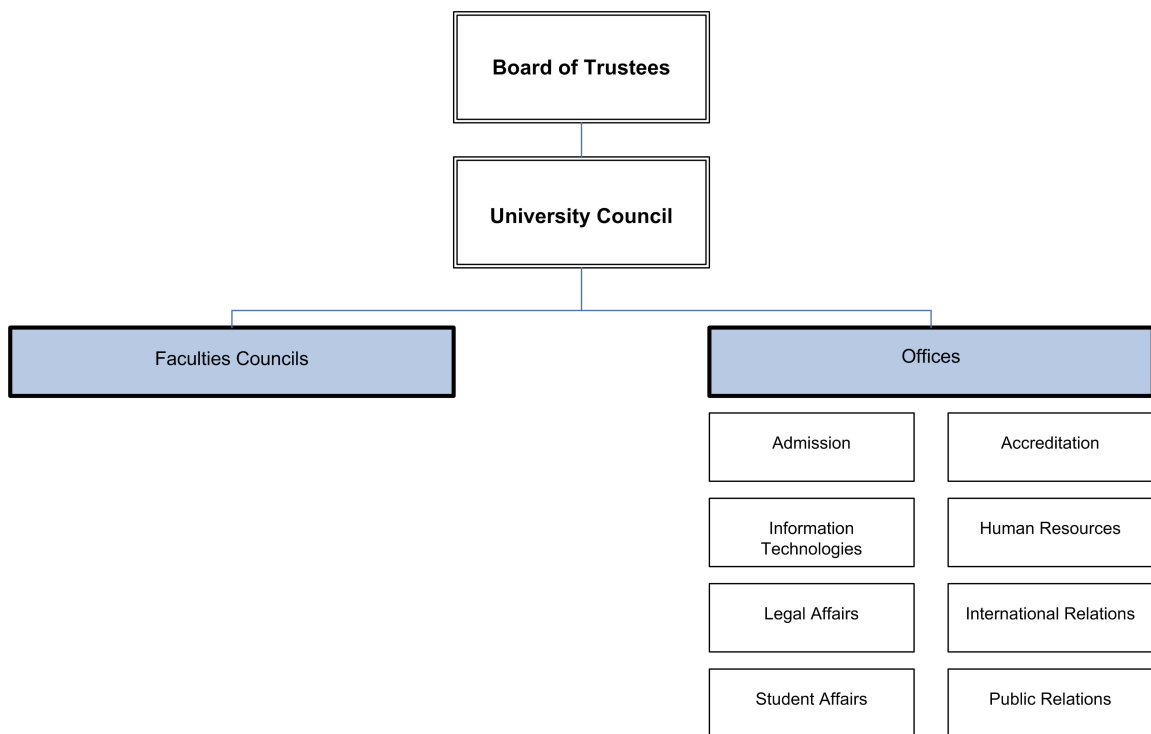


Figure 7. 1: *Alpha administrative structure*

7.3 University Location

The university is located in a rural area on an approximate central location in Syria and between two major cities. This location choice has been determined by several factors. Firstly, the choice of a rural area, not urban, has been controlled by the ‘geographical approach’ (Osborne & Shuttleworth, 2004) imposed by the MoHE. Despite the fact that the government has established all of its public universities in urban areas in major cities, it forces all private universities to open in rural areas as a means of facilitating higher education access across the whole country. In the case of Alpha University, most of the university shareholders are from the particular region where the university has been constructed. The idea that private universities were to be opened in rural areas only was most welcomed by the shareholders here since they believe that this would reflect positively on their own community. Consistently, the university claims non-profitability as it proposes its aim is to develop the area, and provide a good education and work. This area

is now described to be among the fastest growing in terms of number of population in Syria. Moreover, comparing the economic status of people in this region with others in the country, they are wealthier which could suggest higher affordability for them having in mind the high cost of private education (Interview: senior member of staff). Also, people here generally tend to pursue higher education more than in other areas. A senior member of staff says about this:

People in our area, although it is rural, love education... it is because many people from our area travel abroad... I know many families that do not have any member that is not university educated. You don't really see this in villages in other places (Interview: senior member of staff).

All these issues make the choice to locate in a rural area tempting, yet it would have been more tempting to open in an urban area. The senior member of staff adds:

Of course it would be better to have our university in a major city where the population density is higher, this would bring more students... but this is what we were able to do... the Ministry only allowed private universities to operate in rural areas and we are working with what we have (Interview: senior member of staff).

To surmount such a problem, the university charges extra fees and provides transportation from the main nearby cities and towns, which enables students to feel safer and it is more convenient. Another challenge that was created by operating in a rural area was academic staff recruitment, as highly skilled and qualified people generally live in the capital city or in other major cities.

The university location, which has been described as 'strategic', attracts different students, but the majority of the students are still from the region in which the university is located. Another senior member of staff says about this:

Our university attracts students from the area and nearing villages for some reasons. These people know the university... they even sometimes know some people that work here... Some students might prefer not to enrol at our university as they might want to go to a public one, but the closest public university is in (X City) which is like 50 km away... I think it is very important to students to be at a university close geographically to their homes and their parents (Interview: senior member of staff).

An incident that caused some challenge to the university was the opening of an additional new private university last year in the same geographical region. Although this new

university provides wholly different programmes, Alpha sees it as a competitor, competing for the relatively small market. This, in fact, will offer more options for prospective students in that region, and this makes Alpha *an* option, rather than the only option.

A parent says on location:

My daughter and I chose this university because it is not very far from where we live. We couldn't choose anything further... even if she was admitted at Damascus University (which is supposed to be the most well-established public university in Syria), I wouldn't let her go there, you know it is a big city and she is a young girl; it is very hard for a girl to live alone there (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

A father quotes:

When we thought about my son's options, we first thought about travelling abroad, Germany or Sweden. He loved to travel abroad, but I thought he was too young for that... I hear a lot of horrible stories about what happens there to young students... I think this university is better option for him... it is just 20 minutes drive from home (Focus Group Interview: Parent 3).

The mother adds:

It wasn't his father's decision only, our son himself wanted to be close to home, we even told him to apply to student accommodation but he said he had no problem driving 40 minutes and to commute as he prefers to sleep in his own bed and eat what I cook (Focus Group Interview: Parent 4).

All these quotes highlight the importance of location and the preference for parents to have their children close to home. Ho and Hung (2008) have reported different findings where location has not been so important in selecting a university in Taiwan. The contradiction highlights contextual differences.

In some situations choosing to enrol at this university for local students is an issue of belonging and patriotism as it was put by one student "I am from X village (where Alpha is located), and I cannot imagine myself enrolling at any other university, it would not be nice to me and to them that I go to another private university and pay my money there... I would be like a disrespectful person if I did that". This shows the integration between the university and its local community.

The university location also serves in attracting students from areas other than the nearby villages. As the university is located between two major cities, this makes it a more potential university for prospective students there. A senior member of staff highlights:

We know that there is a potential market in these two cities, and we have been targeting them... For example, I organise visits to some secondary schools in the wealthy areas in these cities to invite students to visit our university and have some ideas about it... you can get to these universities in maximum half an hour drive and this means that they can still live at home and commute every day here (Interview: senior member of staff).

The university is also only a few kilometres from a bordering country; which makes it attractive to students from that country. However, it is noticed that the university does not target students from distant areas as it does not have sufficient dormitory accommodation to offer.

The university location is also strategic in the sense that it is close to a major highway which serves two advantages. Firstly, it makes access easier from nearby cities. Secondly, it makes the university more visible to people commuting on the highway, and this helps in making the university more popular and well-known.

The university is situated in an attractive scenic area with greenery, hills and valleys which could attract many perspective students. A member of the admission team quotes:

The whole area is lovely, many people come here around the year for vacation for the nice weather and nature... such an environment stimulates the students to think and study... Also talking about the students' health, the air is clean, not polluted like it is in the cities (Interview: member of staff).

This point has been supported by many students about this particular university in the earlier research phases. One student says, for example:

I did not apply to X University though it was closer to my hometown and though my parents had an extra flat there. It was on the top of a cold mountain; winter is very cold and depressing over there. Sometimes the snow blocks the roads and you get stuck there... I love the atmosphere and the nature at Alpha much more (Interview: Student 1).

Being in a superior area encourages parents to come along with their children to visit the university when enquiring or enrolling. One parent says “we came with our son to

encourage him and as a day trip to the whole family... as he finished the application we all went together to a nearing resort”.

Finally, one drawback about the location is noted as it is not well-directed and illustrated on the university website and promotional materials. Students from different regions find it difficult to locate the university. This suggests that the university is more engaged in attracting students from its own region. One student from a major city quotes: “I have spent like half an hour on the website to know where the exact university location is... I had to call them over the phone in the end to ask that. It might be more helpful if they provided a map that shows their exact locations”.

7.4 Programme

The university has two faculties. The number of students is almost equally distributed between these two faculties. The university boasts of offering specialised, distinct and up-to-date programmes. A member of staff comments on this saying “people love to study new knowledge, a programme that deals with new technology things... they make themselves more distinct and special with this”. The university also boasts excellence in some departments, for example, they claim that one department to be the best among private universities in the country. A senior member of staff explains:

Our (X) department is the best and most distinct... 80% of this department’s academic staff are French good lecturers... the department’s excellence has been proofed by our students’ academic achievements and performance... this year they went to study in France and they scored in their assignments and projects better than the French students did... their French tutors reports were also excellent... this shows we are doing very well (Interview: senior member of staff).

The university’s decision to establish these particular faculties and provide particular programmes has been affected by several issues, as highlighted by a senior member of staff:

First of all, there is an educational map being issued at the Ministry for the geographical distribution for different programmes... It is supposed to provide a wider range of programmes and specialisation to prospective students across the country... Secondly, the advice we get from our French partner universities. They tell us what programmes they can provide help and what programmes they cannot. I remember that we were thinking of establishing a faculty of pharmacy,

but they said that they could not provide help in that at that time; therefore, we reconsidered this decision... The third issue that determines what faculties and departments to open, and the most important, is popularity. When we notice there is high demand on a particular programme or a whole faculty, we consider it, just like what happened with the faculty of pharmacy (Interview: senior member of staff).

This senior member of staff also believes that the availability of a particular programme at a university is the most important issue in the selection and therefore the university aims at expanding the range of programmes offered to cover a wider range of students' wants and needs. Another senior member of staff says about this:

Some students want to be engineers but their marks could not allow them to study engineering at the public universities. In this case they would search for private universities that offer engineering programmes... at private universities, a student studies what he/she wants, not what his/her marks at the NSSE allow them, they have a choice now, and in this instance we need to provide programmes that most students want (Interview: senior member of staff).

These findings support the assumption raised in research phase one that a private university is usually a second option. That is, if students' marks in the NSSE allow them to study in their preferred areas; they will most likely choose to go to a public university.

Added to what has been highlighted earlier, the university believes that the major reason for students to pursue higher education is to improve career prospects. This has also reflected on the universities' choice of programmes provided as they are programmes that are in a way related to 'good' jobs. A senior member of staff says:

No one can find a job nowadays without a university degree; a bachelor degree is a minimum requirement for a job. Of course I am talking about a good job. Most if not all of the students applying at our university have that reason in mind... some other students are wealthy, these people do not need to look for a job; however, they need to help their parents and family in their established work. And with their degrees they believe that they can improve and develop this established family business.... And you can see how we design our programmes to be all career oriented; I am not saying that we are being a vocational university, but the programmes we offer all provide what society calls a respectable job. This, in fact, leads me to other idea that makes some people want to study at university; it is the prestige and social status they get when they get the degree and the respectable job... I do not think there are people that study what they love; I mean they do not usually study an area of passion to them... They study a programme that they just do not hate; a programme that is promising of a good job and prosperous life (Interview: senior member of staff).

These beliefs are shared among all administrative staff and parents interviewed at this university. The relation between the choice of programme and future career has been

discussed by Saiti and Prokopiadou (2008) where they explain that better career opportunities increase a student's desire to pursue higher education.

When investigating the choice of programme, the role of parents emerged. Parents and students work together to reach a mutual decision. It is mutual in the sense that it is not the students' own decision as it should not contradict the parents' wishes, and it is not the parents' own decision as it should be a programme that the students are keen to pursue. One parent says:

I had a role in deciding what programme to study... I am an engineer and a university lecturer... I did not want her to study engineering like me because I know that the labour market is full of them nowadays. The proof is that earlier, like ten years ago, an engineer would be guaranteed a job at the government as he/she graduates. Now it is not like this. You have to search for a job and you might not get lucky... Moreover, I know my daughter's abilities and potentials; I have always kept track of her study records. She is good at practical things not theoretical things, so I directed her to study in a particular area (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

I asked the parent whether this was his decision or whether he forced his daughter to study at this programme, and he replied:

No of course not, I honestly wanted her to study education to be a teacher, but she did not agree... I did not force her for that. She told me that she could not imagine herself a teacher, she did not want to be a teacher spending her life with the children, so I said it was ok, and together we reached into deciding to study something else (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

A senior member of staff believes that the major role of parents in deciding the programme is attributed to the students' ignorance about the programmes, and also what they aspire to be in the future. There were many examples where prospective students visit university unsure of what they want to study. The university admission team provides time for students, as well as their parents, to explain about the programmes offered and their future prospects.

7.5 Language of Instruction

Another aspect the university employs in marketing is the use of English language as the official language of instruction. Although there have been concerns of losing the national

language and identity in HE (Brock-Utne, 2007), the university employs this strategy from a belief in the urgent importance of English in the labour market. Thus, making English the only official language of instruction would enable students to master English as a language, and could guarantee them more positive future prospects. Similar argument has been suggested in Bangladesh by Farooqui (2007). Learning in English could also help the students in their global employment prospects, whether for work or to pursue post-graduate education. A member of staff says:

English helps the students in their future studies; you know how a student needs to set the TOEFL® or the IELTS® exams and obtain a good result to get accepted at a university abroad... We enable the students through the study years to reach into that level (Interview: member of staff).

English at Alpha University has been attractive for both students and parents. One parent explains, for example:

My son was accepted in parallel education at a public university. But we did not want to study there as they teach in Arabic. Actually, all the public universities teach in Arabic that is why we started thinking about private universities... He went to the Naval University; it was very close to where we live. He first liked it, and liked the programmes offered there. He was about to enrol there, but something happened made him change his mind... he learnt that they teach in Arabic and he believed that computer engineering as a science should be taught in English... It is not that we are against Arabic as a Language. It is our language and we love it, but the language of business nowadays is English. If you want to excel in your business then you must master this language (Focus Group Interview: Parent 3).

Teaching and learning in English was not always an attraction as it could create some concerns and reservations for the students, as they might be not competent enough. Parents and the enrolment team come forward to help in easing these concerns and reservations. A parent says: “She was really worried that she would fail as it would be very hard for her to study in English, but I encouraged her and told her to look at her peers and see that they are doing well”. A member of staff says:

A few students get worried that we teach in English. Our role here is to make them feel comfortable with this. What we usually say is that it is not going to be hard and that we even provide English courses for beginners. There are actually students here who first came without knowing a word in English as their second language is French, not English, and they are doing fine now in their studies (Interview: member of staff).

On enrolment day, new students are usually sent to the English department to take an English test that normally lasts an hour, to check their competencies in the language. Students are then divided into four levels and distributed into remedial English courses.

Teaching in English is not exclusive to Alpha University; almost all private universities do the same. However, Alpha claims to be the best private university in this particular area. A senior member of staff says:

We excel in the way we teach in English... This makes an added value to what the students gain at the university... most of the other private universities claim that they teach in English but they don't really do... We are teaching 95% in English, while you see other universities hardly reaching 60% (Interview: senior member of staff).

An example of how some students went to France to study for a semester in English, and did well in their studies has been frequently mentioned by all staff members interviewed. This example provides evidence that the university is excelling in teaching in English. In order to be able to teach in English the university receives assistance from a Western organisation, which basically runs the English Language Department. This organisation also helps in providing native English language teachers. The university believes that when students are taught English by native speakers they would learn faster and more efficiently as the only medium of communication would be English language between teachers and learners. A senior member of staff says proudly:

We have a lot of native English language teachers... Students really like this, actually not only students but everybody; It makes the university have an international dimension... There is also the general belief about the foreign teachers, and that they are better than local ones, people like this... and we honestly use it as a marketing factor when we advertise for the university (Interview: senior member of staff).

The sense of pride in the member of staff's quote resulted from the point that it was not very easy for many other private universities to provide foreign teachers, but his university did, which may put this university in a better position among others.

7.6 Communication

The method of communication with public and prospective students is another important aspect of Alpha's marketing strategy. Its importance has been translated into reality as the university conducted a market survey to evaluate communication methods. The most important method of communication for the university is 'word-of-mouth', which can run through current students. Bonnema and Waldt (2008) refer to this as the 'social source' of information where views and ideas about a particular provider stem from individuals with whom the learners may interact. The university believes in the power of such source and highlights its current students as an acting 'social source' informing the public and prospective students. These students usually tell their families, friends and many others about their university, and this in time builds up the university's 'word-of-mouth' reputation (Bruce & Edgington, 2008). A senior member of staff explains:

The best way to advertise and tell people about our university is our students... They tell everybody about us. Even if they don't tell, eventually people will ask them about us. They are like ambassadors for us... That is why we all the time think about our students... making them feel comfortable and happy studying at our university. If they were unhappy they would reflect a bad image about the university (Interview: President).

The importance of current students in establishing a university 'word-of-mouth' reputation is supported by parents and students interviewed as they all mention this factor in the university search for information and selection. A parent offers an example of the importance of what people say about a university, and how it could redirect the decision, saying: "Initially we wanted to enrol at X University, but people did not recommend that... his friends told him bad things about it... I also started to ask people I know and this was true".

Another vital method of communication is the open-day. The university organises special days, usually four times a year, where potential prospective students and their parents are invited to visit and learn more about the university. On targeting these students, and the visiting arrangements a senior member of staff says:

I target secondary school in the wealthy areas, sometimes the private schools... because you know tuition fees is a lot of money and people from such schools can afford to come and enrol here. It is that we are targeting the students with the highest potential of enrolment... When I visit a school I

meet someone in charge there and ask to get the third secondary students' contact details. Then I give these contacts for the people in the admission office where they contact the students and invite them for this day (Interview: senior member of staff).

Transportation is arranged free of charge for students and their parents from specific areas in targeted cities and towns to visit the open-day, as the university is located in a rural area and access may be inconvenient. The university usually has about 150 visitors, which are divided into groups of 20, and then taken on a campus tour. After the tour, visitors are offered a complementary lunch, an initiative that shows generosity and professionalism as the university cares about the smallest of details (Interview: Parent 4). After lunch there is a presentation for all visitors about the university and its departments. The presentation is offered by many key people at the university such as the university President, deans of faculties and departments, and the Admission Officer. Following the presentation, there is a 'question and answer' session. The university believes this method of communication is very efficient for several reasons which are highlighted by a senior member of staff:

It is a chance where we can demonstrate our strength areas to the public... to show them how professional we are in organising that day and leaving a positive impression on them... I believe even if that potential student has not enrolled, he/she and his/her parents will talk positively about our university.... It is not like a phone enquiry where they talk for five minutes; it is a whole day that provides plenty of time to explain about the university and the departments fully to the prospective students and their parents.... It saves time and effort for us as informing is done collectively... a private university is something new and explaining things for people is not simple; this explanation needs to be verbal not written. Verbal communication is more preferred in our context as it establishes trust with the public. Moreover, not many people like to read, they want to hear more (Interview: senior member of staff).

The university also uses other strategies to communicate to the public, such as websites, promotional brochures, newspapers advertisements, street billboards, and educational exhibitions. Although there is a shared belief among the three members of staff interviewed that all these strategies, except for the websites, are not effective, the university insists on adapting them intensively. A senior member of staff says about this:

The way we promote and advertise our university is wrong... we spend an enormous budget on advertising on the radio, street billboards, and newspapers, and this is wrong. This is a waste of money and resources... who would be walking in the street or driving a car and bother to read a street billboard about our university and what programmes we offer; this method might be more appropriate for consumption products not higher education... people nowadays also do not really read newspapers, we shouldn't be advertising there. Maybe a youth magazine would be better option, but even that we don't do, we mainly advertise in the national newspapers and some other advertising-newspapers (Interview: senior member of staff).

This quote is consistent with the evidence from the survey the university has conducted to be informed of sources of information students used. The Internet, however, is believed to be a better alternative, rather than a core strategy, for effective communication. Nonetheless, this has not been translated into reality as the university website is not well developed and under expectation. This opposes the issue raised by Blumenstyk (2006) that universities in the USA are placing great emphasis on their websites and online recruiting. Perhaps this is a result to another senior member of staff's belief that only very few people, the well-educated, use the Internet in Syria. The website is not frequently updated with the latest information and many of its web-pages are blank showing that the website is still under construction. A member of staff offers an example saying: "I have asked many times for a section on 'questions and answers' to be added to the university website... It never happened... It is never taken seriously. They don't see it as an urgent issue; it is more like a luxury issue" Sometimes there are inconsistencies or contradictions comparing the information provided on the website with other promotional materials; something that could explain the reason people prefer, or are forced, to gain information through verbal communication.

7.7 Scholarships and Discounts

A further strategy that the university implements in marketing and attracting prospective students, is offering a range of scholarships and discounts. Cabrera and Nasa (2000) agree on this strategy, and say that low socio-economic status students are more likely to apply to an institution when offered financial assistance. The first kind of scholarship is a certain or full reduction of tuition fees for the less advantaged and low-income students. For this scholarship, a student applies to the university committee that evaluates their legibility. With this scholarship the university claims securing equal opportunities for students to learn, regardless of the students' financial status, and this assists the university in changing public opinion on the private universities, that they are organisations concerned only with financial profits. This scholarship also enhances the university's popularity as it is available not only for the wealthy but for people of all classes. Moreover, as there is an evaluation

procedure for applicants based on academic achievements and qualities, the scholarship attracts academically good quality students; something that could contribute positively to the university overall achievements. A parent says on this scholarship:

We chose this university only because of the scholarship that my daughter was offered... She scored very well in the NSSE and this helped her in her application... I am a university teacher, and I honestly can not afford to pay a private university tuition fees... We might have chosen another private university if she was offered a scholarship, but this is the only private university that she got a scholarship from (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

The university also provides other types of scholarships and discounts, including a 10% discount for students from the local area, further evidence of the university's commitment to local rural development and improving local opportunities. Another scholarship covers all tuition fees for the best achievers in the NSSE, and other equivalent exams, in an attempt to attract good quality students. Siblings are also offered a 7.5% reduction on tuition fees. The university also provides reductions for students after they have enrolled. For example, the highest achieving student in the academic year is offered a 35% tuitions fee reduction, and 100% reduction is awarded for students who score 90% in any module. A member of staff comments on the scholarships offered saying:

These scholarships are very important for the university and the students having in mind the very high cost of tuition in a private university... When prospective students come to us and ask about the university, they like it. However, when they ask about the fees, we can understand their feelings that it is too expensive... Sometimes because of the high fees they change their minds and just walk away, but we tell them about the scholarships and discounts and they feel a bit more comfortable... these scholarships are also important to motivate the students study and achieve in their subjects. I know many students who are studying really very hard just to get more that 90% in the exam and get the reduction (Interview: member of staff).

7.8 University-Student Relationships

The quality of relationship that the university builds with students is another important aspect in attracting prospective students, and this suggests a relationship marketing strategy (Yang *et. al*, 2008). These relationships with students and the way they are treated are distinctive factors. The words of a senior member of staff summarize the type of relationship with students when he says: "We look at students as they are our sons and daughters, it is a relationship that is built on respect and understanding". A family-like relationship is encouraged at the university which is made possible by the low university

population. An important example of how students feel about the family-like university is highlighted by a member of staff who says:

On the day we moved to the new buildings, all the staff were busy either moving furniture or cleaning the new offices and rooms. The students were so happy to move to the new buildings that most of them helped us... Our students are really very special; when they saw us working hard on that they came and offered help, we said no but many insisted saying that this university is theirs as well... I am sure you don't see this at any other private university (Interview: member of staff).

There has been a claim that many members of staff, whether academic or administrative, know almost all students by name. All university members of staff treat current students, as well as prospective students in a very friendly, respectful and helpful manner. The member of staff offers an example on this saying:

We help the students in anything they want... Sometimes because they are far from the university and they need to come to the university to sign a document; we tell them to send the document by post or fax and we get that signed for them, although the regulations says that the student should be present with the document, but we are really very helpful and easy with that... we think about the student, that this travel to the university is a lot of trouble for him/her so we try to help... We even sometimes help students in affairs that are not in our duties (Interview: member of staff).

There is no excessive bureaucracy, creating unnecessary problems, and students are allowed at any time to meet any key member of staff. There is a general belief among the administrative members of staff that this kind of relationship makes students satisfied and positive about their university experience. Perhaps, they are treated this way as the university perceives its current students to be its ambassadors, building its word-of-mouth reputation. Al-Alak (2006) uses the term 'relationship quality' which refers to customers perceptions and evaluations of individual service employees' communication and behaviour such as respect, courtesy, warmth, empathy and helpfulness. In this respect, Alpha University shows high levels of 'relationship quality'.

This kind of treatment is obvious, even for prospective students and their parents. The criticality of enrolment days and treatment on the first visit is highly understood by the members of staff; it is a first impression that the university wants to enhance. A parent says on his first visit to the university:

My daughter and I are really very happy here about the way we are treated. As we entered here, there was a person to give us enough time to ask; she was also very kind and respectful. She was very

helpful. Even when we finished with our questions she took us to the deans' office; it is not that she just gave us directions there, but she walked us there. This is really very nice of her (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

The Dean meeting prospective students, is another strategy the university employs. A parent says on this:

My son was really confused which university to choose... The admission officer sent us directly to the dean of faculty. The meeting we had with the dean made him want this particular university... He was very smart, well-educated, and friendly person. I myself liked what he said... He talked to us about the prospects of a graduate... We all liked the attention he gave us; we felt like he really cared about our son's future (Focus Group Interview: Parent 3).

Obviously, showing special attention to prospective students is a very important issue.

Students' views and opinions, which are gained through various channels, are very important to the university. There are formal channels where students report their views on various aspects, such as the 'student-staff discussion meetings' which are held once a term, module evaluation forms, and a 'suggestions and objections' box. There are also meetings with parents which show the university's awareness of the important role of the parents. Students and parents' views and suggestions are used to evaluate the university's performance in different areas such as teaching processes, the academic calendar, teachers and activities. There are also some other informal channels the university uses to know students' views and opinions. A senior member of staff explains this saying:

I know students' views very well because I am close to them... I live with them in the student accommodation and I am like a friend or like a big brother to them... I have long conversations with most students there and they tell me if there is any trouble they have... In most of these conversations you find them telling me or complaining about a teacher... I report students' views and complaints directly to the university president and the people responsible for taking actions (Interview: senior member of staff).

Nonetheless, being highly responsive to students' needs creates some sense of concern for the parents, as they think that this might reflect on the university's discipline and educational quality. A parent highlights an example that he sees many students smoking in the university hallways, and he feels that the university should be more strict and prohibit smoking indoors. The President says that the university is having a moderate stance in strictness with students.

7.9 International Partnerships

The university's relationship with international educational institutions, particularly French institutions, is a very important aspect of Alpha University marketing strategies. This is evident through the interviews with all groups. When the university was first established, it was known as the Alpha French University, as its strategy was to be a university with French educational standards (Document: Prospectus). The university, however, had to change its name to its current name (Alpha University) after the President of the country issued a decree forcing all private universities to have local names. The change of name has had a major impact on the university; a senior member of staff comments on this:

We have been much affected negatively with this decree... many of the students whether current or prospective thought this was a result that the university cancelled its partnership with the French institutions we had many questions from our students on this and it created a state of worry among the students that it is not going to be real, although we had explained to them in many meetings that everything was fine and we were forced to do so and that it was just a change in the name but not in the kind of partnership... many promotional materials had to be reprinted and this cost us huge budget. It had huge negative impact on our university brand name... People used to know us and then out of a sudden the name disappeared and a new name came up... Many people thought that we are a new university (Interview: senior member of staff).

Although there is some literature on university name change e.g. Moorer (2007) and Haytko, Burris and Smith (2008), it addresses this issue as a strategic option, rather than being forced by an external body or force. However, despite the name change the university still insists on its strategy to establish and empower relationships with French institutions. The French dimension is clear everywhere; for example there are several logos and names of French educational institutions on the university website and promotional materials. Relationships with French institutions are sometimes described as partnerships. However, investigating further in the nature of partnerships with the 'partner' French institutions, it was found that these institutions have more of a supervisory role, rather than a mutually cooperative role.

Relationship with French institutions focuses on three major areas: educational support, student exchange and dual degrees. Starting with educational support, a senior member of

staff highlights that the ‘partner’ French institutions support Alpha in various educational matters, such as designing curriculum, suggesting teaching methods, providing guidelines for quality assurance and providing some academic and administrative members of staff. An example of suggesting and appointing a French professor to be the university president is mentioned; however, this decision has not been approved by the MoHE, as a university president is required to be Syrian national. The main aim of involving French institutions is to improve the quality of the educational services. Hence, offering higher education in French standards in Syria seems tempting for many prospective students and parents. A parent comments, for example:

The study system is interesting... There are three terms every academic year. You know they don't have this at public universities... There is also the credit hour system which is used in France... It makes you feel how different and distinct this university is... I think it is all a result of the relationships with the French universities (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

The second area that the relationship and partnership help is student exchange. The university offers its students in the fourth year a chance to travel and study at the ‘partner’ institution for one term. The exchange programme offers the students a number of benefits; a member of staff explains these:

Our university is distinct and special as it offers its students a chance to go to France and study there... Our relationships with the French universities are now put to practice... There are 40 students who travelled to France this year and they studied their last term there... They did their graduation project there... We helped in providing the VISA which is very hard to arrange; a student can not arrange to get a VISA on his/her own... The students pay the travel fees... It is a very important change for a student to travel and live in a foreign country. It is not only the good quality education they get there, I am talking the whole experience: to live alone in a European country and to communicate in French and study in English... This makes Alpha graduate stronger and more able than graduates from other private universities. There are some private universities that claim that they can arrange similar exchange programmes, but I am sure that we are the only ones that translated this to reality (Interview: member of staff).

Students and one parent reported that they found the student exchange programme tempting, and that they enrolled at Alpha for that particular reason. A substantial number of Syrian students desire to travel to Europe, as they usually wish to pursue higher education; however, many have difficulties in acquiring a visa. Some of the students that participate in exchange programmes stay in France as they find study opportunities at the ‘partner’

institutions to enrol in a Masters programme. The exchange programme empowers the public trust in the university. This is explained by a member of staff who states:

People are usually worried about how good a private university is. We do not blame them, because the university is only four years old. However, when they see that there are active partnerships with French institutions, and that the students really travel and study there, they trust us and our work... Sometimes when they see this they do not worry or even ask about any other matter. They do not ask about the books we use or the teaching staff (Interview: member of staff).

The university website and promotional materials show and talk substantially on this issue. For example, there are many photographs of students leaving the airport to travel to France for the exchange programme. There are also many related articles and items of news. In the interview with students, this issue is the first to attract their attention and discussion.

The third area the relationship and partnership is aimed at, is to offer Alpha's students a dual degree, which is a degree awarded to graduates of Alpha to be signed by two universities, Alpha University and a French University to which the students attend on the exchange programme. This dual degree is a crucial aspect for the university, as it empowers its international accreditation. A senior member of staff says: "A dual degree is important to our graduates as it will facilitate their future prospects abroad, whether to pursue higher education or obtain work. When our students have this kind of degree their qualifications will be better recognised". Having a Western, or European qualification, is also highlighted to be important in Syria. Another senior member of staff explains this "Employers appreciate candidates with European qualifications. They see these candidates enjoying different skills and abilities... This is inherited in our culture that we like what is being imported". Offering this degree has helped in other areas. Alpha prides itself on being a pioneering university in its advanced international relationships. Moreover, it has contributed significantly to current students' satisfaction as they will be awarded this kind of degree on graduation.

7.10 Case Study Summary

This chapter has reported on the investigation of marketing strategies at Alpha University in attracting prospective students by means of case study research strategy. A detailed

picture of the case under scrutiny in relation to the research questions has been provided. The case study offers an in-depth understanding of complex incidents and their relationships. The case study also serves in illuminating and contextualising the data and findings that have emerged from earlier research phases.

Seven aspects of marketing strategies to attract prospective students have emerged at Alpha through data analysis and interpretation; location, programme, language of instruction, communication, scholarships and discounts, university-student relationship and international relationships (see Figure 7.2). One very important factor that emerges is that the case study provides an example of the marketing mix strategy, as the aspects emerged reflect on the marketing mix model elements, and these are examples of theory put into practice at this university. The seven aspects emerging from the first case study, nonetheless, have certain reflections and modifications on the “7Ps” marketing model and its elements discussed in the literature e.g. Gray (1991), Coleman (1994), Kotler and Fox (1995), Ivy and Naude (2004), and Ho and Hung (2008). In this case study there are different emphases and grouping of the elements, and this goes in line with Maringe’s (2005) suggestion that none of the mixes suggested in the literature are suitable for all institutions all the time; each institution with its specific context would have its own mix design.

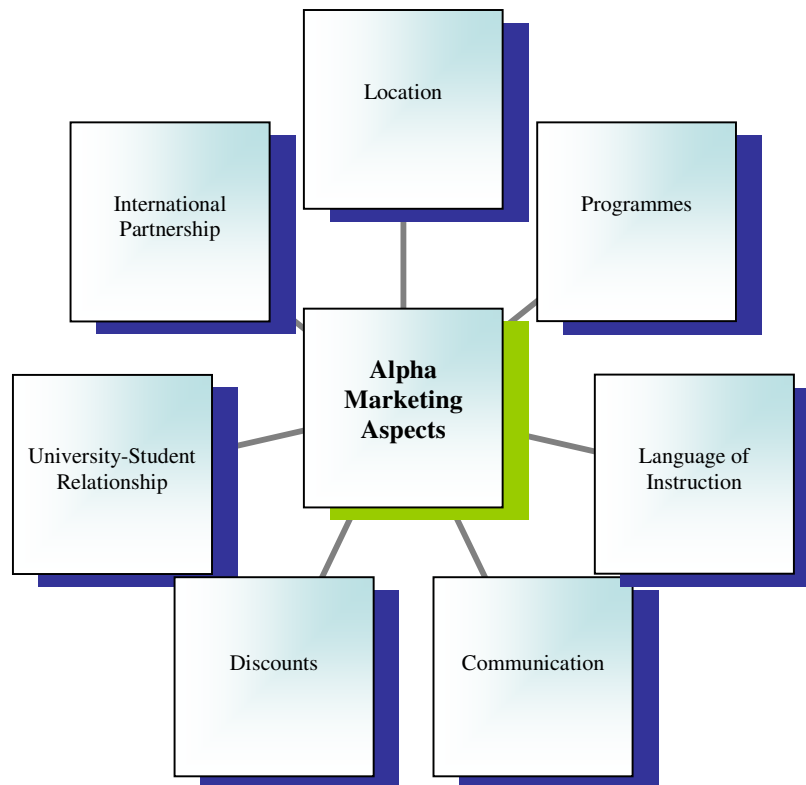


Figure 7. 2: *Alpha marketing aspects*

The programme aspect has been evident in the case study and it proves to be a core attracting aspect for prospective students. Language of instruction could add to the programme as it is taught in a particular language; language of instruction could also relate to the process element as it is the method by which the service is delivered. University-student relationship aspect also relates to the process as it reflects how the university manages its relations with students; it also relates to people as it talks about the staff attributes at this university. The place element is also evident as the university location and built-environment are among the marketing aspects. Scholarship and discount aspects of the price element are most evident in this case study. One aspect, international partnership, is, however, left out. It could relate to multiple elements; for example, promotion, as it is promoting the university's name. It could also relate to people, as it is providing international members of staff. It could also relate to process, as it is reflecting on the university's managerial processes. As there are different emphases and grouping for aspects

and elements, there needs to be a new model that could reveal marketing aspects in the Syrian private higher education sector.

Another key factor that emerges from the case study is the importance of 'word-of-mouth' reputation, and this exemplifies very strongly the importance of the relationships marketing model. Relationship has been evident to be highly positive and 'family-like', especially with students, the direct customers. Such an environment could be a result of the small institution size. The analysis shows how the university has responded to external influences and reflects on the internal processes, what Foskett (2003) calls the two important vectors of external relations management. Relationship marketing and the marketing mix are the most evident strategies in this particular case study, and this amplifies the theoretical approaches to marketing.

Chapter Eight

Phase Three: Findings from University Case Study 2

8.1 Introduction

This chapter is a presentation and discussion of the second case study, Gamma University. The enquiry is concerned with how Gamma University implements marketing activities for the purpose of attracting prospective students, and how the university responds to issues raised by students in earlier research phases. There are ten aspects Gamma University employs to market and attract more prospective students emerging from data analysis. Hence, the primary theme is 'how Gamma University markets itself to attract prospective students' which is considered in eleven subthemes: 'the university context', 'programmes', 'language of instruction', 'location', 'communication', 'internship programme', 'direct enquiry and enrolment management', 'academic staff', 'cost', 'accreditation' and 'quality assurance'.

8.2 University Context

Gamma University is among the pioneering private universities in Syria. It was licensed in 2001, but began teaching four years later. During these four years there was much work and preparation undertaken, such as constructing the temporary buildings, establishing the university administrative structure, recruiting and training members of staff and establishing curriculum guidelines. This long period of preparation has reflected positively on university performance; this is most evident in the rapid increase in student population. The university student population in the first year was just a few hundred, however, in 2009 it grew to thousands, and this number is expected to increase to reach 10,000 by 2012 (Interview: senior member of staff). A student comments on the student population saying:

You can see all these students... It is really crowded; I really like this. I mean you feel that it is bustling with life. A life that I really felt I wanted to be part of... It would make my life there more interesting as I would meet more people... It is not like other universities empty. I browsed another university website and saw the pictures there; you feel that it is like an empty school in summer time... I also think that having many students there shows that this is a good university. I mean many other people have chosen to study here, and this means that it is a good place (Interview: Student 2).

From this student's words, it is understood that a large student population has a reflection on students' choices. This aspect is well-employed by the university as its website and promotional materials use a variety of photographs showing the large number of students in common areas. The power of imagery on the website emerges in the student's words, where particular images can lead to a certain decision.

Although having many students on campus acts as an incentive for prospective students, the rapid growth has been challenging for resources planning and management. The administrative structure, which is large and complicated, has attempted to cater for this. There are about two hundred administrative members of staff distributed on several councils, boards and directorates to facilitate the university's work. The administrative structure comprises a board of trustees, a university council, a board of directors, faculty councils, and ten directorates: admission and enrolment, finance, human resources, information resources, information technologies, maintenance and service, professional training, public relations, quality and accreditation and student affairs (see Figure 8.1). In each of these directorates there are many members of staff to co-ordinate and integrate the tasks assigned.

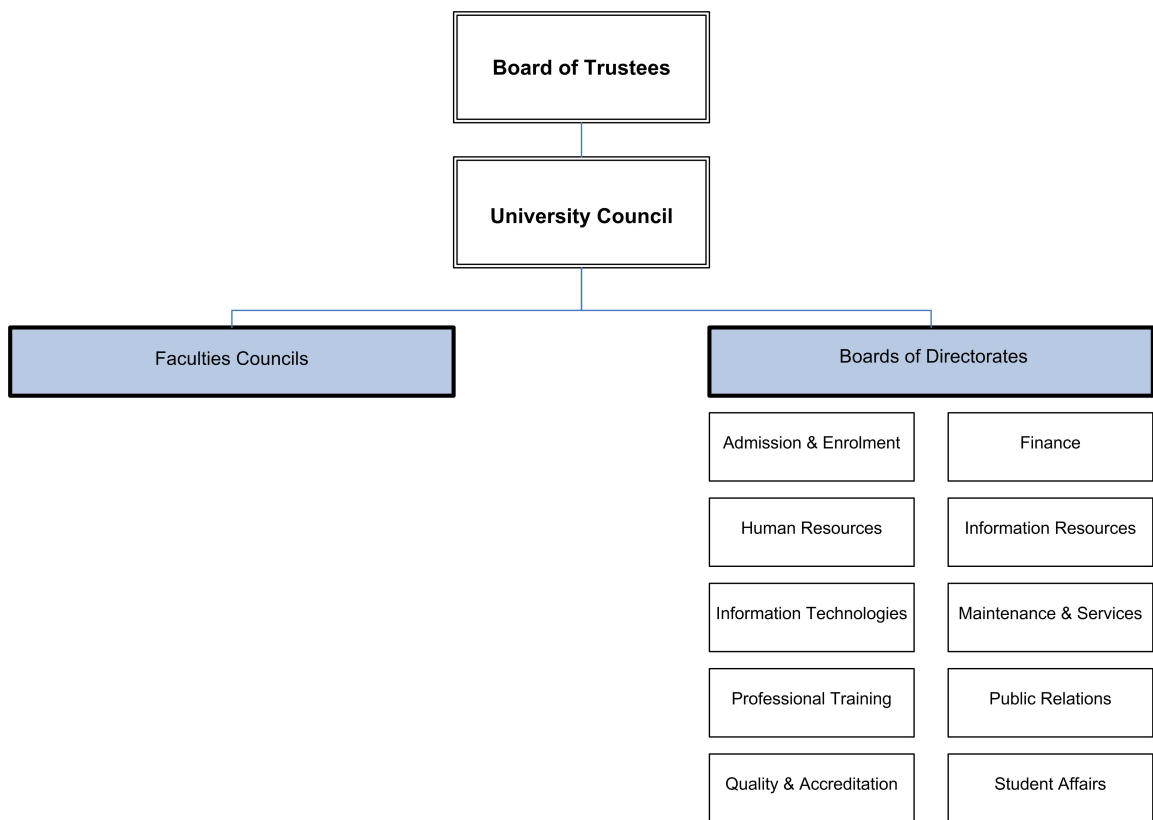


Figure 8. 1: *Gamma University administrative structure*

The large student population shows the vast capital investment injected. Gamma University is a closed-shareholding corporation, and there are a large number of shareholders, known as investors. These are mainly business people, with some academics. Nonetheless, there are some negative reflections on the university’s public image as it is viewed in this sense as an explicit for-profit corporation. One parent highlights, for example:

I really did not want my son to enrol there...this university is just like any other private university in Syria after business and making money... When I visited the university, I asked the people there to get a list of the members of the university council and the shareholders... There was on one of their brochures a list with the people’s names. I immediately recognised most of the names. Most of them were business people and even members of Chamber of Commerce. One of them was even featured on the national newspaper to have some financial and fraud problems and all his properties were confiscated... I do not know if such a person should be a university council member or even a shareholder. I am sure he does not care about educating our children; all he cares about is financial

profits... I even once met a person that is a currency dealer¹. He told me that he is also a university council member. I was really shocked to know that; he did not even have a university degree, so how could he be a member there? He replied 'with money everything can happen'... I do not think such people appreciate or even understand what higher education is (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

Gamma, similar to many other private universities, has started functioning in temporary buildings; nevertheless, what makes this university distinguished is that its temporary buildings were not rented, they were purpose-built, yet they were too small for their purpose. The university anticipated that fewer students would enrol in the first two years, and the numbers would gradually grow later. Through field observations, an intensive and substantial construction plan for new buildings was noticed. In 2007 two very large permanent buildings were ready. This again provides evidence of the high capital investment.

The university campus is large with plenty of indoor and outdoor space, about 300,000 m² (Document: Prospectus). The built-environment is 'impressive'; it is very modern with an eye-catching architectural design. There are many facilities available on campus for students and staff. There are outdoor and indoor sports areas, restaurants, cafeterias, a general library and specialised libraries, a clinic (with an ambulance), some lawns and gardens. The classrooms and laboratories are also modern with many new technologies. All the promotional materials and the website use plenty of impressive visual imagery showing and advertising various areas of the campus and the facilities with many students around. A student says about the campus:

As you see here on the alternating photos, the buildings are really impressive. Every facility that a student might need is available there.... Look at the library for example; I know that every private university has a library but it is the library design and layout here that is interesting and attracting. It is in a modern style, and this tells me that all other things are also modern there at the university. If you see the website of X University, they only show small photos of their buildings from the outside. You can see nothing from the inside. I do not know why, but I know that if you have something nice you should show it... Even their buildings from the outside look like a school. I do not want to study in a school. I want to live the university life and for this you need to get the feeling from the environment you are in (Interview: Student 1).

¹ A currency dealer is looked at as not well-respected job as it used to be illegal and most of the dealers work with the black-market.

The 'impressive' built-environment has a major impact on students' choice of this university. Many students mentioned that they chose Gamma University because of its interesting buildings. This is also supported by a survey conducted by the university itself to identify issues of attracting prospective students; built-environment was one of the most important issues. The role of the built-environment is evident not only to students but also parents. The two interviewed students are persistent on making explicit comparisons between the buildings at Gamma University and some other private universities.

8.3 Location

Gamma is located in a rural area between three cities. It is on the major highway that links Syria and a bordering country. This serves in commuting and making the university visible for people travelling on the highway. A considerably strategic advantage for this location is that it is only a few kilometres away from a major city, which population exceeds 25 per cent of the population of the entire country (Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Being near such a major city, Gamma University focuses its recruiting and promotional activities in that area, and consequently, the majority of enrolments have been by students from this particular city. Students from this city can commute daily and still live with their families. For these students, and others coming from the two other relatively close cities, the university charges an extra fee and provides transportation in luxury comfortable coaches. This provides further evidence that university distance from home is a major preference factor for prospective students.

Although the university's location is comparatively strategic, there still exists competition from some other universities within the local area for applicants and staff, especially amongst these neighbours who offer similar programmes.

8.4 Programmes

When the university first started, it comprised only three faculties. In the following years three more faculties were opened. Three more faculties are planned to open in 2010. Each

of the faculties provides various specialisations. The most popular faculties are the ones that lead to a prestigious career, and this provides further evidence that students prefer a university education leading to such careers. A senior member of staff says:

There has always been this link between pursuing higher education and the future career... Students tend to seek specializations that will offer a decent job...a proof of this is that there are many important specialisations that the labour market does not offer decent jobs for; you would not find many students enrolling there... There is also the society's impact on students' preferences of programmes. Sometimes it is the title they seek. (Interview: senior member of staff).

Another senior member of staff adds:

Some specialisations such as medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, and engineering are more appealing to students due to a social pressure ... I can explain what I mean by social pressure; it is that a pharmacist or a doctor is an important and more respected person in our society. People look at him/her as a privileged individual. This is a social legacy that has been based from the 60s where it was not very common to meet a medical doctor especially in the country side. It is also the uniform, the white coat and the glasses, a doctor wears. It makes people think that this person is very smart. Such legacy makes these programmes very popular and sometimes over subscribed. For example, if we say today that we want to recruit a thousand new students at a medical faculty, we can reach that number in two days... There is a massive demand from the market nowadays for business administration graduates. You know with the new improvements in business in Syria there needs to be people with such qualifications... yet people do not really understand that this is a very important major (Interview: senior member of staff).

It is understood, from these quotes, that the university's choice of establishing these particular faculties and providing these particular programmes is affected by two factors. The first is market demand, where these particular programmes and faculties are more popular and more sought after by prospective students. The second factor is the university's understanding of the labour market requirements and needs in Syria. The quotes above also show particular understanding of the social role and pressure on programme selection.

8.5 Language of Instruction

In its various faculties and programmes, Gamma University uses English as the main medium of instruction. The university requires a specific TOEFL® score as an entry requirement, and students who do not have the required score are required to take an English language placement test, and are also offered intensive remedial English courses for extra fees. Teachers can use some Arabic in class to make sure that knowledge is being

well delivered. The university website is entirely in English and does not support any Arabic language. Prospective students like this as it gives them an impression that English is a requirement to study there. Similar to Alpha University, English language is perceived at as a very important aspect in selecting a private university. I came across an interesting related case in my field observations which supports this proposition. One student accompanied by a parent who wished to transfer to Gamma University, because the university the students had enrolled at did not use English neither in instruction nor in coursebooks. They had been told by the original university that teaching would be in English, but this was not the case upon commencing study at the university. These people were frustrated as transferring cost them much time, effort and money. All interviewed students and parents highlighted the importance of English language at Gamma University; this encounter is explicit evidence on the importance of English language for prospective students.

8.6 Communication

Gamma University uses various methods of promotion and communication, and there has been a major change in their strategies over time. The words of a senior member of staff explain this change and provide reasons for it:

Since 2005 the promotional strategy has changed, and it will keep changing. It is so as the university is changing itself; I should stay evolving... When we first started there was nothing tangible on the ground. I mean the university had not achieved anything; therefore, we had to promote the university through advertising... It was just like advertising for any product through radio, television, street billboards, and flyer. We knew that this is not a proper style for promoting a higher education institution; you never see any university in the developed world countries using such methods; however, we had to as we had no other option. Three years later and till now we changed the strategy as performance has started to play a major role; we promote our university by excellent performance... Our current students also have played a major role... Current students are the ones that can bring new students or even prevent new students from coming here... A turning point in will impact on our strategy is when our students graduate and go to the labour market. This is a turning point for the university itself. We would promote our university by saying that all our graduates got decent jobs in short time after graduation... In fact, last year we conducted a survey to identify sources prospective students heard about our university. 60% of participants said from current students that they had known, and 25% said through the university website. These results have impacted on the university policy in promotion. We reduced the budget for advertising to 25% and decided to spend the 75% on our current students providing more services and facilities and to improve the website... For now and the future we promote ourselves by hosting related activities such as international research conferences and all these are usually covered by the media. With this

the public will know who we are and what we do... I think the best promotion would be if a member of our academic staff won an international research award (Interview: Vice President).

From this point of view, it is understood that the university has focused on 'word-of-mouth' reputation and relationship marketing strategies, yet there has been a recent shift towards quality performance as it is believed to be a more effective method to deliver its message to the public. This shift in communication strategy also indicates a more secure market position for the university, as it is selling the number of applicants it can service.

8.7 Internship Programme

The internship programme is a temporary job taken on by a student at a local business organisation, to learn a profession or a trade. It is arranged through mutual agreement between the university and other organisations. It is short term, supervised practical work experience which is related to a student's field of study. This programme is one of the most important aspects of attracting new students. The programme is committed to offer exceptional opportunities for undergraduates who wish to experience real business life in the Syrian business market, while they are pursuing their university education. It is highlighted that Gamma University is the only university in Syria which currently runs such a programme. As some students might feel reluctant to participate, bearing in mind that the culture of internship is a new concept in Syria, it was decided to make this programme credited. Participants are offered four marked credit hours depending on their performance and commitment. Contact is maintained between the university and the organisations for mutual supervision of students' performance. Considerable effort is given to provide and arrange internship opportunities with some of the leading organisations in areas such as banking, insurance, telecommunication and pharmaceutical business and industry in Syria. A senior member of staff explains on the strategies implemented to arrange internship opportunities, by saying:

We arrange to invite key business people and other important people like ministers, members of the parliament, and ambassadors to our university activities... For example, we are having the graduation ceremony next week, and I am arranging to invite those key people... It is that we want them to see the university and our graduates so that they agree to offer internship opportunities in their organisations and companies (Interview: senior member of staff).

One student comments on the programme, saying:

I was really amazed by this programme when I first learnt about it. I read all the details about it on the website... I even wanted to apply for an opportunity the next summer. In this way I can spend my summer holiday in something that could benefit me... I was really attracted and thought that this university is working on providing practical knowledge... I have heard earlier that many people who study at university would not be competent enough when they go to real work as they graduate... with this programme I would not be so (Interview: Student 1).

Evidently, offering such a service makes Gamma University an attractive option for prospective students, as they have shown general awareness of the potential benefits they would get for participation.

A senior member of staff says: “We want the companies and the community to know that our graduates are very good; this is proof that we are doing a very good job here”. In this respect, the internship programme goes beyond direct prospective student attraction. It proves the abilities of Gamma University’s graduates and strengthens relations with employers and the business community. This serves in presenting the university in a positive way to the public as they are ‘producing’ quality students. Harris (2009) comments on this issue saying that institutions need to build relationships and even partnerships with employers and business communities as they are also consumers of the educational services provided to students.

Another senior member of staff highlights some issues about the programme saying:

The programme is about the gains and skills for the students and making them not like graduates from other universities... You know finding a job is not very easy nowadays as there are many people going to higher education; this makes a lot of competition and effort to find a job, and of course I mean a decent one. With the programme we are giving them the edge over others ... You know, the most common methods of evaluating a university’s performance are research and graduates employability. Well, we both know that there is no real research in Syria and universities are not evaluated in that method; this means graduates’ employability is the most significant indicator of a university’s success. This is why this year is very important to us as the first group of students are going to graduate... We thought of providing the internship programme to raise our graduates’ employability prospects... I got really surprised that many of the students that participated in the programme got a permanent job offer in the organisations they got trained at. Because you know, our students speak English well, and have good amount of IT and interpersonal skills... This again proves that we doing well. We are going to use this as a promotional strategy next year... that all over graduates found decent jobs in a very short time after graduation (Interview: senior member of staff).

The quote above expresses a shared belief among members of administrative staff that the majority of students pursue higher education for a future employment. Similar findings have been reported by Gibbons-Wood and Lange (1998) and Connor *et al.* (1999). This has resulted in focusing on the practicality of knowledge; something that impacted on the styles and methods of teaching. With this philosophy, getting students involved in the internship programme becomes a necessity. The importance and seriousness of this programme is obvious as a whole directorate is assigned to it. There is a general agreement on the significance and relevance of such a programme to the students' future professional life and employability. This, in fact, stems from the university's belief in few concepts which are stated clearly on their website and promotional materials: empowering graduates to understand organisational culture, strengthening self-awareness and confidence, providing professional experience and knowledge, networking and presenting future perspectives. Some concerns are posed against such beliefs, which give this university a vocational dimension, rather than being a place for research and knowledge development. Boden and Nedeva (2009) argue that although employability discourses may be unfavourably affecting pedagogies and curricula, they are to the benefit of students, institutions, employers, social justice and civil society.

8.8 Direct Enquiry and Enrolment Management

The method of answering prospective students' enquiries, and managing the enrolment process is another aspect Gamma University employs in attracting applicants. All students and parents interviewed report that visiting the university to enquire, and also the way they are welcomed, is very important in selection. They want to be well taken care of and have all their enquiries answered satisfactorily. The university understands the power of verbal communication and the influence it has in providing information over other methods of communication such as promotional printed materials. A senior member of staff shows understanding that prospective students visit several universities before choosing one to attend; hence, Gamma University attempts to show a pleasant first impression on the visit especially in the efficiency of answering enquiries. Another senior member of staff says: "When people visit to enquire and see the university, it is that they are searching or

expecting to find some nice things... The way we treat them which is full of respect and special attention makes them admire the university". One parent comments on the importance of welcoming experience saying:

We compared it with the public sector where staff members are usually not very friendly...There was an experience where my son and I went to X University (a public one) and the employees there were not so nice. I could feel that they did not really bother if we enrolled there or not. I did not really care about this, but my son did not like this at all. He said he could not study there for that particular reason... He thought if the members of staff did not care for him then his future teachers would be so, and therefore education there would not be so good (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

The university has noticed the importance of direct enquiry and enrolment management as it pays it special attention through its preparations. Not only has it provided its receptionists with a plan for each visiting prospective student, but it has also made use of online applications for its current students. Using technology has been successful in reducing the extensive time previously consumed by manual enrolment processes for already existing students. This has offered the admission staff an opportunity to devote more attention to prospective students' enquiries and enrolments. Moreover, large temporary well-equipped halls are assigned and extra members are recruited at specific times of year for this task. There are eighty student-workers who are well-trained and provided with handbooks and notebooks before events.

Having student-workers is proving to be a very successful strategy. The university has realised that many of the prospective students, and their parents approach current students to ask for information and advice. The university makes this uncomplicated by placing student-workers in positions where they can be easily consulted. A senior member of staff explains more on the reasons for having student-workers stating:

Student-workers tell about our university in a more realistic way. They can offer a clearer picture of what Gamma University is... They know more about some details because these details are parts of their lives here... An example about this is the total cost. We quote the cost for courses, but there are some other costs that we might not know. Students themselves know how much that would add up to be...There are some people who might feel more relaxed to ask a student rather than asking us... They might be shy or have an embarrassing question... Students are more spontaneous, authentic, and trustworthy as well. They are objective in their views more than our staff. Prospective students and their parents might think of a staff explaining about the university in way that he/she is promoting the university. A member of staff might be looked at as a sales person who cares only about selling a product... Getting students to enrol is not by providing sweet promising words. It is done by realities and providing facts (Interview: senior member of staff).

A number of examples emerge about the positive impact of involving students in such work. One student reports that he likes meeting student-workers as it offers him a chance to meet with senior students and learn from their experience. Another student says that they have helped her in selecting a programme of study.

Having student-workers also serves in providing work experience to working students, which could link to the earlier discussed issue of internship. A senior member of staff claims that students from less advantaged areas, such as the countryside, are chosen for this task. This person justifies this by saying that “such people need more work on their communication and professional skills”. Nonetheless, another senior member of staff suggests otherwise; he says that students are selected after an interview and those that are high-achieving, presentable, well-dressed and have negotiation skills are chosen. It was not mentioned if the interviewer enquires whether the chosen students have a positive attitude towards the university. However, having student-workers with such qualities serves in attracting prospective students, as the university is presenting its ‘best’ students to prospective students and their parents. Prospective students may feel that they want to be like the student-workers in the future.

There may be a worry that parents did not take the student-workers seriously, as they are young and not professional. This proposition has proved incorrect when the parents interviewed expressed their contentment and satisfaction with the student-worker initiative; they reported a comforting effect. For instance, one parent was worried about the university’s international accreditation, but the student-worker made the parent feel at ease when he suggested that it was so, and that he was going to pursue his masters degree education abroad as a reference that the qualification offered at Gamma University was accredited in the country that the student was travelling to. Another parent highlighted a further issue about the way students-workers were dressed. She says:

We come from a certain religious background, and I was really worried that when my daughter goes to university it would be a place of immorality... I thought it would be a place where girls do not wear Hijab, and my daughter does. I was really worried about this new environment she was going to... I was worried that she might not fit in... I saw the students there who were helping. I saw one

or two of them were wearing Hijab. I went to them and I asked them how it was for them over there. They said things that really made me feel comfortable. They even told me that there was a praying area on campus (Focus Group Interview: Parent 3).

A senior member of staff highlights that the process and management of enrolment are evolving. Every year there are changes, which indicate that change is a mode at Gamma University as it is booming. Feedback on the process is offered and necessary changes are made to make the process more effective and efficient.

8.9 Academic Staff

Having top quality academic staff at Gamma University is one of the major marketing aspects used to attract prospective students. All interviewed administrative members of staff stress that their academic staff, and their high qualities play a major role in students' selection criteria. One senior member of staff offers an example of this, saying that prospective students and their parents frequently ask the names of the academic staff teaching in the programmes they are applying to. At other times they even ask to meet some of the academic staff in person. The university website and promotional materials provide plenty of photographs showing some of their academic staff members to satisfy such curiosity. A student comments on this:

You see this picture. You can see the teachers there, he looks nice and professional. He is also dressed smartly and this also tells me that he is a very professional person... He does not look Syrian as well. This tells that the teachers are good and high-level. I like it that there are foreign teachers here... I also got really attracted by the way he is teaching and the technology he is using. I can see that he is using the Power Point and there is a student next to him... It tells that he is getting the student to participate in the class. It is not that he is just lecturing (Interview: Student 1).

There is a common belief at Gamma University that the high quality of their academic staff is the 'benchmark' that distinguishes them from their competitors, and that having such staff with this quality performance is a major source for current student satisfaction. A senior member of staff draws attention to the importance of academic staff as they are a major component of the educational service; it is that "they are the deliverers of the service and the knowledge". The method and style of teaching used is also significant. As most of the academic staff are educated in the West, or are foreigners, they speak English fluently

and use modern practical teaching methods. The number of academic staff is also another factor; the university claims to offer the best teacher/student ratio compared to other private or even public universities in the country.

The university aims at recruiting distinguished, important and well-known people e.g. former ministers or deans from public universities. Gamma competes with other private universities to attract the best academics, bearing in mind that there is scarcity of qualified people for such jobs in Syria. With this scarcity that imposes severe challenges and competition in mind, the university employs special staff attracting and recruitment techniques. For instance, they make the option of part-time work always available to allow recruits to maintain other jobs and positions, possibly in the government or public universities. **Moreover, it provides conducive work conditions, e.g. they offer high wages (Interview: senior member of staff).** Finally, the way in which faculty members are treated and the degree to which they are empowered at work are further techniques employed. The following quote highlights important issues related to teacher empowerment:

We give power to our academic staff to be firm with students especially in assessment and admission... Although some students might not like this, but it has been reflecting positively on students' satisfaction... It also reflects on the university reputation. For example, we sometimes have some bad students that do not want to study. They affect the university pass ratios. Teachers would recommend if a student is to be expelled or given another chance... teachers actually enjoy the degree of power and authority we offer. It reflects on their performance and confidence... I believe that the university staff must be happy and satisfied in their work conditions. This relates to internal marketing, because when they are happy they tell the public good stories about the university and when they are not they would tell horrible stories (Interview: senior member of staff).

Despite the university's effort to assemble the best faculty staff, one parent expresses dissatisfaction when he highlights the issue that most staff members used to work at public universities and now they work here as they are retired. His reference is that Gamma University, in this sense, does not distinguish itself from any other public university, where public education is under expectations. Investigations regarding this issue found that the university makes use of such academics as there are difficulties in finding qualified personnel. The rapid growth of the university is also raised again here since the growth necessitates more academic members of staff every year. In an attempt to overcome this,

the university plans to offer scholarships to its best achieving students to pursue higher degrees, that will then qualify them to join the university faculty.

A further issue is raised by another senior member of staff is that there is no influence or nepotism in assigning members of faculty. The claim is that they are assigned merely on the basis of their merits and established reputation while at other private universities, influence and connections are dominant. Gamma University seems to seek to employ academic staff on the basis of quality before and during their service. Before a new academic member of staff is employed, they are assessed through certain processes that include extensive interviews, study of previous work profiles, and in most occasions a presentation demonstrating the capabilities possessed. Student evaluations of teaching are conducted towards the end of the semesters for each subject taught, to evaluate and assure the quality of in-service faculty. All students express their views of the different member of faculty in each subject. Although Liaw and Goh (2003), show concerns about issues of bias in such an evaluation tool, the survey feedback reflects consistently on the member's future employment, that is, this university will only employ teachers that satisfy the students. This practice, which is very uncommon to the Syrian culture, shows customer orientation and sovereignty at Gamma University. This orientation is stressed by other methods through which teacher performance is evaluated at the university. A senior member of staff explains:

We can know about a teacher's performance from the verbal feedback we get from students... Many times students go to their dean or head of department complaining about a teacher... We investigate on such a complaint to see what the problem is... but of course it is not just one case; some times there is a complaint from one single student. In this case we just ignore it. If complaints get to happen again on the same teacher we investigate... We also organise class observations, where more experienced teachers or even people from the quality directorate attend classes and provide constructive feedback (Interview: senior member of staff).

With such customer sovereignty, a question is posed at this level: how a 'good' teacher can be conceptualised. Another senior member of staff stresses that it is not only a teacher that has many qualifications, long research experience, and publications, but a teacher who also can deal well with students, make them happy and deliver knowledge effectively. Students appreciate such qualities which help them to enjoy their study and succeed in the subject.

8.10 Cost

There is unanimous agreement among members of administrative staff that the most important factor for prospective students in selecting a university is cost. It is said that students and their parents care most about total cost, and that they usually tend to select the cheapest option. A senior member of staff reports that the most important question prospective students ask is about tuition fees. Enquiring about fees, the methods of pay and the services included predominate. This is most likely the result of the long tradition of free education in Syria, since its establishment in the country. The idea of paying to learn was introduced by private universities. Such a belief has hugely reflected on the university marketing strategies which are all geared towards providing lower cost education without altering quality. There are also policies facilitating methods of payment; for example, students can pay in instalments, and the university is flexible and lenient when a student is late in any payment. Another senior member of staff says about the cost issue:

The most important factor is the price... They always prefer what is free. 90% of students who get accepted at a public university go there, because it is free. They do this even if they are rich, because it is free. People like free things... Regretfully, many people do not think about other issues that come with this. Some people think that other universities are cheaper, but they should know that those universities do not offer half of the services we have here. I believe it is an equation where price and quality balance... I know that we are the cheapest university in our category... There are other universities that are cheaper but they are not of our level... Some students might get transferred to another private university, which is of a lower level, as they might think it is cheaper. However, after few months of their transfer they ask to be transferred back here as they understand that quality is a more important issue (Interview: senior member of staff).

This quote raises three issues: desire for free education, quality and price balance, and the person's own classification of private universities. As for the first issue, prospective students seem to prefer what is cheaper or even free. Parents stress the relatively extreme high prices for private higher education in general. They also say that this adds a financial burden to the family and for that reason they prefer their children to attend a public university.

The second issue is a question of how the university can manage to provide such education with a lower price. It should be kept in mind that Gamma University offers many services

which are included within the paid tuition fees. For example, it is the only university in the country that provides free, fully comprehensive medical insurance as well as subscriptions for many online library resources. Being able to provide such low prices suggests an efficient and effective financial management, where resources are well directed to provide an educational service with the lowest cost possible. An example provided by a senior member of staff, is that the university has decided to cut down by 75% on its advertising budget, and invest the surplus into other areas related to the quality of services, which could benefit students and the university in better ways.

The final issue raised is the opinion that private universities in Syria are of levels of esteemed quality. Further investigation into this issue reveals that Gamma University assumingly looks at private universities in three classes: top, medium and lower. Gamma puts itself and one other university, in the top class category, one university in the medium and the remaining private universities are in the lower class. This assumption is important because if proved correct, it would definitely reflect on students' preferences. This suggests that further investigation into this area, and comparison between universities is worthy to find out the reality of such an assumption.

8.11 Accreditation

There is an understanding of the importance of national, regional and international accreditation and its reflections on prospective students. As prospective students and their parents visit this university, they almost always ask questions about its accreditation (Interview: senior member of staff). During enrolment, members of staff attempt to provide evidence that proves that the university is genuinely accredited. For example, a member of the admission tells these people that their graduates have applied, and been accepted on postgraduate courses at Syrian public universities, which shows that those public institutions recognise qualifications awarded at Gamma University. A senior member of staff provides another example on international accreditation, where this person's own daughter had transferred from Gamma University to Lebanon, and been accepted in the American University in Beirut (AUB). This proves that Gamma University is accredited

and recognised there. This senior member of staff mentions that there is always this fear from private universities, even in other Middle Eastern countries, where private higher education has a longer and better-established history. This is confirmed as the interviewed parents expressed serious worries about accreditation for private higher education.

The MoHE has set up certain criteria to accredit private universities. The criteria are multi-faceted, including issues related to provision of certain spaces, facilities, faculty members and assessment. The university has been investing serious efforts to implement all the standards set (Document: Prospectus). This is achieved through fulfilling the requirements of 'general accreditation' and 'programme accreditation' by reviewing study plans and courses in a way that serves the objectives of the educational process. A senior member of staff comments on the Ministry's accreditation criteria:

We have exceeded this by achieving more than what is required. We even managed to achieve issues before the Ministry asked the private universities for...And I believe it is important that the Ministry sets strict rules for this. This is working in our favour... I would not like it to see all universities are treated and accredited alike. We have been working really hard, and this is our reward... It is that survival would be for the fittest. The example is X University where they have not achieved what is required for accreditation and now they have to close (Interview: senior member of staff).

The MoHE plays a significant role in directing prospective students towards a particular university when it reports to students and parents on quality and accreditation, during their visits to the Ministry to enquire about different private universities. This means it is important for the university to please the Ministry and match its standards and accreditation criteria.

The university's website and promotional materials provide extensive literature on university accreditation and how they succeed to match the MoHE criteria, and this has been a source of relief for parents as they felt that having this documented is reliable evidence.

It is not only local accreditation and recognition the Gamma University is aiming at, it also aims at regional, and even international accreditation. On the regional level, for instance,

the university joined the Arab University Union (AUU), facilitating stronger cooperation with other Arab universities. Through this, Gamma and another private university were accredited and recognised by the Ministry of Higher Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This has reflected very positively on the university's image and views about its international accreditation. As a result, a senior member of staff states that a few hundred new Syrian students whose families used to live in KSA, enrolled at the Gamma. Such an accreditation from the KSA is important for many people in Syria who wish to travel there for employment as they graduate.

The university also aims at making itself visible and even accredited internationally. This has been achieved through partnership agreements with universities and institutions abroad. There are currently agreements between Gamma University and twenty other international universities in several countries including Canada, France, Germany, the UK and the USA. To activate and assist these agreements, the university strives to design its programmes on 'international standards', as this would facilitate the international mobility of its students. An example of this is the initiative to introduce the ETCS (European Transfer Credit System) which would enable students to transfer to any European university at any point of their study. Besides, the agreements include student and faculty exchange programmes, assessment evaluation, and staff development.

Many of the university's international activities aim at highlighting 'internationalisation', defined by Knight and de Wit (1997) as "the process of integrating an international perspective into the teaching/learning, research and service functions". The university encourages students and faculty from different backgrounds, preferably European, to come and join the university. Gamma refers to its endeavours in this regard as the 'internationalisation at home' strategy that would increase international and intercultural competencies for students and faculty members. Seeing foreigners (international students or faculty staff) on campus, and photographs on the university's website and the promotional materials, works in favour of making people assume that the university is internationally accredited and recognised. Taylor (2004) argues that similar strategies of internationalisation are driven by resources, the growth of public accountability and the

emergency of market forces and competition. In order to increase the number of international students at Gamma University, a department has been established that offers courses in Arabic to speakers of other languages.

8.12 Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is one of the most important aspects of the Gamma University marketing strategy; this aspect relates to the one previously discussed, accreditation, in the sense that when a university is committed to offering a high level of quality education, it would be accredited locally and internationally. A senior member of staff says of the importance of quality: “Where there are many private universities, it is quality that counts... and this leads prospective students’ decisions... Our distinctive quality is the competitive edge”. Reflecting on these words, Gamma has been working, since its establishment, on implementing modern quality concepts related to the educational process and assuring that it complies with national and international standards. This has been intensified through the creation of quality assurance and accreditation directorate which aims at setting an example for developing the quality of higher education in Syria. It also aims at strengthening its accountability, and gaining and building the community’s confidence in educational provision. The directorate ensures that the university is working to meet the accreditation standards and measures set by the MoHE and other international accreditation agencies. It also implements continuous evaluations that result in improvements in the administrative and academic levels. This directorate evaluates all other directorates, faculties, departments and offices. It also evaluates teachers’ performance and student satisfaction. The evaluations conducted lead to firm decisions as the directorate is linked directly to the university President’s office.

As the meaning of quality is complex and contentious (Harrison, 1994; and Sallis, 2002), a senior member of staff clarifies how Gamma University defines quality, which is meeting the needs of the customers, whether direct (i.e. students) or indirect (i.e. parents and future employers). Their definition reflects a customer-orientated marketing strategy. And for such proposed quality curriculum, learning tools and methods are continuously evaluated to

assure their compliance with local, regional, and international requirements (Document: Prospectus).

With quality assurance the university hopes to prevent errors rather than correcting them afterwards. There are many initiatives and attempts to improve quality by developing selected quality techniques within the managerial framework. This includes planned and systematic activities designed to ensure that customers are satisfied and that the university consistently delivers services of the highest standard. For example, one of the issues that the quality assurance directorate has been working on is documentation of procedures and administrative work processes, and improving them continuously to assure quality of the service offered. A senior member of staff explains on this saying:

We have been trying to manage the university work in an institutional method and to specialise work for each division or directorate. The work duties and procedures are being written. It is what we are trying to do something like the ISO... There is no random work here. You might feel sometimes that there is some chaos; it is so because there is a lot of work and a lot of employees. With our work on quality assurance we are looking at the far future... A university is not managed by people, but by a system, which is stressed through quality assurance. This is why we need to have things written down. A university would not end in this case when its president leaves... It is very hard for all private universities to find well-qualified and experienced staff... We get many people with poor experience and train them here... then another private university offers them a job there so they leave... This is happening a lot, and for that we needed the experience not to go with that person... so it is documented (Interview: senior member of staff).

Reflecting on these words, 'quality assurance' procedures are employed to embed and standardise the university's core processes and to ensure that its output requirements and expectations are met. This in turn would result in institutional performance consistency for the delivery of high quality services for every student.

8.13 Case Study Summary

This chapter has investigated the aspects of marketing strategies at Gamma University in attracting prospective students by means of case study. The chapter has provided an in-depth understanding of complex issues related to how the university attracts new students, and incidents related to this activity and the relationships amongst these incidents. The case study has also served in shedding light on findings from earlier research phases.

It has been found from data analysis that Gamma University employs ten aspects in their marketing strategy to attract prospective students. The aspects are: programmes, language of instruction, location, communication, internship programme, direct enquiry and enrolment management, academic staff, cost, accreditation and quality assurance (see Figure 8.2). These aspects reflect on the marketing mix theoretical model suggested in the literature. They also reflect on aspects that have emerged in the earlier case study. Five aspects have been evident in both case studies which suggests some common areas in private higher education marketing strategies. Case study individual variation was evident in common aspects.

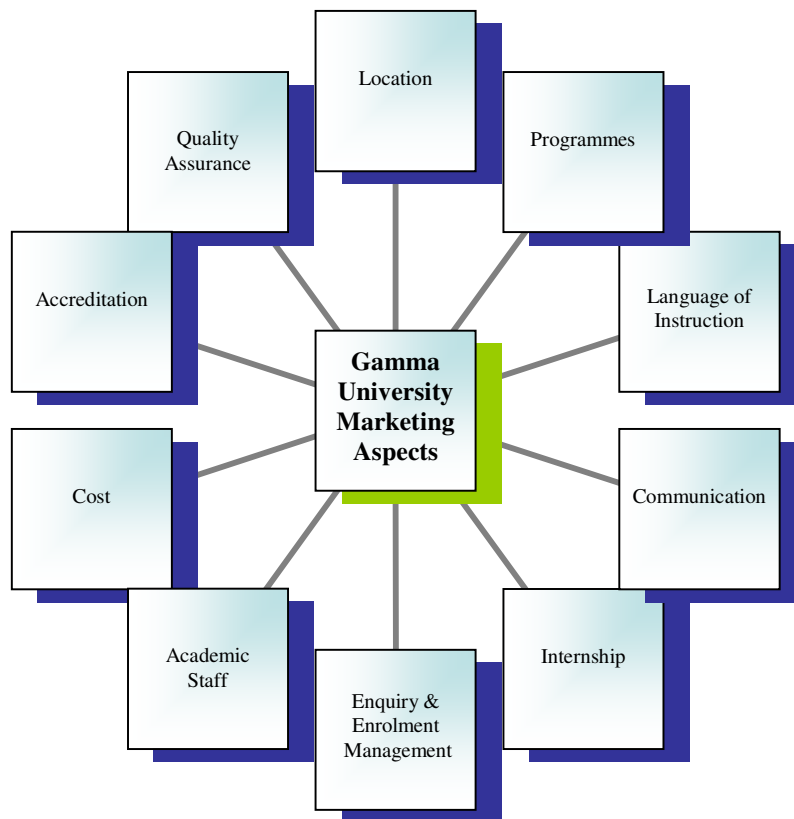


Figure 8. 2: *Gamma University marketing aspects*

A key factor that has emerged from the case study is the importance of three key issues: 'quality' which balances with 'reputation' and 'relations with community'. This exemplifies the importance of the marketing triad model (Foskett, 1998). It is also noticed that the university has gone through three evolutionary stages. In its early stages it used a strategy focusing on recruitment as it had not had any established reputation. This is evident in the use of the conventional advertising methods. A few years later, when there had been students experiencing university, the strategy shifted to the relationship model as its current students are the best way to build its reputation. The third stage is characterised by quality issues, and this is evident in the establishment of the quality assurance system. Such an evolution shows the university is enjoying a more secure marketing position at the time. The marketing concept at Gamma University shows a more practical managerial dimension as it covers issues of efficiency and quality.

Chapter Nine

Phase Three: Findings from University Case Study 3

9.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the last case study, Beta University. The exploration here looks at the methods this university implements in attracting prospective students, and how issues raised by its students in earlier research phases are responded to by the university.

Ten marketing aspects are identified through the data analysis. Hence, the primary theme, ‘how this university markets itself to attract prospective students’, is considered in eleven subthemes: ‘the university context’, ‘programmes’, ‘academic staff’, ‘language of instruction’, ‘communication’, ‘location’, ‘university heritage’, ‘built-environment’, ‘accommodation’, ‘university/student relationship’ and ‘student life’. The following sections of this chapter discuss these subthemes in some detail.

9.2 University Context

Beta University was the first private university in Syria to open and initiate teaching. Such an early start has constituted an advantage over other private universities which opened subsequently. This is most evident in its large student population. (More discussion on this issue is presented later in this chapter under the ‘university heritage’ subtheme.)

Similar to the situation of Gamma University, students here report the attraction for Beta University as it is a large university. This is stated by a student saying: “What is good is sold quickly.” The student means here that having many students is proof that it is a ‘good’ university. Popularity is not only an objective, but also a tool for Beta University to attract

more students as this aspect promises new students with good opportunities to have a good social life, through meeting a wider population during their study life. Since the opening, this objective and tool, population, has enabled numbers to grow gradually and systematically.

Not only is Beta a large private university in Syria in terms of student population, but also it encompasses a large number of faculty members and administrative staff, as well as a spacious built-environment. From field observations, a large number of administrative offices with a large number of staff members were noticed. The administrative structure is more complicated compared to the previous two universities studied (see Figure 9.1). There are over 250 administrative members of staff distributed on several boards, and directorates to facilitate the functioning of the university. The administrative structure comprises a board of trustees, a university council, a board of company, faculty councils and seventeen directorates: alumni, admission and examinations, catering, finance, events and activities, healthcare, human resources, housing, information resources and library, information systems, maintenance and services, media and advertising, public relations, security, student affairs, study-abroad delegation and transportation. Each of these directorates comprises many members of staff or offices to arrange for specialised duties. A parent highlights a related issue saying:

Generally you do not see mistakes with their work. I want to give you an example that might be irrelevant to the question. When I take my daughter to the place where she takes the coach on Saturday mornings, there is a huge number of coaches waiting for students. There is also huge number of students wanting to go to university... It is really complicated to arrange and expect the number of students who want to go to university on that particular time... You can not manage this with computer software; you need a lot of effort and resources to arrange for this issue... I never remember a day where I saw any student waiting for a coach or was left without transportation... This shows the hard work from the university administration (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

This is one example of others highlighted by participants, showing a theme of effectiveness and efficiency. Being able to manage the transportation services for students in such a successful manner has been a result of assigning a whole directorate for it, which shows that dividing the university's work in such a detailed manner, with the directorates and offices, has reflected on the efficiency and effectiveness of work and the services offered. A look at the names and the tasks assigned for the directorates reveals a more customer-

orientated approach at this university compared to the previous two. For example, at Beta University, there is an entire directorate of five full-time members dedicated for arranging events and activities for the students. Other universities studied do not have such specialised function.

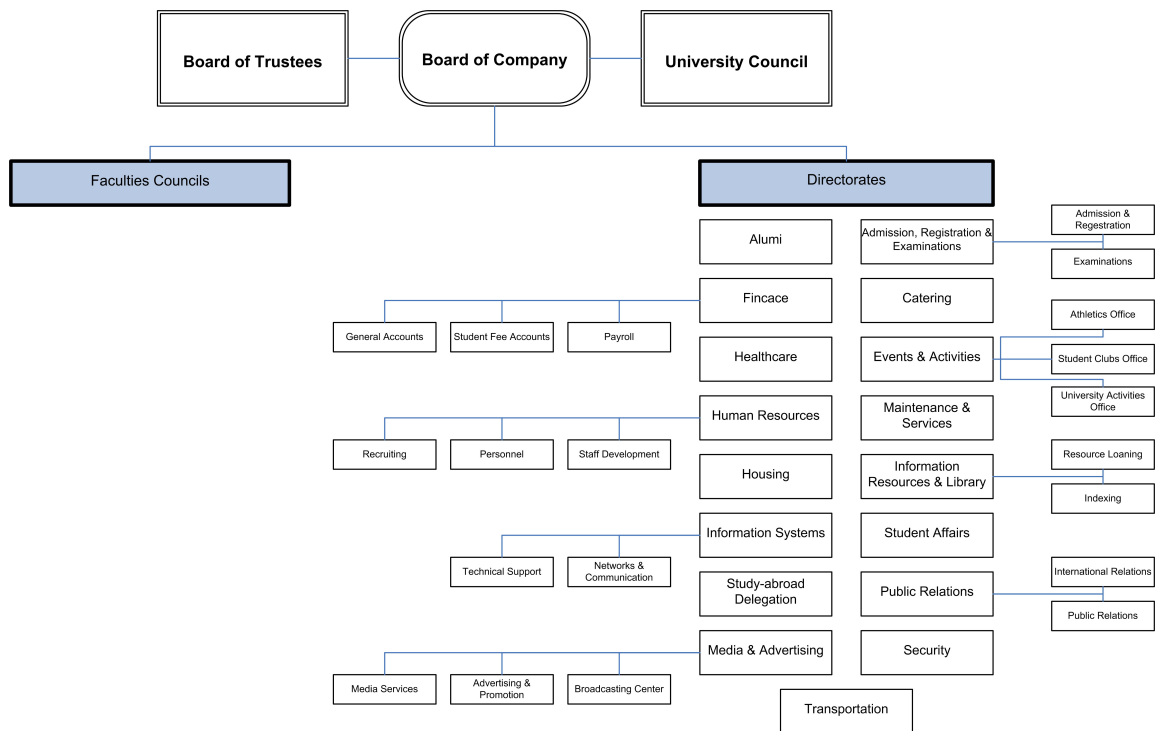


Figure 9. 1: Beta University administrative structure

Beta University has three different boards; the university board, the board of trustees and the company board. These boards manage and set the university administrative and academic guidelines. A further investigation into the nature and purpose of the least conventional board, the company board, finds that it comprises the major university shareholders, i.e. the main ‘owners’ of the university. Interestingly, this board seems to be the most active in managing the university; and in doing so, it is very explicit. The administrative members of staff interviewed agree that all university directions and final decisions are made by the Company Board. The company is quite explicit about its active function not only in the lives of its workers, academic and administrative staff, but also it

attempts to foster its role in the minds of students as well. The Prospectus exemplifies this; it dedicates two full pages to the description of this company, its message, aims, and functions, showing photographs of its key members. The following is quoted from the Prospectus:

The Company is in charge of providing the University with highly qualified scientific, administrative, and technical staff, with the best available curricula and modern methodology as well as with the best equipment and services that meet modern standards. The company assures the good progress of the University's work in order to achieve the set objectives emitted from objective ideology stipulating that true development is only brought about by real education qualifying new graduates to approach scientific, vocational, and moral aspects of their age (Document: Prospectus).

The statement above declares that the company is the executive body in charge of academic and administrative activities. While for students, such a statement might seem promising, there are concerns about such duties being assigned to people who are not academics, but rather business oriented. The company Chairman, who owns the biggest share in Beta University, is described by people interviewed as being a dominant figure. Although the university has a president, the company Chairman is described as the real acting president. Perhaps this practice comes from the long inherited business culture in Syria, where the owner manages the business. The company Chairman has an office on campus and works on a full-time basis. His photographs, and words, are evident on most of the promotional materials and the website pages. Three interviewed administrative members of staff highlight implicitly some negative implications for his presence on campus. For example, a senior member of staff states that this person "interferes in much of the university's business and even the staff's duties", and most of the time it makes them feel "handcuffed". It is 'his' university, as highlighted by one of the parents in an interview. He states:

We went to Mr X's university on a visit... all the family. We saw the large effort he has been doing to establish such a university... It would be so when it is made by such a big name like his... You can see the influence he uses to make the university succeed as he has arranged to construct a subway under the near highway. This has made transportation much safer... If he could arrange for that with the government, then I am sure that he can arrange for anything that would benefit his university and consequently the students (Focus Group Interview: Parent 2).

In this quote, the association between Beta University and this person is obvious. There is extensive literature on the role of the 'owner-manager' in pre-university education such as Gibb (1983), Simpson *et al.* (2004), and in higher education Rae (2007), none of which is

directly relevant as they refer to the owner-manager role, and its reflections in small businesses, which is not the case in Beta University. In the quotes above, it is understood that the Chairman's role does not imply a direct negative role on prospective students the way it does with administrative or even academic staff. On the contrary, the association of Beta University with such a person and leadership acts as an attracting factor to prospective students. As some students have reported, worries about private higher education in Syria in previous research phases, the association with this person provides trust in this particular university.

9.3 Programmes

As Beta University is a large private university, it provides a large spectrum of programmes for prospective students. There are several programmes distributed over nine faculties: starting from “Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy... to Media and Applied Arts” (Document: Prospectus). The order in which these faculties are listed is exactly as it is on the Prospectus; it is an “attention-grabbing” point, as it reflects the issue of faculty or ‘programme hierarchy’ raised in earlier chapters. In this hierarchy, medicine is set at the top, then comes dentistry, pharmacy and health sciences. These are the faculties that contain programmes that lead to a career with a ‘medical doctor’ title and qualification that allows them to practice as a doctor in medical profession. At the bottom of the hierarchy is media and applied arts, which supposedly do not usually lead to well-paid careers. In this prospect, the arrangement of the faculties in such a manner shows the way the university is reflecting the social perspective on programmes.

Establishing a Faculty of Medicine has served the university word-of-mouth reputation. It is a distinguishing factor as not many private universities can afford to establish such a faculty, bearing in mind that the Syrian MoHE regulations require a university to own an on-campus hospital for that.

The market demand of the different programmes provided by Beta University is diverse. While some programmes are oversubscribed, other faculties always have space for more

applications. A senior member of staff confirms this and states that the university does not need to promote its medical programmes, while other programmes, especially the programmes offered at the Faculty of Media and Applied Sciences, need promotion. The university choice to provide its 'top' programmes is, hence, informed by demand or popularity factor. The provision of 'unpopular' programmes is probably an attempt to offer a larger spectrum of options for various potential students. After all, there are applicants whose NSSE records do not satisfy the minimum requirements of the MoHE to undertake 'top' programmes, and these have to be catered for. Another senior member of staff comments on capacity and availability of programme options. He states that "... Beta University cannot leave these students and specialisations for other private universities to excel with; we have to be involved in that... We prove that we are a large university by the wider range of specialisations offered."

As many of the programmes are over subscribed, the university sets its own criteria for admission in which a student's records in the NSSE play a major role. The MoHE has set a guideline for admission in particular faculties based on the NSEE records. For example, if students enrol at faculties of medicine at private universities, they should score no less than 69% overall marks in the NSEE. However, Beta University has experienced the luxury of admitting only those students with marks not less than 89.5%, which is more than 20% above the criteria set by the MoHE. This percentage has been reported as increasing every year, showing that the university is getting more popular. Having students with high aptitude in the faculty of medicine is an inherited belief in Syria, as previous to the establishment of private education, only students with NSEE scores above 95% could study on such a programme. When browsing the university website during an interview with a student, he was instantly attracted by a link saying 'admission criteria' on which he said:

This is really very important thing... I do not want a student that has hardly passed his/her NSSE or even scored 130 to be with me in the Faculty of Medicine. It does not sound good to be so... There is a huge difference in the competencies. A student with only 130 marks would not have the ability to and the resilience to study medicine, yet the university selection criteria would not be as hard as it is at the public universities. I think a person to study medicine should be more than the average... At X University, they admit any student applying... It is not really very good (Interview: Student 1).

As this student has high study competencies, he makes reference to the fact that he is expecting peers in his faculty to be equally competent. He believes that having such criteria would work on strengthening the educational level in class. The university being able to pick and select its own students is highly appreciated by prospective students. A senior member of staff believes that selecting the best available students is a critical factor for the success of the university. This is because such students would be more motivated to learn and have better future prospects, and consequently, this would reflect on the university image.

In Beta University, student selection criteria are not solely based on the NSSE records as the university has created its own admission tests. When students apply, they set a one-hour admission test which consists of general knowledge questions. Students in the earlier research phase expressed lack of understanding of the purpose of such a test. Nonetheless, it has been explained by a senior member of staff that the NSSE is not the only mean of evaluating a student's abilities.

9.4 Academic Staff

Similar to Gamma University, recruiting high calibre academic staff is a major marketing issue for Beta University. There are a large number of members of academic staff who have been described to be the most competent in the entire country (Document: Prospectus). Intensive effort to attract academic staff with the best teaching and research reputation has been reported by two senior members of staff. A parent described in a focus group interview regarding academic staff at the Faculty of Medicine: "I know many of the academic staff members there as I am a medical doctor myself... They are the best, and I would love my daughter to be trained and educated by such people". The parent assumes that having the most reputed medical doctors in the country to teach at the Faculty of Medicine is a very attractive issue. Such high calibre academic staff are well-promoted through the website and other promotional materials. The Prospectus even provides photographs of such people in an attempt to associate the university with such nation-wide famous professionals and academics.

9.5 Language of Instruction

English language is also among the marketing aspects that Beta University employs to attract prospective students. The university understands the weak performance of English teaching at pre-university education in Syria, and for this reason it provides courses in English to enhance students' competencies. What is most distinct at this university is that although they focus on English, generally it is not used as a medium of instruction. This has been justified by a senior member of staff, that students do not have enough competencies for that. He adds that students in the fourth year are taught in English. Deciding to teach mostly in Arabic shows the university's national identity. However, there is some contradiction in this as the university uses coursebooks that are printed in English. This is a result of the lack of equivalent up-to-date, finely illustrated and attractively presented coursebooks in Arabic that include pictures and diagrams.

9.6 Communication

Beta University employs various methods of communication to promote itself to the public and potential students. Similar to the previous two case studies, Beta has conducted a market survey over three consecutive years to identify the most influential method, and again the word-of-mouth reputation has been reported to be the most important. Word-of-mouth reputation raises the issue of institutional 'perceived ethos', which reflects how other people perceive an institution through various informal signs and channels. Prosser (1999) draws a line between the 'perceived ethos' and the 'substantive/real ethos' where people could perceive and develop certain ideas about a particular institution which might not be realistic, and this emphasises the importance of word-of-mouth and informal reputation. There have been a number of reflections on university practices that have found such a major role for word-of-mouth. The main reflection has been that the university raised its sensitivity to its current students' satisfaction aiming at providing a positive student experience. However, and unlike the Gamma University which reduced the budget of advertising and directed more finance to student welfare as a result of discovering the

importance of student satisfaction, Beta University continued to invest more in advertising. A senior member of staff justifies this as “advertising is a strategy option in order to prove the university’s existence... If the university stops its advertising campaigns, it would leave a chance for competing universities to gain power”. Assigning a whole directorate for media and advertising issues reveals placing considerable amount of attention on these selling methods of promotion and communication.

The university website is among the most important methods of communication, which has drawn a lot of attention. The results of a survey conducted by the university have placed the website as the second most influential method, and this is reflected on the fact that more attention is paid to this channel. The website is refined and well-designed, with many pieces of news as well as photographs. From observation, it is noticed that the website is updated more frequently, compared to the other two universities, and this shows that Beta University understands the key role of such a method in modern life. The interviewed students report their admiration of the website as it answers all their inquiries. The website, however, is in Arabic and does not support any foreign language, and this, perhaps, again reflects an identity issue. The other two universities’ websites support other languages, demonstrating a more international dimension.

Selling practices, such as open-days, visiting schools, participating in educational exhibitions (Maringe, 2005) have also been evident in the activities held by the public relations directorate. For example, the university arranges school visits, where students from potential schools are invited to visit and learn more about Beta University. There is also an open-day, where university agents at various cities in Syria arrange for people who are interested in that university to visit.

9.7 Location

Beta University is located just outside a town, on the highway from a major city to others. The university’s location is described as strategic. A parent states for example:

There is no one who does not use the highway that links X City with others and it is visible from there... You can see the huge buildings and billboards... There are other universities that I do not know anything about in the north east of the country. I have never been to that part of the country actually (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1).

This parent's words express the promotion provided by a university by being near to a major highway; a strategy that has been targeted by Beta University. It is also situated in an approximate central position in Syria. A senior member of staff highlights that such a location provides a larger catchment area. He makes a comparison with Gamma's university location, whose catchment area, he claims, is mainly restricted to one major city. This is supported in the diverse geographical background of students at Beta University through my own observation as, surprisingly, none of the interviewed members of academic staff have clear ideas about the geo-demographic distribution of the current students. This person has mentioned that people in the directorate of housing have such information. This shows the poor communication within the university and its directorates, as such important and strategic marketing information should have been shared and made use of.

There are some disadvantages of the university location, however. The university is more than several kilometres away from any major city. This means that students wanting to study there, have to either live in the provided halls of residence, or take the inconvenient option of commuting daily by means of the provided coaches. Two senior members of staff are aware of this, nonetheless, they believe that being away from major cities provides a better study environment that is "quiet" and "clean". Interviewed students and parents report otherwise as they wish it was closer to their home cities. Another disadvantage is the geographic nature in that part of the country, which is dry desert. Interviewed students mentioned that they wished there was more greenery around. **Another disadvantage, added by the a senior member of staff, is that being this far from major cities forces the university to provide lower tuition fees and higher salaries, to attract both students and staff. However, when compared with the two other universities, it was found that this university charged higher fees.** Although Cabrera and Nasa (2000) show that there has been extensive research showing negative relationship between tuition fee increases and enrolment, this has not been the case in Beta University, as many of its programmes are oversubscribed. Having

these location disadvantages in mind, and the risk of locating in a relatively distant and isolated area, the choice of such exact location is mainly a result that the owners are from this particular local area and community, and their vision, is to develop it with the establishment of such an institution.

9.8 University Heritage

The university heritage and age is one of the most important aspects used to attract prospective students to Beta University. The promotional materials, and website claim explicitly that Beta is the first private university to be licensed and initiate teaching in the country. Similarly, interviewed members of administrative staff are proud of this factor. Students and parents, on the other hand, are aware of this issue and they felt it is an important issue to help them decide to choose this university. However, I wondered about the importance of Beta University being the first private university. Beta University is only a year older than other universities, yet this short period plays a significant role, due to the whole short history of private higher education in Syria. A metaphor suggested by a senior member of staff is that “it is like a race, where Beta has started a year earlier. It has given the university an advantage over others”. Maringe (2005) similarly highlights a premier university in Zimbabwe, and the relative advantage it has compared to the emerging ones. However, an understanding that such a position should be maintained with excellent performance is evident from the interviews with members of the administrative staff. There have been claims that state (Documents: Prospectus) in order to be able to be the first university to start, help has been sought from an international university, which offered to provide much of its experience and knowledge. This issue relates to international partnership, which has been most evident in Alpha University.

The university’s age provides a number of related advantages. One parent says, for example: “They are the first and this has made it easier for them to be known” (Focus Group Interview: Parent 1). It is understood from this statement that when there are no other providers, which made Beta University a monopolistic provider at that time (Thomas & Cunningham, 2009), the opportunities to be recognised in the market are better for a

provider, as there is no competition. One student says “It is really encouraging that Beta is the first private university” (Interview: Student 1). In this student’s words, there is some confusion about the meaning of the word ‘first’. Does this mean that they are the first in terms of quality (e.g. on a rating scale)? Or does it mean they are the oldest? Such confusion is also evident in promotional materials, which state in many places, “Beta University is the first university in Syria”. Perhaps such a statement is deliberately formed in such a manner to try to convey to the public that Beta is the ‘best university’, rather than the ‘oldest university’; something that would make this university potentially a more attractive university for prospective students.

A senior member of staff highlights more on this advantage, saying: “being the first university has helped us in attracting and recruiting the best academic and administrative staff whether from Syria or from abroad. Perhaps, other private universities that opened later were less lucky with this”. However, this has posed a challenge, as many members of staff recruited earlier, are leaving to join other private universities.

In a market that is driven by relationship marketing and word-of-mouth reputation, university age seems to be very significant. Being ‘older’ means that there is a larger number of people that have experienced education there, and consequently they would tell more people about it. In 2007, Beta University was also the first university to award degrees, which is a very important issue. The importance of this issue has derived from rumours that “private higher education is not going to be accredited by the MoHE” (Interview: Student 2). And in 2007, a student adds, that students “graduated with a degree signed by the MoHE”. In this prospect, the university age aspect reflects on student trust of the university’s legality and accreditation. This explains what a senior member of staff calls the ‘huge propaganda’ accompanying every graduation ceremony, as the university wants to deliver the message that it is a genuine university, and offers officially accredited qualifications.

9.9 Built-Environment

Although the built-environment has been discussed in earlier case studies within the university context subtheme, this aspect is discussed separately here, due to the major emphases and influential role that it has in this particular university, and to allow comparison across cases. All interviewees have made several significant references to the built-environment. All members of administrative staff placed this aspect top in attracting prospective students. A senior member of staff states:

If you walk around through the campus you can see what I mean and the huge capital allocated for this project to make it like what it is now, there is huge land property about 1.000.000 km²... add to this the constructed buildings and student services... I can not imagine any other private university is able to do like these (Interview: senior member of staff).

A sense of pride is evident in these words, which also suggest comparison of the built-environment in other universities. Noticeably, this university has, by far, the largest number of buildings. Another senior member of staff compares the university with others by saying: “You will find other private universities to be no more than one building or two. Students do not like this; they want something more complicated”. Through field observation, the ongoing development in building and construction has been evident. A parent comments on this, saying: “I can really see the rapid growth there...Every time I pass by the university on the highway I can notice that there is a new building added”. It is significant that the parent equates the growth of the built-environment to the general overall growth of the university. A question has been posed at this level of how such progress could be achieved in such a short period of time. A senior member of staff highlights an important issue, explaining that since the establishment of the university, there has not been any financial profit offered to shareholders, and that all profits made are geared towards enlarging the university’s built-environment.

The campus is divided into three main areas; educational, accommodation and services. As a person enters, there are many blocks of buildings allocated for accommodation as well as a hospital. There is then what is called ‘games reserved’. When I first heard about this from the website, I was curious to see what its function was on-campus. It looked to me like birds behind a fence, or in a zoo, yet its functions were not clear even to members of

administrative staff. After that, there are the main educational buildings. Then there is the services area, which includes a large refectory that can accommodate more than 1000 students. There is also a bank, a very large open theatre built in Roman style, which can accommodate more than 2500 people. There is also a large mosque, and an indoor sports hall and many playing grounds. More buildings were still under-construction during my last visit which would include a new central library, more educational buildings and a commercial shopping mall. Questioning the reason of having such a mall on campus, it was explained that “the profits of which are to go to the university fund to support the educational process and to handle any future financial needs which occur as a result of generous spending on sophisticated and state-of-the-art equipment” (Document: Prospectus). This case is overstated for students, as well as parents, as in interviews they express their awareness that Beta University is a for-profit organisation and such promises would not be realistic.

There are very large parking areas, yet only a few cars, as students are not allowed to park on campus. However, a special area is allocated for parking off-campus. There are large open areas with lawns designed around the buildings to “enable students to gather for celebrating special cultural, scientific or social events or occasions” (Document: Prospectus). All buildings and classrooms are provided with up-to-date technology, on which the website and promotional material allocate considerable space to show and describe.

Having such a large campus has brought a number of related benefits. First of all, through interviews with parents and students, it is found that size of the built-environment matters; to the extent that a university is judged by the size and looks. Secondly, it has helped in providing parents and prospective students with a feeling of comfort and trust. This issue has been raised, as one university has been forced by the MoHE to close due to insufficient provision in the built-environment. A senior member of staff says about this closure: “These buildings cannot be anything else but a university... It is an investment of billions of Syrian pounds, and with this people trust us and our potential”. When prospective students and their parents visit the university, the built-environment, in this prospect, is

physical proof conveying positive feelings. Finally, the built-environment brought better student satisfaction, which is a major attraction factor in a market dominated by word-of-mouth reputation (Yang *et. al.*, 2008).

9.10 Accommodation

Offering student facilities is one of the aspects the university employs in attracting prospective students, and accommodation is the most distinct of these. Bearing in mind the university's remote rural location, the university understands the key role for this service in attracting prospective students. As education is a service business, "it improves with the extra facilities and services included such as the accommodation" (Interview: senior member of staff). Kotler and Fox (1995) confirm this as they see such services are integrated within the overall educational service. There have been intensive efforts to provide convenient accommodation for each student with 'high standards' aiming at creating a suitable environment in terms of safety and relaxation that stimulates students to focus on their studies.

Accommodation brings a number of advantages for attracting prospective students. First of all, Beta University distinguishes itself from other private universities by having a high number of rooms and units available, not only for students but also for staff. There are also plans to build more units in the future. A senior member of staff adds another distinguishing factor by claiming that Beta is the only private university in Syria that has its residence halls on campus; something that "brings much convenience to students". There are also local shops on campus, which makes the university campus like "an independent town", providing all services (Interview: Student 2). One parent comments on this, saying:

It is a complete self-sufficient project... Students can get anything they want on campus. There is a supermarket that serves all kinds of food. They even have ready-made meals. It is important for students as they do not have time to prepare and cook food... I do not think it would be good if she went out of campus at night to buy something. It would not be safe... At first she said that she did not want to live on campus and that she preferred to live at home and travel to the university everyday, but later she changed her mind. She wanted to live in the residence halls because she said that travelling everyday waists much of her time and she would live there and invest this time in her study (Focus Group Interview: Parent2).

From this it is understood how important it is that the parent reflects on the relevance of convenience for students, as well as parents. They feel their children are located at a secure and well-serviced place. It is also understood that interviewees believe in the assumption that there is a relation between convenience and academic achievement, as the more comfortable students are, the better they study.

Another advantage is that accommodation promotes the university's word-of-mouth reputation nationally. This is because the residence halls have made this university a potential university for students from all over Syria, not only nearby cities as in the case of other private providers of higher education in the country. In fact, the university's central location in Syria has consequently created a student community with a diverse geographical background. In this sense Beta University stands to be a national university, rather than being a regional or even local one, and this has reflected on its reputation, as it is recognised and known across the whole country.

A further advantage has been highlighted by another senior member of staff; he says: "The nice accommodation we offer and the quiet environment encourages people to study and live here, most particularly Syrian expatriates' children". Investigating more into this issue, a whole significant customer segment has emerged, namely Syrian expatriates' children. Many Syrians travel abroad for work, most particularly in the Gulf Council Countries (GCC), and most of these people send their children back to Syria for higher education. Nonetheless, being admitted to a public university is becoming harder for them due to extremely hard admission requirements, and private higher education comes forward to provide a suitable alternative solution. I asked why such people preferred Beta and not any other private university. The person answered that these people find it not only cheaper, but also safer for their children to live in campus halls of residence, and not in major cities.

There is an issue, or even a challenge, concerning university accommodation in the particular context of Syria, however. While for some eight centuries in Britain and other western countries, the provision of accommodation has been part of the need and the mission of a university (Silver, 2004). This case has not been so in Syria. In other words,

the education culture of Syrians does not normally have students leaving their families to pursue education. While it is very unlikely for a family to consider it an option for their sons to leave home for study, it is even a taboo for female students of some families. “It is not very nice for a girl to live away from home” as highlighted by one parent. The university sets some ‘strict rules and regulations’ for the halls of residence. While these rules and regulations have created a feeling of dissatisfaction by some students, they have been favoured by parents as they feel more secure about their children’s ‘healthy’ study life.

Another issue and challenge for providing accommodation relates to cost. Wilson (2008) highlights the substantial increase accommodation adds to the total cost of education, and that in many cases prospective students and their parents ignore this, and look at tuition fees as the only cost of education. Parents and students interviewed report otherwise as they show total understanding of all hidden costs. However, their views differ regarding the accommodation and living costs; some of them feel it is too expensive, while others feel it is appropriate.

9.11 University/Student Relationship

Beta University describes its relationship with its students as ‘serious and strict’. It uses this image as a central marketing aspect to attract prospective students. Although students may generally dislike such a type of relationship, evidence suggests that it is an attraction, especially for parents. A senior member of staff says about this:

It is a major shift in student life, and parents represent a control figure over their actions... As they are the ones paying the tuition fees they want to make sure that their children are still under control. Students are teenagers; they do not have a lot of confidence and self-discipline... Parents’ opinion about our university is the most important factor in selecting a university. They want to know and see that we provide serious education, and that there is continuous supervision over their work (Interview: senior member of staff).

It is noteworthy how students at university age in Syria are viewed as ‘teenagers’, and not as adults who can make their own decisions and have proper control over their lives. A paradox poses itself to the university in this regard, as the university will need to decide

who it wants to satisfy: students who are the direct customers, or parents who are the fee payers. It seems that Beta University understands the Syrian culture and perceives a more focal role for parents who want their children to be controlled with formal regulations ensuring discipline and a commitment to study. The university feels that it is mostly the parents' decision to select a university, and sets its practices more towards satisfying the taste of this particular customer group. Hence, the main objective of Beta University is to please the parents first and the students second. A parent comments:

It is the first impression, you either like it or not. You can quickly notice strictness there with students, but not with parents. They are nice to parents actually. You can see that it is a well-disciplined university, and that they are very strict... I am really happy about this, because students need to be controlled. I first thought that they should not be this strict, but there are some students that should not be university students; these people need a stick to be controlled. Such people I even wish they were not admitted at all, people that even their parents can not control. These students do not come to learn... Most of these come from rich families, people who lived abroad... or wearing earrings. These are habits that our society is not very open to and comfortable with. I think Mr X (the university chairman) is already preventing such bad social habits there. I do not want my daughters to be exposed to such things at university. I really appreciate the strictness there (Focus Group Interview: Parent 3).

The parent's comment above raised various key issues. First of all, it is 'he' who likes or does not like a university, not his daughter, implying that he is the decision-maker. He also shows levels of protection over his daughters' welfare and that he is worried that they might be affected by peers and the new environment. There is an indication that having undisciplined students would reflect negatively on the whole university performance and learning, where it would not be a proper learning environment. It is noticed that students at private universities in Syria generally come from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Interview: senior member of staff), and it is argued that such students tend to be less serious about achieving academically (Marks, 2009, Sianou-Kyrgiou, 2008, and Pajares, 1995). In this prospect, formal regulations and discipline are needed to keep control of, and improve student performance.

Another senior member of staff compares Beta's University formal regulations and control with other private Syrian universities, saying:

You do not see here any sign of chaos, especially with student attendance and examinations process... If students are absent for more than 15% of their classes they are not allowed to sit the

examinations, and that is final. I am sure you would find other universities soft and lenient with this issue (Interview: senior member of staff).

Comparing the promotional materials from Beta University to other universities, it is evident that Beta is far stricter. The prospectus, for example, dedicates a substantial space (nine pages which is about 14% of the whole document) to the “academic study system”, covering the university rules, regulations and even disciplinary penalties, while the prospectuses at the other two universities studied do not mention such issues. By way of example, headings include: “Student Attendance Policy... Student Dismissal/Expulsion from the Faculty or the University... Placing Student under Probation... Student Unsatisfactory Performance... Failing a Course... Exam Regulations and Instructions... Exam Infractions and Penalties... University-Wide Infractions (Serious Offence)... Disciplinary Penalties”. From field observation, there are many signposts around the campus with further rules and regulations. A number of examples have been highlighted through interviews; for instance, students are not allowed to park on-campus, students are not allowed to leave or enter residence halls after 22:00 o’clock. Also, the university reports student unsatisfactory academic or disciplinary performance to parents.

The parent, quoted above, reports a great level of satisfaction with such a disciplined university, to the extent that he enrolled another daughter of his here in the next two years. From the parent’s words, the role of the university Chairman’s values and leadership emerges again as influencing the university’s decisions, regulations and rules. A senior member of staff explains that the university commitment to such a formal and disciplined approach reflects the owners’ commitment to ‘real education’. He says: “They opened this university not for financial profits, but to provide real education”, and, presumably, being formally disciplined and strict are the best methods for this. Another senior member of staff goes further by saying that “students need the stick to be controlled”. Such a view, perhaps, is inherited from an ‘old’ perception of pre-university education that has been dominant for decades in Syria, when corporal punishment was approved in schools. It is clear how such an idea has reflected on Beta’s perception of disciplined education.

Asking if such a formal, regulated and disciplined atmosphere has reflected on students' levels of satisfaction, a senior member of staff answers, "Yes, it has reflected negatively, yet on the 'not very good' students. And the university wants the good ones". This has been supported by two factors. First, it is the selection criteria where Beta aims to attract the best students, and the second is the type of programme offered by the university. For example, a student of Medicine, who is presumably achieving well, might be more disciplined than others.

When asking a senior member of staff about the methods the university used to listen to its students views and opinions, or if it even uses any, he says that "the university makes students feel that they are heard either through direct conversations or student surveys". In this respect, this university does not listen to students, yet creates an illusion of responsiveness and care about students' views and opinions. The minor role of students' views and opinions draws an interesting cultural factor contrasting the emphasis given to the NSS (National Student Survey) in the UK and other western countries. The university might not value the students' views and opinions as they are looked at as 'teenagers' who are unable to make real decisions. Two senior members of the administrative staff have said that there are periodical student surveys conducted through the website to gain insights about students' views on the service offered for improvement. However, people in top management say that such surveys do not exist. This provides further evidence that the university does not listen but creates an illusion of that as results of surveys have not been influenced the decisions of top management.

9.12 Student Life

Empowering an active student life, is one of the marketing aspects used by Beta University to attract prospective students. The university invests in creating an environment that involves students in "extra-curricular activities that could entertain students constructively" (Interview: senior member of staff). With the formal and disciplined university/student relationship discussed above, there have been some attempts to compensate students through activities hoping to create a positive student experience. Aiming at such a positive

attitude has been a result of the university's awareness of the important role for satisfied students in building word-of-mouth reputation and attracting prospective students. Another senior member of staff says that "the survey conducted to identify factors of attracting prospective students stresses the importance of current students' role, and therefore the university has started to invest more in improving student activities".

As the university is in a rural area, which suggests a "boring and slow lifestyle" for students who mostly come from major cities (Interview: senior member of staff), the university endeavours to compensate students by creating an entertaining social environment on campus. The role of the public relations directorate is more active at Beta compared to the other two universities. This is as a result that is supported by another directorate, events and activities and a student union. Together they create and empower an active student life environment and arrange for a wide range of activities, such as sport, social, cultural and scientific events. The Student Union comprises a large number of societies with various interests ranging from environment to astrology, photography and camping aiming at catering for the varied students' interests. With these societies, the university also aims to encourage students to take an interest in new areas and build 'positive habits' which in turn will develop their skills.

Sport is highly encouraged, and this comes from the philosophy "the sound mind is in the sound body" (Interview: senior member of staff). The availability of a large number of sports facilities on-campus makes it possible to hold many sporting events, such as Beta University Football Championship for Syrian universities. One student comments on sports activities saying:

When I first look at the site I want to see students and any related news, I see their activities and how students live there... I can see that student life is an important issue in Beta University as there are many pieces of news talking about it... This issue is very important to me because this is going to be my life there... I would like it to have an active and social environment... Let's look at this link... Betampics I love sports and I really like the idea that they have their own Olympics. I can even see that this is the seventh one... It is really encouraging that Beta University is interested this much in sports. I am sure that all students like this... I can also notice that they have new sports, street basketball and fencing ... I would like to try these someday (Interview: Student 1).

There is evidence of the important role of encouraging sports to attract prospective students. The student even generalises this to all other students. Similarly findings have been evident in other studies such as Kazoleas *et al.* (2001), Harries (2009), and Johnson *et al.* (2009). From the student's words, it is also evident that the university has been interested in encouraging students since opening, as the student refers to the seventh university Olympics and the university is seven years old at this time. The student also makes reference to the point that Beta University is introducing new sports which are not very popular in Syria. It could be understood by this that this university is trying to convey new concepts. It has also been noticed that a number of sports, such as fencing and horse-back-riding, are being addressed to people of an advantaged socio-economic background. This provides further evidence that students at this university come from more advantaged backgrounds.

Many social events are also held to create a positive student life experience. A look at the website provides a detailed list of these activities, such as student parties, music concerts, trips and social talks. A senior member of staff explains about a social talk where the cast members of a recent successful television show were invited by the university. He claims that "students find it very interesting and entertaining to meet famous people they have seen on screen. It also provides a stimulating opportunity to converse with such people and learn from their experience" (Interview: senior member of staff).

Students are also encouraged to participate in 'scientific events'. Each faculty has an 'active day' where it arranges various study-related activities. For example, the Faculty of Medicine hosted a public key talk on Swine Influenza (N1H1) which was a major concern for people at the time. A senior member of staff says that this talk was so crucial, not only to students of the Faculty of Medicine, but to all students and even members of staff. This is evident as the interviewed students highlighted their sincere interest in this talk as we read about it on the website. They also appreciated that Beta University plays a role in spreading awareness about significant daily life issues. In this sense, the university seeks to portray itself not only as a provider of university education but a holistic institution reflecting on the community.

All student activities are properly covered by media such as television, radio and newspapers. The university also has its monthly magazine reporting on these activities. This suggests that the aim of these activities has not only been to create an active student life but also to promote the university's brand name. This is more evident as the university offers to sponsor external events. An example of this is the sponsorship of the Arab Women Basketball League. Blumenstyk (2008) sees promotion through such events as presenting a prime opportunity for institutions seeking to reach a large audience to enhance their institutional brand. A senior member of staff agrees on this and explains the reason for such sponsorship by the promotion it would benefit on a regional Arab level. He says: "It is that we first need to deliver the university's name to the largest audience; it creates a positive first impression. Later they will ask about us and know the content and that we are a good university". This is branding where the university initially passes the name through the largest and most important sources of media. The second stage would be establishing a relationship with the targeted audience (Harris 2009). Bennett and Ali-Choudhury (2009) lay particular emphasis on similar branding activities as new universities, such as all private universities in Syria, need to establish strong brands in order to (a) enhance market awareness among potential recruits and their parents, (b) improve their ability to recruit high-calibre members of staff, (c) differentiate themselves from rival new universities, and (d) gain market share.

9.13 Case Study Summary

In summary, from this case study data analysis, Beta University uses ten marketing aspects to attract prospective students. These are programmes, academic staff, language of instruction, communication, location, university heritage, built-environment, accommodation, university/student relationship and student life (see Figure 9.2). These aspects reflect on the marketing mix models suggested by the literature e.g. Kotler and Fox (1995) or Ivy and Naude (2004), and they provide implications and modifications. At this university, it is a strategy of ten elements covering a set range of marketing aspects.

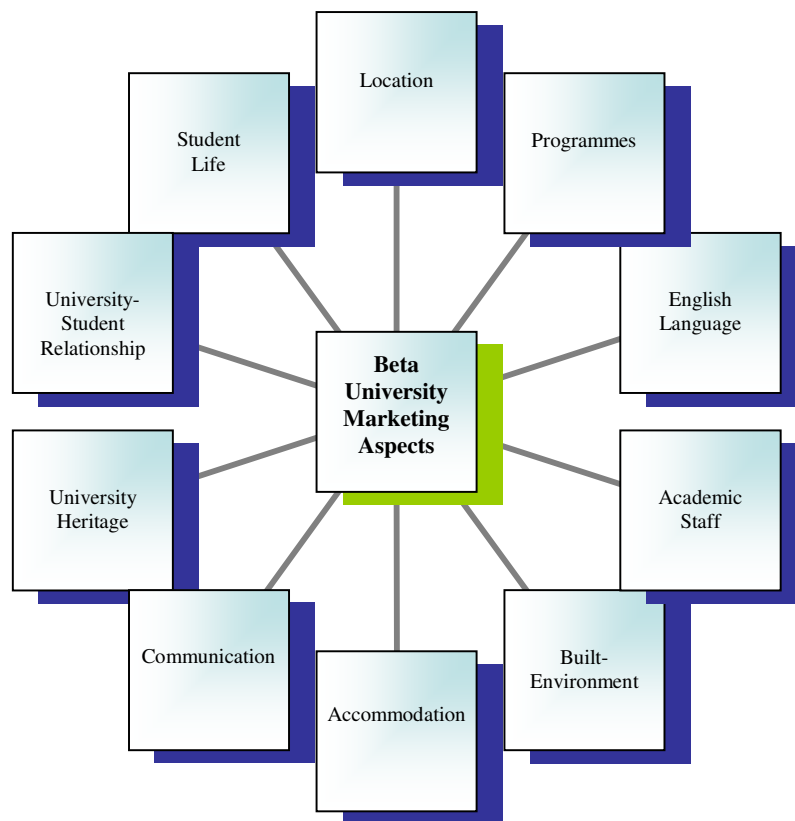


Figure 9. 2: Beta University marketing aspects

It has been discussed that the Syrian private higher education tends to be a more word-of-mouth reputation driven market. Similar findings have been reported in other markets e.g. USA by Yang *et al.* (2008) and Jordan by Al-Alak (2006). This suggests a marketing strategy that builds and empowers the relationships of an institution to the public, and

influences their perception of the quality of the institution (Foskett, 1999, 47). To improve and build such a relationship and reputation, Beta University has invested in the provision of quality education and services to the public. Although there is little evidence of market research, there is an awareness of the power of the reputation factor, and the contribution it has on enrolment. The case study has shown indicators of being both responsive and prescriptive to customers needs. It is assumed by Al-Alak (2006) that satisfied customers are key factors to build a university's reputation, and Beta has indicated evidence of customer-orientation. A struggle has been acknowledged being split into two key customer groups, namely students and parents. This university reports more interest in the latter as they are the tuition fees payers and the real decision-makers, and to satisfy them they create a disciplined and controlled environment. Yet, students' social needs are not ignored as there have been attempts to create positive experiences for them through empowering certain aspects of student life. With this 'balance' the university expects to satisfy both parties. Other literature has portrayed students as the key stakeholder customers of a university (Yang, *et al.*, 2009. 149), which has not been the case here as the key customers are the parents. Perhaps, this suggests that marketing at private universities in Syria should be compared to marketing at pre-university education in other Western cultures where parents select a school for their children (Ahier, 2000).

Although selling practices, such as open-day and advertising are evident, marketing perception has exceeded to further limits, and this contradicts findings by Maringe (2005, 148) who identifies that in the less developed world, a 'traditional understanding of marketing' as a process of selling or informing the public about the products or services of an organisation. There is evidence that the university is establishing its brand name which is associated with success. For example, Beta University is an institution for successful students who will have good future prospects, and consequently this will reflect on the university image and brand. Another example is the association of the university with nationally recognised members of academic staff. Beta University is striving to portray itself as a premier, holistic and independent project that goes beyond university education to reflect on the community on a national level. Advertising and media, which are key tools for empowering brand and image to the public (Harris, 2009), are used intensively for this

purpose. The issue of the university brand and organisational 'unique culture' at Beta University draws on the 'hothouse' organisational type (Prosser, 2006) where the organisation maintains pressure to keep members on task, and to devise social control to prevent distraction, and simultaneously it seeks to maintain group social harmony, which is easily disturbed by pressure to keep on task. Such an organisation aims to be high achieving at everything, for example academically or sports. In the 'hothouse' type of organisation, Prosser (*ibid*) explains it is the power of dynamics where all members, whether student, teachers, or administrative staff, are under pressure, surveillance and control to the extent that members feel like 'inmates'.

Having discussed the three case studies in a idiographic approach in three separate chapters, drawing on marketing aspects employed at each studied university, the next chapter brings the cases together in a nomothetic approach.

Chapter Ten

Cross-Case Analysis and Discussions

10.1 Introduction

The third research phase, multiple case studies, followed an *idiographic* perspective, using a case-by-case presentation. However, there needs to be a cross-case *nomothetic* analysis reflecting on case studies and establishing basis for analytic generalisations. Hence, this chapter presents a synthesis of findings from the three case studies presented earlier, by means of comparative analysis and discussions. Nonetheless, particularity and individuality of each case study are not ignored as I also draw not only on similarities as well as differences between the cases.

Following an analytical and theoretical generalisation perspective, the findings are arranged thematically. Marketing aspects emerging from the case studies in earlier chapters are now arranged into five thematic groups: teaching and learning, customer centred focus, finance, branding and environment (see Figure 10.1). Aspects are arranged into these themes because they dynamically interrelate, interact and overlap across each group. In addition, aspects from each thematic group interact and relate to aspects in other groups, as shown in Figure 10.1. Further discussion explaining the dynamism, interaction and fluidity between themes and aspects is presented in this chapter.

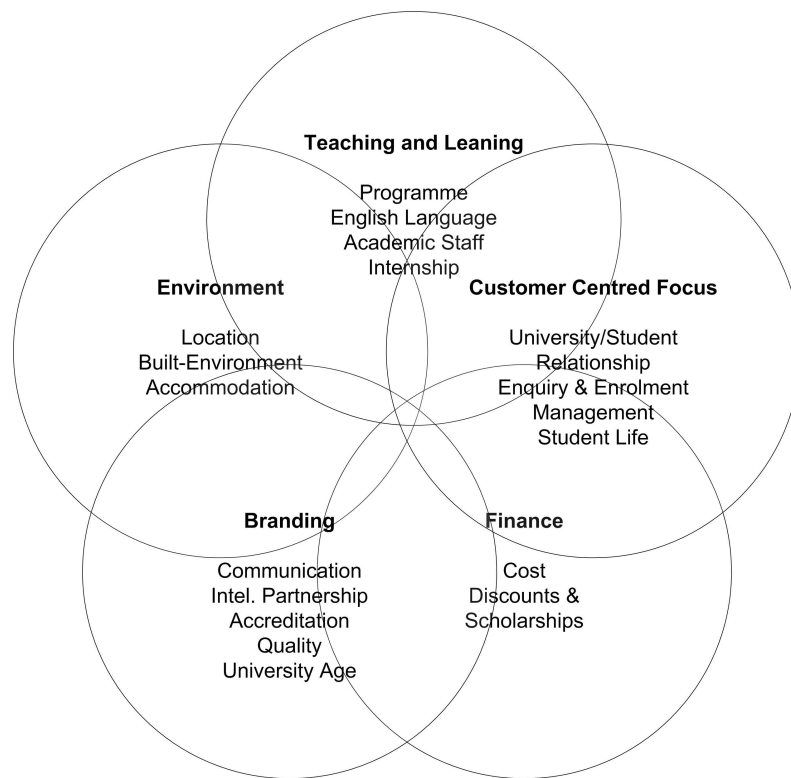


Figure 10. 1: Five categories of marketing aspects

10.2 Theme 1: Teaching and Learning

Four marketing aspects are grouped into this theme: programme, English language, academic staff and internship programme. A dynamic interrelation between these aspects is suggested, as they all relate to the teaching and learning process. For example, a particular programme is taught in English by a particular quality of faculty member, and supplemented by practical knowledge through internship opportunities. As similar grouping has been suggested in literature where such a theme is called ‘programme’ (Kotler & Fox, 1995), ‘concept’ Wasmer *et al.* (1997), ‘product’ (Ivy & Naude, 2004), and ‘learning’ (Ho & Hung, 2008).

10.2.1 Programme

The choice programmes offered has been identified as one of the most important aspects to attract prospective students. In selecting a programme the universities have shown understanding to social reflections on students' decisions, although they have not shown any evidence of systematic customer needs analysis. The 'programme hierarchy' has been identified to be the most influential factor to pressure prospective students towards a particular programme. The hierarchy has deep manifestation on social esteem and respect towards students studying particular areas. There is also a link between the 'programme hierarchy' and future career, as some careers are viewed as better in the Syrian community. It is noticed how the three universities choose to provide programmes that provide social respect and esteem, and lead to a 'respectable' and rewarding career. The relation between programme choice and future career is not a new issue; it has been discussed by a considerable amount of literature; e.g. Brown and Scase (1994), Townsend (2003), White (2007). Saiti and Prokopiadou (2008) explain that better social reflection and career opportunities increase students desire to pursue higher education. These findings are further supported by Allen and Shen (1999) as they found a relationship between unemployment and higher education enrolment, where an increase in the former comes with an increase in the latter.

An important factor, or external force, relating to the programme aspect and one that reflects on the universities selection of programmes offered, is the restraint imposed by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), as deciding to provide any particular programme has to be approved by such a higher authority. It seems that the MoHE realises that most prospective students desire to attend a medical programme, and the negative reflection this would impose on the Syrian graduate labour market. Therefore, it sets highly challenging standards for a university wanting to offer such programmes. The MoHE has also specific consideration for the wide geographical distribution for each programme. This issue has not been evident in programmes such as business administration as all cases have business administration faculties, yet evident in medical faculties. This could be justified by the MoHE understanding of the Syrian labour market where particular programmes are further required. Within such imposed restraint and external force, Beta University distinguishes

itself from its rivals by the ability to provide medical programmes. Alpha University, on the other hand, which cannot afford to offer medical programmes, finds an alternative strategy to provide distinctive, modern courses and specialisations, revealing a niche market strategy.

10.2.2 English Language

All three universities support English language as it is believed to attract prospective students. The level of emphasis varies from one case to another. At Alpha and Gamma Universities it is the official language of instruction, yet at Gamma it is supported with the use of Arabic in class. English language is present at Beta, although not the official language of instruction, which reflects the university's awareness of the impact of a foreign language on the national identity in higher education (HE). Similar worries have been reported in European universities, in Norway and Sweden by Brock-Utne (2007).

There is no necessity to equip graduates with any foreign language, but rather an urge for this particular language. For example, Alpha, which has a French orientation, relationship and supervision, might be expected to teach in French, yet it does not. The urgent importance of being competent in the English language stems from several contextual factors. Teaching in English is not a strategy restricted to Syrian private universities; there are many universities around the world following similar strategies for the labour market and internationalisation considerations (Farooqui, 2007). Responding to such forces and providing such emphasis on the English language indicates the universities responsiveness and ability to identify customers' preferences and requirements. They desire to secure better prospects for the future whether at employment or post-graduate education locally and globally. Besides, private universities are not only able to identify the weak performance of English language teaching at pre-university education, but they are able to offer solutions. Given such emphasis on the English language creates some challenges to providers. The majority of applicants are not competent in English, and this has forced universities to offer more remedial courses. Almost identical procedures of evaluating

students' competencies at enrolment and admitting them into remedial courses are evident in three cases.

10.2.3 Academic Staff

Having top calibre academic staff is highlighted as being highly important in two universities, Beta and Gamma, but less important in the third case, Alpha. It is an important aspect as universities understand the key role for teachers within their institutions and the way they are perceived by prospective students (Coccarri & Javalgi, 1995). At all three universities there are course evaluation surveys, where students evaluate various aspects of the courses and most importantly, the teachers. Such a practice is newly introduced in the Syrian culture through private education showing customer sovereignty, power and orientation. This might create concerns for teachers who have had much of their former experience in public education, where they had more 'power' over students. Universities, through these evaluations, assume that they are evaluating their overall performance, and this again reveals the relevant role of academic staff. With such a critical role, a distinctive team of academic staff offers a competitive advantage.

Some contradiction, or difference in perspective, is evident as Beta and Gamma universities both claim to have the best team of faculty members. Perhaps, each case assumes different perspectives to make such claims. They have both been aiming at employing members with certain qualities, the most important being able to deal well with students. Academic staff members are preferable with Western higher qualifications and experience. Universities also aim at recruiting distinguished and well-reputed academics, as their distinction and established reputation would reflect and benefit the university. Promotional materials and websites also make good use of promoting the university's name through such people, which relates this aspect to the fourth theme, brand and image. Although Alpha University does not enjoy such an advantage as it is located far from a major city, where such potential academics live, it still aspires to this. An outsourcing strategy is employed instead where they seek academic members of staff from their French 'partner' institutions.

Universities have been making use of academics from public universities on a part-time basis; however, there are plans and strategies to assemble a permanent full-time body of academic staff. Universities currently might have difficulties finding such people committed to a particular institution. With the scarcity of well-qualified academic staff members in Syria, universities implement a certain strategy of recruitment, the most distinctive being the relatively high wages, compared to wages offered at public institutions. The number of faculty members available is also relevant as the MoHE sets certain teacher/student ratios, and therefore, the more academic staff available, the more students a university is able to admit. However, the struggle is to recruit quality academics rather than just any academics that may be available.

10.2.4 Internship Programme

The internship programme is an exclusive marketing strategy for Gamma University which distinguishes it from its rivals. With its internship programme, this university proves itself as the most sensitive to students needs. As most of students pursue higher education for future employment, the programme provides an invaluable chance to equip students with the practical knowledge and skills required. Gamma understands the power of its graduates' employability in providing better ranking among other universities. Graduates' employability has been suggested as an indicator for a university's success. Though the other two universities show some evidence of understanding the power of such an issue, they do not introduce any similar initiatives. Martin (1996, quoted in Holdsworth & Nind 2005) highlights the importance of similar career preparation initiatives in influencing student choice.

The internship programme helps Gamma University to establish relationships with employers, who are also looked at as part of the customer group (Harris, 2009). Alpha and Beta Universities do not show any sign of establishing any relationship with this customer group. The concept of internships is new in Syria. It is a Western practice reflected in Syria; which also gives Gamma positive competitive advantages as being a creative institution

introducing new ideas and practices to the Syrian community, an experience which other universities could learn from.

10.3 Theme 2: Customer Centred Focus

The second theme encompasses three aspects: university/student relationship, direct enquiry and enrolment management and student life. The dynamic interrelation between these issues emerges as they all reflect on the relationship and interaction a university is establishing with its customers and public. The following subsections explain more about these interrelations. Perhaps, this theme is mostly linked to the relational part of the 'process' element in the marketing mix suggested by Kotler and Fox (1995). This theme also reflects on the relationship marketing model discussed by Yang *et al.* (2008).

10.3.1 University/Student Relationship

The quality of relationships the university builds with its students is an important aspect in marketing and attracting prospective students; this suggests a relationship marketing strategy dominating the Syrian private HE market. **An interesting comparison has been suggested by three of the interviewed parents in university/students relationships and customer treatment between public and the private universities in Syria. They mentioned that public organisations in Syria generally have excessive bureaucracies and are unconcerned about maintaining positive relationship with customers, while private organisations in contrast are places where customers enjoy better treatment as well as more power; the same applies to educational institutions.** Administrative members of staff in all three case studies are very friendly, respectful and helpful to all students and parents. Al-Alak (2006) uses the term 'relationship quality' which refers to customers perceptions and evaluations of individual service employees' communication and behaviour such as respect, courtesy, warmth, empathy and helpfulness. The quality relationship maintained in the case studies has reflected positively on students as well as parents. Alpha University has shown the highest level of such 'relationship quality'.

The university/student relationship has also reflected on responsiveness. Alpha shows a higher level of responsiveness to students' views compared with the other two cases, which create worries for parents as they think it might reflect negatively on the university's discipline and the 'educational quality'. This suggests a balance between 'relationship quality' and 'educational quality'. Alpha's attitude might have been affected by the small student population that creates a family-like atmosphere. Foskett (1998) remarks that the smaller an institution is, the more it needs to depend on relationship marketing. On the other hand, Beta University, which has a large student population, holds an opposing attitude as they are not responsive to students maintaining strict discipline; this has satisfied parents. Gamma University reports a moderate balanced attitude, being not very responsive, yet not very insensitive.

All three universities endeavour to build and strengthen relationships with parents by involving them in their children's studies. For example, Gamma University creates an online user name for parents where they can view their children's study records and exam results via internet. Alpha holds frequent parent meetings whenever a relevant decision is needed. Although there is much literature regarding the role of the parents and families in pursuing post-secondary education e.g. Foskett and Hesketh (1997), Pugsley (1998), Reay (1998) and Ahier (2000), none focus on their direct role of leading preferences and institutional responsiveness to this customer group.

10.3.2 Direct Enquiry and Enrolment Management

This aspect relates to this theme as through direct enquiry and enrolment, the universities try to establish a positive impression, relationship and rapport with prospective students and their parents, right from the first experience. This aspect also relates to the communication aspect, as through direct enquiry the universities communicate verbally with their prospective customers. These customers enjoy the attention and care shown to them, which makes them value a university for its individual attention to students. Universities understand the importance of this issue and they design various strategies. Gamma University makes use of student-workers, a technique that is appreciated by prospective

students and parents. This university's strategy reflects on its internship programme as it involves students in professional tasks. At Beta University, most of the administrative staff help the admission team on enrolment and enquiry days, to ensure they run efficiently. As Alpha University is a small university, it does not recruit extra members of staff. Two universities, Alpha and Beta, use the open-day strategy where they have more power and control over information passed to the public, showing more of a selling practice. Gamma, however, does not run such an activity as it does not want to portray itself to be selling, and seeking customers, which relates to the institutional intended image.

10.3.3 Student Life

Related to university/student relationship is the issue of student life; the relationship between these two issues is established as they both reflect on the student way of life and experience at university. Student life aspect has been most evident at Beta University where it attempts to create an active university experience for students through various activities ranging from science, to sports and culture. The other two universities also employ a similar strategy yet, not as strongly as Beta which assigns a whole directorate to manage and arrange such activities. This particular university has resorted to this strategy to compensate for the intensely disciplined and regulated system maintained. Interest in this aspect emerges from an awareness of the importance of student satisfaction as a customer group.

It should be highlighted that the concept of active student life has not been popular in Syria prior to the establishment of private higher education, as public universities have not been keen on this issue. Creating such an active student life experience has been more evident in Western countries; students have admired the student life that they see on television, especially American movies and how they show 'college life'. Comparisons can be drawn between student life at private and public universities; private universities appear more active which shows that private universities are adopting a Westernised university life model. Private universities have more sports facilities than public universities, as the MoHE (2006) forces a provision of 1.6m² of sport facilities space per student, which has

created an opportunity for students to practice sports. Another issue relating to this is that customers at private higher education pay fees, and therefore, they wish to see real differences to the free public universities.

Active student life helps in building a university's informal reputation in the sense that it is not only current students and their parents who are invited to join in the activities held, anyone interested is welcomed. An example is the social and cultural talks with public invitations. Any member of the public can join any of the activities at the university and establish ideas about which they can tell other people about. Such a strategy is important for public awareness bearing in mind the relatively short history of private universities in Syria.

10.4 Theme 3: Finance

Two aspects are grouped in this theme: cost and scholarships, and discounts. A dynamic interrelation between these two aspects is suggested as they relate to the monetary cost. Reflecting this theme on the literature, it relates to the 'price' element in the marketing mix model (Kotler and Fox, 1995) and (Ivy and Naude, 2004), and 'cost' (Wasmer *et al.*, 1997). Ho and Hung (2008), however, call this theme 'economy' as they add graduate employability and its expected future economic returns.

10.4.2 Cost

The importance of the cost aspect within a marketing strategy stems from the customers' sensitivity to monetary issues. Gregory (2001) highlights a similar sensitivity to prices in the Omani context. As higher education has been offered for free for decades in Syria, it is deep rooted in people's beliefs that education is free and this has contributed in making a private university, where education has to be paid for, a second option after the public option. Evidence of this is that enrolment at private universities increases rapidly after public universities announce the admitted applicants, and those who are not admitted in the desired areas, and can afford private higher education would then apply to private

universities. This suggests a challenge for private universities as their enrolment is affected by the admission criteria set at public universities. In other words, when public universities admit more students, fewer are left to apply privately.

In pricing, different strategies have been observed in each case study. It should be highlighted that the MoHE does not set any guidelines for pricing the educational services and assumes that market demand should control such an issue. At Gamma University there is a strategy that aims at providing education with the lowest possible cost; this is supported by the 'cost efficiency' strategies implemented there (Ehrenberg, 2002). On the other hand, Beta University sets the highest cost believing that customers in education are more sensitive to quality rather than price. Tang *et al.* (2004) highlight a relationship between an institution's tuition fees, and reputation and ranking; the better reputation it has and the higher ranking it enjoys, the higher tuition fees it charges. This suggests that Beta might perceive itself to be of better reputation and on a higher rank than its competitors. Alpha University sets itself to be in a balanced position between these two universities regarding price. The issue of cost is very important to universities as they are run on a business basis, with profit being the major incentive for shareholders to invest (Mahmoud, 2001). Nevertheless, there have been attempts by case studies to convey a different image, as customers resent being thought of and treated as financial profits.

10.4.1 Scholarships and Discounts

All three universities implement a scholarship and discount strategy in attracting potential students; however, this aspect has been most evident at Alpha University, which is perhaps, a result of the fewer applications they receive. Alpha assumes that it would increase potential customers with this strategy. Scholarships and discounts offered at all three cases are various depending on academic achievement and other merits or qualities. There are also particular discounts for students from local areas of the universities, as they show a commitment to their local communities. The choice to follow such strategy is not entirely up to a university, as the MoHE obliges all private universities to offer a number of scholarships and discounts for particular applicants. The Ministry's strategy is supported by

equity of access to such institutions (MoHE, 2006). This point sustains the later mentioned issue of whether or not the Ministry has succeeded in supporting better geographical distribution of higher education across the country.

There has been criticism about the scholarship and discount strategy in literature; for example Blumenstyk (2009) says that such strategy, or what he calls ‘putting tuition on sale’, undermines an institution’s value; discounts can be quick-fix to affordability concerns, but they do not achieve the expense structures that really drive cost.

10.5 Theme 4: Branding

This theme comprises the largest number of aspects: communication, international partnership, accreditation, quality and university age. The dynamic interrelation between these five aspects has been suggested by their remarkable reflection on a university’s brand and image, and the way it is perceived by the public. This suggests a relationship between this theme and the brand marketing strategies (Harris, 2009), and image and reputation (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001). Reflecting this theme on marketing mix literature, it relates mostly to the ‘promotion’ element (Kotler and Fox, 1995), ‘communication’ in Wasmer *et al.* (1997), and ‘reputation’ in Ho and Hung (2008). For Ivy and Naude (2004) it extends to two elements ‘promotion’ and ‘prospectus’.

10.5.1 Communication

This aspect is the method that universities employ to connect and communicate with the public. Communication relates to this theme as it is the mechanism that delivers the perceived university’s brand and image. It is also how information is delivered. Universities realise the significance of such a marketing aspect in attracting prospective students. All three case studies show very little evidence of market research, which has been limited to a few surveys evaluating methods of attraction and promotion. Findings from all surveys place ‘word-of-mouth’ as the most influential. Current students have been acting as informal agents, spreading information about their university and building its ‘informal

reputation'. With such a major role for students, their satisfaction seems decisively relevant, and all universities expressed their interest and even endeavour to reach that. Briggs (2006, 707), however, warns against universities relying heavily on their word-of-mouth reputation; he highlights that depending on such a strategy is not so efficient in the long term, because "if success and good performance are not maintained, good reputation goes off in a few years". This suggests that private universities should design strategies that could maintain and guarantee a longer lifespan for this. The power of word-of-mouth reputation stems from the lack of an official ranking system among universities in Syria; there are no external agencies evaluating providers' performances, and an audience depend on what they hear from various informal sources.

A university website is also among the most influential channels of communication. The role of imagery emerges to play a key role, and even lead students' decisions. This is consistent with findings reported by Ramasubramanian, Gyure, and Mursi (2002). Students at some levels evaluated a university's quality by the 'professionalism' of its website design. Universities express and reflect different, images, attitudes, cultures and ideologies through their websites. Beta's website only uses the Arabic language, as it is an issue of national identity; Gamma's website only uses English language revealing an international tendency. Alpha does not rely on a website or the Internet for this purpose.

Website and promotional materials at Gamma University show the campus to be highly populated, and even crowded in some images, which is perceived a positive sign, as in the Syrian culture it attracts students believing it to be a positive indicator. This could be contrasted with a Western culture where a crowded university might be a negative indicator as it shows that there may be less personal attention for students. For example, this could reflect on people's perceptions of teacher/student ratios. It also reflects on the exclusivity factor. This could justify the decisions of Alpha and Beta Universities to show fewer students on materials, revealing an exclusive marketing strategy.

Other methods of communication are also used: literature, street billboards and educational exhibitions; there are various levels of emphasis on each of these methods in each case

study. Although surveys to evaluate methods of communication conducted by universities have shown a minor role for these methods, only Gamma university responds to the findings and makes substantial reductions on ‘advertising’ expenditure. This suggests that Gamma is more dynamic and effectively managed, as it is responsive to information and suggestions offered by research. This example also suggests differences in organisational ideologies between Gamma and the other two universities. Gamma finds it inappropriate for a higher education institution to be promoted through such ‘inferior’ methods, where Alpha and Beta Universities believe such methods are invested to establish or increase awareness of the existence of the institution (Berger & Wallingford, 1996).

10.5.2 International Partnerships

Partnership with international institutions, and ‘internationalisation’ (Knight & de Wit, 1997; Maringe & Gibbs, 2009, 83), is another marketing strategy in this theme that supports building a positive university brand and image. It does so as these newly opened universities are making use of international well-established institutions’ experience and bringing it to customers in the Syrian market. This aspect relates to accreditation as the agreements deal with mutual recognition of degrees. Screening the cases, there are different as well as similar strategies. Firstly, the regulations imposed by the MoHE state that a private university has to establish relationship, cooperation or partnership agreements with well-established foreign universities (MoHE, 2006); these agreements would guarantee scientific and administrative support in running the business.

The method of approaching the issue of international partnership has varied from one case to another. Alpha University has decided to take this issue further by establishing ‘partnerships’ particularly with French institutions conveying French ethos. The impact of such ‘partnerships’ is evident to prospective and current customers. For instance, several students have travelled to study for a term in the partner French institutions, and there are several French members of staff on campus. At Gamma University the international dimension is also evident and most particularly in the naming ‘international’. Gamma also has plans to establish joint and exchange programmes with foreign institutions. The focus

at Gamma is widely international rather than focused on any one particular country. Beta University also has strategies for ‘internationalisation’ e.g. scientific trips abroad and administrative support. However, it is the only university that declares its relationships with Arab or even national institutions. This, perhaps, comes from its national and Arab orientation and identity, yet it still has relationships with international institutions. All three cases promote their international demission well whether on websites or promotional materials. Partnership agreements are also available to view on the universities websites.

10.5.3 Accreditation

Accreditation also relates to brand as each university endeavours to portray itself as an institution that is well accredited and recognised locally and internationally, which links with the previous aspect, international partnership. Gamma University has provided an example strategy of empowering their regional accreditation with targeting HE officials in the Arab region. Alpha has shown interest in French accreditation, and Beta has shown more national orientation.

Accreditation has been important in all three cases for two main reasons. Firstly, there is an important reflection on their qualifications and students’ future prospects. In other words, if a university is not accredited, students might not consider it, which would reflect negatively on enrolment. The private higher education market has been described as turbulent as it is new and lacking experience and established reputation and history. For this reason, the three case studies have endeavoured to brand their names as well accredited, and all their communication channels are geared to promote this.

On the other hand, accreditation is important as it reflects on a university’s legality where the MoHE sets certain ‘firm’ rules and regulations to accredit any private university. The MoHE believes that such rules and regulations guide the educational quality within private higher education (MoHE, 2006). An example highlighted through the research, a private university lost official accreditation and had to close as it was unable to meet the MoHE rules and regulations. This has also continued to make the market more turbulent and

created a greater sense of fear with current and prospective customers about providers. A question could be posed about what makes any other university immune to such an incident. Therefore, universities use various methods to show the public how they are following the exact rules and regulations set by the MoHE.

10.5.4 Quality

Quality could be grouped within all other themes as it is a generic overarching issue reflecting on all other aspects; nonetheless, it is discussed within this theme as it is particularly important in presenting, promoting and branding a university providing 'high quality' services. It is the overall quality that is essential in branding. All universities have provided evidence and drive towards such quality; however, this is problematic as the meaning of quality is rather relative, complex and contentious (Harrison, 1994, and Sallis, 2002). Therefore, it is questionable what 'high quality' is, and by whom it is determined. In this respect, each institution has shown a different definition and understanding. Alpha University sees it as the positive relationship with students; the university offers individual attention and family-like relationships that care about what is best for their students. Beta University provides evidence of another understanding for quality, which is the disciplined and controlled education. The discipline and systems they have, seem to match the aimed quality of education. With such perception of quality they seem to satisfy mostly the parents and again this comes from their understanding of the importance of the parent customer group to determine what quality is. Alpha and Beta Universities do not have a systematic approach to quality, but rather a conceptual approach. At Gamma, however, there is a systematic approach depending on the 'quality assurance' system to manage such an issue. It believes that quality is determining the customer needs (Mostafa, 2006), and the 'quality assurance' system is there to guarantee that the service offered is achieving customer needs consistently. Thus, quality at Alpha and Gamma Universities reflects responsiveness and care given to the student customer group compared to quality at Beta that somehow 'ignores' students' views.

10.5.5 University Heritage

Reflecting on the other aspects within this theme a university's heritage and traditions are important aspects. Nguyen and LeBlanc (2001) identify an institutional reputation and image as a mirror of the organisation's history which serves to communicate to its target groups the quality of its service in comparison with competitors. The key word in Nguyen and LeBlanc words is 'history', which shows the importance of this aspect within this theme. The importance of university heritage also stems from the customers' perception about the relatively short 'history' of private higher education in Syria. It should be highlighted that the MoHE still allows further private universities to be established. The number of private universities between 2007 and 2010 has increased from nine to fifteen (MoHE, 2010). The three cases included in this study were established in 2005 or earlier. This could suggest that these universities belong to the 'first generation' of private universities in Syria. This provides them with an important competitive advantage over the 'second generation' universities as they have relatively more history and experience. The first four years of a university's life are most critical as the public image of a university changes radically after its first group of graduates go on to the labour market and prove the benefits of the education received. Beta University is the most fortunate of all private universities as it was the first to be licensed and start teaching, and consequently graduate students. This has reflected greatly on its perceived image and enrolment. Apart from that, the 'semantic manipulation', 'persuasion' and use (or misuse) of the word 'first', has been employed by Beta where they try to convey through promotional materials that they are the 'first' on a ranking scale.

10.6 Theme 5: Environment

Three marketing aspects have been grouped into this theme: location, built-environment and accommodation. These aspects dynamically interrelate as they relate to a university's campus and environment. Similar grouping has been suggested in the literature where such theme is called 'place' (Kotler & Fox, 1995), 'channel' (Wasmer *et al.*, 1997), 'premiums' and convenience' (Ivy & Naude, 2004), and 'living' (Ho & Hung, 2008). This theme also

relates to the 'physical evidence' in Kotler and Fox as these aspects reflect greatly on the service offering mix.

10.6.1 Location

Four issues contribute to location: geographic location, environment, accessibility and visibility. The geographic location for the three universities is of crucial importance and is selected on a strategic basis. As the MoHE imposes private universities to be in rural areas, it is questionable as to whether it has succeeded in widening access to higher education, and provided better social justice with such a decision. The majority of students of Alpha University are from rural local areas. However, in the other two case studies it has not succeeded as the vast majority are from urban areas. This could suggest some implications; as the initiative reflected positively on students and staff coming from the local rural areas, it has reflected negatively on other people coming from urban areas, as they have to travel to rural areas for education (Osborne & Shuttleworth, 2004). Being close to urban areas, which have the highest demographic density, is evident in all three universities. Their highest potential customer segments are those within their catchment areas as a university close to home is preferred by customers. Briggs (2006, 706) identifies a similar trend, and says that Scottish universities are regional in their student recruitment reach, so their undergraduate population tends to be local. Beta University, however, attempts to overcome such an issue by providing quality residence halls. Nonetheless, parental safeguarding of students is emerging evidence in all case studies, and this shows that parents prefer a university close to home, allowing their children to live at home. This has been supported by the major role of parents in the university selection process. This is not the case in other contexts, such as the UK or USA, where parents might push their children out of home and leave their local areas, in order for them to experience independence.

The second issue is the environmental dimension where universities have been attempting to promote their location environmental dimensions. Alpha, for example, promotes being situated in an attractive scenic area with greenery, hills and valleys. Beta, on the other hand, promotes the unpolluted fresh air in their area which stimulates studying. The third and

fourth issues are accessibility and visibility which have been triggered by all three universities, by being near a major highway. Easy access is vital as the vast majority of students and staff needed to commute from their towns and cities. To ensure convenience, all universities provide their own transportation.

10.6.2 Built-Environment

The importance of the built-environment aspect has emerged in all universities. All cases started functioning in temporary buildings and later moved to permanent. This has been a strategic decision as all cases have aimed at being among the pioneering providers in the market relating to the university heritage aspect. The period of move from the temporary buildings to the permanent ranged in all cases. Beta and Gamma Universities were fast, but Alpha was slow and this has reflected dramatically on student satisfaction, enrolment and image. This shows the relationship between the provisions of suitable built-environment, and customer satisfaction and enrolment.

The importance of a university's built-environment for potential customers stems from the physical evidence and proof that it offers and trust that it establishes. A first encounter of a university may not show any other indicator of what the university is like. A factor that led to this is the emerging market where private universities do not have long established history to prove their performance and potential; some universities have not, as yet, had graduates. Universities' websites show plenty of imagery of various areas and buildings of their campuses, which is a way of showing their potential to the public. These website photographs have provided a quick means of comparison for students to judge providers as other means are absent. When the built-environment is impressive and complicated, it will be a major attribute in students' selection criteria. University growth and prosperity will be evident to the public eye through the growing and expanding of its built-environment. In this prospect, it is the material representation of the buildings and the way they look physically that matters.

The built-environment is also highly important and a source of major concern to the MoHE, which has been worried that the new private universities might not be able to provide sufficient and 'up to the standard' requirements. One private university was shut down by the MoHE for that reason, which was a warning sign to all other private universities to take this issue very seriously and not admit more students than could be safely accommodated. Major continuous construction work has been evident in all three cases, which indicates that they are expanding and growing, as the larger the built-spaces available, the more students can be admitted. Alpha is restrained by the limited space available which is reflected by the small student population, while the other two universities have not had such a concern.

10.6.3 Accommodation

Accommodation relates to the built-environment and location. It relates to the former as the residence halls are part of the built-environment. Holdsworth and Nind (2005) highlight the importance of providing good accommodation options and its reflections on attracting students in New Zealand. The findings of this study challenge this assumption as strategies regarding accommodation varied in the cases studied. Alpha and Gamma Universities decided to construct small residence halls off-campus, but Beta decided to construct larger halls on-campus. When the latter decided to build on-campus, this helped by making its built-environment larger. This issue has been important to prospective students and parents as they generally judged the potential of a university by the size of the built-environment. Accommodation also relates to location; Alpha and Gamma Universities have focussed on local and neighbouring catchment areas, where students would not need to leave their parents' homes. Beta, however, stretches its catchment to reach national level with the provision of large accommodation, which is essential for a certain customer segment. With accommodation on campus, a secure isolated environment has been created at Beta. Nonetheless, parents still prefer a university closer to home especially when the student is female.

10.7 Summary

This chapter has presented a cross-case *nomothetic* analysis reflecting on the case studies and establishing a basis for analytic generalisations. This has been done by means of comparative analysis, discussions and reflections on theory and literature. Nonetheless, individuality of each case study has not been ignored as I have drawn on both similarities and differences. In presenting the chapter, findings from all three case studies have been grouped and reduced into five elements through a thematic approach. Based on critical reflection, applying this particular model in a nomothetic framework shows dynamism, interaction and fluidity between the themes and aspects. The five themes discussed are teaching and learning, customer centred focus, finance, branding and environment. These themes and aspects have provided reflections on the theoretical models of the marketing mix and strategies.

The chapter has shown key similarities and differences between cases. The overall key similarities are centred on the five themes discussed in the chapter, and more particularly on the aspects of programme, academic staff, English language, customer relationships, enquiry and enrolment management, scholarships, communication, international relationships, accreditation, strategic location and built-environment. All three cases offer programmes that are highly required by the public, and this shows a particular sensitivity in private higher education to customers. Teaching or focusing on English language and high calibre academic staff are also core aspects for all cases. Attention to establish a positive customer relationship is another important issue which starts from the first customer visit, enquiry and subsequent enrolment. All case studies also provide scholarships aiming at attracting particular student groups. In the branding theme, three aspects have been evident in all case studies, communication, international partnership and accreditation. It is noteworthy how focus has been placed on these three aspects to build a university's public image. The choice of strategic location is also a generalised issue as the cases realise the importance of convenience for prospective students. Finally, the importance of built-environment has been stressed by all cases as it is the physical evidence of potential and seriousness.

Reflecting on, and evaluating marketing strategies, in all three case studies, has shown a developed understanding and practice exceeding the “traditional understanding of marketing as a process of selling or informing the public about the services” highlighted by Maringe (2005, 148) in the developing world. All cases provided some evidence on market research; the example mentioned has been restricted to methods of communication and evaluation surveys. Although none of the universities has a marketing office or directorate, public relations are used instead. This does not mean they do not look at marketing as a strategic option; the issue concerns the exact naming of the term ‘marketing’ which is not suitable in the educational context in Syria. This raises again the discussion presented in Chapter Two about the controversially negative attitudes maintained against marketing in education e.g. Sharrock (2000) and Holbrook (2005).

All cases reflect various levels of evidence of customer orientation which is the main element of marketing concepts (Taylor & Reed, 1995). The relationship and branding marketing strategies have been highlighted in these cases due to the major role of the word-of-mouth reputation in the Syrian market. Relationship and branding are marketing strategies that build and empower the relationships of an institution with the public, and influence perception of quality (Foskett, 1999, 47; Harries, 2009; and Cubillo *et al.*, 2006). Universities have also provided various evidence of responsiveness to customer demand; they anticipate customer requirements which Foskett (1998, 48) believes to be an essential element of strategic planning. Marketing has reflected on strategic decisions in all three cases, for example, the strategic choice of university location.

The commonalities in marketing strategies mainly result from the market in which the institutions function. In other words, to some extent, similar external market forces impact on these case studies, and shape their marketing strategies. For example, the regulations and guidelines imposed by the MoHE, and customer demands and requirements lead to particular common marketing strategies.

Although similarities have been highlighted between cases, each case has shown a significantly different approach in dealing with similar issues, which leads to the following

issue of case study uniqueness. Key differences have been evident in the approach and strategy of managing the mentioned aspects. Although 'international partnership' has been highlighted to be common in all cases, the strategy of managing this differs. The method of approaching international relationships has been addressed differently in each case; Alpha works on a French orientation; Gamma works on international, and Beta focuses on a national and Arab orientation. Each university's orientation reveals strategies of identity where each case study aims at associating its brand name with the destination it is focusing on. Another more explicit example of differences is the method of managing direct enquiry and enrolment. Such differences show that these cases are looking at such issues from a different strategic perspective. An institution needs to be adaptable and flexible to its particular organisational needs and circumstances. Institutional needs and circumstances are not the only factors for case uniqueness; there has also been a tendency in these cases to distinguish themselves from competitors, and certain strategies have been used for that.

Striking a balance between similarities and differences, I believe that organisations functioning in similar contexts would have overall similar guideline strategies to shape their marketing; nonetheless, there is an opportunity for uniqueness supported by the organisational contextual factors. All cases are common and unique at the same time. In this respect, saying that each institution needs its own formula of the marketing strategy or mix (Maringe, 2005) seems correct. For this reason Taylor and Reed (1995) suggest the idea of situational marketing as there could not be a prescribed marketing formula that applies to all organisations all the time. Issues of uniqueness and distinctiveness distinguish each institution from the other in the public perception, and this, in turn, feeds and enforces student choice. In other words, if institutions were the same, student choice would be meaningless. More discussion on the match and relationship between the student choice of university and marketing strategies is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter Eleven

Student Choice of University and Marketing Strategy: a Composite Model

11.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the findings presented and analysed in earlier chapters relating to the research questions. This also involves reflection and discussions of related research and theoretical models. The main purpose of this chapter is to indicate the basis of the evidence of a close connection between student choice and marketing strategies. The connection between the two models works towards a composite synthesis model. The structure of this chapter follows student choice of university model with its five distinct stages (motives, information gathering, evaluation and selection, decision and enrolment and post-purchase evaluations) discussed in Chapter Six, with reflections on the marketing strategy model, with its five themes and aspects as discussed in the earlier chapter. It is important to mention that the decision to structure the discussion in this style has been a result of the findings which present student choice of university model as the core around which marketing themes, and aspects within a marketing strategy, centre and evolve.

The association between student choice of university and marketing strategies has already been highlighted by Gray (1991), Kotler and Fox (1995), Foskett *et al.* (2003), Ivy and Naude (2004), Briggs (2006), and Maringe (2006). The latter says, for example, that a useful way of understanding a market is to have a clear grasp of the choice and decision making process of intending applicants. Briggs (2006) adds that a conceptual model of institutional choice provides an institution with the marketing intelligence to improve their portfolios and facilitate strategic benchmarking between institutions. Effective marketing should develop strategies that not only influence or manipulate choices, but help customers

to reach informed decisions (Foskett *et al.*, 2003). However, none of the mentioned research has reached a detailed synthesis model; this chapter bridges that gap.

Table 11.1 shows a matrix of relationships between aspects of marketing and steps in student choice. The 'Xs' in the table represents incidents of relationships between the aspects or stages of each model. An example of these relationships between the two models is between student motives to pursue higher education, and the programmes offered by an institution; it is a two-way supply and demand connection. Some particular programmes are more appealing to students as they satisfy particular needs, and consequently they are more sought after. As a result of this demand, universities aim at providing such programmes; there is a link between student needs and institutional response. It is not only student needs that are affecting marketing strategies, the latter also affects the former. For example, when there are a limited number of programmes available at a university that is geographically convenient to a student, the choice of a particular programme might be altered to suit that student's needs. This chapter explains more about these relationships, revealing an integration and synthesis of the two models.

Table 11. 1: *Matching student choice and marketing strategies*

Themes and Aspects of Marketing Strategy		Stages of Student Choice of University				
		Motives	Information	Evaluation & Selection	Decision & Enrolment	Post-Purchase Evaluation
Teaching & Learning	Programme	X	X	X		X
	English Language	X	X	X		X
	Academic Staff		X	X		X
	Internship	X	X	X		X
Customer Centre Focus	Uni/Stu. Relationship		X	X	X	X
	Student Life	X	X	X		X
	Enquiry & Enrolment		X	X	X	X
Finance	Discount & Scholarships		X	X		X
	Cost		X	X		X
Branding	Communication	X	X	X	X	X
	Intel. Partnership	X	X	X		X
	Accreditation	X	X	X		X
	Quality		X	X	X	X
	University Heritage		X	X		X
Environment	Location		X	X	X	X
	Built-Environment		X	X	X	X
	Accommodation		X	X		X

According to the matrix in the table above, the discussion starts with the initial stage in the student choice model, motives and then moves to the following stages of information, evaluation and selection, enrolment and ends with post-purchase evaluation.

11.2 Motives

This section discusses the relationship between students' motives and need to pursue higher education, and institutional marketing strategies to satisfy such matters. As it is crucial in any business to identify prospective customers' unmet needs, and provide a product or

service that satisfies such needs (Kotler & Fox, 1995), the relationship is established between prospective students' motives, and what the university offers. The link between prospective students' motives and the marketing strategy model is most explicit with aspects of the teaching and learning theme e.g. programme, English language and internship.

The findings from the student survey in Chapter Six place issues of career and security to be the most important in order to stimulate students to pursue higher education. These findings are consistent with those presented by Brown and Scase (1994), Night and Yorke (2004), Holdsworth and Nind (2005), and Saiti and Prokopiadou (2008). The case studies match this issue as they take good consideration of what programmes to offer; all their programmes are career orientated and, supposedly, lead to secure and rewarding careers. Nevertheless, the question raised is whether, in reality, these programmes do guarantee such proposed secure and rewarding work or it is just a social contextual myth. A related issue that has been raised throughout the research is subject programme hierarchy where particular subject programmes are viewed more highly than others. This issue has been tackled by Brooks (2003), who explains that such perspective is derived from the status of careers with which programmes are associated.

The internship programmes offered by Gamma University demonstrates how this particular university has taken such motives further by increasing and enhancing their students' professional prospects, which suggests that this university has developed a more sensitive and effective marketing strategy, as it better satisfies such needs. The choice of teaching in the English language is also relevant to this motive as it strengthens students' future employability. A further marketing aspect that relates to career and security motives is a university's international partnership. This relationship stems from the fact that some students may prefer to pursue future opportunities in foreign countries and organisations that are in partnership with a Syrian private university, such as Alpha University where a number of its students plan to travel to France for future prospects.

Both career and security motives, and social and personal motives have reflected on universities' marketing strategies. The choice of programme has reflects on the social motive of position and status. As certain professions are more socially respected in the Syrian context, the decision to provide such particular programmes seems accordant. It can be inferred that there is a relationship between social respect for particular professions and their rewardability, but this will need validating through further research. Other than that, social motives of friends, social networking and experience relate to the customer focused theme and particularly to the student life aspect in the marketing strategy model. Although such motives have scored lowest on the student survey, they are still addressed by the universities by creating an attractive social environment. This shows higher sensitivity to the wider range of motives of attending university for different individual customer segments.

Personal motives to pursue higher education, such as expanding knowledge, personal development and ambition of excellence also relate to the teaching and learning marketing theme. A link is established as these motives would be typically satisfied through the intellectual gains students obtain through university education. Apart from this, the case studies have shown no other signs of satisfying personal motives, which suggests that there could be further investigation and investment in addressing such needs and motives.

The above examples of relationships between students' motives and marketing strategies show the extent to which marketing strategies in private higher education in Syria are affected or even shaped by customer needs and requirements. Such an issue in literature has been discussed through the area of customer needs analysis e.g. Gray (1991) and Maringe and Gibbs (2009).

11.3 Information

Discussion in this section reveals relationships between prospective students' information gathering processes and institutional marketing strategies in information provision. Prospective students, through their information gathering process, have been investigating

all aspects highlighted in the marketing strategy model. As information has been described as critically important in shaping students decisions, universities have developed various strategies to target this issue.

Kotler and Fox (1995) categorise information channels into two main groups: marketer controlled, for example, advertising, sales representatives and non-marketer controlled i.e. word-of-mouth and mass media. It could be argued against this grouping as an organisation is still able to control sources of information that Kotler and Fox consider as non-marketer controlled; nonetheless, the control is indirect and more difficult to maintain. Foskett and Hesketh (1997) agree that both channels are under the control of an institution, yet the indirect channels require long-term external relationship management, and the pursuit of quality within the institution. Therefore, information channels are grouped in two categories: directly controlled and indirectly controlled.

11.3.1 Indirectly Controlled

The indirectly marketer controlled channels of information, which build an institution's word-of-mouth reputation, are most influential in shaping student choice as they are more trusted and from which prospective students start the information gathering process. Marketing aspects that relate to indirectly marketer controlled channels are university/student relationships, student life, academic staff and university heritage. The latter relates to the information gathering process as information or institutional informal reputation is an accumulative concept enforced through time.

The association between university/student relationship and information is evident as current students are acting as agents providing the public, and more particularly prospective students, with ideas and information about their institutions. Similar association and effect have been spotted by Al-Alak (2006) in Jordanian private universities, a context that could be similar to Syria. If a university builds positive relationships with its current customers based on respect and understanding, they would supposedly offer positive feedback to the public. Similar effects of positive image reflections are evident through the student life

aspect as when students enjoy an interesting active social life, they would be informing their social networks, and more particularly their friends about this. The importance of these marketing aspects is also evident as many prospective students have sought advice and information from their social networks and people with direct service experience. In addition, when information about a university is delivered through a student-to-student channel, it is more understandable and better communicated than it would be through any other formal channel e.g. admission staff members. The student-to-student information channel is also perceived to be objective, and consequently more trusted than those directly controlled by providers. Such a critical role for current students justifies their highly important state e.g. one university looks at its current students as ambassadors of the university and treats them accordingly. In this respect, a marketing strategy that is more customer-focused building positive university/student relationship and active student life is more effective in promoting a positive image to the public and prospective students.

University members of academic staff are also among the indirectly controlled channels as they provide information through an informal manner. The reference here is that the academic staff would usually talk about the institutions they work for to the public. This issue could relate to the internal marketing idea discussed by Gronroos (2000), where he believes that an organisation needs to firstly market its services and products to its staff, so that they strongly believe in it, and then mirror it positively to the audience. The importance of this channel has been revealed as prospective students, through their social networks, might informally meet a member of academic staff at a given university and seek an insider's perspective and advice. Academics, in particular, are more sought after, as they are perceived to be objective and highly trusted due to their socially respected role. Only one university, Gamma, realises such a critical role for academic staff and internal marketing which is a key area for a marketing development strategy. Gamma University has implemented some techniques to empower internal marketing e.g. staff empowerment.

11.3.2 Directly Controlled

Directly controlled sources of information, such as direct enquiry, press advertisement, and print-materials have been used as follow up sources as prospective students have already gained information from other informal sources. This has significant implications for marketers as they need to place particular attention to target these indirect sources before direct. Lauder (2007) highlights possible decision manipulation through directly controlled channels of communication and advertisement; this study has not come across any example of such manipulation, but rather advertising is acting on providing clarity about institutional strengths and enhancing personal ability to make informed decisions. Marketing aspects that relate to directly controlled channels of information are promotional materials and direct enquiry.

Promotional materials used by students are newspapers advertisements, street billboards, brochures, flyers, prospectus and websites. All, except websites, have scored badly in the student survey in Chapter Six, although the case studies have reported considerable effort and investment in these channels. The low score for newspaper advertisements and street billboards is attributed to the fact that their role is informing about a brand, or what Berger and Wallingford (1996) call, establishing awareness of the existence of an institution, rather than providing detailed information. **The prospectuses, brochures and flyers also scored low as people in Syria prefer more convenient sources of information.** The implication from this is that universities have developed more effective alternative strategies delivering information verbally.

The website, on the other hand, has scored a high ranking (third). Its high ranking has been a result of the practical convenience it provides through browsing potential institutions pages and even gaining some visual insight and evidence on potential providers. Not all cases have been successful in developing websites that are able to communicate effectively with the audience. This could be a result of the poor website design experience in the country, or perhaps not showing enough dedication for website development by the institutions.

Direct enquiry is also one very important marketer controlled channel of information due to the weaker role of other marketer controlled read channels and its face-to-face communication strength. All case studies have developed specific strategies; nonetheless, Gamma University seems to have developed the most effective strategy as it involves its current students in the direct enquiry and information provision process. Again, the importance of involving students emerges as they are normally more trusted than other formal university associated people e.g. admission staff. This example shows this particular university's ability to connect its strategies with detailed customer understanding. The direct enquiry offers a mutual benefit for an institution and prospective student. It is a chance for prospective students to inspect what they have been told about an institution, and it is a chance for the institution to provide visual and physical proof of information offered earlier or conceptions gained through other less controlled channels.

11.4 Evaluation and Selection

This stage in choosing a university is the most critical among all others as it relates to all the highlighted marketing themes and aspects. Therefore, in brief, discussing relationships is presented following the six categories of student selection criteria as mentioned in Chapter Six: teaching and learning, informal reputation, convenience, administrative, social and economic issues. It is critically important for an institution to highlight what is most important for its prospective customers in their selection, and work on matching these factors, as this would increase the probability of gaining a larger market share.

11.4.1 Teaching and Learning

It is noteworthy how the same issue of teaching and learning has been found in the data collected from students, as well as from data collected from institutions. This issue has scored the highest mean in the student selection criteria through the survey, and similarly its importance has been consistently highlighted by case studies. These findings are consistent with those presented by Ivy and Naude (2004), Holdsworth and Nind (2005), Ho and Hung (2008), and Ivy (2008). According to students, a good university offers a high

level of teaching and learning opportunities for which specific attributes are required, such as the high calibre faculty members, language of instruction, convenient number of students per class, up-to-date coursebooks and modern teaching methods. Most of these issues have been taken seriously by the case studies, but with different articulation. The variance has been a result of different market forces on particular universities and institutional context and orientation.

It was noticed that certain issues in this category, such as programmes, language of instruction and academic staff, have been given more attention by the case study universities. Although other teaching and learning issues, such as the teaching methods, coursebooks and final-year-abroad programmes are relatively important in the student selection criteria, there has not been much mention by the universities of such issues indicating minor attention. In order for an institution to better match a prospective student's selection criteria, more attention should be given for such issues.

Customer power and influence over institutional decisions are clearly evident in the institutional choice of programmes to offer. Programme options provided by private universities are relatively narrow, and most programmes available are usually conventional and traditional, such as those offered at public higher education institutions. This is a result of private universities not being able to successfully offer programmes that cannot be sold easily; an organisation can offer only what is needed, or perceived to be needed, by the public.

11.4.2 Informal Reputation

The issue of informal and word-of-mouth reputation is important in the perceived institutional image and prospective student selection criteria. This is consistent with the findings of Al-Alak (2006) and Yang *et al.* (2008). Reflecting on informal reputation in marketing strategy, it relates mostly to the branding theme. It is interesting how prospective students make final judgements about a provider by its informal reputation, and what they hear from others. For example, in the case that they hear negative opinions about a

particular institution, they do not follow up with questions for further information; they literally leave the university out of their potential choice.

Relating to informal reputation, the marketing aspect of communication is important, as institutions empower positive institutional image through various channels of communication and promotion. Quality also relates to informal reputation as universities have been aiming at presenting themselves as institutions that deliver high quality services. From a public view, saying that a certain university is a quality university is the most important issue for selection. Nonetheless, the term 'quality' is still generic and holistic reflecting on every aspect and practice of an institution.

The most important element in this category is accreditation, whether local or international, which scored top in the student survey. Placing this issue at the top has been a result of the turbulent market status and official attitude at private higher education. It is an issue of security for prospective students where they want secure investment, and the private higher education does not seem to have gained such status yet. In order to gain public trust the universities have been designing and implementing several strategies. One example is the propaganda they run at each graduation ceremony, in an attempt to show the public that their students are graduating and being awarded the qualifications that they have been promised. As private higher education is an emerging sector, it is a matter of timing for private higher education to prove itself as its graduates go on to the professional world and show their competencies.

11.4.3 Convenience

Issues of convenience in the student selection criteria relate mostly to the environment theme in the marketing strategy. Overall, convenience scored badly in the student survey. Ivy (2008) highlights a similar minor role for this category. Comparing attention provided for the environment aspects by universities, with importance placed by students, it is noticed that universities are exaggerating students' expectations. Perhaps, efforts and

budgets invested in the environment should be invested elsewhere, for example, teaching and learning.

Only three issues of convenience scored relatively high in the student survey: transportation, technologies used in classrooms, and student services and facilities, ranking eleventh, fourteenth and eighteenth respectively. All case studies have shown particular understanding for the importance of providing transportation, due to their remote suburban geographical location. Technology used in classrooms is also well implemented as all three universities are providing modern teaching aids, such as overhead projectors and computer laboratories. The level of attention to student services and facilities varied between cases, which has been a result of the potential and capital investment available for each case. For example, as Beta University owns an extensive area of land, it has been able to construct a large number of sport and leisure areas. The issue of student services and facilities relates to the student life marketing aspect because better student facilities would enable more student activities.

Like Holdsworth and Nind's research (2005), this study shows a university's distance from home to be a minor factor in students' selections; however, differences emerge in the importance placed on university accommodation. Students have not considered living in the university provided accommodation as they prefer to live in private off-campus housing. This has implications for the university providing accommodation; it is not matching students' requirements for various reasons. It is relevant for universities to identify these reasons, and redesign their accommodation services to match customer preferences.

11.4.4 Administrative Issues

Administrative issues come third in the student selection criteria. This category relates to the customer centred focus theme of the marketing strategy as it deals with how a university manages its relationships with students. The issue that scored highest, eighth, in this category is institutional rules and regulations, which relates to formal regulations ensuring student discipline and commitment to study. My initial assumptions have been

that students might be deterred by formality and prefer a more casual learning environment. Nonetheless, this has proved to be incorrect as students are aware of the importance of discipline of a formal learning environment, and its positive impact that it would have on their learning experiences and outcomes. Beta University has been successful in designing a strategy that is able to match students', as well as parents' expectations, by establishing a well-disciplined environment.

The issues of student/administrative staff relationship and student support scored relatively badly in the student selection criteria. This raises the discussion of relationships presented by Al-Alak (2006), where he places a high importance of relationship issues in reflecting on student satisfaction, loyalty and business referral. In this respect, quality relationships would reflect on the long-term word-of-mouth reputation. Another issue that relates to the administrative category is the 'friendly' admission team members, which is discussed later in the 'decision and enrolment' section.

11.4.5 Social Issues

Although other research e.g. Brooks (2003) and McAllum *et al.* (2007) suggests friends or peers play an important role in student choice, this research shows that it has minimum influence in evaluation and selection. Nonetheless, the role of friends and peers has been more influential in the aspiration and information gathering stages. Social issues have scored last in the student selection and evaluation criteria; similarly minimum influence has been reported by Mullen (2009). When relating this category to the marketing strategy model, it associates mainly with student life. This limited association is a result of the weak influence an institution could have over such issues. For example, an institution is not able to determine, and directly control its students' socio-economic background and friendships. Nonetheless, this influence is evident in other issues, such as student population number, active student union and the social environment.

Concerning student population, two universities have implemented strategies to expand their population throughout the years, and one university decides to cater for a smaller

population. The issue of population has been invested by one university through the visual representation of crowded space through their visual communication channels. The issue of empty/crowded space is profoundly cultural. In the Western marketing conception, empty space might be perceived an advantage as it is conveying exclusivity. However, in a Syrian context, when a university is busy and crowded it provides prospective students with trust and comfort, as it is as sign that the university is ‘good’, ‘desired’ and ‘popular’.

‘Social environment’ and ‘active student union’ have scored badly in the student selection criteria. However, universities are not ignoring these issues, as particular strategies have been placed to provide friendly environments through the social activities, and the establishment of unions and societies. It was noticed that the larger a university is, the stronger the student union is and the more societies it has; and the smaller a university is, more emphasis is placed on social activities such as trips and parties.

11.4.6 Economic Issues

This category relates to the finance theme in the marketing strategy model as most of the aspects are replicated in two models, discounts and scholarships, and tuition cost. Economic issues are not viewed as important in the student selection criteria as this category has ranked fourth throughout the survey. Although the general supposition is that tuition cost is of major importance in the selection criteria, this issue is not of importance to students as it has scored low, ranking nineteenth. The findings of Ahier (2000), Cabrera and Nasa (2000), and Pimpa (2005) highlight the issue of cost to be important, yet the association is more emphasised on the family’s affordability. The low ranking empowers the assumption raised earlier, that students at private universities are mainly from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds.

Doti (2004) pinpoints the integration of financial issues with institutional strategic decisions as pricing policies reflect directly, and intensely, on revenues. Beta University has followed a pricing strategy, making itself the highest-priced educational institution in the country. Such a strategy has attracted a specific segment of customer groups. Another

issue that contributed to this state of low ranking of financial issue, is that students do not usually worry about tuition cost, as their parents are normally the fee payers in Syria. Moreover, this has been confirmed by the fact that there are not any national schemes for student loans or financing in the country. In this respect, a marketing strategy aimed at presenting educational services with a lower cost, such as Gamma University, is not that successful in influencing student choice, but for parents whose role is highly influential.

A related aspect to the economic issues is 'quality' where more expensive purchases are often conceived to be of better quality. This is consistent with the findings of Tang *et al.* (2004) and Holdsworth and Nind (2005). Prospective customers would not compromise price with quality, as the latter is far more important. This has certain implications for institutions that might assume it would be an ultimate goal to present services with the lowest fees no matter what the quality is. One issue that has not been raised by any of the cases, is the ease of payment and instalment systems. Nonetheless, from the cross-case analysis in Chapter Six, Gamma University has scored significantly higher above other universities in this study, showing students' appreciation of such an easy payment method.

To conclude, this stage is the most critical in the student choice model in its reflection and relationship to institutional marketing strategy. Student selection criteria have shown association with all the highlighted marketing aspects, and this again reveals the significant influence of customers in shaping the market and its strategies. The criticality of this stage stems from the point that a university is striving to match customers' criteria; nonetheless, the challenge emerges in identifying and matching the most salient. It is also almost impossible to match all customers' tastes and preferences, and this suggests a target marketing strategy through which a university could assign itself to segments of particular preferences, for example, a low cost institution for lower income groups. In the next section the discussion moves on to the following step in the student choice model: decision and enrolment.

11.5 Decision and Enrolment

The decision and enrolment stage mostly associates with the marketing aspect of enquiry and enrolment management. The association emerges as the method of managing enquiries and enrolment reflects on the students' decisions. Similar associations have been spotted by Dennis (1998) and Taylor *et al.* (2008). Students highlighted that their first visits affected their perception of an institution, and similarly institutions showed particular strategies to generate positive first impressions. Efficiency of the members of admission staff on these days affected decisions because through such days students evaluate the university's overall performance. There are examples where students changed their decision to enrol at a particular university due to their poor impression of the university on their visit. The serious efforts made to effectively manage these days illustrate the institution's awareness of the criticality of this stage of decision making.

Though it is a critical decision, prospective students have shown determination, and this demonstrates the universities' abilities in providing a sufficient amount of information. Although determined in their decisions, students are worried about making the wrong choice due to the turbulent and emerging state of the market. Institutions are using strategies and techniques to lessen such worry on the visit and enrolment days. For example, admission personnel will show prospective students and their families the campus, and the large capital investment indicating the serious efforts to make their institution succeed.

A question has been raised through the research about the identity of the real final decision maker, parents or students. The survey results have shown the students to be the actual final decision makers. However, it is still problematic to identify the real decision makers as students through the survey might have perceived it to have been their decision. Gray (1991) believes that parents' role in the decision fades towards the age of eighteen; nonetheless, this study shows otherwise as parents are still playing a very significant role in influencing the final decision. Foskett and Hesketh (1997) remark that marketing conceptualisations that ascribe choice-making to either parents only or students only do not capture the full complexity of choice in the education marketplace. Reflecting these

findings on marketing strategies, institutions need to understand the dynamic relationship between these two stakeholder groups and design strategies satisfying both. An example that exhibits such a responsive strategy and relates to direct enquiry is the open-day arrangements, where institutions invite both students as well as parents.

Related to the stage of decision-making and enrolment are aspects of location and built-environment. For example, though a student may have decided to enrol at a particular university, they may find that the commute from home to the university is too difficult and too far from home, and therefore may change their decision. For this reason, all institutions arrange free transportation for prospective customers from major destinations. The built-environment also reflects on decisions, as it is the initial physical evidence of an institution. Similarly, certain strategies are assigned to make the campus look its best to the audience. An example of this is when Alpha University moved to the new permanent campus some time before the start of direct enquiry and open-days.

11.6 Post-Purchase Evaluation

This stage emerges as students have evaluated their decision to attend a particular institution. Reflecting the post-purchase evaluation stage on the marketing strategy themes and aspects, the association is evident with all themes. Students' sensitivity to aspects within these themes highlights the relationship. For example, in 2008 universities had to increase tuition fees, and this reflected negatively on students' satisfaction as they felt they had been manipulated and exploited. A similar effect has been discussed by Supiano (2009) where she suggests that customers should be informed of the expected cost increase before enrolment.

With the importance of informal word-of-mouth reputation determining an institution's market position, students' views, opinions and satisfaction are critical. Added to this, the market is still emerging, and these students are the pioneers experiencing these institutions. A satisfied student will normally reflect a positive image of the university to the public. In the same way, student opinions and satisfaction reflect on marketing strategies. All the case

studies have shown an interest in investigating student satisfaction using systematic formal methods. Nonetheless, what has been noticed through the data collected is that these investigations have been focusing on aspects of teaching and learning through course evaluation surveys, ignoring other important institutional aspects. It could be justified that such focus has been a result of the teaching and learning aspects that are the most importantly viewed by students. To investigate students' views about other aspects, informal investigation methods, such as the staff-student causal conversations, are frequently used. The results of both formal and informal student satisfaction investigations have been considered and reflect on various important issues, such as future academic staff employability, yet levels of consideration and reflection varied from one university to another.

The range of responsiveness to students' views about particular issues from one case study to another is important. While Alpha University has been responsive to students' views, Beta University is on the other extreme. This is determined by the institutional culture, context and the way they view their students. At Alpha University, which is a small university with a family-like atmosphere, such an approach seems more appropriate. However, it is noteworthy that Alpha scored lowest in the overall student satisfaction, whereas Beta scored highest. This leads to the inference that student satisfaction is not achieved through being highly responsive but rather by being highly disciplined and regulated such as in the case of Beta University. This has implications on much of the literature on student satisfaction. For example, DeShields *et al.* (2005) and Popli (2005) assume that responsiveness to student and customer needs leads to higher levels of student satisfaction. In this research such an assumption is not applicable. Perhaps, replacing the word *responsive* with the word *sensitive* is more appropriate, as students want to be heard and respected and at the same time do not appreciate an institution that is indulgent.

Student expectations are a significant explanatory factor. Kotler & Armstrong (2008) note that what determines if a customer is satisfied or dissatisfied with a purchase is the relationship between the customer's expectations and the service perceived experience. Prugsamatz *et al.* (2007) stress the importance of student expectation for marketers as it

provides a standard of comparison against which customers judge the performance of a provider. In the survey, students indicated a neutral position for the issue of university matching their expectations. This indicates that through information provision, universities are not being cautious enough not to create false or exaggerated expectations from prospective students. This raises the discussion by Armstrong and Lumsden (1999) where they state that many institutions commit the mistake of creating promotional materials with exaggerated information and photography.

Despite the fact that there is a close connection between the findings of this study and previous studies, there are some unique insights in this research because it takes into account key issues previously overlooked. There is no other research that tightly and dynamically matches student choice of university with institutional marketing strategies. The design, location and contextual culture add further uniqueness to this particular research. The difference in the findings of the earlier research has been a result of these contextual cultural differences. Vrontis *et al.* (2007) highlight differences in student choice of university between the developed and the developing worlds based on contextual and customer rights differences. This gives this study more significance as it is conducted in a developing country where no previous similar research has been conducted. Among the major contextual differences and factors influencing student choice and marketing strategies, is the role of family and friends, as well as the emergent state of the market.

11.7 Summary

It has been found that stages of student choice of university and aspects of marketing strategy are interrelated dynamically and dependently. The chapter has provided explanation on incidents of relationships between the marketing mix elements and aspects and stages of student choice as shown in Table 11.1. Discussion in this chapter has highlighted and revealed a two-way matrix relationship between the two models. The match and relationships between these two groups, students and universities, imply that marketing strategies at the case study universities are significantly related to customer demand and requirement, and that student choices are being affected by marketing

strategies and practices. It is a 'push-pull' relationship where each is influencing and shaping the other. I suggest a metaphor of the association to that of the atom (see Figure 11.1) where the student choice of university model is the nucleus, surrounded by marketing strategy elements, which are the electrons. They are all part of an atom and have different electrical charges which resemble the 'push' and 'pull' factors determining the student's and the institution's behaviour. That is to say marketing strategies are determined, and shaped by student choice of university, but on the other hand, student choice is determined and shaped by the providers marketing strategies together with some other external factors. These two components form the same nuclear unit and are tightly bound to each other; an alternation or change in any of the components of the models would alter the entire structure of the atom. This is a chain reaction. An example explaining more on the dependant relationship is the dynamic association between the information gathering stage and the communication marketing aspect. Universities target particular sources of information because they are most approached by prospective students. If students change their preferred sources of information, marketing strategies will be modified to adjust to new change. Similarly, students are approaching particular sources of information because they are serviced and offered by the providers. If universities provide information through a new convenient channel, consequently students will adapt to consider this new channel.

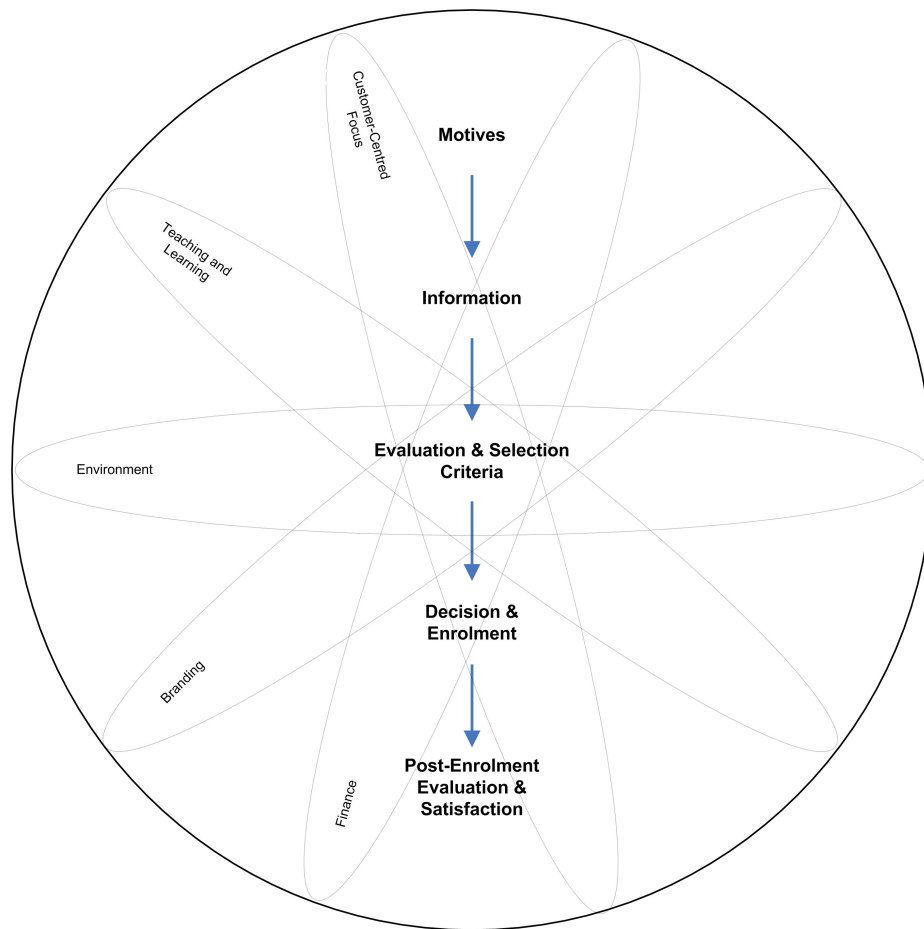


Figure 11. 1: *The Atom Marketing Model: Reflecting Student Choice of University on Marketing Strategy*

The atom marketing model moves our theoretical understanding forward from previous works in the way it deals with marketing from two dimensions, the customer and the organisation, unlike other methods which give customers a less active role in shaping marketing strategies. The atom marketing model provides an alternative to other marketing models, for example, marketing mix, as it provides, through researching student choice, further information on how to structure marketing elements or aspects. Integrating findings from student choice and marketing aspects would feed a chain reaction, comprehensive and effective marketing strategy that places the customer as the centre of the marketing behaviour of an institution. Thus, an understanding and synthesis of the student choice model and marketing strategies model offers a more holistic, contextual, sensitive, proactive and effective marketing strategy.

Chapter Twelve

Conclusions

12.1 Introduction

This final chapter firstly evaluates the research outcomes in relation to the three research questions posed by study. The extent to which these questions were answered is assessed in three subsections. The first addresses the issue of student choice, the second addresses marketing strategies and the last reflects student choice on marketing strategies. The discussion then focuses on the original contributions of this study to knowledge, highlighting research strengths in terms of methodology, theory and content. Finally, research limitations are discussed and directions for further research into the understanding of these issues under scrutiny, are suggested.

The importance of this study and the suggestions it raises stem from the fact that it was conducted during an important and critical phase in higher education (HE) in Syria. This study witnessed and recorded crucial issues as private HE was newly introduced in the country, and students had to make choices. With the presence of various public and several private options, prospective students now have more of a variety of providers to choose from than ever before. The sudden emergence of private universities has posed considerable challenges, as they struggle to locate and improve their position within the market.

12.2 Assessment of Research Outcomes

This section summarises, assesses and reflects on the research outcome. This is organised in three sub-sections following the research questions.

12.2.1 Research Question One: How do prospective students choose, act and prioritize in the university buying decision making process?

Informed by evidence from students and parents, student choice and decision-making of a private university in Syria follows five steps. The process starts with motivation to pursue HE. Issues of future career, security, society and personality are the major motivators. The most important relate to economic future prospects showing students' perceptions of HE, for example, a university education provides the opportunity of securing a 'good' job which would provide a better way of life. These motives are pragmatic and instrumental as students have certain expectations of future benefits from obtaining university education. This study finds that students have a combination of motives for pursuing HE with different priorities.

Following 'motivation' is 'information gathering'. There are two approaches to information gathering; they are subconsciously and consciously. Much of the information gathering process taking place while students are still in the early years of secondary education, is unpremeditated and subconscious. The range between the two approaches tends to be more conscious, advertent and even intensive as the student approaches the time to go to university. Five categories of information sources have been identified in this study: (a) social connections namely family and friends, (b) direct enquiry, (c) media, (d) current students and (e) the department of private HE at the Ministry of Higher Education. The most effective amongst these is direct enquiry (face-to-face), where students visit a university which is due to visual proof and verbal communication power. Syrian HE customers prefer direct contact with university staff and students rather than other sources, such as printed materials. After direct enquiry comes the university website. This source was expected to be of minor importance; however, students showed particular interest in this source due to its convenience. Although these two sources, direct enquiry and website are highly powerful, they are not trusted. It was interesting to find that customers had doubts concerning the veracity of information provided. This was due to public attitude towards private business in Syria which is perceived to be profit-orientated, and private universities are not immune. Hence, customers validate information provided by 'marketer directly controlled' sources against other 'less-marketer, or non-marketer controlled'

sources, such as family and friends, which are the most influential here. Another information validating technique is to approach current students at a given university to ask their opinion. This is another influential source as it relies on perceived knowledge of current students' practical experience at their university.

Based on information gathered, the third step of student choice is to create a list of potential universities and evaluate the alternatives. In the search for a university that matches their preferences and priorities, students use a certain criteria which encompass six variables: teaching and learning, informal reputation, convenience, administrative, social and economic issues. The most vital of these are issues related to teaching and learning quality, as customers are aware of the positive impact of this variable on future potential and prospects of students. Syrian HE customers have a perception of university as basically a place to learn and gain knowledge, rather than an opportunity to socialise or have extra curricula activities. After the teaching and learning variable comes informal reputation. The significant role for this variable results from a lack of official ranking or evaluating bodies that could provide the public with realistic reviews about providers. The vitality of informal reputation is enforced by the emerging and turbulent state of the private HE market, and the lack of public credibility. Administrative issues came third, followed by economic and social issues.

Having listed potential universities and during the evaluation process students narrow their options down until there are one or two remaining, and then make their final decision. Through the 'narrowing down' process, students seek further information and usually visit their short-listed universities. For students, the decision to select a particular university is critical and brings major ramifications on their future life; thus, they seek advice mainly from their parents who typically accompany them on the enrolment day and influence their decision according to their preferences and circumstances. Based on all the information gathered and advice offered, a student eventually reaches a final decision and proceeds to enrol. The enrolment stage is highly sensitive as any inconvenience (e.g. enrolment team inefficiency) might alter a student's decision about that particular university.

The final step in the process is post-choice reflections. Once students have enrolled and experienced the service, they start to evaluate their decision and the selected university. This stage has manifestations about student expectations, views and satisfaction. Students compare the reality of the experience with perceptions established earlier through the information collected. Any incongruity between expectation and reality leads to dissatisfaction. Students at private universities are most satisfied about issues related to teaching and learning, and they are least satisfied about issues related to tuition fees which is due to the instability and increase in tuition every year.

The findings establish a good basis of answers to the first research question in detail. The extensive research, using a wide range of tools and participants, provides a satisfactory outcome. The overall structure, and steps of student choice of university observed in this study, reflect findings in other research e.g. Paulsen (1990), Foskett and Hesketh (1997), Cabrera and Nasa (2000), Briggs (2006), and Vrontis et al. (2007). However, it was expected that due to the contextual and cultural difference of this study, where other research was mostly conducted in Western countries, significant differences emerge in the detail and ranking of different variables within each stage. The most significant dissimilarity has been the importance placed on issues of informal reputation resulting from the emergent state of the market. Another significant difference is the strong influential role of parents and relatives in the particular context of this study.

12.2.2 Research Question Two: How do universities market to attract new students?

Informed by the evidence from three case studies, marketing strategies at private universities are based on five elements: teaching and learning, customer centred focus, finance, branding and environment. These elements comprise several marketing areas and activities, and reflect on how universities shape their services.

Teaching and learning is the most important element to market to attract prospective students. This element comprises four related aspects: programme, English language,

academic staff and internship programmes. It was found that teaching and learning are given particular priority in the sense that they are expected to train students on the required professional knowledge and skills for future employment prospects.

A customer centred focus is the second element which encompasses aspects of university/student relationship, direct enquiry and management and student life. This element shows a university's tendency towards a relationship marketing model. Attention to establish a positive customer relationship is essential, which starts from the initial customer visits and enquiries. Positive relationships are also maintained and empowered through enrolment and the service experience. This element highlights evidence of customer orientation which is a core element of the concept of marketing.

The third element is finance containing aspects related to fees, discounts and scholarships. This element is sensitive as prior to establishing private universities, HE had always been offered free of charge by public universities. Private universities charge a relatively high tuition fee compared to the local per capita income. Because of this, all private universities realise that they are a second option for a prospective student. Although different pricing and discount strategies have emerged from the case studies, this element still plays a key role in shaping an institution's marketing strategy, as it affects revenues, enrolment and applicants' economic background.

Another key marketing element for private universities in Syria is branding. This element includes the largest number of aspects (communication, international partnerships, accreditation, quality and heritage) which all contribute to build an institutional image. The main factor which makes this element highly important is the public perceived image a university aims to establish. Private universities aspire to portray themselves as institutions with an international dimension, that are well accredited and provide quality services. Such an image is delivered through current students and the various methods of communication. The emerging state of the market places considerable emphasis on this element.

The final element in marketing and attracting prospective students is environment which includes three aspects: location, built-environment and accommodation. Strategic location is crucial as the Ministry of Higher Education forces all Syrian private universities to be located away from major cities, in rural areas. Basic location strategies suggest being close to major highways in order to facilitate mobility and visibility. Built-environment has also been emphasised, as a prospective student will judge a university's potential and propensity through its built-environment. Finally, the aspect of accommodation is used to reflect a university's national capacity.

The outcomes on the second research question are satisfactory as they reveal detailed marketing strategies at the studied cases. It was expected that the findings would reflect the exact marketing mix elements provided in the literature. However, the overall style of grouping aspects and elements of marketing strategies through this research shows a variation to those offered in the literature through the marketing mix models e.g. Kotler and Fox's (1995) "7Ps", Wasmer et al.'s (1997) "5Cs", Ivy and Naude's (2004) "7Ps", and Ho and Hung's (2008) "five elements". This study finds a different mix consisting of five different elements. The variation between this mix and others emerges from a different emphasis and interrelationships of various aspects within each element affected by contextual and institutional factors. **Three of the elements are, to some extent, correspond with the mixes offered in the literature: teaching and learning, finance, and environment. However, two elements, branding and customer centred focus, correspond less as they are not as highly developed in the mixes offered in the literature according to research evidence in the Western higher education context (Chapleo, 2003).** The main factor contributing to this is the emergent state of market where these two issues are given more emphasis. That is to say, in an emergent market, a newly-born institution emphasises on elements of branding and customer centred focus.

12.2.3 Research Question Three: What is the relationship between student choice of university and marketing strategies portrayed by the universities?

Matching and comparing the findings emerging from the three research phases together, an interdependent relationship is evident between students' choices and university marketing strategies. Stages of student choice of university and elements and aspects of marketing strategy are consistent and interrelated dynamically and dependently. The research has shown a two-way matrix relationship between the two models; this relationship has provided a composite model (the atom marketing model). An example of this consistent, dependant and dynamic interrelation is between sources of information that prospective students use to gather information about private universities, and the methods of communication employed by private universities. That is to say, if an institution did not provide information through its website, prospective students would not be able to gather information from that source. Chapter Eleven, where findings from students and universities are brought together, offers detailed examples of this consistent, dependant and dynamic interrelation. The match and interrelationships between these two groups, students and universities, imply that marketing strategies at the case study universities are significantly related to customer demand and requirements. Similarly students' choices are affected and influenced by private universities' marketing strategies and practices. It is a "push-pull" relationship, where each is influencing and shaping the other. These two models are bound firmly together, and therefore, in order to reach a better understanding of marketing, an understanding of both should be applied.

Assessing the research outcomes to answer this question, the relationship between student choice of university and marketing strategies had been expected, prior to conducting the research. Nonetheless, this research has helped in broadening understanding about the dynamic dependant relationship. It has highlighted and portrayed which elements relate to which steps in particular; this, in turn, should provide useful information for HE marketers and policy makers.

12.3 Strengths and Contributions of the Study

The strengths and original contributions of this study are highlighted in respect to three key areas: methodology, theory and content.

This study is underpinned by a rigorous research design in which a sequential logical progression has been followed, starting with piloting and exploring, followed by a survey and three institutional case studies. This study utilised a wide range of methods and sources from which data were collected, and this has provided a detailed description and holistic understanding of the issues under investigation. Various sources and methods of data collection have facilitated methodological and participant triangulation. A mixed-method approach, which has been justified pragmatically to be the best “fit-for-purpose”, has been applied where data have been generated both qualitatively and quantitatively. Beside the conventional methods of data collection, for example, interviews and questionnaires, this study makes use of an innovative style in conducting interviews with students supplemented by websites and promotional documents.

Regarding theory, there is a connection between the findings of this study and earlier findings in researching student choice or marketing strategies. As the study confirms earlier findings in a different cultural context, it ecologically validates earlier theoretical propositions. Nevertheless, the study provides various findings that are unique and exclusive to this particular context. In addition, this study gains theoretical significance because it puts equal emphasis on two parallel areas of marketing in education, the customers and institutions. It has shown that in order to have a better marketing understanding and practice, an institution needs to evaluate both student choice of university and marketing strategies as they are connected. Limited research and literature have investigated these two marketing areas in such a manner. This study takes theoretical understanding forward in the way it shows the dynamic, two-way interdependent relationship between the two areas of student choice and marketing strategies. Researching these two parallel areas has provided the basis for a new marketing model (the atom marketing model). Reflecting on the marketing mix theory, this study has shown that each institution has its own marketing mix, which depends on contextual and institutional

circumstances. Students and parents also contribute towards shaping and blending the elements of the mix.

There are three main contributions in this study regarding the content. First, this is the only study which has addressed marketing in private HE in Syria, and therefore, this study leads the way for further research. Rather than research conducted on marketing public HE, there is paucity of literature and research conducted on the private sector of HE internationally. Secondly, the study gains significance as it is conducted in an emerging context. In this respect, this study could provide useful insight into similar future studies around the world where private HE is newly introduced. Institutional experiences in the emerging private HE market in Syria could provide lessons for other emerging markets. This study is useful to ecologically similar contexts. There is an intercultural dimension in this study as Western marketing theories and practices are being utilised by Syrian universities. It explores this interconnection between Western marketing models which are being planned and implemented in a different context. It has been shown that an institution cannot simply buy a marketing model or package from a Western culture; certain modifications need to be made. Finally, the findings are likely to be of interest to policy makers in private HE in Syria, and they will consequently reflect on private HE marketing strategies and practices. As the study reveals the strengths and weakness of particular marketing policies and practices, other institutions may learn from these insights.

12.4 The Limitations of the Study

The study has four limitations. The first concerns the investigation of student choice. This study asked participants to recall incidents from the past. Data was collected through interviews and questionnaires with participants who were in their first, second, third or fourth year. Students were asked to recall the process of their choices which could affect the quality of the data, as some participants might not be able to remember all the important details. Nonetheless, future research into this area may make use of ethnographic research methods in order to overcome this limitation and provide more synchronic data.

The second limitation regards investigating the marketing strategies of the case studies. Participants, mainly administrative members of staff, expressed 'their views' on marketing issues rather than the 'reality' of marketing practices. This means that the research in this sense has obtained people's perceptions and opinions rather than actual activities. Therefore, the data from the interviews with administrative members of staff was triangulated with other sources. However, only a small amount of data was collected through field observations due to time constraints on this study.

Another limitation to this study relates to the sample bias in selecting the case studies and consequently the generalisability of the findings. Three case studies, out of a total of nine such private university institutions, were conducted. In selecting the participating case studies, this research aimed at choosing as diverse cases as possible in order to enrich data rather than reach statistical generalisability.

The final limitation relates to the gender issue, where the questionnaire did not include a question about gender. My initial assumption about this issue was insignificant. However, the data, especially from research Phase Two and Three highlighted this issue to be significant. It was found that gender issues play a significant role in student choice especially when students consider programmes of study, and geographic location of an institution.

12.5 Directions for Further Research

The limitations of the study suggest how directions for future research in the area of marketing private HE in Syria can be made. First of all, a further longitudinal study could be conducted in the same context to investigate student choice on a longer time scale. Such study could follow and scrutinise diachronically the process from early stages of inspiration to post-enrolment evaluation. Such a study could also investigate students' opinions after graduating from an institution to review the whole experience. The use of ethnographic methods in such research would be very insightful. A longitudinal study could also assess the marketing policy changes in universities over time.

Secondly, there is a need to investigate the perception of other customer groups (e.g. employers and officials) which could contribute to offering a better understanding of issues under investigation. Undoubtedly, these customer groups' views and roles impact on student choice and institutional marketing strategies. Thirdly, conducting research that investigates university marketing strategies on a statistical basis, and including more private universities would be beneficial in order to establish more powerful generalisations in this area. Such a proposed study should focus on the investigation of contextual factors shaping marketing strategies. Finally, some further studies could focus specifically on gender differences, given evidence of its potential significance to the importance of differential strategies required in recruiting potential male and female students.

12.6 Summary

To conclude, this final chapter has started with assessing research outcomes in the light of the three research questions posed. The first section has addressed the process of student choice of university, the second has tackled marketing strategies at private universities, and the third has shown the relationship between the former and the latter. The chapter has also discussed the strengths and original contributions of this study in terms of methodology, theory and content. The study limitations have also been highlighted and finally the chapter provides suggestions for further research in related areas.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1: Interview Schedule with a Marketing Manager at Leeds University

Appendix 2: An Illustration of the Theoretical Models

Appendix 3: Pilot Student Interview Schedule

Appendix 4: Pilot Student Interview Schedule: into Arabic Translation

Appendix 5: Student Interview Schedule

Appendix 6: Pilot Student Questionnaire

Appendix 7: Student Questionnaire

Appendix 8: Student Questionnaire: Into-Arabic Translation

Appendix 9: University Administrative Staff Interview Schedule

***Appendix 10: University Administrative Staff Interview Schedule:
Into Arabic Translation***

Appendix 11: Parents Interview Schedule

Appendix 12: Parents Interview Schedule: Into Arabic Translation