



The Marketing Mix Design for Attracting Foreign Students to Iranian Universities

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study aims to design a marketing model to attract international students to higher education institutions in Iran. The necessity of this research is underscored by the fact that international students comprise less than 0.3 percent of the student body in Iran's higher education system.

Methodology: The research was conducted at major universities in Iran that host foreign students, including Tehran University, Imam Khomeini International University, and Ferdowsi University. A sample of 367 international students and 23 academic and executive experts were randomly selected using a cluster sampling method. Two researcher-made questionnaires were employed, tailored separately for each group. The reliability of the research instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.958.

Findings: The results categorized the proposed model into four levels, 15 dimensions, and 96 components. The macro level includes political, cultural, scientific, and economic dimensions. The higher education level comprises internal and external dimensions. The university level is segmented into seven dimensions: place, people, program factor, prominence, price, prospectus, and promotion. The individual level includes personality and motivational dimensions. Confirmatory factor analysis (first and second order) was conducted on the student questionnaire. For the expert questionnaire, all dimensions and levels were ranked and weighted using the TOPSIS method. In the resulting "marketing astrolabe" model, the university level holds 41% weight, the higher education level 25%, the macro level 23%, and the individual level 11%.

Conclusion: The developed marketing model highlights the critical components and their respective weights in attracting international students to Iranian universities, providing a strategic framework for improving international student enrollment.

Keywords: higher education, Iran, foreign student, marketing mix.

1. Introduction

The concept of internationalization in higher education is multifaceted, involving academic, cultural, social, and economic dimensions. One critical aspect is the marketing of educational institutions to foreign students, which necessitates an understanding of various determinants influencing their choice of study destination. Previous research has highlighted the importance of governance, ownership structures, and economic conditions in attracting foreign investments, including in the education sector (Bajaher et al., 2021). The relevance of these factors extends to the context of higher education, where governance and institutional reputation play crucial roles in appealing to international students.

International student mobility and high-skilled migration are influenced by multiple factors, including economic opportunities, academic quality, and cultural experiences (Faghiharam, 2019; Felbermayr & Reczkowski, 2014; Golabchi et al., 2024; Jahani et al., 2022; McDonnell et al., 2024). The decision-making process of prospective students is complex and multifactorial, often involving considerations such as the availability of scholarships, quality of education, and post-graduation opportunities. For instance, English proficiency and the availability of English-taught programs are significant determinants for non-native English-speaking students (Botha, 2015). This highlights the need for Iranian universities to enhance their English-language offerings to attract a broader pool of international students.

The application of marketing principles to higher education has evolved significantly, with the development of specialized frameworks such as the 7Ps marketing mix for MBA programs (Ivy, 2008). These principles can be adapted to the broader context of international student recruitment, emphasizing the importance of product (programs offered), price (tuition fees and financial aid), place (campus and location), promotion (marketing and communication strategies), people (faculty and staff), process (admissions procedures), and physical evidence (campus facilities). Effective marketing strategies must address these elements to create a compelling value proposition for prospective international students (Fiş et al., 2022).

Economic conditions and institutional characteristics significantly impact the attractiveness of a study destination. Research on the impact of housing price volatility on foreign capital entry, including in the education sector, underscores the importance of stable and affordable living conditions for

international students (Lin et al., 2021). Moreover, labor market flexibility and economic freedom are crucial in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) and foreign portfolio investment (FPI), which are relevant for funding and supporting international education initiatives (Oliveira & Forte, 2021; Ramani & Srinivasan, 2019). Institutions must consider these macroeconomic factors when designing strategies to attract international students (Wang & Li, 2018).

Cultural and social factors also play a pivotal role in international student mobility. The presence of a supportive and inclusive campus environment can significantly enhance the attractiveness of a university to foreign students. Studies have shown that international students are drawn to destinations that offer a welcoming atmosphere and opportunities for cultural exchange (Kraysman, 2022). Additionally, the availability of academic and social support services is critical in ensuring a positive experience for international students, thereby influencing their decision to choose a particular institution (Mangal & Liu, 2020).

Educational marketing is a powerful tool in the internationalization of higher education. Romanian universities, for example, have successfully used educational marketing to strengthen their international presence and attract foreign students (Fiş et al., 2022). These strategies often involve targeted marketing campaigns, partnerships with international education agents, and participation in global education fairs. By leveraging these marketing tactics, Iranian universities can enhance their visibility and appeal to prospective international students.

Understanding the consumer behavior of international students is essential for designing effective marketing strategies. Recent studies have employed statistical prediction and marketing recommendation models to analyze the behavior of international students, providing insights into their preferences and decision-making processes (Shen, 2023). These models can inform the development of targeted marketing initiatives that resonate with the specific needs and expectations of international students.

Iranian universities face unique challenges and opportunities in attracting international students. Despite the potential benefits, the share of international students in Iran's higher education system remains low, necessitating a strategic approach to address this gap. Environmental characteristics, such as political stability and economic conditions, influence foreign direct investment growth and, by extension, the attractiveness of a study destination

(Faramarzi Babadi et al., 2024; Naeimi Tajdar et al., 2024). Addressing these challenges requires a concerted effort from academic institutions, policymakers, and stakeholders to create an enabling environment for international education. This, this study aims to design a marketing model to attract international students to higher education institutions in Iran.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to develop a marketing model aimed at attracting international students to higher education institutions in Iran. The study targeted universities with a significant presence of foreign students, specifically Tehran University, Imam Khomeini International University, and Ferdowsi University. The total population of foreign students in Iranian universities is approximately 14,220, with a demographic breakdown of 51% undergraduate students, 28% master's students, and 21% doctoral students. The gender distribution includes 71% males and 29% females.

A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure representation across different degrees and gender groups. According to the Morgan table, a sample size of 373 students was deemed adequate. The final sample comprised 367 international students who completed and returned the questionnaires. These participants represented 22 universities and hailed from 21 different countries. Additionally, 23 academic and executive experts from these universities were also included in the study to provide their insights and validate the research findings.

2.2. Data Collection Tool

Data collection was conducted using two researcher-developed questionnaires, designed specifically for the two participant groups: international students and academic/executive experts. The initial questionnaire was developed based on an extensive literature review and examination of existing instruments such as the Student Satisfaction Inventory. Over 100 elements related to the marketing mix were initially identified.

Through two brainstorming sessions with four experts, these elements were refined and reduced to 60, categorized into two main dimensions: university and individual. The university dimension was further divided into seven factors: place, prominence, prospectus, human resources, promotion,

price, and program factors. The individual dimension was divided into personality and motivational levels.

To ensure content validity, the refined elements were presented to 15 experts and specialists who provided feedback on the questionnaire items. This process resulted in further refinement, reducing the number of items to 52. The final questionnaires were then administered to the selected sample. A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed, and 367 valid responses were obtained from the international students.

2.3. Data Analysis

The reliability of the research instrument was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.958, indicating high internal consistency. The data analysis was conducted in several stages, focusing on both exploratory and confirmatory techniques.

For the student questionnaire, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to validate the structure of the marketing model. Both first-order and second-order CFAs were conducted to examine the relationships among the observed variables and their underlying latent constructs.

For the expert questionnaire, the Technique for Order of Preference by Similarity to Ideal Solution (TOPSIS) method was employed to rank and weight the various dimensions and levels of the marketing model. This multi-criteria decision analysis method helped in identifying the relative importance of each factor in the proposed marketing model.

The results of the analyses classified the marketing model into four levels, 15 dimensions, and 96 components. The levels included macro, higher education, university, and individual. The macro level comprised political, cultural, scientific, and economic dimensions. The higher education level consisted of internal and external dimensions. The university level included seven dimensions: place, people, program factor, prominence, price, prospectus, and promotion. The individual level encompassed personality and motivational dimensions.

The "marketing astrolabe" model was developed based on the weighted importance of each level. The university level was found to have the highest weight at 41%, followed by the higher education level at 25%, the macro level at 23%, and the individual level at 11%. This model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the key factors influencing international students' decisions to pursue higher education in Iran and offers strategic insights for improving international student recruitment.

3. Findings and Results

The statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS software, with a focus on factor analysis to validate the questionnaire items and their corresponding dimensions. The results from both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the validity of the questions within their respective dimensions. Additionally, the second-order factor

analysis supported the structure of the seven dimensions at the university level and the two dimensions at the individual level.

The importance of the dimensions at both the individual and university levels was ranked and combined into a single table with an additional column indicating the level of each dimension:

Table 1

Effect Levels of Dimensions

Dimension	Effect Level	Level
People	1	University
Prospectus	2	
Prominence	3	
Place	4	
Promotion	5	
Program Factor	6	
Price	7	
Personality	1	Individual
Motivational	2	

Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the significance and categorization of each dimension in attracting international students.

Table 2 presents the goodness of fit indices for the model. The indices include the chi-square coverage index (χ^2), Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI),

and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). The criteria for desirable fit are a chi-square coverage index larger than 0.05, GFI and CFI larger than 0.95, and RMSEA smaller than 0.06. All dimensions met these criteria, indicating a good fit for the model.

Table 2

Fit Model Indices

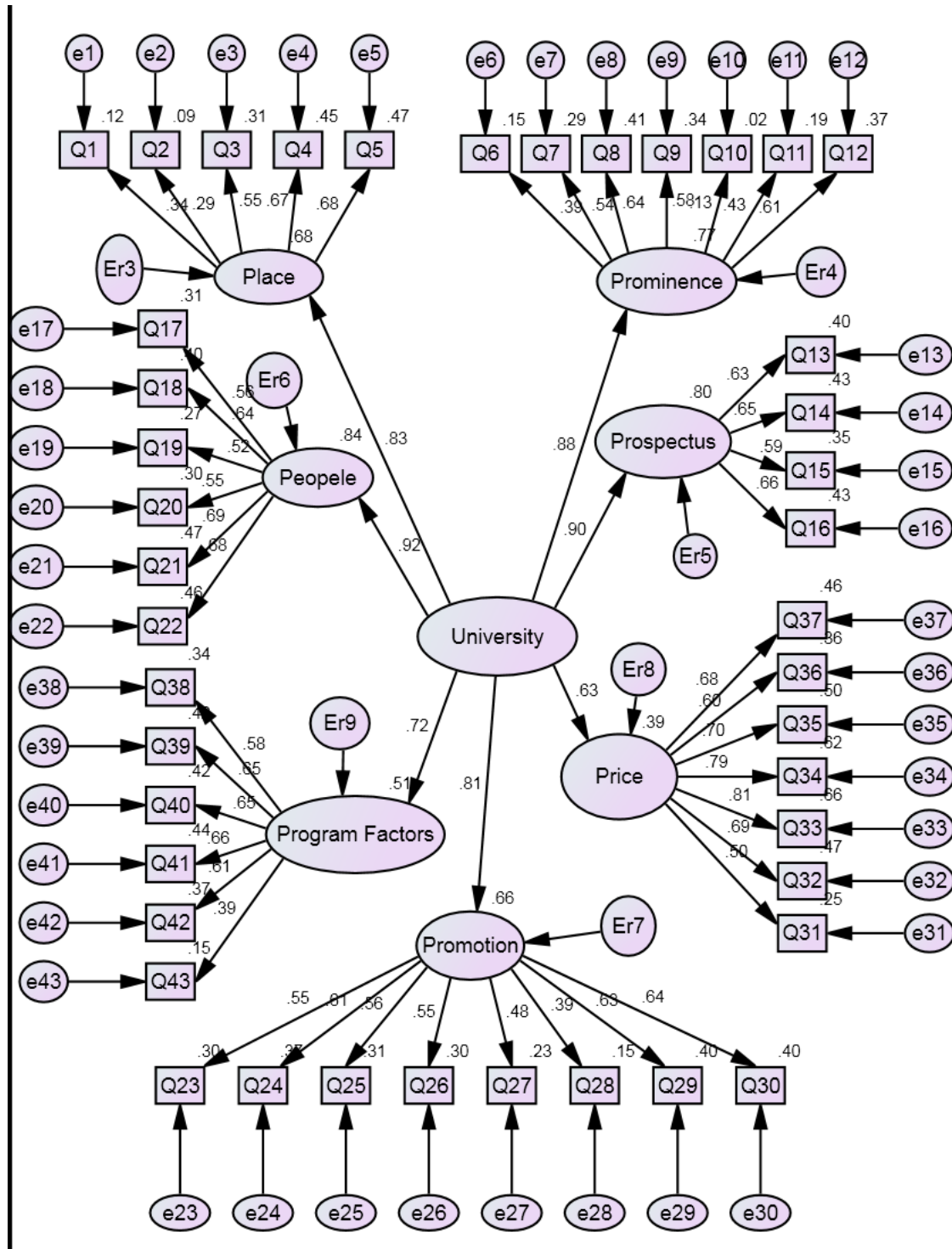
Dimension	χ^2 Coverage Index	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Place	0.09	0.991	0.986	0.053
Prominence	0.02	0.982	0.966	0.053
Prospectus	0.018	0.988	0.978	0.09
People	0.03	0.982	0.974	0.081
Promotion	0.008	0.978	0.971	0.054
Price	0.033	0.983	0.990	0.051
Program Factor	0.006	0.981	0.972	0.069
Personality	0.295	0.993	0.997	0.028
Motivational	0.329	0.999	1.000	0.000

The Measures of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) analysis showed that all values of the matrix diameter of correlation were greater than 0.05, indicating sampling sufficiency. The

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index value also confirmed that the data were appropriate for factor analysis.

Figure 1

Model with Standard Coefficients (Beta)



The structural model for the university level confirmed the seven dimensions—place, people, program factor, prominence, price, prospectus, and promotion. Each dimension exhibited significant factor loadings, indicating robust relationships with their respective observed variables.

The results of this study provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the key factors influencing the attraction of international students to Iranian universities. The validated dimensions and their relative weights highlight the areas that universities need to focus on to



enhance their appeal to international students. The "marketing astrolabe" model, with its weighted importance of each level, offers a strategic tool for university administrators and policymakers to optimize their marketing efforts and improve international student enrollment.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the key factors influencing the attraction of international students to Iranian universities. The proposed marketing model was validated through rigorous statistical analysis, including factor analysis and the TOPSIS method, confirming the importance of various dimensions in shaping international students' decisions. The university level dimensions, including people, prospectus, prominence, place, promotion, program factor, and price, were ranked in order of importance, with "people" being the most significant. At the individual level, personality and motivational factors were identified as critical determinants.

The goodness of fit indices for the model indicated a strong overall fit, with all dimensions meeting the desirable criteria. The Measures of Sampling Adequacy (MSA) analysis confirmed the sufficiency of the sample, and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index value supported the appropriateness of the data for factor analysis. The structural models for both individual and university levels demonstrated robust relationships with their respective observed variables, highlighting the multidimensional nature of factors influencing international student attraction.

The findings of this study align with previous research on the determinants of international student mobility and the application of marketing principles in higher education. The significance of "people" as the most important dimension at the university level underscores the critical role of faculty and staff in creating a supportive and engaging learning environment. This is consistent with the work of Ivy (2008), who highlighted the importance of human resources in the marketing mix for MBA programs (Ivy, 2008). The emphasis on "people" reflects the broader trend in educational marketing, where interpersonal interactions and relationships are crucial in shaping student experiences and perceptions.

The prominence of "prospectus" and "prominence" as key dimensions further supports the notion that information dissemination and institutional reputation are vital in attracting international students. According to Fiş, Panţir, and Cheregi (2022), effective educational marketing

strategies involve clear communication of the programs offered and the institution's strengths (Fiş et al., 2022). This aligns with our finding that a well-designed prospectus and a strong institutional reputation significantly influence prospective students' choices.

The identified importance of "place" and "promotion" also resonates with existing literature on the impact of environmental and promotional factors on student mobility. Botha (2015) emphasized the role of location and cultural context in attracting international students, particularly those seeking English-taught programs in non-English-speaking countries (Botha, 2015). Similarly, Nonthapot and Thomya (2020) found that promotional activities are crucial in increasing demand among both domestic and international students (Nonthapot & Thomya, 2020).

At the individual level, the significance of personality and motivational factors highlights the personal and psychological aspects of students' decision-making processes. This is in line with the findings of Felbermayr and Reczkowski (2014), who noted that high-skilled migration is often driven by personal aspirations and career motivations (Felbermayr & Reczkowski, 2014). Understanding these individual-level determinants can help institutions tailor their recruitment strategies to address the specific needs and preferences of international students.

The results also indicate the relevance of economic and institutional factors in shaping international student mobility. Stable and affordable living conditions, as well as labor market opportunities, are critical considerations for prospective students (Lin et al., 2021; Oliveira & Forte, 2021). Addressing these macroeconomic factors can enhance the overall attractiveness of Iranian universities as study destinations.

Despite the comprehensive approach of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample was limited to major universities with a significant presence of foreign students, which may not fully represent the broader landscape of higher education in Iran. Future research should include a more diverse range of institutions to capture a wider array of experiences and perspectives. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine changes in international student preferences and behaviors over time.

Secondly, the reliance on self-reported data from questionnaires may introduce response biases, as participants might provide socially desirable answers or misinterpret questions. Triangulating data from multiple



sources, including interviews and observational methods, could enhance the robustness of the findings. Lastly, the study focused primarily on quantitative measures, which may overlook the nuanced and context-specific factors that influence international student decisions. Incorporating qualitative approaches, such as case studies and focus groups, can provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of international students.

Building on the findings of this study, future research should explore the interplay between the identified dimensions and other contextual factors that may influence international student mobility. For instance, examining the role of digital marketing and social media in shaping students' perceptions and decisions could provide valuable insights in the digital age. Given the increasing importance of online platforms, understanding how universities can leverage these tools to enhance their marketing efforts is crucial.

Additionally, future studies should investigate the impact of global geopolitical events and policy changes on international student flows. The dynamic nature of international relations and immigration policies can significantly affect students' choices and mobility patterns. Research in this area can inform policymakers and educational institutions on how to adapt their strategies in response to global developments.

Moreover, comparative studies across different countries and regions can shed light on the unique challenges and opportunities faced by universities in various contexts. By examining best practices and successful models from other countries, Iranian universities can gain insights into effective strategies for attracting and retaining international students. Collaborative research initiatives and partnerships with international institutions can also facilitate the exchange of knowledge and resources, contributing to the global discourse on higher education internationalization.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made for Iranian universities seeking to enhance their international student recruitment efforts. Firstly, universities should prioritize investing in their human resources, as the quality of faculty and staff interactions emerged as the most significant factor influencing international students. Providing professional development opportunities and fostering a supportive academic environment can enhance the overall student experience.

Secondly, institutions should focus on developing comprehensive and transparent prospectuses that clearly

communicate the programs offered, admission requirements, and available support services. A strong emphasis on the institution's unique strengths and achievements can help build a compelling brand identity and attract prospective students.

Moreover, universities should leverage promotional activities and digital marketing strategies to increase their visibility and reach a broader audience. Engaging with prospective students through social media, virtual open days, and online forums can create meaningful connections and provide valuable information to assist in their decision-making process.

Furthermore, addressing practical considerations such as housing, affordability, and labor market opportunities is essential. Providing information on affordable accommodation options and facilitating access to part-time job opportunities can enhance the overall attractiveness of the university as a study destination. Collaborating with local businesses and industries to create internship and employment opportunities for international students can also contribute to their academic and career success.

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive marketing model for attracting international students to Iranian universities, highlighting the importance of various dimensions and providing actionable recommendations for enhancing recruitment efforts. By addressing the identified factors and implementing the suggested strategies, Iranian universities can improve their global presence and attract a diverse and talented student body, contributing to the broader goal of higher education internationalization.

Authors' Contributions

The first author was responsible for conducting the interview and collecting data, and the other authors were responsible for analyzing the data and writing the article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

In this study, to observe ethical considerations, participants were informed about the goals and importance of the research before the start of the interview and participated in the research with informed consent.

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