

## The use of competitive intelligence as a strategic tool for student recruitment in public universities



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### ABSTRACT

Competitive intelligence strategies are employed by higher education institutions to assist with student recruitment. These competitive intelligence (CI) strategies help maintain or increase market share in education. Utilising competitive intelligence is crucial for firms in competitive markets, assisting in strategic planning and execution. Higher education organisations can benefit from CI to make informed decisions and develop strategic goals. The competition between selected public universities that reside in the same town has resulted in devising competitive strategies to attract grade 12 students with effective and innovative student recruitment strategies. The study sought to examine how competitive intelligence is used as a strategy to promote student recruitment at selected public universities. The study adopted a quantitative research approach where 234 first-time entering university students were used as key informants. To collect data, a questionnaire was used and is attached. It was discovered that both institutions utilised similar strategies to recruit students. Results reveal that the selected public universities employ traditional and technology-based strategies for student recruitment, relying on past success rather than a standardised approach based on competitive intelligence. Further research is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of competitive intelligence strategies in student recruitment, aiming to promote diverse communication needs among current and potential students.

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## Introduction

The study explored competitive intelligence strategies used by selected public universities to promote student recruitment, focusing on marketing and communication techniques. It highlights the competitiveness of East London, a region with two universities offering parallel programmes, thus intensifying regional competition. According to Maluleka (2023), competitive intelligence (CI) is a strategic planning tool that gathers vital information from the competitive environment, utilising big data tools and methodologies to effectively direct and incorporate valuable knowledge (Wilkins 2020). Higher education institutions employ strategic marketing planning to succeed in competitive markets by targeting market segments most likely to be interested in their offerings. HEIs must adapt to the changing environment and stay relevant to drive economic growth and socio-economic development. They must distinguish themselves to attract students, especially in South Africa, where high unemployment rates necessitate adaptability to address challenges.

Higher education institutions utilise competitive intelligence tactics to aid in student recruiting. These competitive intelligence (CI) tactics aid in the preservation or expansion of market share in the education sector. Employing competitive intelligence is essential for companies operating in competitive marketplaces, as it aids in strategy planning and implementation. CI, or Competitive Intelligence, can provide higher education organisations with valuable insights to facilitate well-informed decision-making and the development of strategic goals. The rivalry among chosen public institutions located in the same city has led to the development of competitive tactics aimed at attracting high school seniors through effective and innovative student recruiting strategies. The study aimed to investigate the utilisation of competitive intelligence as a strategic approach to enhance student recruitment at specific public

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universities. The study employed a quantitative research methodology, utilising 234 first-time entering university students as primary sources of information. A questionnaire was utilised to gather data, and it is included as an attachment. It was found that both colleges employed comparable tactics to attract students. The findings indicate that the chosen public institutions utilise both conventional and technology-driven methods for attracting students, placing more emphasis on their previous achievements rather than adopting a uniform approach rooted in competitive intelligence. Additional study is required to assess the efficacy of competitive intelligence tactics in student recruitment, with the goal of enhancing communication tailored to the different needs of present and prospective students.

## **Literature Review**

### **Theoretical and Conceptual Background**

#### **Competitive Intelligence**

Research on competitive intelligence in developing countries is limited, with most studies conducted in developed markets. South Africa's research is insufficient, focusing on government bodies and the business sector, which uses CI for understanding competitors. According to Oraee et al. (2020), the advantages of CI include finding new clients, boosting strategic planning, identifying hidden knowledge, and facilitating systematic information collection. Furthermore, CI helps organisations improve information quality, accelerate decision-making, promote operations, cut costs, raise awareness, detect opportunities and threats, and save time. CI is relevant to higher education institutions (HEIs), as they possess valuable student data that can be utilised for CI through efficient analysis. Their capacity to gather valuable information can help them establish themselves in the HE sectors and create internal strategies (Panda et al., 2019).

#### **Underpinning Theories**

This section discusses the competitive intelligence systems and competitive intelligence cycle theories that contribute to our understanding of competitive intelligence and how it might be applied in higher education institutions for student recruitment at selected South African universities.

#### **Competitive Intelligence Systems**

In competitive intelligence systems, according to Rothberg & Erickson (2017) inputs are collected from the internal and external environments by the intelligence team, which may be in the form of a marketing department to a convergence point, resulting in actionable intelligence. Lutz & Bodendorf (2020) explain that CI provides decision-makers with a balanced picture of the industry environment regarding the behaviour of external stakeholders (competition) of the organisation in order to reach strategic decisions.

The selected HEIs offer the same product but with different qualifications that attract different people at the same time. Hifza et al. (2020) state that where an institution can achieve and maintain a competitive advantage, it will perform above average, particularly in the area where the business is run.

#### **Competitive Intelligence Cycle**

Haliso, & Goodluck (2020) refer to the competitive intelligence cycle as a legal and ethical technique of gathering information on the activities of a company's competitors. The intelligence cycle's goal is to turn raw data into intelligence that can be used by the organisation's decision makers (Mihăescu & Bulgariu 2020). Rahmi et al. (2020) state that in higher education, competitive intelligence is in demand, where it is used as a strategic management strategy. HEIs have now recognised their valued intelligence and have assumed a changing role in the education sector and the society to act as business organisations, using their resources to deliver quality services to stakeholders and maintaining a competitive advantage (Kanwal et al., 2019). CI characterises a systematic and organised cycle, namely competitive intelligence planning, data gathering, data analysis and dissemination of the results

#### **Competitive Intelligence in Higher Education Institutions**

HEIs must prove strong student relationships via top-notch education to compete effectively (Twum & Pephrah 2020). HEIs need to ensure quality education and build strong relationships with their students to remain competitive. Nicol (2021) suggests that HEIs must track graduates for competitive positioning and engage with employers to increase their employment opportunities. The use of technology such as web marketing, e-learning, and distance learning strategies can give HEIs an advantage over competitors. Miotto et al. (2020) argue that HEIs aim to attract top students and faculty, improve facilities, and engage with desirable organisations, all in the pursuit of sharing knowledge. Sustainable advantage is key in the HE sector, relying on strategic practices to stay ahead. Naming competitor weaknesses and seizing opportunities helps HEIs and leads to sustainable futures. Hashim et al. (2021) explain that competitiveness measures educational standards when universities face local or international competition. Collaboration is needed within institutions for market advantages.

#### **Competitive Intelligence Used for Student Recruitment**

Nanath et al. (2021) note the growing competition in higher education, as institutions offer various programmes and study options to attract students in similar markets. HEIs compete on factors including course content, price, facilities, and outcomes, differentiated slightly from one another (Brennan 2021). As competition in higher education has intensified, gathering more data has become crucial for HEIs to outperform rivals. The growing internet is impacting HEI markets by enabling communication technology. HEIs use diverse and innovative ways of communication, integrating methods for stakeholders to benefit from multiple forms of media (Kisiolek et al, 2021; Gordon-Isasi at al., 2021). HEIs must prioritise digital transformation to meet challenges and anticipate stakeholder needs in a competitive environment. Digitization improves information systems and marketing (Zalite & Zvirbule 2020).

### **Competitive Intelligence as Marketing and Communication Strategy to Promote Student Recruitment**

Bussey et al. (2021) explain that the student recruitment process is not simple, but an expensive exercise, using marketing techniques, aimed at attracting and engaging with potential students during the HE admissions process. In the HE sectors, marketing plays a progressively key role in student recruitment. Nowadays, the traditional HEI's recruitment and marketing ways of communication are changing rapidly with various channels of communication available to potential prospects to enable a prompt, personalised, and reliable recruitment strategy (Malcheva 2021). Additionally, Mulyono et al. (2020) believe that it has become a crucial and significant objective of HEIs to attract new students and retain current students and as such they must be creative and innovative to gain a competitive advantage in the future.

Gerardo & Metcalfe (2020) believe that in response to the increased higher education competition, HEIs are now using advertising and marketing campaigns for student recruitment and market positioning within a competitive system. Therefore, HEIs create and develop marketing and communication campaigns intended to attract, in the most encouraging way, soon-to-graduate high school students to their institutions. To ensure that potential students select the institution of their choice, HEIs must be cognisant of important choice factors and put effort into designing an attractive advertising and promotional strategy as a competitive long-term plan (Ali 2021). The marketing, communication, and advancement directorates at selected universities manage institutional communication, collaborating with advertising teams to recruit students using various strategies. Therefore, CI optimises student enrolment by monitoring marketing and communication performance, detecting trends, and allocating resources for campaigns. It also aids in monitoring recruitment campaigns, making informed decisions, and managing future student recruitment campaigns (Gaftandzhieva et al., 2023).

### **Institutional Brand As A Competitive Strategy for Student Recruitment**

Zhang (2023) argues that branding, as a marketing strategy in higher education, promotes institutional differentiation. Increased competition and decreased government funding are pressing issues for higher education institutions today, making it a highly competitive industry. Potgieter & Doubell (2020) say that a brand is a name that represents a set of perceptions created on emotional and functional standards and benefits that support the differentiation of a product from the rest. Bekimbetova et al. (2021) indicate that branding is referred to as a set of marketing tools and a procedure for brand management, which involves developing a brand name for products, market positioning and ensuring reputation through consistent monitoring for compliance of a definite brand with the market requirements. According to Clark et al. (2020), institutional branding is another determining factor in higher education that separates each institution from the other competitors, and it ensures that the brand promise is executed through the provision of values that are expected by the target audience. In the branding of HEIs as institutions that uphold the principles of brand management with a large population that is directly affected, they should assume a proactive role to understanding and shaping the meaning of the university brand by carving its identity through advertising and public relations (Mathews 2021). Arevalo (2021) states that in HEIs, the marketing role deals with whether marketing communication techniques are effectively applied and are not only to understand the market forces. To pull through, the selected HEIs should discover new techniques to showcase and market their institutions to potential students who still see a future in higher education. Potential students will seek surety that their needs will be met should they decide to enrol with them. As a result, understanding and managing all stakeholders' brand views is critical for achieving competitive differentiation (Gutiérrez-Villar et al., 2022).

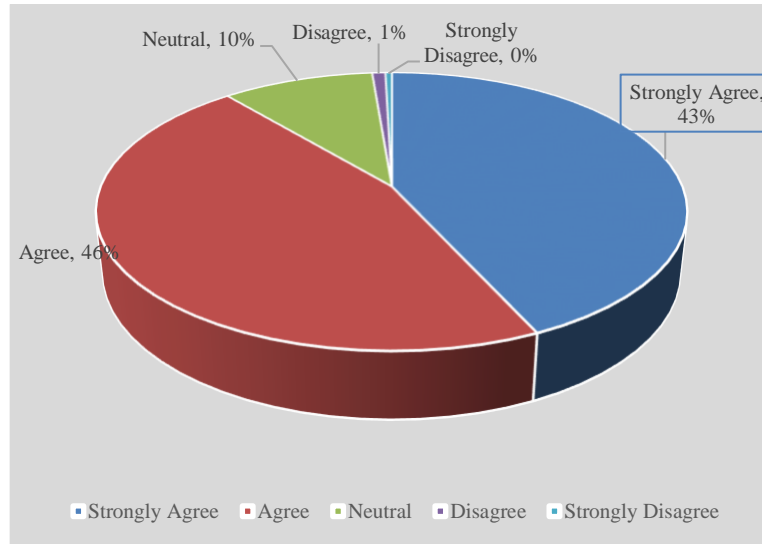
## **Methodology**

The study was framed within the quantitative paradigm based on the selection of universities. According to Mohajan (2020), quantitative research is a method of data collecting that entails conducting surveys to a select group of participants who submit self-reported responses to a set of questions posed by the researcher. A probability cluster sampling was used on 234 first-time entering students as key informants. Scholtz (2021) defines it as a non-probability technique that gathers information from conveniently selected participants. A survey data was collected from 234 first-time university students as respondents via Likert scale questions. The reliability scale's Cronbach's alpha was 0.89, which was considered satisfactory. According to Bonett & Wright (2014), the Cronbach's alpha test is the most widely used measure of dependability in the social and organisational sciences. The closed questions were used to collect data from first-time entering students, and the results of the items were evaluated using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong (2011) argue that data analysis is important because it uses raw information to learn something more conceptual and universal. To complete the description, descriptive data such as mean score and standard deviation were acquired. Validity, as reported by Khathise (2019), was observed throughout data quality control.

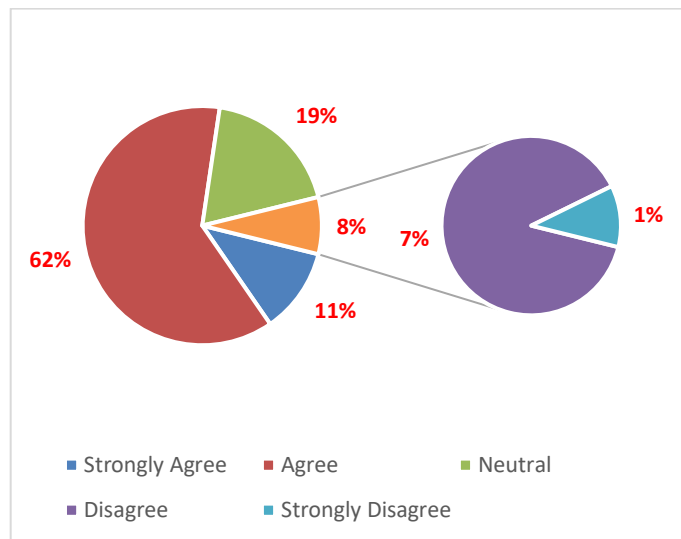
## Results and Findings

Two hundred & thirty-four (234) questionnaires were distributed to the study participants. The first section dealt with demographic information about the participants. According to the biographical gender frequencies and descriptive samples of respondents, 58% were males and 42% were females. The sample population's age distribution shows that 80.34 % of the respondents were between the ages of 19 and 23, 19.23 % were between the ages of 24 and 28, and 0.43 % were between the ages of 29 and 33. The distribution of participants' universities of study, as indicated by the respondents, shows that 56% of respondents were registered first-year students at the University of Fort Hare, whereas 44% were registered first-year students at Walter Sisulu University.

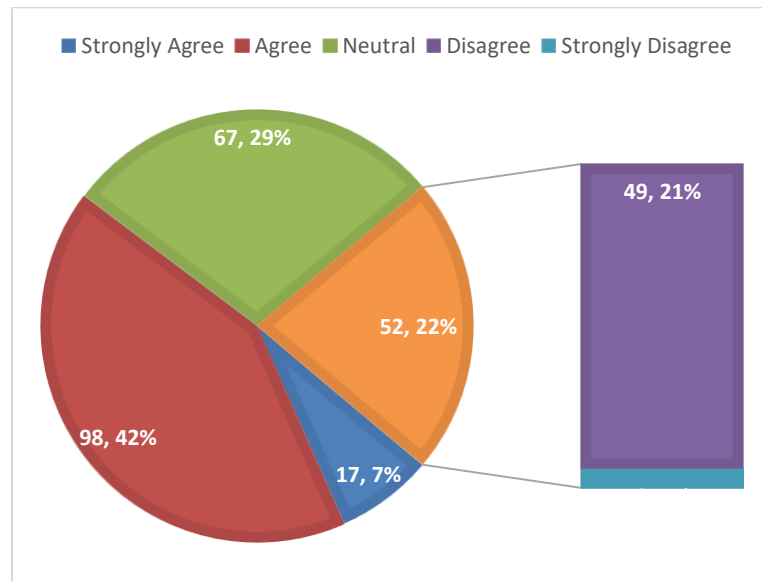
Marketing and communication student recruitment factors used by HEIs to recruit students N=234



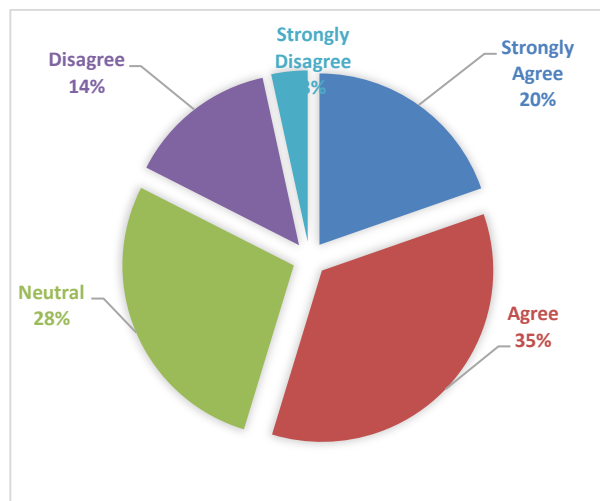
**Figure 1:** Reputation and Brand



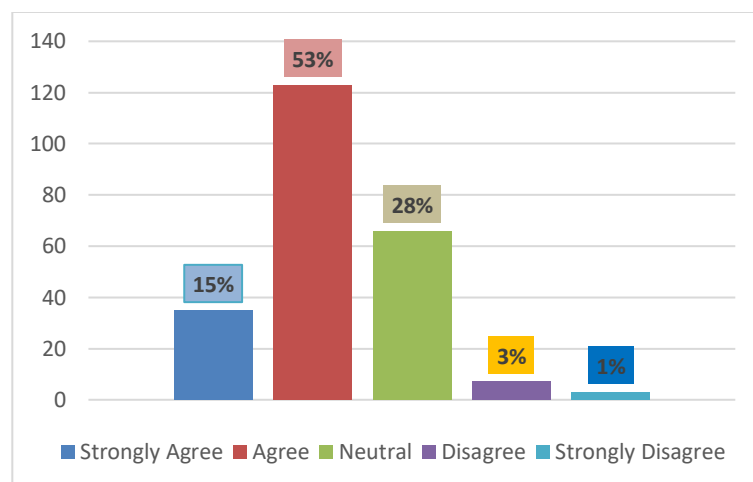
**Figure 2:** Information about university



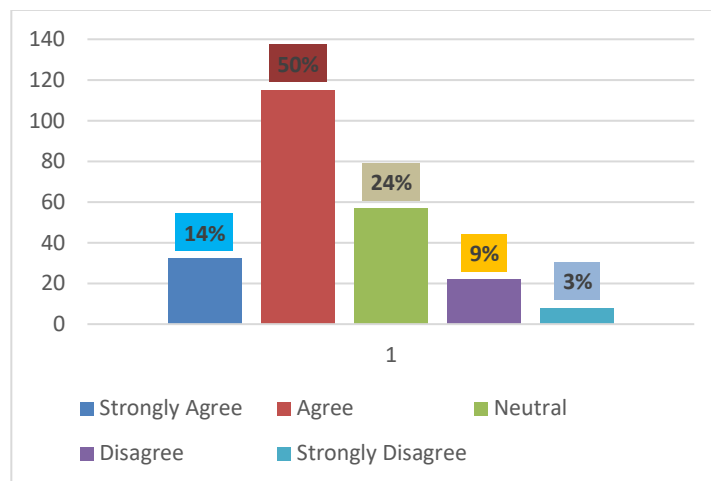
**Figure 3:** Persuasive Marketing Strategies



**Figure 4:** Advertising Campaign Tools



**Figure 5:** Contact communication tools



**Figure 6:** University customer service

## Discussion

The study's aim was to investigate how selected public universities employ competitive intelligence methods to recruit students, including how these competitive intelligence methods affect selected public university student recruitment in the East London region. The study also sought to examine what influences student recruitment in higher education. Therefore, two competitive intelligence theories were used as a base for discussion and the development of the arguments.

This study's analysis has shed light on critical aspects of student recruitment in higher education from the perspective of first-time entering students. The findings provide useful insights for higher education institutions' decision-making and strategic planning, as well as how competitive intelligence could assist HEIs to construct a holistic student recruitment strategy.

This study has demonstrated the critical role of competitive intelligence in higher education institutions and its potential to drive long-term student recruiting strategies in the higher education sector. This study analysed critical tactics and suggests innovative solutions that can revolutionise standard student recruitment efforts and dramatically improve the success of a competitive intelligence strategy. This study has major practical implications for higher education, since it provides a clear plan for South African higher education institutions to examine and incorporate information received from a competitive intelligence plan.

The study's findings indicate that employing a CI strategy as opposed to more general or conventional approaches produced better knowledge of the standards upon which prospective students base their enrolment decisions and the degree to which universities would satisfy their needs. According to Marulanda-Grisales & Vera-Acevedo (2022:525), HEIs must use various assets, both tangible and intangible, to implement objective initiatives. Knowledge is an intangible asset reflected in intellectual capital and the foundation for competitive advantage. Chivugi & Tadu (2020:2) claim that a strong corporate and brand image gives a competitive advantage and improves performance. To create a strong and distinct image, both management and personnel need to be more creative and dedicated. This requires marketing and communication to understand their competition and industry trends. By applying effective analytics, the institution can become a significant player in the HE sectors. According to Wilkins (2020:141), HEIs are not fully utilising all marketing tools and techniques used in other business, such as strategic group analysis. Despite adopting marketing principles like social media, branding, and digital communication, HEIs should also create an annual data gathering plan to stay updated on current trends and understand the needs and preferences of potential students. Iroaganachi (2022:6) claims that sharing findings improves decision making, competitiveness, and enterprise status. This leads to effective decision making and enhanced processes and structure. CI is vital in the knowledge-based economy and involves competitor and market analysis to help organisations predict market trends and respond promptly. The CI strategy in higher education should set goals, track activities, and monitor progress over time. Advancement officers must report strategy changes to decision makers.

## Conclusion

The study examined how competitive intelligence is used as a strategy to promote student recruitment at public universities. Several competitive theories were used as a base for discussion and argument development. However, there is a disconnect in establishing the relationship between CI and student recruitment. It was noted that CI methods are mostly used for academic purposes rather than for institutional image and reputation. The focus was on highlighting academic/educational offerings aligned with the market. These HEIs recognised market trends, assessed their range of programmes, and ensured popular academic options were available. Based on survey, factors influencing university choice were solely based on the institution's competitive strategy. Such factors include programme variety linked to entry requirements, personal career direction, facilities, student support, affordability, and assistance. Other factors such as marketing, communication, and tools used by respondents were considered. HEIs need to be proactive and

capitalise on competitors' weaknesses to be competitive in the HE markets, which was not addressed in the instruments used. These factors are common to most HEIs worldwide. Here is a proposed framework for student recruitment using competitive intelligence strategies for public university student recruitment.

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**Author Contributions:** by authors with equal participation. All authors have read and agreed to the published the final version of the manuscript.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Ethical review and approval were obtained for this study.

**Data Availability Statement:** The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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