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**VISION OF MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION:  
A CASE STUDY AT A QS 4-STAR UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM**

**Nguyen Thi Dan Tam**

Ho Chi Minh City University of Economics and Finance, Vietnam  
Address: 141-145 Dien Bien Phu Street, Ward 15, Binh Thanh, HCMC

**ABSTRACT**

This paper reports high school graduates' evaluations and attitudes towards a marketing strategy which a QS 4 star university in Binh Thanh district, Ho Chi Minh City, implemented during last summer, 2022. This university offered potential students a free-of-charge intensive English program, namely ECP (English Consolidation Program), which lasted for 60 periods (50 minutes per period). The study aims to discover students' evaluations of learning experiences in this English program and if they perceived ECP as a "marketing strategy" from the university. A questionnaire and two focus groups were conducted to collect data. Findings show interesting and surprising students' perspectives towards the "marketing strategy" from the university and their positive evaluations for ECP. The paper also points out the success of the so-called "marketing strategy" from this university did not follow the traditional framework of marketing in higher education, yet providing an innovate vision, heading to the mission of this university: internationalization.

**KEYWORDS:** UEF, QS 4 stars, higher education, marketing strategy, product, internationalization.

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

It cannot be denied that marketing plays a key role in the field of business and economics. No matter what product is introduced to customers, it is needed to be done via marketing. In educational sector, the norm of "marketing" is sometimes avoided because educators may not accept education relates to business, which aims at making profits. However, when there is an increase of number of international students in Western universities, marketing has become a part of the universities' brands. In Vietnam, in the trend of internationalization, more international and private universities were established, so the need to introduce the values of their institutions to their customers, students, is undeniable. However, their marketing campaigns were not always successful.

One of the main reasons of the failure is not receiving positive attitudes from the community. This study will discover students' attitudes towards a marketing program to explore that issue.

## **2. RESEARCH PROBLEMS**

### **2.1. Definitions of “marketing”**

As fundamentally as it gets, marketing is managing relationships with customers to make profits. The two main goals in marketing are attracting new customers with favorable values and retaining current customers with satisfactory service (Kotler, Burton, Deans, Brown, & Armstrong, 2015). [1] The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines, “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. (2017).” [2] However, according to Lamb (2012), marketing has two faces. Beside the definition of the AMA which focuses on practicality, he believes marketing can also be “a philosophy, an attitude, a perspective or management that stresses customer satisfaction,” (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2012). [3] Regardless of which definition to go with, in its simplest form, marketing can be understood as: brands provide customers with satisfaction and thereby create value for both parties.

Now when speaking specifically in the realm of higher education (HE), some semanticists argued that marketing should not be called “marketing”. Yet, the vast majority agreed that marketing when applied in HE, is still marketing. And this should not be anything controversial that raises deep concerns (Simmons, & Laczniak, 1992)[4].

### **2.2 History of marketing strategies in higher education institutions (HEIs)**

Although universities and colleges have been around for hundreds of years worldwide, it is debatable exactly when HEIs started using marketing strategies to admit prospective students in desirable numbers.

There have been many strategies to marketing in general. Perhaps the most well-known framework for marketing was the 4 Ps (Product- Place- Promotion- Price). The first known origin of marketing mix can be traced back to Prof. James Culliton of Harvard when he mentioned the concept in late 1940s [5]. Sometime later, his colleague, Prof. Neil Borden published The Concept of the Marketing Mix [6], earning him a title for popularizing the original concept. But it was until 1960 in Basic Marketing: A Managerial Approach written by E. Jerome McCarthy [7], where the modern form of the 4 Ps emerged. In the 21st century, Philip Kotler also took part in popularizing the approach [8], it is now widely adopted and secures a foothold in the world of marketing.

### **2.3 Is marketing needed in HEIs?**

Although the core definition of marketing has the tendency to focus on economics and business; and some scholars have been avoiding the term “marketing” in educational sector, do universities, especially private ones, need marketing to reach their recruitment targets?

According to the latest report from the state of Wisconsin, the USA[9], private universities' enrollment of spring 2022 of the state of Wisconsin dropped 9.8% compared to the same time of the year before. It is suggested that COVID-19 had an impact on enrollment, and low-income students

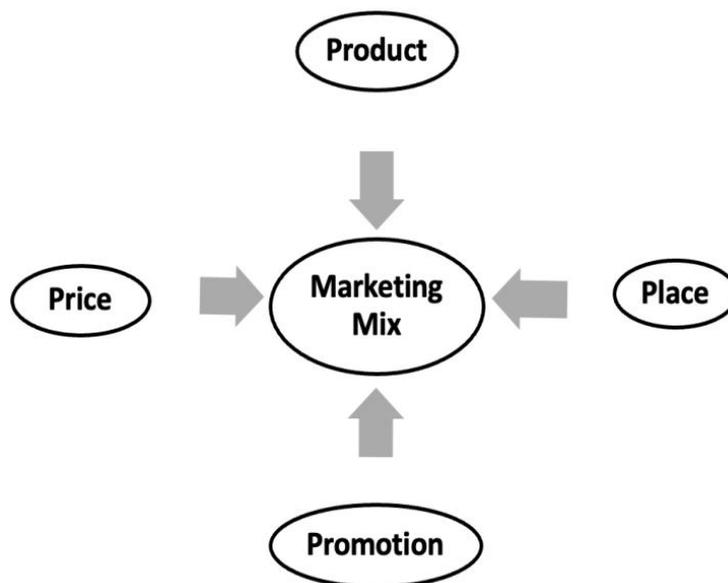
were the last to apply for financial aid from the government and/or the university, even if there were any. Another article from Chicago Business [10] reported high school seniors graduating in 2023 was down 5% compared to 2015, so universities in Illinois are facing a prelude 5% drop in enrollment already. The two articles proposed similar reasons why HEIs are facing “the cliff” in enrollment rate; they have to do with how HE is perceived nowadays. According to this poll by Gallup [11], in 2013, 70% of Americans see college education as very important, but only 6 years later in 2019, the number dropped to 51%. Even more heart-breaking, the age group from 18 to 29 had the most devastating plummet. In 2013, 74% of young people viewed college education to be very important, in 2019, only 41% of them do.

Graduates have to face an overwhelming amount of debt post graduation with possibly a 10-year repayment, just to have a promise of landing a steady full-time job. One way for students to not be indebted so much is they can enroll into community colleges and/or get Associate degrees instead of the typical 4-year Bachelor’s degrees from universities. But as this paper [12] concluded, over 90% of 2-year program students transfer to the 4-year course, and the debt that they bear is similar in the end. Even community college students have to take out loans for their credits. And the federal government tends to aid in the form of loans instead of grants (González Canché, 2014).

All the aforementioned reasons hurt enrollment rate, pressuring HEIs to seek new “customers” and keep the business afloat, like any other. Thus, undoubtedly marketing is needed in higher education, very much so. According to this report from The Guardian in 2019 [13], universities in The UK are pouring millions into marketing, such as University of Central Lancashire spent £3.4m in 2017-2018. The similar scenery is also happening in the US, but even more extreme. The biggest spender in 2019 was Southern New Hampshire University, \$144 million on advertising and promotion. University of Maryland Global Campus announced they would spend \$500 million in the next six years from 2019, half of it on digital advertising, figures by The Hechinger Report [14]. The dead drop in university students’ enrollment also happens in Vietnam. According to various reports from popular online Vietnamese newspapers including Tuoi Tre, Thanh Nien, and Giao Duc Thu Do [15] [16] [17], by October, 2022, the time to welcome the new intake of students, hundreds of universities in two biggest cities like Ho Chi Minh and Ha Noi have announced additional recruitments due to their extremely low rates of students’ enrollment.

#### **2.4 Marketing in HEIs**

Based on the Marketing Mix framework by McCarthy (1960), this graph demonstrates how the 4 Ps model translated into marketing for HEIs.



**The 4 Ps in Marketing Mix by McCarthy (1960)**

According to a wide variety of sources [18][19], HEIs primarily focus on the fourth P: Promotion. Not stating Product, Price and Place of marketing are not important, because they are. Nevertheless, Promotion, as defined by Kotler and Armstrong (2013)[20], is basically communicating with customers about the value of the product and persuade them to buy it. This raises the question about how a HEI should go about communicating with their potential customers, who are in this case, high school graduates, university undergraduates/graduates and others in need of a higher education degree.

### **2.5 Ways to apply the fourth P: “Promotion” in HEIs**

There are many strategies HEIs can adopt to solve some of potential students’ concerns before enrolling into a discipline. One thing that has been seen as attractive by students is internship programs. Students in Applied Computer Science reported in this survey [21] that internships provided valuable real-world experiences (Schambach, & Dirks, 2002). But many problems arise when graduating students take up internships. Two professors in University of Illinois and George Washington University found that outcomes from internships varied between individual interns [22]. For example, students had difficulty applying classroom knowledge into the workplace; a supervisor received little training and was unable to ensure a productive experience for interns; and the goals of internships for companies and HEIs did not align (Zehr, & Korte, 2020).

Another strategy for HEIs to introduce themselves to prospective students is organizing education fairs, where multiple universities set up directly on high school campuses or inviting high school students to come to a particular university and experience the institution, an indispensable opportunity for a lot of informative conversations.

Stepping up, HEIs can offer precollege programs and/or trial study days in the summer for high school students. The main differences between the two are the duration of the experience, ranging from a few days to weeks; and the price, whereas trial days are free (such as offered by The Hague

University of Applied Sciences) and precollege programs are charged (by many major Ivy League colleges), which sometimes can be expensive. Students can experience hands-on the life of a university student, taking college-level classes without the pressure of grades and credits, participating in social activities with peers and actual students, discovering their interest with guidance. A study in 2015 [23] found out that precollege programs can improve HEIs enrollment initially (Glennie, Dalton, & Knapp, 2015).

### **3. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study was conducted at a well-known private university in Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam last summer, August, 2022.

#### **3.1 Research setting**

The university in this study is located in Binh Thanh District, Ho Chi Minh city, Vietnam. It was founded in 2007, and has been providing over 33 courses for undergraduates majoring in Economics, Finance, Logistics, and Foreign Languages. Despite its young history, this university is one of the most prestigious and leading institutions in Ho Chi Minh City. Its prestige has been proved by the high rates of students' enrollment. Recently, it has been recognized 4 stars by Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), the world's leading British provider of services, analytics, and insight to the global higher education sector. There have been very few (about five) private universities in Vietnam which achieved 4 QS stars so far.

#### **3.2 Research context**

This study was inspired from the English program course, called ECP (English Consolidation Program), and provided by that 4 QS star university. This course was designed for high school graduates who would like to have trials in learning and socializing at this university. Because it focuses on students' trials of university learning, it is of course free of charge, like other common trials at other universities and language centers. However, the significant difference is it is not a few-day trials, but a 60-period intensive course which lasts for a whole month. Each period was 50 minute long.

In order to be enrolled in this course, high school graduates will take a placement test and sit for an interview in English. If their results are below the average, they will be provided a schedule to follow the ECP. They will make the decision to enroll in an undergraduate course after finishing this ECP. Last summer, the university offered over 60 ECP classes (40 students per class) for high school graduates before their confirmation of enrollment.

#### **3.3 Research participants**

The data in this study were collect from 59 students in two ECP classes in summer 2022.

#### **3.4 Research instruments**

The data were gathered from a questionnaire and two focus groups. The questionnaire was delivered directly in class in the final week of the course. Two focus groups were conducted in the last day of the course. There were 7 students in the focus groups. These students were selected for 15 minute-interviews after they had competed all the procedures for enrollment.

#### 4. FINDINGS

Data gathered from the questionnaire and focus groups explored students' learning experiences and attitudes towards two main aspects of the English Consolidation Program (ECP): the quality and marketing strategy.

##### 4.1 Students' evaluations of the quality of ECP

In the questionnaire, all of the participants (59 students, 100%) agreed that the quality of ECP was **"very good"**. In the focus groups, students were asked to explain how good it was. 3 students said ECP was very **"useful"** for their learning of English in terms of **"developing their communication skills and building their confidence"**. They explained that when they were in high schools, they had few chances to speak in English the classrooms. Therefore, they lacked confidence when using English in reality. However, after completing ECP, they felt less nervous and tense when speaking English. Moreover, another student in the focus group added that ECP helped **him "review English grammar and daily vocabulary systematically"**. This was meaningful to him as he had neglected studying English at high school. Finally, in the focus groups, all of students concluded that ECP **"satisfied their learning needs"**.

In addition, 43/55 students (78.1%) in this study, confirmed that they had paid the full tuition to enroll in the undergraduate courses at this university.

##### 4.1.1 Design of the curriculum

In the questionnaire, all of the participants (59 students, 100%) agreed that the design of ECP curriculum was **"very suitable"**. In the focus groups, 6 among 7 students pointed out the content in the curriculum had **"a focus on improving speaking and listening skills"**. Moreover, the lessons in the course book were **"suitable with their English levels"**.

##### 4.1.2 Teaching methods

In the questionnaire, the majority of the participants (55/59 students, 92.3%) revealed that the teaching methods in ECP were **"very effective"**. In the focus groups, 4 students reported that both lecturers who were in charge of their class were **"very friendly and caring"**. They added that their lecturers **"varied teaching activities such as music, games, and different interactive speaking tasks"**. Therefore, they felt **"motivated and relaxed when coming to the classrooms"**. However, 2 students suggested that they wished the lecturers organizing some speaking activities which were for **"making new friends instead of discussing about the lesson topics"**.

##### 4.1.3 Time-table

In the questionnaire, many students (51/59, **86.4%**) reported that the time-table of ECP was **"convenient"** while a few of them (**13.6%**) said it was **"inconvenient"**. In the focus groups, 3 students said that they wanted to **"shorten the course from 5 days to 3 days per week"**, and **"5 periods per day instead of 3"**. They explained that because most of them had not enrolled in the course, they were staying very far from the university during ECP. Therefore, shortening the course and lengthening the periods would help them travel to the university. Furthermore, 2 students in the focus group said that **"the time-table of shift 4"** (from 3.50 pm- 6.10pm) was very **"inconvenient"** for them because when they finished the class, it was very late for them to return home.

#### 4.2 Students' attitudes towards the university marketing strategy

In the questionnaire, most of the participants (57/59 students, 96.6%) reported that they did ***“not think offering this ECP course was a marketing strategy”***. Instead, in the focus groups, 6 among 7 students said that they thought ***“the university really wanted to help weak students”*** like them. Therefore, they were ***“so grateful”*** with what the university was doing. In addition, they pointed out that ***“such generous act”*** from the university was ***“great contribution to the community”*** because they assumed that the university must have spent a great deal of capital to run so many ECP classes. In contrast, only student in the focus group agreed that offering this ECP course was ***“a kind of marketing”***, but she emphasized that although it was a marketing strategy, it was ***“so human and generous”***. She said she had ***“never seen such a human and kind act from a marketing strategy for recruiting potential students”*** before.

#### 5. DISCUSSIONS

The findings in this study align with the traditional principles of marketing, which is attracting new customers and retaining current customers with satisfactory service (Kotler, Burton, Deans, Brown, & Armstrong, 2015).

However, the success of recruiting new students from this university thanks to their different marketing strategy. According to the Marketing Mix framework by McCarthy (1960), the marketing at HEIs primarily focuses on ***the fourth P- “Promotion”***. The purpose of this is for communicating with customers about the value of the product and persuades them to buy it (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). However, the university did not concentrate on just “Promotion”; instead the university chose to focus on ***the first P- “Product”*** by offering ECP courses so that students had chances to experience trials of learning at the university. Although offering free-day-trials for university learning have been done by many Ivy League colleges, and charged expensive fee for the pre-college English programs (Glennie, Dalton, & Knapp, 2015), this university offered free-pre-college programs, which was completely opposite to what other educational institutions have been doing. This is the significant difference that the university ran during the summer program for their marketing strategy.

When looking back at the mission and vision of this university, it ***“stresses the importance of student-centered approach” and “education quality”***. Therefore, the university chose a different marketing strategy which focused on customer satisfaction (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2012) instead of just communicating with customers about the product and persuade them to buy it (Kotler & Armstrong, 2013). In contrast, because the university stresses on education quality, it lets students to experience the product. This is the most convincing strategy which makes the university marketing stands out from the crowd. As Dr. Nguyen Thanh Giang, the President of this university once said: ***“Not anyone who invests finance in education is successful. Education is very special, so educators and students need to be treated specially”***. Perhaps, because of this special insight, this university has such a special yet human marketing strategy which brings the success it deserves.

## 6. LIMITATIONS

As mentioned above, this study was conducted among 2 classes of ECP during last summer. Therefore, the sizes of data collection in this study were rather limited. Further studies on larger samples will bring more effective and richer data to analyze marketing strategies at HEIs.

## 7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper reported students' evaluations and attitudes towards a marketing strategy, ECP courses, at a QS 4-star university in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. Findings show students' very positive evaluations for the quality of ECP courses. Besides, students did not perceive ECP courses were a marketing strategy. Instead, they showed their gratitude's and the majority of them officially enrolled in the course after experiencing ECP courses. The study also points out that the marketing at this university does not follow the traditional rules which require lots of finance and passion for education. That is the vision that the university in this study has created: vision for education and vision for marketing. /.

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