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Article

Improving Higher Education Quality, Competitiveness, and Sustainability: Strategic Analysis of International Student Recruitment in Saudi Universities

Tahani Abdullah Abdurhman Alhumud*

Department of Educational Sciences, College of Education, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5023-2675>, Email: t.alhumud@psau.edu.sa

Abstract

This research endeavored to create and deliver a context-specific strategic framework for international students to Saudi Arabian universities with a view to enhance quality, competitiveness, and sustainability. The mixed-methods approach was used, synthesising content analysis of national policy materials and Vision 2030 texts with international best practice comparative review, surveys with administrators (n=21), faculty (n=43), international students (n=237), along with thematic interviews, with results triangulated through SWOT lens. It was revealed that administrators and faculty demonstrated heightened awareness of policies (71.43%) with preferred perceptions on transparency of admission procedures (61.9%) and sufficiency of residential facilities (71.43%). However, limitations emerged in terms of scarce devoted resources (38.5%) and underperforming international marketing initiatives (33.43%). The prevalent language barrier impacted interaction for administrators and faculty (61.91%) as well as students (75.53%). In spite of these limitations, students offered robust desire to study in Saudi Arabia (92.84%), while concomitantly forecasting administrative barriers (57.39%) as well as challenge in academic as well as social integration (67.09%). The analysis reflected that programme-target national level aims overshooting programme-level implementation with success dependent on streamlined governance structures along with English-medium instruction with suitable support with languages with merged students' servicing with partnership with industrial associates. The study yields a practical non-inferential framework through combining pre-sessional English lessons with streamlined admission procedures with centralised student advisory with performance-driven benchmark with Vision 2030 synthesised to translate national strategic intent as concrete as well as sustainably internationalisation deliverables.

Keywords

Policy Alignment, English-Medium Instruction, Student Services, Industry-Linked Scholarships, Benchmarking.

Correspondence to Tahani Abdullah Abdurhman Alhumud, Department of Educational Sciences, College of Education, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5023-2675>, Email: t.alhumud@psau.edu.sa

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Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education is now a leading approach to institutional quality improvement, competitiveness, and sustainability. It is a process through which universities become part of the international scholarly community through attraction of students, staff, and resources, thus stimulating excellence in instruction as well as scholarship. Specifically, international student recruitment is identified as a critical vehicle for stimulating academic cooperation, stimulating intercultural interaction, as well as economic returns to host countries. The extent of this process has deepened with greater interconnection of colleges across the globe as well as greater international mobility of students across borders. With increased focus on international reputation as well as international ranking of universities, international student recruitment is increasingly demanding formulation of formulated strategic agendas within colleges.

The international student recruitment lens is influenced as much by market-led as intellectual arguments. Market-led arguments cite its value in revenue diversity streams for the institution, while intellectual arguments dwell on collaborative research opportunities and innovation. Internationalisation is centre-stage in international policy debate since governments and policymakers are aware of the positive externality on national economies as well as the internationalisation of higher education. In the Middle East region, especially Saudi Arabia, internationalisation has emerged as a centre-piece within the purview of Vision 2030 with education as a development instrument of diversification. As such, international student recruitment as a strategy goes beyond institutional mission to national cause, serving cultural diplomacy, economic diversification, as well as global connection.

Higher education research highlights the growing international student attracting competition among universities (Sin, Antonowicz, & Wiers-Jenssen, 2021). Top destinations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, developed inclusive schemes to attract and retain international skills, reinforcing their world centres of learning status. In comparison, Saudi Arabia is still underrepresented in international study mobility despite recent reforms. Records indicate that nearly 74,000 international students studied across Saudiishertary education settings in 2024 as part of 1 percent of estimated international mobile students of nearly seven million (Nguyen, Murphy, & Chen, 2025). The such as “Study in Saudi Arabia” programme introduced in 2022 represent a significant step on international footing and competitiveness lines despite efforts still remaining in infancy with constant checks needed on them (Kohoutek, Antonowicz, & Kováts, 2025; Morschett et al., 2025).

In spite of such developments, it is difficult for Saudi universities to draw international students. Writing dominating thus far pinpoints such limitations on Saudi institutional attractiveness as structural, institutional, and cultural barriers. The strongest limitations are poor language planning, rigid administrative processes, as well as poor international marketing efforts. Further, social as well as cultural adaptation challenges are not even addressed, limiting Saudi universities' competitiveness with destinations that possess mature support infrastructural bases. Whereas international literature records effective international student recruitment strategies, limited advice pertains to the adaptation of the same to the particular cultural, regulative, and institutional environment of Saudi Arabia. The lack of context-specific frameworks is a notable gap the study intends to fill. The main area of concern is that strategic planning in Saudi universities has inadequately developed to tackle structural limitations as well as institutional reality. Lack of such frameworks has hindered international student attraction efforts as well as limited the potential of Saudi universities to attain international competitiveness. Therefore, the research dilemma can be expressed as that literature prevailing currently inadequately stares at the impediments as well as the promoters of international student attraction in the Saudi higher education context, thus leaving some pertinent questions about the effective strategic alignment yet to be resolved. This presents the significance of scrutinising the world best practices as well as ascertaining the applicability within the Saudi context.

The overall purpose of this study is to provide a strategic comparison of international student recruitment in Saudi universities. The research seeks to determine barriers as well as opportunities, critically review international best approaches, and suggest a framework relevant to the Saudi higher education environment. The overall aim is to increase quality, competitiveness, and sustainability through informing institutional strategies as well as policy formulation with a view to contextual knowledge as well as empirically grounded wisdom. In exploring internationalisation framework-contextualisation in international settings outside the West,

theoretically, it enhances knowledge on contextualising internationalisation framework in non-Western international settings. Empirically, it brings forth evidence regarding particular barriers as well as enabling circumstances that shape international student recruitment in Saudi universities. Methodologically, it avers a strategic framework that can inform institutional decision-making as well as inform policy formulation. The anticipated deliverables seek to produce actionable wisdom to increase global reputation, entice varied international students' groups to converge as well as build up circumstances that enrich intercultural learning, research cooperation, as well as sustainability that can align with national aspiration.

Statement of the Problem

Internationalization in tertiary education has been acknowledged internationally as a central vehicle for quality improvement, competitiveness, and sustainability with hosting systems increasingly reliant on strategic recruitment for diversification and deepening of institutional profiles (Hung & Yen, 2022). In Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 makes no secret of linking international student intake with human capital formation and diversification of the economy, although actual levels of enrollment are still low compared with mature international destinations. Continuing difficulties such as inadequate language preparation, bureaucratic administrative processes, perceived shortcomings in service levels, and inadequate support for integration hinder program attractiveness of campuses (Yousef, 2024). The limitations can compromise institutional quality measures, jeopardize research networking development, as well as delay internationalization sustainability outcomes development. It is thus imperative to conduct a concentrated analysis as a means of ascertaining practical as well as contextually relevant strategic solutions for enhanced recruitment as well as retention.

The main issue investigated in this research relates to the gap between national intentions for internationalisation and institutional-level functioning that impacts international student choice in Saudi universities. The evidence from other systems underlines that successful recruitment is based on marketing strategies' alignment with service provision platforms as well as with culturally sensitive learning environments (Hsain & El Housni, 2024). Still, detailed analyses for the Saudi case are scarce, especially as concerns scalable approaches that can increase quality, international competitiveness, as well as sustainability at once. In practice, dispersed efforts along with weak benchmarking hinder translation of intent from internationalisation policies to regular enrolment expansion. This gap calls for a framework that is both theoretically grounded as well as implementable in practice. Current regional research shows economic as well as systemic advantages that internationalisation policies with proper structures can produce while revealing gaps in implementation approaches as well as evaluation tools appropriate for Gulf settings. In spite of growing international literature, international student choice barriers as well as facilitators along with country-specific adjustment of international excellence models to national governance structures, local considerations for languages as well as support structures for students remain weakly researched cases for Saudi. As such, this research initiates the following question: what strategic framework can be developed by Saudi universities that can reinforce international student recruitment while advancing higher education quality from one angle as well as international competitiveness as well as sustainability in the longer term from another?

Study Objectives

1. To recognize and study institutional, cultural, and regulatory barriers that hinder international students' recruitment within Saudi universities with emphasis on what makes them least competitive.
2. To investigate international students' enrollment decision-making factors including academic excellence, cultural and social fittingness, and institutional features.
3. To review successful strategies and best practice used by world-class universities for enlisting international students as well as for retaining them, and to explore its possibility of adaptation to the Saudi Arabian context of higher education.
4. To suggest a context-specific strategic framework for boosting Saudi universities' global reputation, competitiveness, and sustainability in the international landscape of higher education.
5. To facilitate Saudi universities' academic and administrative experience to international students' expectations in line with international students' expectations while accommodating Vision 2030's overall aims.

Study Questions

1. What institutional, cultural, and regulatory barriers constrain international students' recruitment in Saudi Arabian universities, and how do these restrictions impact institutional competitiveness?
2. What are the main academic, cultural, social, and institutional determinants that influence international students' enrollment decisions in Saudi Arabian universities?
3. What approaches to best practice used by top overseas universities have proved most successful in attracting international students and retaining them, and to what degree are these approaches transferable to the Saudi Arabian post-school arena?
4. What elements would you include in a context-specific strategic framework for Saudi Arabian universities to increase their international visibility, competitiveness, and sustainability, and what can be done to upgrade the academic and administrative atmosphere to meet international students' expectations while fulfilling Vision 2030 aims?

Literature Review

This section presents previous research using a critical literature review approach, wherein existing studies are systematically analysed, organised thematically, and evaluated critically. The review identifies prevailing methodological approaches, theoretical frameworks, areas of consensus and disagreement, as well as gaps in the literature, thereby establishing a comprehensive and insightful foundation for the present study.

Comprehensive Overview

The literature reviewed investigates international student recruitment as a means to quality improvement, increased competitiveness, and sustainability in higher education systems with specific reference to policy environments, finance, and soft power agendas. Conceptually internationalisation is both a strategic institutional initiative as well as a national developmental tool often linked with revenue diversification and intención with intercultural outcome promotion. Methodologically studies mostly utilise mixed designs which combine document analysis with surveys and interviews to determine drivers, barriers, and performance indicators. Research inquiries typically address determinants of student attraction, institutional preparedness, as well as relative national initiative performance across international competitors. Theoretical underpinnings derive from market rationales, academic capitalism, as well as hard power suites with governance and quality assurance operationalised constructs. Sampled populations in these surveys are mostly administrators, academics, as well as international students drawn from middle eastern as well as international settings with partial consideration directed to Saudi Arabia. Comparison exercises determine Saudi reform congruence with leading international destination practice with emphasis placed on adaptation difficulties along with benchmarking requirements (Tight, 2022).

Thematic Analysis

The texts can be summarised into three interrelated themes. First, internationalisation is framed as a strategic tool that combines finance considerations, quality assurance, as well as soft power with revenue diversification and institutional reputation (Bound et al., 2020). Second, recruitment initiative success is dependent on institutional readiness with language provision, streamlined admission processes, as well as student support services that impact adaptation as well as persistence outcomes (Yasmin, Li, & Slaninová, 2022). Thirdly, the role of coordinating policies is demonstrated; national approaches need to be enactment-led at the programme level with support from believable marketing initiatives as well as linked pathways to industry to stay competitive with mature international destinations. Methodologically, research makes common usage of mixed-methods approaches through combining surveys as well as interviews with documentary analysis to triangulate factors that impact recruitment as well as related barriers (Wang et al., 2024). The common finding is the under-development of Saudi-specific framework with reforms on-going leading to gaps in governance as well as evaluation mechanisms. Current research is in support of embracing benchmarking initiatives while tailoring interventions to native linguistic as well as sociocultural settings (Alqahtani et al., 2022).

Comparative Analysis

The compared research collectively points up international student recruitment as a strategic priority in achieving financial sustainability as well as institutional reputation, though differing on optimal methods as well as effectiveness. Evidence from matured higher education markets points to tuition-driven revenue diversification as well as advanced branding mechanisms, while research with Saudi Arabia as a focus point to the common case that usually policy aspiration exceeds institutional operational preparedness. There is consensus on support for languages as well as student servicing as indicators of powerful predictors of satisfactory as well as retention outcomes, though with differences as well as persistence of these effects across different measurements as well as lack of longitudinal measurements. Sampling quality is uneven: multisite research enhances external validity while single-campus case research provides detailed insights while limiting generalisability. Measurement methods are also mixed with combinations of key performance indicators, self-reported surveys as well as proxy measurements rendering cross-study synopsis hard (Afzali & Vazirov, 2023). The differences point up a requirement for triangulation of administrative records, stakeholder perceptions as well as benchmarking measurements to yield accurate outcomes measurements. Points of consensus on governance support, support for languages as well as student servicing help identify strategic levers for contextual constraints test points.

Advanced Integration

An integrated framework links governance alignment, institutional readiness, and student experience to international student recruitment outcomes. Policy initiatives create motivations which, when integrated within programme-level governance and quality assurance procedures, facilitate plausible marketing and open admissions practice (Tight, 2022). These arrangements interlink with language support, academic support, and accommodation provision to reduce adaptation difficulties and boost student satisfaction, thus underwriting institutional reputation. Financial instruments, as with scholarships and industry-related career routes, again drive demand through enlarging perceived returns as well as employability potential. Benchmarking introduces performance benchmarks and indicators, while combining multifaceted analytical resources counteracts discrepancies in measurement. This interweaving accounts for consensus on governance, languages, as well as student service support, while elucidating discrepancies through differential implementation as well as scarcity of longitudinal research analysis (Mercan, 2024). The current research study will intermingle administrative datasets with stakeholder views as well as coordinate admissions with language support as well as service provision to maximise evaluative results.

Research Gap and Current Study Objectives

Some gaps continue in existing literature. First, Saudi-specific strategic frameworks are underdeveloped compared to national reform agendas with programme implementation and evaluation scarce at levels below that. Second, unevenness in measurement along with overdependence on self-reported measures suppress cumulative inference while evidence with a timespace matrix linking recruitment to outcomes is lacking (Wilkins, 2023). Thirdly, while adaptation support in terms of languages offered, accommodation, and student service is identified as essential-optimal alignments with associated cost-effectiveness remain speculative. Fourthly, while benchmarks are available for comparison, targets and governance arrangements bespoke to local settings are seldom indicated (Almossa & Alzahrani, 2022). In counterpoint, the study seeks to produce a context-specific strategic framework, benchmark systems with indicators calibrated to Saudi limitations, explore the mediator role of languages support and service on student satisfaction as well as on intention to enrol, and merge administrative records with stakeholder views. The aims are aligned with existing consensus on governance along with institutional preparedness while filling gaps in measurement unevenness as well as operationalisation, framing the study as both confirmatory as well as innovative with specification of evaluable pathways. In summary, the review interweaves evidence on international student recruitment along strategic, governance as well as student experience dimensions with Saudi-specific gaps in operational framework, metrics as well as with timespace matrix on outcome links on recruitment evident across it. The study's aims thereby address these gaps directly through framework bespoke design, benchmarking, testing as a mediator, as well as merged analysis on data with these aims staying aligned with research design with added emphasis on relevance for institutional quality on competitiveness as well as sustainability.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach adopted in the study, detailing the data collection procedures, the analytical framework employed for data examination, and the overall research design utilised.

Research Approach

The research utilised a mixed-methods design in a convergent parallel framework to balance qualitative and quantitative elements with a view to both breadth coverage and triangulation. The design was chosen to enable breadth-depth balance through both the quantification of stakeholder perceptions as well as contextual subtlety exploration. The approach framed the research as both exploratory and confirmatory at once: exploratory in ascertaining gaps occurring at policy-practice levels, as well as confirmatory in Saudi practice comparison with international standards. It focuses on context-adaptive practice with national goal concertation in institutional realities while accommodating multi-stakeholder góç perspectives.

Data Collection

Data were obtained from three primary sources to ensure reliability and depth of understanding.

1. Documents and Reports: The Saudi Ministry of Education's official publications and strategy papers released in relation to Vision 2030 projects were studied. They are its statistical yearbooks, transformation plans, Human Capability Development Program (2021), and "Study in Saudi Arabia" research papers. They presented factual baselines on policy orientations, overseas student enrolls, scholarship offerings, and admission policies.
2. Questionnaires: Three structured questionnaire forms with 30 closed-ended questions each were handed over through Google Forms to administrators (n=21), faculties (n=43), and international students (n=237). The questionnaires examined awareness of policies, institutional preparedness, awareness of Saudi Arabia as a study destination, and experienced difficulties. The ratings were noted on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The tools weretested from a scholarly standpoint by two profsessorsof education and field-tested with tiny groups to confirm simplicity andreliability.
3. Interviews: Semi-structured interviews of administrators, teachers, as well as international students were held with the aim of understanding in-depth policy implementation, operational challenges, as well as reform avenues. Informed consent was elicited from all participants before taking part.

Analytical Framework

The mixed-methods research used both quantitative (survey-based) and qualitative (document/report analysis and interview) approaches to answer research questions. The quantitative data were supplemented with qualitative analysis to create a base numerical description. Interviews used thematic content analysis under NVivo to detect main categories such as barriers, opportunities, and solutions. Furthermore, policies, strategic documents, as well as official reports of Saudi Arabia's higher education, systematically monitored under systematic observation led to detailed analysis with suitable explanations on these lines. The research further estimated the strength, weakness, opportunity, as well as threat that Saudi universities encounter in attracting international students through the estimation with a SWOT paradigm. The results were triangulated with the aid of convergent parallel design (Bhardwaj & Kumar, 2023), in which both qualitative as well as quantitative data had simultaneous completion despite separation for methodological robustness as well as validity support. The combined result shows robust evidence to inform institutional decision-making (Adoui, 2023; Mercan, 2024) (Figure 1).

Study Scopes

1. Extent of the Objective: The research aims to investigate policies, strategies, and limitations influencing international students' recruitment in the education systems of higher education. It aspires to investigate institutional practice with national aims to determine actionable structures.
2. Time Horizon: The study is centered on a specific time frame that is parallel to relevant reforms, initiatives, and policies' introduction. This time frame ensures fleet observation on whether strategies are coherent with overall developmental agendas.

3. Spatial Scope: The research is limited to post-school institutions in a defined national dimension. Although such analysis is mindful of wider regional and geographical context of these post-schools, it is confined to a well-established national borderline.
4. Human Scale: The research examines perceptions as well as practice of main actors participating in internationalisation of postgraduate education. Administrators, teachers, as well as students who are involved in direct implementation of policies on behalf of an institutional practice are such actors.

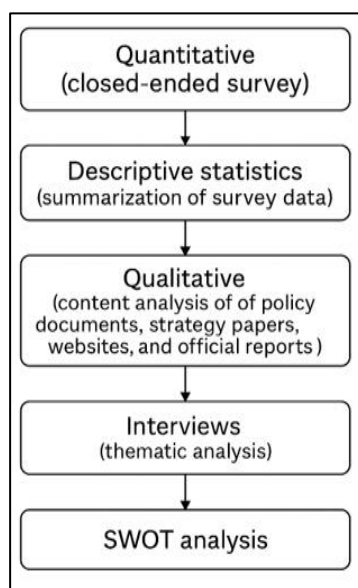


Figure 1: *Research Design.*

Study Significance

The research is highly theoretically relevant to informing research on practice in higher education. It initiates a context-specific framework that brings together governance motives, institutional preparedness, as well as student experience, framed within Vision 2030's national reform plan. The study methodologically contributes through its triangulated mixed-methods approach that combines surveys, interviews, as well as SWOT analysis to guarantee construct validity while providing a replicable template for new higher education systems that are emerging. Furthermore, it adds to the comparative higher education literature through placing Saudi Arabian universities at the center of international debates on market rationales, quality assurance, as well as soft power while underlining locally calibrated benchmarks' significance. In unison, these contributions fill critical knowledge gaps while clarifying conceptual conceptualisation of internationalisation within non-Western higher education settings.

From a practical viewpoint, the research yields actionable advice to help policymakers derive specific programme-level outcomes from overarching internationalisation aims. Chief recommendations are performance-based budgeting, source diversification country-wise, and instituting open accountability mechanisms to enhance national aims aligning. In its recommendations to institutions, the research yields evidence-based advice on widening English-medium instruction coverage, centralising admissions procedures, instituting industry-linked scholarship offerings, and enriching faculty developmental programmes in aid of student recruiting as well as retaining efficiencies. In its recommendations at the student level, it is critical on its advocacy of complete academic, linguistic, as well as social integration services that facilitate progression, employability, as well as intercultural competence levels of students. As a whole, these practical applications undergird the capacity of Saudi Arabian universities to increase global competitiveness levels, entice plural international cohorts with diversity, as well as sustainably grow according to Vision 2030 specifications.

Key Concepts and Terminologies

1. Internationalisation of Higher Education (IHE): IHE is a proactive system- as well as institutional-level process that weaves internationality, intercultural, and globalization across governance, curricula, research, and student service. It blends outward mobility with "at-home" internationalisation of curricula

- with the aim of attaining measurable educational as well as institutional outcomes in terms of quality, competitiveness, as well as sustainability (Tran et al., 2023).
2. International Student Recruitment (ISR): ISR integrates aligned institutional policies, strategic marketing of markets, relationship-based practice aimed at attracting, admitting, and enrolling international students within regulatory and ethical guidelines. It includes varied pipelines of recruitment, data-based targeting, and risk analysis as well as post-admission support to retain streams of revenue, diversity, and programme sustainability (James, 2023).
3. University Competitiveness: University competitiveness is defined as institutional ability to gain position, resources, talent, and influence by means of both market drivers (such as prices and programme supply) as well as field-based drivers (such as ranking, prestige, and accreditation). Selectivity, research depth, as well as signalling devices may impact outcomes as much as programme diversification, achieving a persistent advantage (Mitterle & Bloch, 2024).
4. Service Quality in Internationalised Universities: Service quality is the perceived quality of both academic and support service facets such as academic advice, languages service, administrative responsiveness, course levels, and induction programmes. In internationalised environments, quality service rises student satisfaction, loyalty support, positive word-of-mouth support, and institutional brand equity promoting recruitment support as well as retention support (Amzat et al., 2023).
5. Sustainable Internationalisation (Internationalisation for Society): Sustainable internationalisation positions cross-border interaction as a social good with a focus on social responsibility, ethical collaborations, and long-term sustainability of systems. It features inclusive access, consideration of the environment, balanced mobility of students, capacity building, and impact indicators that go beyond mere volume counters (Cai & Leask, 2024).

Results

The results of this research contribute empirical findings from surveys, interviews, and documentary analysis that offer a multifaceted, comprehensive understanding of international student recruitment in Saudi Arabian universities. The findings are organised based on stakeholder perspectives, evaluation of policies, and thematic analysis that integrate qualitative depth with quantitative measures. This framing makes it possible to have a clean evaluation of existing practice strengths as well as limitations while bringing forth the prospects as well as challenges that are shaping Saudi internationalisation efforts in support of Vision 2030. The results are presented within this section thus:

The Closed-Ended Surveys

Closed-end questionnaires were distributed to the targeted groups of university administrators, faculty staff, and current international students in Saudi Arabia. The questionnaires involved 21 administrators, 43 teaching staff, and 237 international students. The following figures illustrate the outcomes from each questionnaire. As we can see from Figure 2, it is revealed that a significant number of university administrators register high awareness of the national internationalisation goals with 71.43% agreeing or strongly agreeing. In spite of that, many universities are without well-specific mechanisms to integrate their internationalisation policies with Saudi Vision 2030's vision. Furthermore, slightly more than half of those involved regularly monitor shifts in national internationalisation policy with possible communication or capacity constraints. Well over 38% of administrators affirmed that their universities provide special resources for international students with a significant gap in structures.

Positively, 61.9% of administrators disagreed or strongly disagreed that admissions are opaque and inept, indicating administrative procedure improvements. Likewise, 71.43% disagreed or strongly disagreed that universities' accommodation for international students is inadequate. Conversely, 33.43% disagreed or strongly disagreed that Saudi universities strongly market themselves as international study places, indicating marketing strategy deficiencies. Nevertheless, 71.43% of administrators indicated that international students still retain interest in Saudi study encounters as attested from yearly application levels. Since Arabic is mainly used as a teaching language, 61.91% of administrators admitted that linguistic issues are a big challenge for international students. In addition, 57.14% disagreed or strongly disagreed that administrative and regulatory barriers continue to be common in the industry.

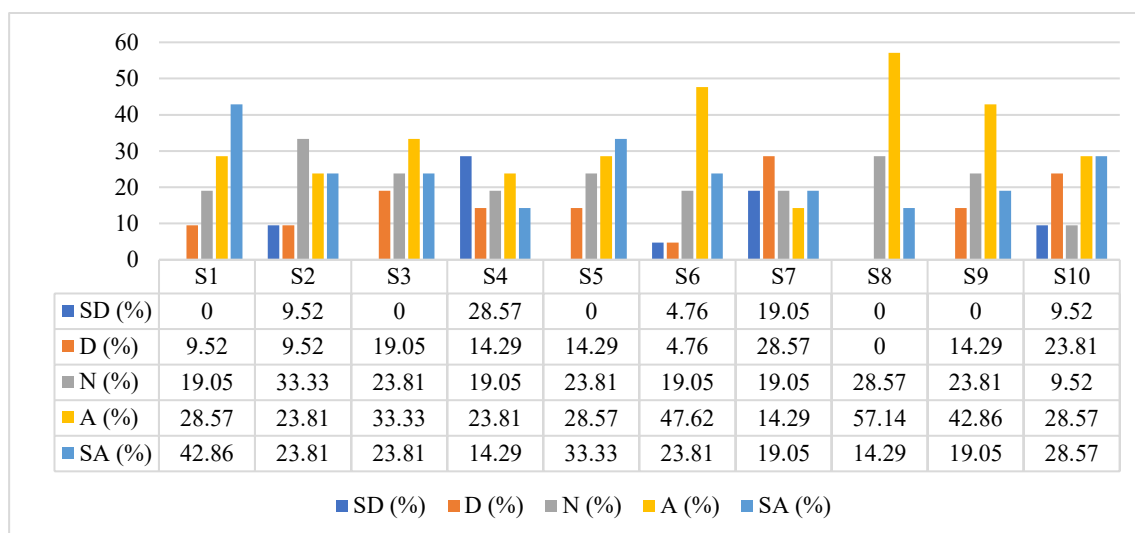


Figure 2: Results of the Survey Administered to Universities' Administrators.

As indicated in Figure 3, 71.43% of faculty indicated good awareness of Saudi internationalisation aims in higher education in line with Vision 2030. The lack is despite this that departmental-level teaching planning does not always incorporate these national internationalisation aims such that only 47.62% of faculty approve of such alignments while suggesting that institutional coordination can be improved. In addition to this, 52.38% of faculty agreed strongly/blocked that there are insufficient faculty wider developments as well as training agendas to manage teaching international students. In a similar pattern, 57.14% of respondents disagreed/remain neutral on culturally diverse formative resources.

However, 61.9% of instructors stated that they felt confident while teaching students with varied culture backgrounds as they trusted in their abilities as well as flexibility. Furthermore, 66.67% responded in agreement or strong agreement that Saudi is increasingly becoming appealing to international students as it represents advancements in Vision 2030 aims. Surprisingly, 76.19% of participants stated that international students add valuable viewpoints to educational settings as it represents appreciation for diversity in terms of deepened teaching as well as learning orientations. In agreement with administrators' reactions, 61.91% of instructors responded that they accepted that communication difficulties hamper class interactions with a view to institutional support. Furthermore, 52.38% responded that agreed or strongly agreed that existing curricula demand greater flexibility to cater to varied students effectively.

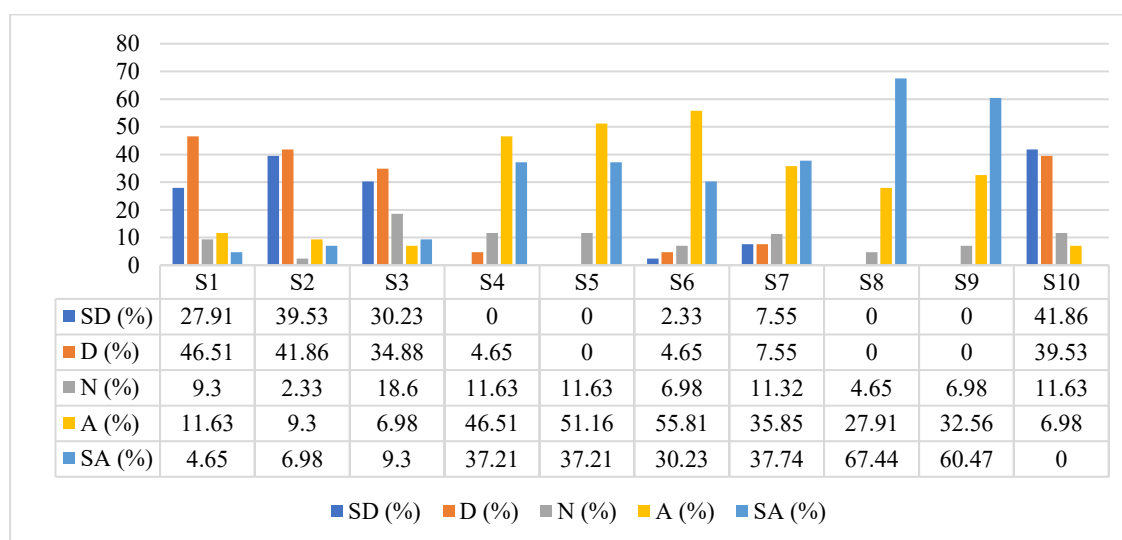


Figure 3: Results of the Survey Administered to Faculty Members.

As shown in Figure 4, a vast majority of Saudi university international students (94.93%) reported being aware of national attraction strategies directed at them. Meanwhile, 80.59% reported that their universities did not inform them well enough on these strategies following enrollment to restrict students' knowledge on how their programs align with wider national agendas. Nevertheless, 67.09% of students felt that agreement with their institutions on sufficient orientation sessions when commencing on programmes was strong enough. Further, 57.39% of students reported challenges with administrative systems such as visa requirements, registration, and accommodation. Although 83.12% felt that it was possible for their universities to be attentive to students' concerns and comments, 67.09% felt that academic support as well as social support was not enough. Positively, 71.3% felt that agreement that Saudi Arabia's swelling reputation as an academic destination makes it a preferable study destination was strong enough. As a result, 92.83% of respondents reported that they would be willing to recommend study in Saudi Arabia despite these challenges. In agreement with administrator and faculty findings, 75.53% of students reported that linguistic barriers negatively impact on students' academic performance as well as overall experience negatively. In any case, 71.31% reported no critical problems with adaptation culturally as well as socially.

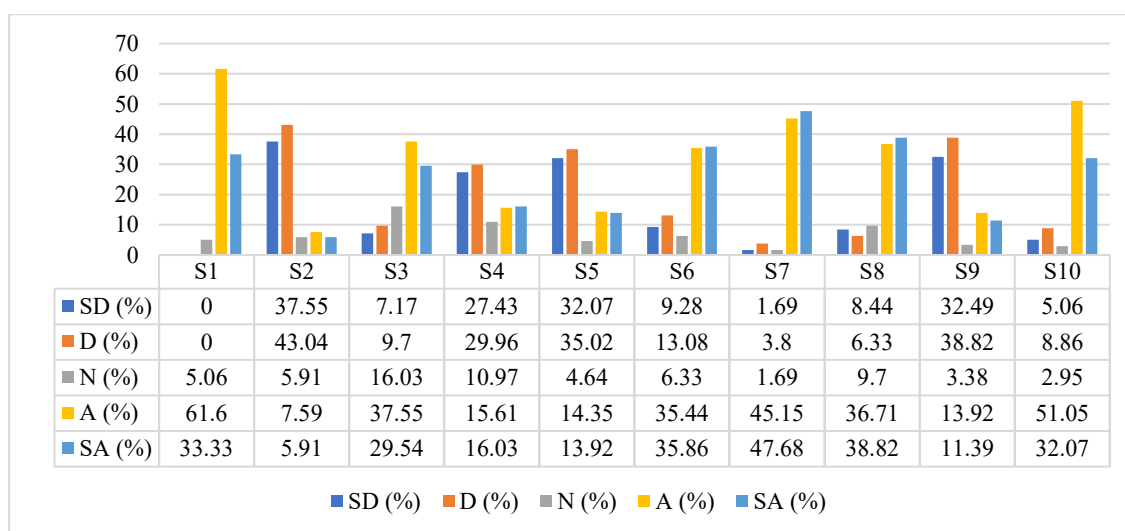


Figure 4: Results of the Survey Administered to Current International Students.

Content Analysis of Documents, Strategy Papers, and Official Reports

To analyse available papers on internationalisation of higher education and international student recruitment in Saudi Arabia up to annual reports on education from ministries of education, statistical yearbooks, press statements announcing Vision 2030 master plans, the Education Sector Development Strategy, as well as those from Human Capability Development Program, highlighted four main foci: (1) international students' disaggregated-by-nationhood yearly intake number, (2) scholarship/grant schemes for international students that already exist, (3) allocation of funds/incentives to universities for international students' recruitment purposes, as well as (4) admission requirements policies that pertain to international students' admission.

These statistics point to Saudi Arabia having fluctuated its international students' enrollees from 2008 until 2024. Table 1 shows estimated figures regarding international students' enrollees number in Saudi Arabian Universities from 2008 until 2024.

Table 1: International Student Enrolment in Saudi Arabian Universities (2008–2024).

Year	Total International Students
2008	18.725
2017	74.000
2019	75,000+
2022	~68,000
2024	~70,000

Table 1 shows that Saudi Arabia expanded its international students' scholarship programme in 2008 for the first time. Remarkable international enrolments' growth was registered during Saudi Vision 2030 preparatory phase in 2017 with record highs right before COVID-19 pandemic onset. The drop was registered later in 2022 as a consequence of post-pandemic disruption. From 2024, scholarship programmes started to gain traction mainly due to the force compelling most Saudi universities to gain academic accreditation from NCAAA as a means of support in Vision 2030's outcome achievement. In addition to that analysis of international students' nationalities from 2008 up to 2024 shows that most international students come from Muslim-dominated nations with which Saudi Arabia can be explained to share significant geopolitical, religious, culture-oriented tie as well as economic cooperation links. The greater part of international students register in four government-held universities which are Islamic University of Madinah, King Abdulaziz University, King Saud University as well as Princess Nourah University (for females). Table 2 shows Saudi Arabia's leading international students' nationalities.

Table 2: The Common Nationalities of International Students in Saudi Arabia.

Region	Example Countries	Notes
Africa	Egypt, Nigeria	Strong Religious Ties; High Demand for Islamic and STEM Education
Asia	India, Bangladesh, Philippines, Indonesia	Significant Scholarship Recipients; Close Religious/Cultural Affiliations
The Middle East	Yemen, Syria	Regional Proximity and Political Support via Humanitarian Scholarships
Central Asia	Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan	Participants in Islamic Studies and Arabic Language Programs
Europe & Americas	Very Limited (e.g., Bosnia)	Small Number, Mostly Exchange or Research-Focused Students

As outlined in Table 2, Saudi Arabian internationalisation strategy is directed by religious, regional, as well as strategic development aims connected to Vision 2030. This is reinforced cultural diplomacy for Saudi as well as augmenting its hard power in strategic regions of concern. Additionally, official reports as well as strategic papers continue to suggest that Saudi universities offer various fully funded international student scholarship offerings. Standard scholarship offerings are tuition fee coverage, monthly stipends, accommodation allowance, healthcare service coverage, as well as overseas travel allowance. Table 3 gives a summary of scholarship programmes offered within the top five Saudi Arabian universities based on international student enrollment.

Table 3: Major Scholarships for International Students in Saudi Arabia.

Scholarship Program	Institution	Coverage Details
King Abdulaziz University Scholarship	King Abdulaziz University	Tuition, Monthly Stipend, Accommodation, Healthcare, Round-Trip Airfare
King Fahd University Scholarship	King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals	Tuition, Monthly Stipend, Accommodation, Medical Care, Textbooks, Airfare
Islamic University Madinah Scholarship	Islamic University of Madinah	Monthly Allowance, Furnished Accommodation, Healthcare
Islamic Development Bank Scholarship	Islamic Development Bank	Tuition, Monthly Stipend, Medical Support, Travel Allowance
Princess Nourah University Scholarship	Princess Nourah University	Tuition, Travel, Housing, Lectures, Books, Other University Activities

While official reports neither release detailed funding allocation data on international students in Saudi universities nor on expenditure levels on international students across Saudi universities' overseas offices, Vision 2030 conceptualizes education as a foundation of human capital advancement and economic diversification. Accordingly, this flagship program is one of its core ambitions to develop the international standing of Saudi universities, with diversification of students being a significant tool for fulfilling this aspiration. Furthermore,

both the Education Sector Transformation Program (ESTP) and Human Capability Development Program (HCDP) outline international talent attraction, both students and scholars alike, as a strategic priority for enhancing institutional strength in terms of quality and competitiveness. Universities are also compelled to develop international enrolments through various incentives. The following is exhibited in Table 4 as some examples of funding mechanisms as well as those offered as Saudi universities' as well as the Ministry of Education's incentives for enlisting international students.

Table 4: Key Incentives and Funding Mechanisms.

Incentive Type	Brief Description	Bodies in Charge
Competitive Research Grants	Funding priority is for universities that engage in international research bodies, e.g., King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) and Research, Development, and Innovation Authority (RDIA).	MOE; KACST; RDIA
Performance-Based Budgeting	MOE related institutional budgeting to specific key performance indicators, including the number of students enrolled as well as the diversity of nationalities.	MOE
Strategic International Partnerships	MOE encourages universities to establish partnerships with international top-ranked universities, offering faculty and students exchange to improve universities' reputation.	MOE
Global Recruitment Initiatives	Universities that participate in international education fairs are supported to build dedicated recruitment offices abroad for international applicants.	Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC)

With regard to international students' admission policies, the ministry of education has provided clear guidelines that oversee eligibility as well as application methods. The guidelines touch on age limits for applicants, documentation, as well as other requisites. The age is 17 to 25 years for undergraduate degree coursework while 30 years as well as 35 years for masters as well as Ph.D., respectively. All applicants are required to obtain clearance from the home state along with presenting attested education certificates along with accompanying files like a police clearance form as well as a clearance in a medical examination. The female students should be accompanied in the mahram (protector), as it is relevant. The applicants should come up with proof of the capacity to study in English as provided through then accredited testing bodies like the IELTS with some of the universities presenting additional requisites particular to those of universities.

Interviews: A Thematic Analysis

The interviews were conducted simultaneously with three groups of stakeholders: university officials, lecturers, and present international students in Saudi Arabia. They comprised some of the Saudi universities. The answers given during the interviews were then grouped into four main themes.

Institutional Strategies and Vision

This theme is of interest to administrative officials in universities and is concerned with the administrative initiatives undertaken through Saudi universities aiming to support international students' enrollment consistent with Vision 2030 since it highlights educational reform as well as competitiveness on international levels. Administrators Sharaly discussed the following characteristics:

1. Saudi universities conform to proactive recruitment policies like offering of scholarships, participation in international study fairs, besides strategic visits to would-be students in strategic places, particularly in the Orient as well as African regions, for widening cross-border mobility of students besides international league tables.
2. The recruitment drive is part of the corollary of Vision 2030's mission to enhance the position of the institution, guarantee innovation in addition to constructing a society that is knowledge-based through joint research endeavors.

3. The internationalisation strategies are assessed both with quantitative indicators—enrolments and with retaining levels—and with qualitative indicators, namely with questionnaires of students' satisfaction as well as with mechanisms of students' feedback.

Operational and Administrative Barriers

This thread goes for international students as well as administrators at the university and focuses on main points that influence international student recruitment. Administrators pointed to several inefficiencies in administrative procedures that always irked potential students, including delayed clearance on visas and lethargic admissions from lack of proper communication among departments. Additionally, students pointed to inadequate proper information regarding submission of the visa, accommodation, as well as other administrative matters. Spare English-language facilities provided in some administrative offices made the situations even worse.

Teaching and Academic Integration

This theme enrolls both international students and faculty staff and delves into international students' encounters with campus faculty in academic arenas. The following are what faculty staff reported:

1. They indicated approval of academic diversity from international students since students' different cultural and academic settings make classroom discourse enriched. Yet, certain instructors indicated concern with students as being unprepared on programmes as well as English or Arabic proficiency variability.
2. In assisting students to adapt, staff used unofficial means both within and outside class, e.g., reducing language complexity and visual supports. Institutional-wide systematic programmes on systematic programmes on comprehensive intercultural and languages training for international students are absent at institutional levels in universities.
3. Newly appointed staff identified gaps in professional development. Although some workshops are provided, attendance is voluntary and content is generic. Staff indicated that tailored programmes of training are needed to develop intercultural teaching skills and facilitate successful academic integration of international students.

Student Experience and Social Integration

This theme applied strictly to international students and dealt with their experience of adapting in Saudi Arabian academic as well as social settings. The students indicated as follows:

1. Although as students appreciated their programmes as efficient and satisfactory regarding instruction and academic facilities, they identified that non-academic service such as healthcare provision, extracurricular activities, and career advice was wanting especially for the freshmen students.
2. Language differences and unfamiliarity with native cultural patterns added to feelings of loneliness and presented serious challenges to adjustment. However, students managed to create encouraging enclaves on campus that defrayed these challenges.
3. Future international students must be culturally prepared beforehand with a lesson in Arabic as well as Saudi social norms so that academic and social integration can be easier.

SWOT Analysis

Based on the synthesis of major documents, official reports, strategy papers, survey findings, and thematic interview data, the following subsections present the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with internationalisation policies and practices in Saudi universities.

Strengths

1. Saudi's universities and education ministry develop internationalisation policies that are very aligned with Vision 2030's vision, with very high national strategic alignment.
2. The bourses provided to overseas students are comprehensive, which often entail tuition, accommodation, stipends, healthcare, among other essential expenditures, thus highly accessible and negotiable.
3. Higher academic profiles have created increased interest among overseas students as a mirror to the international profile of the universities.

4. The administrators and academics demonstrate high awareness of internationalisation significance, particularly international ranking strengthening as well as institutional reputation.
5. The majority of overseas students are from Islamic countries with deep cultural, religious, and economic ties with Saudi Arabia, adding to the kingdom's soft power as education paradise and diplomacy asset.

Weaknesses

1. National internationalisation policies are not always embedded at department levels with institutional cooperation and coordination windows emerging to the fray.
2. Administrative efficiencies remain a concern in certain universities, namely with regards to visa procedures, accommodation issues, and admission procedures, which can divert potential student participation.
3. Staff education to prepare faculty to lecture with varied students is narrow, with systematic programmes of instruction to international cohort requirements being rare.
4. Language differences continue to be a challenge to social integration as well as academic engagement among international students with potential effects on dissatisfaction and dropout.

Opportunities

1. The increased international awareness of Saudi universities provides prospects for broader marketing and brand efforts to reach a broader international student base outside existing regional specializations.
2. There is potential to develop more strategic international partnerships and joint research endeavors, particularly with master's and doctoral students, that can increase research excellence as well as academic excellence.
3. Creating specialised programmes of study and tailoring existing curricula to international students' needs may enhance appeals to enrolments and facilitate easier academic adjustment.
4. Recent increases in international rankings that are in-line with Vision 2030 are a chance for institutional competitiveness enhancement as well as acquiring high-quality international students.

Threats

1. Over-reliance on students from geopolitically aligned Muslim countries makes Saudi universities vulnerable; diversification of host countries is needed to counter this risk factor.
2. Global economic disasters and regional unrests, like post-COVID-19 enrollment contraction, are reminders that international student volumes are vulnerable to outside disruptions. Ongoing cultural and linguistic difficulties can also lead to dissatisfaction as well as student alienation.
3. Visa issuance delays in administration, accommodation arrangement, as well as travel planning, along with uneven interdepartmental cooperation, still impact international students negatively as well as institutional image.

Discussion

The subsequent debate presumes a critical analytical framework that is outlined along six dimensions: results interpretation, theoretical/practical implications, interreference to existing literature, methodological considerations, explanation of convergences/divergences, and future research prospects. The international student recruitment dynamics are simultaneously driven simultaneously by national reform agendas, increasing institutional autonomy, and accrediting-incentivising compulsions that cross with international competition as well as cultural diplomacy (Rumbley et al., 2023). Enrolments growth occurred with repeated operational bottlenecks occurring particularly in language offerings as well as administrative procedures, and variable departmental coordination. Such outcomes suggest quantitative gains buffered through structural restrictions indicative of gains that are both optimistic as well as hampered through operational constraints. Overall, overall findings align with initial hypotheses regarding mixed gains with enduring systemic challenges. Theoretical as well as Practical Applications: This study contributes internationalisation theory to demonstrate governance structures, service supply as well as instruction language as interrelated levers that shape recruitment outcomes (De Wit & Merckx, 2023). The study clarifies national priorities as they can be transmuted as programmatic programmatic enactments on program levels such as curriculum formulation as well as student service as well as performance measures.

In practice, the conclusions underpin the extension of English-medium programmes with furnished Arabic language support to promote greater integration as well as improved academic performance. Other mechanisms are second-stream admissions policies as well as industry-related scholarships that aim at boosting employability as well as international student pipeline diversification (Avolio & Benzaquen, 2024). Ongoing tracking through openmetrics is emphasized as critical within sustaining as well as optimizing recruitment performance.

Comparison with Prior Research: The results converge with prior research when highlighting service quality, innate support mechanisms, and overall recruitment and retention success (Texeira-Quiros et al., 2022). They converge with earlier research underlining effective marketing, curriculum refreshing, and sophisticated support service as drivers of student satisfaction and persistence as well (Firang & Mensah, 2021). Divergences unique to distinctive divergences seen in barrier significance of the language-of-instruction kind as well as accreditation linkages are more significant within Saudi than from common host systems. Comprehensive strategies adopted across top-grade host universities serve as good benchmarking standard notwithstanding local adaptation that is critical with context-specific operational parameter detailed to inform implementation is indicated (Oleksiyenko et al., 2021).

Research Insights: The quantitative strand employed descriptive measures and relative analyses to estimate stakeholder perceptions as well as operating performance. Administrator-student-student triangulation made it possible to draw inferences that conformed with sector-wide quality benchmarks (Khan et al., 2025). External validity was secured through embedding with policy structures as well as accreditation rationality. Key limitations are those of self-reported measures, uneven adoption across department lines, as well as absence of longitudinal tracking of student persistence. Although these limitations do not invalidate central inferences, they do call for prudence when generalising results outside of similar settings.

Similarities and Differences: Convergences with earlier research appeared in service quality mechanisms, value signaling, and organized support, which act collectively on student choice and perseverance (Karim et al., 2024). Differences resulted from differences in linguistic milieus, visa and accommodation processes, and governance transformations, which created different operational settings. Heterogeneity in institutional age, program specializations, and interdepartmental cooperation added differences to experience and intention. Differences in cultural diplomacy agendas also differed in allocative patterns of sending nations as well as responsiveness to scholarship prospects. Overall, results indicate agreement in fundamental mechanisms while elucidating differences due to policy settings as well as organizational forms (Abowardah et al., 2024).

Scholarly Support: Interpretations were based on literature highlighting the interconnection of governance and service quality, reputation dynamics in markets, and performance implications of internationalisation investments (Wysocka, Jungnickel, & Szelągowska-Rudzka, 2022). Language observations on integrated support as well as admissions processes support-place well-established determinants of student transition, engagement, and completion (Bebbington, 2021). Strategy advice is supported with evidence on exchange infrastructure, industry alignment, as well as curriculum modernisation leading to enhancements of recruitment and retention improvements (Hoai, Duy, & Cassells, 2023). Overall, with these results, it is shown that strategic, evidence-based interventions can hasten outcomes by reducing operational bottle-necks. The discussion frames these six dimensions in a coherent manner while utilising proper register fitting for high-impact scholarly output (Alasmari, 2023).

Conclusion

This research brings together analysis from policy texts, surveys of stakeholders, and interviews to evaluate international student recruitment across Saudi universities, which reveals a robust national intention that is not always uniformly operationalised at institutional level. Primary identified challenges are limited resources, restrained international marketing, and abiding barriers within administrative processes and languages. In spite of such barriers, Saudi universities are appealing to potential international students, and enrolment progression maintains convergence with Vision 2030 aims. Conceptually, from a research design perspective, the study advocates a context-specific strategic framework that connects governance convergence, English-medium programmes with added targeted languages support, streamlined admission procedures with integrated student servicing, and industry-partnered initiatives. This framework is supported with triangulated mixed-methods research approach and benchmarking rationality with empirically grounded measurable routes that can inform policy implementation and institutional practice in internationalisation.

Recommendations

Universities must regularise English-medium streams supplemented with pre-sessional linguistic support and foundation modules with tracking through retainment and progression indicators. Further, centralised advice centres and wrap-around support services must be delivered to enable academic, social, and linguistic integration across the whole student journey. The Ministry of Education and institutional offices should streamline admissions and regulatory procedures through one-stop international offices, digitalisation of visa and credentialing processes, and agreement on specific service-level standards so as to align operational procedures with Vision 2030 accountability guidelines. Scholarship programmes must be redirected to industry-linked, co-funded awards with internships and employability guarantee as part of terms. Disbursal must be conditional on performance-related terms as well as post-graduate outcomes so as to reinforce labour market relevance as well as sustainability. Universities must expand cross-border partnerships, student exchange programmes, as well as branded summer programmes offices must be aided through international offices as well as targeted promotional campaigns so as to diversify source countries as well as enhance country internationalisation through increased international visibility so as to reinforce country soft-power positioning.

Limitations

The limitations of this study are a narrow time frame, as the reforms scrutinized are young and initial implementations are young, thus inhibiting the ability to make causal inferences as well as assess long-term effects. The geographical scope is narrow with only one national context used, thus limiting generalisability of results to other higher-education settings. Furthermore, human scope considers only administrators, instructors, as well as international students who are enrolled at present, while using largely descriptive survey data that emphasizes breadth rather than experimental or longitudinal controls.

Study Implications and Future Directions

The research's contributions and future research directions are its embedding of Vision 2030-matched key performance indicators to serve admissions efficiency, student support service tracking, and source country diversification. The colleges should develop greater English-medium streams with matched support service offerings and standardise industry-linked scholarship programmes to boost graduate employability and guarantee long-term survivability. From a methodological standpoint, this triangulated mixed-methods research design yields a replicable template for creating decision-grade evidence. Future research is advised to conduct longitudinal assessments of recently introduced strategies, benchmark international universities' institutional readiness on a periodic basis, and study the mediating influence of provision of languages and student service on satisfaction, persistence in study enrollment, and continued participation.

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