


RESEARCH ARTICLE			A study of the effectiveness of the marketing strategies of three Universities in Azerbaijan	
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Doi Serial		https://doi.org/10.56334/sei/8.10.55		
Keywords		Marketing of higher education, new concept, education in Azerbaijan, education strategy		
Abstract The marketing of higher education is still a relatively new concept in many parts of the world, particularly in Azerbaijan. Given that Azerbaijan has recently obtained its independence, it is important to investigate how higher educational institutions in the country have adapted to the new circumstances and demands in the sphere of education, since at the present time, each educational institution is expected to develop a marketing strategy. An important part of a marketing strategy is a marketing plan or a written plan that contains tactics and strategies, which an institution uses to attract and recruit students. This paper will discuss the strategies used by Azerbaijani universities in order to attract potential students. To investigate this, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used. In semi-structured interviews an interviewee has complete freedom in how to reply to the questions, as the main emphasis is on how a respondent evaluates situations or events and on what an interviewee believes to be important or worth explaining. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews are generally flexible and can have multi-strategy plans, where an interviewer has independence in choosing the sequence of questions and the wording, as well as the amount of time and attention given to each topic.				
Citation. Bayramova V. (2025). A study of the effectiveness of the marketing strategies of three Universities in Azerbaijan. <i>Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems</i> , 8(10), 619-625. https://doi.org/10.56352/sei/8.10.55				
Issue: https://imcra-az.org/archive/384-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-10-vol-8-2025.html				
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Received: 12.01.2025		Accepted: 17.05.2025		Published: 09.08.2025 (available online)

Introduction

Additionally, this research followed the *purposive sampling* approach, aiming to select interviewees who could provide the most relevant information about the topic under investigation (Yin, 2011) and who occupy relevant positions within targeted institutions. The research targeted people responsible for, or somehow influencing, university marketing strategies. Four people from each university were interviewed, including not only vice rectors but also lecturers, rector's advisors, and heads of departments. This sampling was implemented also in order to attain *fairness*, which is when not only senior managers participate in a study (Bryman, 2011), but also other members of the university staff.

All interviews were conducted either in the respondents' personal offices or in vacant classrooms at the universities. The average duration of each interview was approximately 50 minutes.

Future employers are regarded to be the real university customers, since they hire the university students, that is, the educational products of the universities (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Additionally, employers usually evaluate the quality of a programme and an institution's prestige (Cubillo et al., 2006). This research, therefore, also includes interviews with several large employers in Azerbaijan, aiming to answer the following research question:

1) What is the opinion of the potential employers regarding the quality of Azerbaijani graduates in various sectors? Do the employers see a big difference in performance and soft skills between the graduates of Azerbaijani universities and graduates of foreign universities?

It should also be noted that this research will show whether the opinions of the university management coincide with the opinions of the employers regarding the quality of university graduates and how ready the graduates are for employment.. Such a study will allow us to see what is really happening in the higher education and employment sectors of the country, compared to what is supposed to be happening in those areas, which is very important during the current period of the development of the state.

The research included University O, which offers the following undergraduate programmes: Petroleum Engineering, Chemical Engineering, and Process Automation Engineering. All respondents' answers show that University O targets the best candidates and implements the following promotional steps in order to attract them: university representatives go to schools and distribute their brochures among pupils, TV commercials are broadcast, and the university actively uses social media. The Vice Rector for General Affairs mentioned that they see their students' relatives and siblings take up places at University O in later years, which proves the effectiveness of the university strategy and results in students' loyalty and positive opinions shared by word of mouth. However, this university does not have a central department of marketing, which defines the marketing strategy of University O.

Next, University E is the biggest university, not only in Azerbaijan but also in the entire Caucasus region, that offers a full range of economic specialties (which is the main strength of this university) including: Accounting, Finances, Banking, Statistics, Organisation and Business Management, Taxation, International Economic Relations, Marketing and Advertising, State Regulation of the Economy, and some other programmes. All respondents from University E stated that the number one priority of the university is student satisfaction. As the head of the marketing department states, the university marketing strategy includes short-term and long-term goals. The short-term targets are student satisfaction and the establishment of a good reputation. At the same time, a long-term goal of University E is inclusion in the list of the top international universities. The university plans to achieve this objective mainly via research capacity, exchange programmes with established universities and partnership with prestigious transnational corporations. The Vice Rector for General Affairs emphasised that University E has never experienced any difficulties in recruiting students but right now it is imperative for them to recruit the best or top-scoring students to the university.

University F that has six schools: School of Acting, School of Directing, School of Fine Arts, School of Music, School of Cultural Studies and School of Arts. It is the only university in Azerbaijan that offers a full range of degrees and specialties in arts and performance (Gunesh, 2015). Around eight thousand undergraduate and postgraduate students study there. Regarding University F, all interviewees were unanimous when emphasising that the strongest marketing point of this educational institution is the fact that 90 per cent of famous actors, performers, stage-directors, painters, and TV broadcasters in Azerbaijan are graduates of this University. "Our graduates are our best advertisement" is the motto of the university. Regarding student recruitment, the Vice Rector for International Relations emphasises: *"As we are a creative university, we are more interested in talent than in the educational achievements of our students. As we are a specific university, it would not be right for us to go schools and convince the students to enter our university. Our enrollees are always people who have at least some understanding of art and creativity because they all need to pass a performance exam, which needs some kind of preparation"*. The Vice Rector for Education and Humanitarian Affairs of University F stresses that currently, when it comes to the marketing strategy of the university, the most important factor is student satisfaction.

The study of graduate performance in various sectors included representatives of Big Oil, the Big Four, and a local company working with Natural Compressed Gas. The results showed that Azerbaijani graduates are strong in theory but weak in practice. However, this study included only six large employers in Azerbaijan. In order to achieve more fairness and objectivity in the findings, it would have been better to interview ten or twelve

employers of various industries, which would be a possible future research direction in this sphere. When it comes to performance, many students think they will learn everything from the manufacturing process; however, it leads to great financial losses, since nearly in all production spheres in the country the reverse amortisation process takes place. This happens when new equipment breaks not long after purchase, but as time goes by, the amortisation expenses reduce, as people learn how to use the equipment. For example, many graduate engineers are unable to use modern equipment in various spheres of production and manufacturing, in particular in the sphere of oil and gas processing. The main reason for this phenomenon is the absence of appropriate laboratories with equipment at the universities; another reason is that university lecturers are completely cut off from the manufacturing and production processes in the companies. In this respect, University O is planning to fill this gap, at least in the oil sector.

The data collected at University F and through the interviews with theatre artistic directors indicate that the two have differing opinions about the quality of the graduates. Though University F considers itself to give many opportunities to its students for the development of practical skills, employers consider that the discipline and the performance technique of the new graduates are not as good as they used to be in the past. However, among the graduates there are talented individuals who go against this trend. Another complaint is that new graduates are also not used to reading as much as they are expected to. Therefore, the situation in this sector is not as perfect as the university management thinks. However, the employers are happy with the professionalism of editors, critics, stage designers, and costume designers who are also graduates of University F.

There is a definite convergence in findings between the words of the university administration from University E and employers concerning the performance of the students in the economic sector. Overall, graduates in the economic sector satisfy the employers in terms of knowledge, flexibility, and quick adaptability to working conditions. Economics graduates perform particularly well in managerial positions, regardless of the specialization of the organisation. The main complaint of the employers regarding these graduates is the lack of soft or self-presentation skills during initial interactions. The employers also complained that university career centres sometimes do not do their job properly, as some students come to the internship interviews completely unprepared.

There is also a certain convergence in findings among employers concerning the striking difference between local and international students in their soft or self-presenting skills. The employers noted that international students are more confident, easy-going, and speak foreign languages better than the local students. International students are more used to working independently, are effective team players, and do not feel shy about expressing their opinions and views, unlike the local graduates. Future employers are usually inclined to hire international students not only due to their global educational background but also due to their intercultural competence.

Recommendations

The study shows that function remains at the operational rather than the strategic level in many universities (Maringe, 2005). Therefore, the main recommendation for the other universities will be to open a separate department of marketing and to develop a marketing plan with short and long-term objectives.

This study has demonstrated that University F provides beneficial experiences, such as virtual internships and start-up incubators. This is good practice that should be emulated in the other universities in the country, since virtual internships provide the interns with more independence (Franks and Oliver, 2012), and university incubators facilitate the technological and economic development of the country. Additionally, interviews with the university administration have revealed another shortcoming in the legislative system of the country, concerning the absence of any law supporting voluntary work for students. Therefore, the next recommendation will be the introduction of laws supporting voluntary internships or practice for students.

This research has demonstrated that many universities do not hold long-term relationships with their alumni and do not have precise statistics regarding their employment. Monitoring the employability of graduates seems problematic for many universities and they obtain official statistics only from the State Social Security Fund. It will be beneficial for university marketing departments to develop and maintain long-term relationships with alumni and to have statistics regarding their employability. At the same time, educational institutions should also put more emphasis on the quality of education and on the development of the practical skills of their students.

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