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Orginal Article

The Multifaceted Model of Effective Recruitment of International Students in the Universities of the East of the Country

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Abstract

This qualitative study, using a grounded theory approach with the emergent design articulated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), explored strategies for attracting international students to universities in eastern Iran, specifically Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and the University of Birjand. The participants of this study consisted of current and former managers of the International Office of these universities, as well as faculty members who were specialists and had extensive experience in international collaborations. Sampling was purposeful and criterion-based and continued until reaching the level of theoretical saturation, with a total of 15 individuals participating in semi-structured interviews. Data analysis was performed through open, selective, and axial coding using MAXQDA software, and trustworthiness was ensured using Guba and Lincoln's criteria. The findings indicated that universities view attracting foreign students as a form of multifaceted investment. The factors effective in attracting foreign students include: establishing an international unit, having coherent regulations, accepting different cultures, having communication networks, focusing on fundamental research, a modern teaching system, leading scientific references, welfare and service facilities, and creating financial incentives. In explaining the challenges and obstacles, the following were identified: lack of educational standards, the predominance of a financial attitude, credentialism (quantity-orientation), customary/religious ties, lack of international relations, banking system sanctions, and the prevailing security structure. These challenges were divided into internal organizational and external organizational categories. In explaining effective measures and strategies, the following were extracted across three domains: educational strategies (creating

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virtual units, separate education, formulating standard admission criteria, offering dual degrees), research strategies (research companions, joint projects, research-oriented recruitment), and welfare strategies (material and intellectual rights). Finally, in explaining the consequences of attracting foreign students, the following were influential: positive outcomes such as cultural recognition and sharing, intellectual and scientific dynamism, and financial independence, as well as negative outcomes such as behavioral frustration (cultural duality) and academic discrimination. Ultimately, based on a typology of investment patterns, four dominant recruitment models emerged: maximum absorption, regional recruitment, elite-oriented recruitment, and project-oriented recruitment, and a multifaceted model for attracting foreign students was outlined.

Keywords: higher education, internationalization, attracting foreign students, universities of eastern Iran.

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The internationalization of higher education has become a strategic priority for universities worldwide, with the recruitment of international students serving as a key indicator of institutional prestige, academic exchange, and economic diversification. In Iran, despite national policy goals, the share of international students remains modest, particularly when compared to regional competitors such as Turkey, Malaysia, or the UAE. Border universities in the eastern provinces of Iran—due to their geographical and cultural proximity to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asian countries—possess unique potential for attracting international students. However, no comprehensive, empirically grounded model has yet been developed to guide these institutions in effective student recruitment. The present study aims to identify the multifaceted factors, challenges, strategies, and consequences associated with the successful recruitment of international students in eastern Iranian universities, specifically Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and the University of Birjand. Ultimately, the study seeks to propose a paradigm model of effective international student recruitment as a form of multifaceted investment.

Method

The research adopted a qualitative approach using grounded theory methodology, specifically the emergent design as articulated by Strauss and

Corbin (1990). This approach was selected to allow for flexible, inductive category building directly from participant perspectives. The study was conducted at two border universities in eastern Iran: Ferdowsi University of Mashhad and the University of Birjand. Participants were faculty members who had served as current or former directors of international affairs offices or who had extensive experience in international academic collaboration. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed, and data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved after semi-structured interviews with 15 participants (10 from Ferdowsi University and 5 from the University of Birjand). Data analysis was conducted in three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, facilitated by MAXQDA software. Trustworthiness was ensured using Guba and Lincoln's criteria: credibility (through maximum variation sampling), transferability (thick description), dependability (audit trail), and confirmability (reflexivity).

Results

The analysis revealed that universities view international student recruitment as a form of multifaceted investment encompassing four core categories: academic credibility, academic need, wealth creation, and cultural diplomacy. Causal conditions influencing effective recruitment included structural–physical factors (e.g., establishing an international unit, coherent regulations), social–cultural factors (acceptance of diverse cultures, communication networks), educational–research factors (modern teaching systems, focus on basic research, excellent scientific references), and financial–welfare factors (service facilities, financial incentives). Challenges and obstacles were divided into internal organizational challenges (lack of educational standards, financial-oriented attitudes, credentialism/quantity-orientation) and external organizational challenges (customary/religious orientations, lack of international relations, banking sanctions, and the prevailing security structure). Contextual conditions included macro- and micro-policy frameworks, urban and campus attractiveness, transportation facilitation, and regionally/globally relevant academic disciplines (e.g., petroleum engineering, environmental studies). Strategies and actions were identified across three domains: educational strategies (virtual units, separate instruction, standard recruitment criteria, double degrees), welfare strategies (material and intellectual rights), and research strategies (research assistantships, collaborative projects, research-oriented recruitment). Consequences of effective recruitment included positive outcomes (cultural understanding and sharing, intellectual and scientific dynamism, financial independence) as well as negative ones (behavioral frustration/cultural duality, academic discrimination). Finally, a paradigm model of international

student recruitment as multifaceted investment was developed. Based on a typology of investment patterns, four dominant recruitment models emerged: (1**)** maximum absorption model (balancing academic needs with financial benefits), (2) regional recruitment model (focusing on culturally affiliated students), (3) elite-oriented recruitment model (prioritizing academic excellence and global reputation), and (4) project-oriented recruitment model (emphasizing applied, discipline-specific projects).

Discussion

The study concludes that effective international student recruitment in eastern Iranian universities cannot be achieved through a single-dimensional approach. Instead, it requires a multifaceted investment strategy that simultaneously addresses academic, financial, cultural, and structural dimensions. The dominant pattern of recruitment varies according to institutional priorities: some universities may prioritize financial sustainability (maximum absorption model), while others may focus on regional cultural affinity or academic excellence. The findings highlight the critical need for coherent national and institutional policies, removal of banking and visa obstacles, investment in bilingual and virtual education, and fostering of intercultural competence among faculty and staff. Practically, universities should establish dedicated international units, develop double-degree programs, and promote research partnerships with neighboring countries. Limitations of the study include its focus on only two universities in eastern Iran; future research should extend the model to other border and non-border universities. Policymakers are encouraged to move beyond purely economic rationales for international student recruitment and adopt the multidimensional perspective proposed here.

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