An empirical study to understand student choice of higher education and marketing strategies of Sri Lankan institutes

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AN EMPIRICAL STUDY TO UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND MARKETING STRATEGIES OF SRI LANKAN INSTITUTES

by

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ABSTRACT

"An empirical study to understand the relationship between student choice of higher education and marketing strategies of Sri Lankan institutes" – Dinusha Himashika Weerawardane

This study focuses on understanding the relationship between student choice and marketing strategies of private higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. With the higher education industry becoming increasingly competitive, the need for marketing has also augmented over the past few decades, but no relevant research has hitherto been conducted in Sri Lanka, which has been the catalyst for this study.

The literature review discusses various perspectives on higher education marketing and the theoretical framework conceptualises models and theories pertaining to student choice and marketing. The researcher has also put forward a new model to analyse the student choice process in a Sri Lankan context and the marketing mix has been used to critically analyse institutional marketing strategy.

This study is centred around three research questions which investigate (1) the student-consumer's higher education decision process; (2) the marketing strategies of higher education institutions in Sri Lanka; and (3) the relationship between student choice and marketing strategies. The research was carried out in three distinct phases. The first stage involved a series of exploratory interviews to gain preliminary insights, improve the overall research design and serve as a base for the second phase, which consisted of a survey across 800 students from four institutions; a case study analysis of these four institutions was conducted in the final phase through general observation. Information was also obtained through interviews with institutional marketing personnel.

Research findings revealed that Sri Lankan students go through a five-phase higher education decision process and are influenced by their respective socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, the institutes attach varying degrees of importance to the different elements of the marketing mix corresponding to the different stages of the student-consumer decision process, and that there was, in fact, a 'push-pull' relationship existing between student choice and marketing strategy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADB   : Asian Development Bank
BPO   : Business Process Outsourcing
CEO   : Chief Executive Officer
CFO   : Chief Financial Officer
CSR   : Corporate Social Responsibility
FMCG   : Fast-Moving Consumer Goods
GCE A/Ls   : General Certificate of Education Advanced Level Examinations
GCE O/Ls   : General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level Examinations
HE   : Higher Education
HEI   : Higher Education Institute
HESA   : Higher Education Statistics Agency (UK)
ID   : Identity
ISO   : International Organisation for Standardisation
IT   : Information Technology
KPO   : Knowledge Process Outsourcing
LED   : Light-Emitting Diode
MoHE   : Ministry of Higher Education
OECD   : Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PR   : Public Relations
SMS   : Short Message Service
UGC   : University Grants Commission
UK   : United Kingdom

CHAPTER 1 : INTRODUCTION

1.1.   INTRODUCTION

Due to capacity constraints in state universities and a whole host of ancillary reasons, the Sri Lankan higher education (HE) market for foreign qualifications has become extremely competitive over the past decade with countless private higher educations institutes (HEIs) offering a plethora of degrees and professional qualifications. Attracting students has become a difficult task, and various marketing tactics are being resorted to, of which the efficacy is not entirely known. As such, this study focuses on understanding the relationship between student choice of HE and the marketing strategies of HEIs in Sri Lanka. This chapter gives an introduction to Sri Lanka and its HE market, and also explains the aims and significance of the study.

The researcher's personal interest in this research area stems from the fact that she was employed in the HE sector at a private HEI for the past four years and holds a range of foreign professional and academic qualifications studied at a variety of HEIs in Sri Lanka. During her tenure of employment at this particular HEI, the researcher was responsible for overseeing the marketing activity for the institute's key programmes, increasing current student numbers and developing international partnerships, and in doing so, the researcher has understood the importance of correctly understanding the behaviour of HE consumers, which has acted as a catalyst for this research.

1.2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

1.2.1. Background information on Sri Lanka

As this study delves into HE marketing in the context of Sri Lanka, the researcher feels it necessary to provide some background information about Sri Lanka to help the readers understand the unique economic and socio-cultural factors that influence its market dynamics.

Sri Lanka is a small island surrounded by the Indian Ocean in South Asia with a total population of 21.2 million in 2016 and a total area of 62,710 km^2 (Trading Economics, 2017a and 2017b). According to the World Bank (2017), Sri Lanka is a lower middle-income country with a per capita income of USD 3,924 in 2015, and has now transitioned from a predominantly rural, agricultural economy to a more service-driven urbanised economy, with the services sector contributing as much as 62.4% towards the country's GDP. Having recently overcome a thirty-year civil war in 2009, Sri Lanka's economic growth in recent years has mostly been attributed due to the "peace dividend"; nevertheless, there have been significantly improved standards of living, a decline in extreme poverty and the country has been ranked 73rd on the Human Development Index (World Bank, 2017).

Sri Lanka is a multicultural and ethically diverse country (See Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2 below) and as such, is heavily influenced by cultural norms, which becomes of particular importance for this study.

Ethnic composition of Sri Lanka

0.5%

9.2%

15.4%

74.9%

- Sinhalese
- Tamils
- Muslims
- Burghers and others

Source: CIA World Factbook, 2017
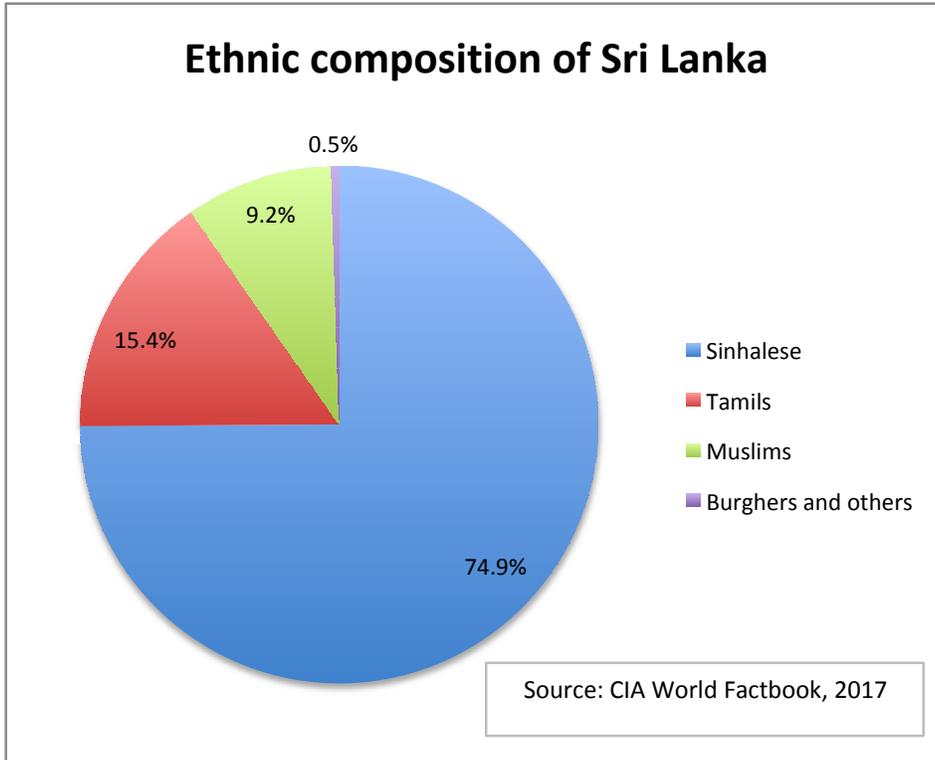
Figure 1.2: Religious composition of Sri Lanka

Religious composition of Sri Lanka

1.30%

0.05%

6.10%

9.70%

12.60%

70.20%

- Buddhist
- Hindu
- Muslim
- Roman Catholic
- Other Christian denominations
- Other

Source: CIA World Factbook, 2017
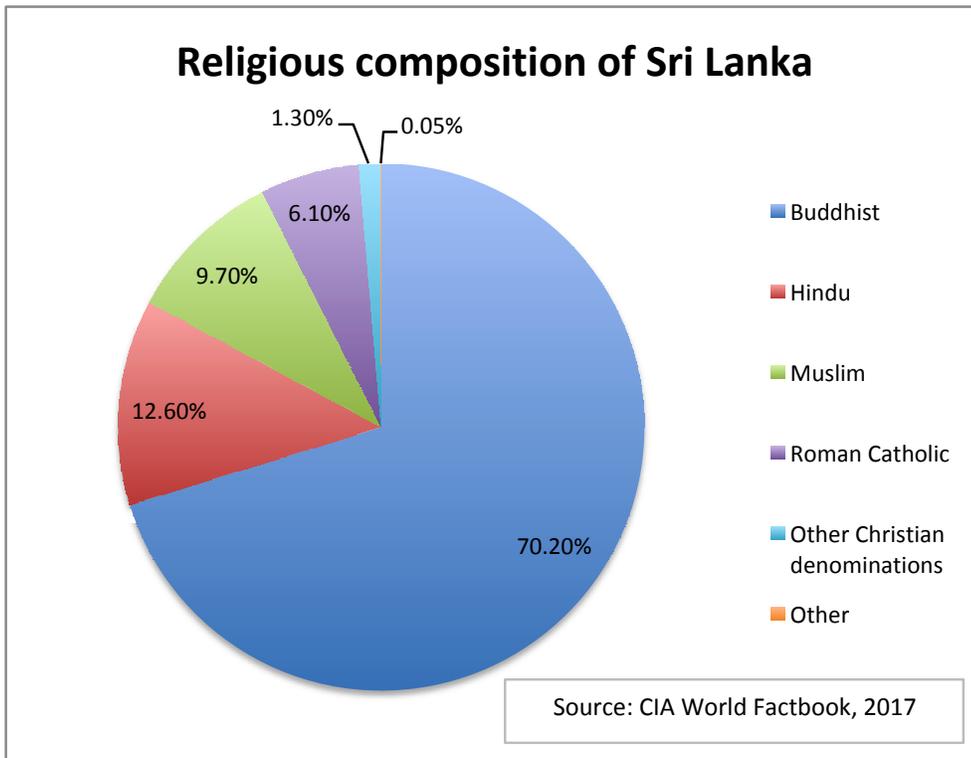
Sri Lanka has a mix of government, semi-government and private schools, and private schools are further sub-divided into local and international schools. Students commence schooling at the age of 6, and primary education upto the age of 10 is mandatory. Students of government and semi-government schools sit for their Year 5 Scholarship Examination at the age of 10, where students of rural schools get the opportunity to transfer to government schools in Colombo based on their performance at this exam. Thereafter, these students sit for their GCE O/Ls at the age of 16, and provided they obtain the minimum grades, they are allowed to take their A/Ls at the age of 19. Students at international schools who follow the foreign curriculum, i.e. Cambridge or Edexcel programmes, sit for their O/Ls around the ages of 14-15, and complete their A/Ls by 17-18.

Only the students who follow the local curriculum are eligible to apply to state universities, and of those who successfully get through their A/Ls, only those with the highest Z-scores are selected on a proportional representation basis from each district, and this varies from stream to stream (University Grants Commission (UGC), 2017). Additionally, students would only be able to apply for a particular major at university only if they have studied the specified pre-requisites at high school level, which puts additional pressure on students to decide early. All the state universities are regulated by the UGC and as they follow a policy of 'free education', the entry process is very competitive.

Sri Lanka has fifteen state universities, with capacity for only about 25,000 students (UGC, 2017). In fact, in 2015, 149,572 students were eligible for state university entrance, but only 25,643 of them (a mere 17.4%) were actually admitted due to capacity constraints (UGC, 2015). Moreover, only 12.68% of them were from Colombo (UGC, 2015). This means that 123,929 students from all across Sri Lanka (without taking into account those following the foreign curriculum) are actively seeking private HE, with expected increases over the next few years (UGC, 2015; UK Trade and Investment, 2010).

1.2.3. *Higher education market*

There are a number of reasons as to why there is a growing demand for private HE in Sri Lanka. Firstly, as mentioned above, state universities have stringent entry criteria, a high demand and very low capacity (UGC, 2017). It is also noteworthy to mention that the Sri Lankan state university students frequently engage in strikes and roadside protests for various causes (notably against private universities), which inadvertently end in violence and the closure of the university for a few months until the issue subsides, and hence, a three-year degree may sometimes take as long as five years to complete. This deters the student who is keen on completing his studies within the stipulated timeframe and hence, the students who can afford private HE, generally the middle class of Colombo and other major cities like Kandy, tend to opt for private HE. Moreover, state universities have extreme forms of ragging which is another deterrent for Colombo students.

A staff member of a leading HEI who was interviewed by the researcher stated the following in support of the above:

"…Not everyone can get into local universities; either their Z-scores are not enough, or they have not done the correct combination of subjects, or they get placed in universities in remote, rural parts of the country where it is difficult for someone born and bred in Colombo to survive. […] Because of things like ragging, the degree gets dragged on unnecessarily for years on end. That's a well-known fact. So what with one thing and another, students and their parents prefer to opt for foreign higher education." [Interview: Marketing personnel of Alpha Institute]

Moreover, judging by the vast numbers currently enrolled at foreign HEIs in Sri Lanka, it is apparent that they prefer to study in Sri Lanka, as opposed to studying abroad. The global recognition of these foreign qualifications would give them the option of working overseas if they decide to do so at some point in their careers. Furthermore, there is a growing demand for skilled professionals in the Accounting/Finance, IT and BPO/KPO sectors in Sri Lanka, and these companies prefer to recruit students with a foreign educational background because it would

mean that their level of English would be high to exceptional (Evans and Little, 2007; SLASSCOM, 2014a and 2014b).

Some interviews with HEI marketing personnel bore testimony to the above.

"Most parents nowadays have realised that with foreign qualifications, the scope is much higher; students become globally employable." [Interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute]

"I'm not running down the local programmes, but foreign qualifications are definitely more valid and valuable in the global market. It doesn't come cheap, that's true, but I mean look at the value you get! You can migrate anywhere and easily find a job because any employer would know that you've gone through a rigorous, quality-controlled programme when you show your UK degree certificate. And also for students who miss out on local university by a few marks, this ends up being the only option. We have a lot of students from the A/L biology stream who weren't able to enter the Colombo University medical faculty, so then they sign up for our Business or Law degree because studying medicine abroad tends to be very expensive." [Interview: Marketing personnel of Gamma Institute]

"Better quality, global recognition, employment prospects, you can complete the programmes faster and you can get the best of abroad while being in Sri Lanka itself. [...] The opportunities for networking are simply abundant. The options are just immense. So anyone who can reasonably afford it would always opt for foreign higher education." [Interview: Marketing personnel of Delta Institute]

Last but not least, the perception that *"... anything from UK"* is desirable also increases the demand for foreign qualifications (Evans and Little, 2007). To further support this perception, research has shown that around 124,710 students in 2011/12 were non-EU students studying towards UK qualifications, which was a 37% increase since 2003/04, and that the group based in Asia increased by 64% over the

same period (HESA UK, 2013 cited in Universities UK, 2013 at pp.9-10) (See Figure 1.3 and Figure 1.4 below)

Figure 1.3: Changes in non-EU students by region, 2003/04 and 2011/12

	2003–04	2011–12
Asia	114,700	188,525
Africa	25,025	35,255
North America	20,540	27,100
Middle East	11,775	26,645
Other Europe	10,495	17,890
South America	3,595	4,090
Australasia	2,055	2,475

Source: HESA

	UK		Other EU		Non-EU	
	2003–04	2011–12	2003–04	2011–12	2003–04	2011–12
Other undergraduate	483,925	359,920	9,470	9,120	19,180	17,730
Percentage share	94.4%	93.1%	1.8%	2.4%	3.7%	4.6%
First degree	1,095,375	1,342,690	42,935	73,965	71,805	124,710
Percentage share	90.5%	87.1%	3.5%	4.8%	5.9%	8.1%
Postgraduate (taught)	286,120	294,295	29,130	35,405	74,830	129,740
Percentage share	73.3%	64.1%	7.5%	7.7%	19.2%	28.2%
Postgraduate (research)	53,260	64,505	10,640	14,060	23,510	30,500
Percentage share	60.9%	59.1%	12.2%	12.9%	26.9%	28.0%
Totals	1,918,680	2,061,410	92,175	132,550	189,325	302,680

Source: HESA

Currently, there are over 50 private HEIs in Colombo, all of which fall outside the scope of the UGC and they are not subject to any specific regulations by the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) or any other state entity. As such, there are hardly any significant entry barriers to foreign universities partnering with local HEIs to operate in a local context. Private HEIs are fully self-funded and are entirely dependent on student fees to manage all costs, including rent, overheads, lecturer and staff wages, to name a few. Marketing costs may be re-imbursed partially by the partner

universities or professional bodies in some instances. That being said however, all these HEIs are profit-making entities as the HE market is quite a lucrative one in Sri Lanka. As such, HE marketing becomes of key importance as all HEIs strive to increase its student numbers in order to earn higher profit margins.

1.3.   RESEARCH AIMS

The aims of this study are to critically investigate and understand student choice of higher education, and also to critically analyse the marketing strategies used by HEIs to attract students and evaluate their effectiveness in achieving the desired objectives. Although not intended to be prescriptive, the study aims to provide some theoretical insights with regard to the effectiveness of consumer behaviour models and marketing theories when applied to the HE sector of a developing country. Lastly, from a methodological viewpoint, the researcher aims to employ a mixed method of research as most of the studies conducted on the HE sector have been based on either surveys or interviews, but very rarely a combination of both (White, 2007; Taylor, 1992).

This study will be driven by three research questions:

1. What is the student-consumers' decision-making process when choosing to pursue higher education?
2. How do HEIs market their suite of qualifications?
3. Is there a relationship between student choice of HE and the marketing strategies of HEIs?

1.4.   SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Despite its dire need, HE marketing in Sri Lanka is a severely under-researched area, both from demand- and supply- sides, with no literature pertaining to student choice in HE and HE marketing in Sri Lanka. To date, only one survey (LirneAsia) has been conducted to analyse the HE market in Sri Lanka - "Mapping the Higher Education Landscape in Sri Lanka" (Gamage and Wijesooriya, 2012), but it lacks focus on foreign HE qualifications. However, a variety of studies have been conducted on analysing consumer behaviour in other sectors, such as the FMCG sector (Bawa, 2011) or telecommunication industry (Silva and Yapa, 2009). Although HEIs in Sri Lanka compete with one another very aggressively, it is questionable whether there is an actual understanding regarding the consumer's decision-making process, and this study argues that the paucity in HE marketing literature in Sri Lanka is due to the lack of interest by HEIs to carry out systematic research to understand the same.

HE marketing in a global context has invited the attention of many researchers, with some debate as to whether education should even be marketed (Dirks, 1998). Kemp and Madden (1998) focused on choice factors of the student-consumer in Australia, Baldwin and James (2000) investigated the demand-side of the Australian HE market, Green (2003) discussed efforts to align HE marketing efforts with other marketing principles, Clayson and Haley (2005) analysed how marketing models could be applied to students and HEIs, and Ivy (2008) established that the traditional marketing mix was not suitable to the South African HE market. Moreover, researchers such as Delmonico (2000) and Pitman (2000), and Spanish researchers such as Beerli and Díaz (2003, cited in Sánchez, 2012 at p.46), Luque and Del Barrio (2007, cited in Sánchez, 2012 at p.46) and Del Olmo (2009a and 2009b, cited in Sánchez, 2012 at p.46) have focused their studies on the student as a consumer of higher education.

Therefore, this study would be particularly significant because it ventures into unchartered territory with regard to analysing the effectiveness of HE marketing strategies in Sri Lanka and its influence on student choice. The researcher also hopes

to critically analyse consumer behaviour models and marketing theories developed by the West for business/service sectors and apply them to the HE sector in an Asian developing economy-context, thereby providing valuable insights which could help HEIs better understand its consumer behaviour and strategise accordingly. It could potentially contribute to HE marketing theory as well. The researcher has extensive experience in the HE sector and also hopes to use the results of this research for the benefit of the organisations surveyed. Moreover, it would also be of immense use to foreign universities to identify and capitalise on HE opportunities in the Sri Lankan market.

1.5.   CHAPTER OUTLINE

This thesis consists of thirteen chapters.

- Chapter 1 sets out the contextual background to Sri Lanka and its HE sector, and discusses the research aims and the significance of the study.
- Chapter 2 provides a critical review of existing literature pertaining to pertaining to student choice and HE marketing.
- Chapter 3 establishes the theoretical framework for the study based on a HE student choice model and the marketing mix.
- Chapter 4 discusses the methodological aspects of the research, including research design, sampling, access to data and ethical considerations.
- Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings from the exploratory phase, i.e. the student interviews.
- Chapter 6 summarises and analyses the findings from the student survey
- Chapters 7-10 present a case study analysis of the four HEIs selected for the purpose of this research
- Chapter 11 presents a cross-case analysis to summarise the four case study analysis chapters and highlight the similarities and differences between the marketing strategies of the four HEIs.

- Chapter 12 presents an overall perspective of student choice and HEI marketing strategy, where the inter-relationships between the two variables are highlighted.
- Chapter 13 consists of the conclusion to the study and broader implications for the industry would also be stated.

Lastly, this thesis also includes a bibliography and a series of appendices.

1.6.   SUMMARY

This introductory chapter has successfully established that while there is a growing demand for foreign HE qualifications in Sri Lanka, there has been no systematic research conducted to understand the underlying reasons behind the choice of the consumers, i.e. the students, and as such, there is no evidence to show that the current marketing strategies of HEIs actually influence student choice of HE. Hence, this research focuses on understanding student choice of HE and its relationship with the marketing strategies of HEIs. The next chapter will provide an overall view of the HE industry and will critically review and assess existing marketing literature.

CHAPTER 2 : LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1.   INTRODUCTION

This chapter covers a broader view of the HE industry, including an introduction to its history and a discussion of the views for and against the notion of HE marketing, with the objective of gaining a better understanding as to why HEIs should follow a market-oriented approach to HE marketing.

2.2.   HISTORY OF EDUCATION MARKETING

During the time when funding was abundant and student enrolments were high, marketing was considered to have a demeaning effect on HEIs (Keller, 1983; Mulnix *et al,* n.d.). However, macroeconomic factors such as changes in global economic conditions, living standards, labour market, social and demographic trends and concepts such as diversification, privatisation, decentralisation and internationalisation have played a major role in shaping the global HE market. As the demand for HE began to grow, HEIs had to compete with each other for funding and to attract students, which made HE marketing a necessity for survival where academics had no choice but to accept the concept of marketing education (Filip, 2012; Nicolescu, 2009; Maringe, 2006; Hayes, 2007; Drummond, 2004).

Writers like Fram and Krachenberg (1972, cited in Mulnix *et al,* n.d. at p.2) began to introduce key marketing concepts in the context of HE, and others like Berry and Allen, (1977, cited in Mulnix *et al,* n.d. at p.2), Rothschild (1977, cited in Mulnix *et al,* n.d. at p.2-3) and Ihlanfeldt (1980, cited in Mulnix *et al,* n.d. at p.3) followed suit. This was how HE marketing first emerged in the mid-1980s (Hayes, 2007). Before long, Kotler himself also started contributing to the development of HE marketing literature (Kotler and Fox, 1995).

However, the suitability of HE marketing continued to be a moot point (Dirks, 1998). Proponents of HE marketing such as Kotler and Fox (1995) argued that it is possible to compare a university with a business, based on the profit-oriented approach taken in recent times, which involved charging tuition fees to cover all expenses and earn a margin, and Pasternak (2005) put forward the view that a student's decision-making process to choose a HE qualification or HEI involves undertaking a cost-benefit analysis, which is the exact same process that any customer would follow when selecting some other product or service, and as such, it makes sense that HE also be marketed like other products or services. Maringe (2006) agreed with these views by further pointing out that with privatisation, the HE sector which was previously a not-for-profit, government-funded sector, was now a profit-oriented, self-funded one, thereby automatically creating a 'consumerist' approach to HE.

Meanwhile, those who continued to oppose the notion of HE marketing were plentiful: Pierre (1995) criticised the apparent shift in the success of the HEIs' operations being measured by customer satisfaction, and has questioned whether the consumers, i.e. students, parents and/or employers, should be given this level of importance; Sharrock (2000) said it would be the cause for severe socio-economic repercussions; Holbrook (2005) was of the view that it is a disgrace to term a student as a customer; and Barrett (1996, cited in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006 at p.319) has strongly opposed the very application of marketing concepts, which are essentially borrowed from the business sector, to the HE sector.

Despite the arguments that have been put for and against marketing HE, the researcher firmly believes that marketing is an essential component for any industry, and that as long as it remains ethical, it would benefit both the institution and the consumer through the dissemination of information required for the purchase decision.

2.3. EDUCATION MARKETING: DEFINITIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

Marketing is a concept that is fairly misunderstood, and there is an even greater deal of confusion when it comes to understanding marketing in the context of education (Foskett, 1998; Ivy and Naude, 2004).

The American Marketing Association, in an attempt to define marketing more simply than the definition put forward by Kotler and Armstrong, states that marketing is *"...the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create, exchange and satisfy individual and organisational objectives."* (Brassington, 2006, at p.7).

In the context of education, Kotler and Fox (1995 at p.6) have defined marketing as *"...the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve organisational objectives..."*

The Further Education Funding Council (1998) has further elaborated the above definition as using extensive market information to put in place strategies that effectively address the educational needs of the student, in an affordable manner.

Simply put, higher education marketing can be seen as a combination of relationship and experiential marketing as it primarily involves exchanging and fulfilling promises (Helgesen, 2011). Trullas and Enache (2011), in support of this view, have stated that higher education marketing is a complex process that goes beyond mere relationship marketing, and involves identifying the needs of society, creating an educational product to satisfy those needs and generating awareness for that product.

Educational marketing can be viewed from two perspectives, the social marketing perspective and the service marketing perspective. From the social marketing perspective, HE marketing goes in line with the HEIs' social responsibility in

matching the needs of the society with the organisations' interest in the provision of knowledge (Filip, 2012). The notion of privatisation that has come about in the HE sector, however, does go against the social marketing perspective to a certain extent, as it would result in serving only a selected portion of the community (Bartlett *et al,* 2002). On the other hand, the HE sector, being part of the services sector, enables us to view it from a service marketing perspective which is characterised by the concepts of intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability (Filip, 2012). However, the HE sector is quite a distinctive one and as such, concepts applicable to the service industry cannot be directly applied to it. The reasoning is explained as follows:

Firstly, in commercial enterprises, there is no doubt about the products or customers. However, in HE, the 'customer' is a moot point. For instance, students could be considered as customers because they are the direct beneficiaries of the HE services provided, while some authors have suggested considering students as primary consumers, with employers as secondary consumers (Nicolescu, 2009; Stensaker and D'Andrea, 2007, cited in Nicolescu, 2009 at p.37). Other authors have classified students as *"products of higher education",* with employers as consumers, and a number of other stakeholders have also been identified, such as parents, the government, funding bodies, quality assurance agencies, and regulatory and professional bodies (Kotler and Fox, 1995; Conway *et al,* 1994; Chapleo, 2004; Voss *et al,* 2007; Kantanen, 2007). On the other hand, it is difficult to classify students as traditional customers, because they are, in fact, one-off customers, something that does not happen in other service sectors (Temple and Shattock, 2007, cited in Nicolescu, 2009 at p.37). Moreover, unlike a traditional customer, students can also have many roles, for instance acting as partners by mentoring other students (Maringe, 2005, cited in Newman and Jahdi, 2009 at p.3). Due to this, Conway et al (1994, cited in Durkin et al, 2012 at p.155) has sensibly suggested that students be considered as *"consumers of the experience"* rather than customers of HE.

Next, the characteristic of 'intangibility' applicable to the service industry can be circumvented through tangible items such as printed marketing brochures; moreover,

technically, although the consumer is 'inseparable' from the provision of the service, online/distance-learning programmes that discourage the presence and participation of students changes this concept (Newman and Jahdi, 2009). Additionally, although services are usually of a perishable nature, technological novelties such as podcasts circumvent this aspect of 'perishability' for the HE sector (Newman and Jahdi, 2009). Moreover, usual marketing metaphors cannot aptly describe the student-university relationship; for instance, customers are entitled to make complaints and get their money back, whereas there is limited scope for students to appeal to examination boards, and money-back guarantees are virtually unheard of (Svensson and Wood, 2007).

The reputation concept is also interpreted differently in HE marketing. Although good reputation for a company means increased sales, for a university it would mean fewer students being accepted to maintain the level of prestige (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). Positioning also becomes difficult due to the similarity of academic products; the only possible forms of product differentiation could be by stream, or taught courses vs. research-based programmes, which do not lead to significant competitive advantage (Chapleo, 2004). Therefore, competitive advantage for a HEI would involve developing competencies like reputation, financial strength and a variety of unique programmes, and to sustain this competitive advantage, they would be required to keep investing in resources and skills and to create distinctive barriers to entry such as by targeting niche markets (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2012; Dierickx and Cool, 1989).

2.4.   RATIONALE FOR MARKETING

Marketing from the perspective of a HEI would be to achieve the targeted number of student recruitments, and a corresponding increase in profits, in addition to enhanced reputation. In some instances, it could even be the means to attract more research grants, which would mean that the university's ranking would improve due to a higher output of research (Levy, 2006, cited in Al-Fattal, 2010 at p.17). Marketing, if done right, could potentially put the HEI on the map, which could be the underlying basis for regional or international expansion of its operations (Bok, 2003).

Marketing also gives a HEI the opportunity to leverage itself based on its competencies and also provides the motivation to maintain and further develop those competencies in order to sustain competitive advantage on a long-term (Agasisti and Catalano, 2006). Moreover, the competition created through marketing is actually a good thing because it compels the HEI to improve the quality of education offered and it helps the organisation contribute to society by improving the educational system as a whole (Levy, 2006, cited in Al-Fattal, 2010 at p.12).

2.5.   SUMMARY

This chapter has defined and explained the concepts of marketing, in general and in the context of HE, and has also analysed the factors that make the HE sector unique when compared to other service sectors. The rationale for and the importance of HE marketing have also been justified here. The next chapter will discuss the theoretical framework for the study, including models that help HEIs analyse the behaviour of customers and develop better strategic marketing plans.

CHAPTER 3 : THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter attempts to conceptualise various models and theories relating to the areas of consumer behaviour (i.e. student choice) and marketing. In terms of consumer behaviour models used to analyse the student decision-making process, the researcher has presented a general overview of existing models and their evolution, and has also put forward her own model which is a refinement of two previous models. Moreover, the researcher has also presented an overview of popular marketing theories and models, which analyse the marketing strategy followed by HEIs. The relationship between the student decision-making process and the marketing strategy of HEIs will be examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

3.2. UNDERSTANDING STUDENT CHOICE

3.2.1. Importance of customers

The strategic objective of any profit-oriented entity is to attract customers and ensure that their needs are satisfied, and by doing so, the company is ensuring its survival. Hence, customers are important to any business and HEIs are no different. In the HE sector, customers are mostly one-off and would not come back for repeat purchases (unless in exceptional instances where the students come back to the HEI to follow a postgraduate qualification); however, the benefit of keeping them satisfied will no doubt result in them advocating for the academic products and service provided by the HEI if they have had a satisfactory experience.

3.2.2.   Consumer behaviour – Definitions and explanations

Blackwell *et al* (2001 cited in Vrontis et al, 2007 at p.982) has defined consumer behaviour as *"...activities undertaken when obtaining, consuming and disposing of products and services..."*

Schiffman *et al* (2010 at p.5) has further elaborated on this definition by stating that consumer behaviour is *"...the behaviour that customers display in searching for, purchasing, using, evaluating and disposing of products and services that they expect will satisfy their needs..."*

For the purposes of this study, the term 'student choice' will be used synonymously with 'consumer behaviour'. Understanding student choice is important because it helps the organisation to satisfy the consumers' needs more effectively; the HEI would know why the student chose to study at that particular institution, thereby enabling better (future) customisation of its marketing strategies so that the most appropriate market segments can be targeted. Briggs (2006) has correctly pointed out that if the universities are able correctly identify which pockets of society its applicants come from, then they would be able to allocate more resources to market to those segments.

3.2.3.   Student choice models

Student choice of qualification and institute is a highly complex decision influenced by several factors; prospects of greater employability, increased salaries, an improved quality of life, personal growth and global recognition of the qualification are just some of the factors that are considered when choosing a particular HE qualification (Briggs and Wilson, 2007 cited in Soares and Simoes, 2010 at p.4). According to Joseph and Joseph (1998, 2000, cited in Osman *et al,* 2013 at p.77) and Wagner and Fard (2009, cited in Osman *et al,* 2013 at p.77), the cost, value of the qualification and the content of the programme are the three greatest influences on student choice; Pasternak (2005) has found that a HEIs' printed material such as

brochures can also be very influential. Moreover, several studies such as those by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), Pimpa (2004) and Chen and Zimitat (2006) have highlighted that in Asian countries, the influence of family and friends can be quite significant on student choice of HE. As such, students go through a lengthy process to arrive at their final decision, and a whole host of authors have attempted to conceptualise this decision-making process through a variety of models.

I. Economic models

Such models assume that customers are rational and make calculated choices based on the economic value offered to them by a particular HEI (Vrontis *et al*, 2007). In order to do so, the consumers would need to have sufficient information regarding the various consumption options available, be able to correctly evaluate the alternatives and select the best option to suit their needs (Schiffman *et al*, 2010). Researchers like Fuller *et al* (1982), Manski and Wise (1983), Schwartz (1985) and Hossler *et al* (1999) have used such models to analyse students' choice of college. However, as Bray (2008) has correctly pointed out, consumers would rarely have access to perfect information, nor would they have the patience to properly analyse the alternatives, and as they would often be influenced by less rational sources such as family and friends, this would mean that these economic models do not realistically reflect the decision-making process.

II. Status-attainment models

These models take into account social and behavioural factors that affect student choice, such as encouragement by parents and students' academic performance strengths (Maniu and Maniu, 2014).

III. Combined models

Combined models that incorporate economic and sociological perspectives have been said to offer better explanations for student choice (Hossler *et al*, 1999). These models present several stages of the decision-making process, with some models having as few as three stages, and others upto five or seven stages (Maniu and Maniu, 2014).

a) The Jackson Model
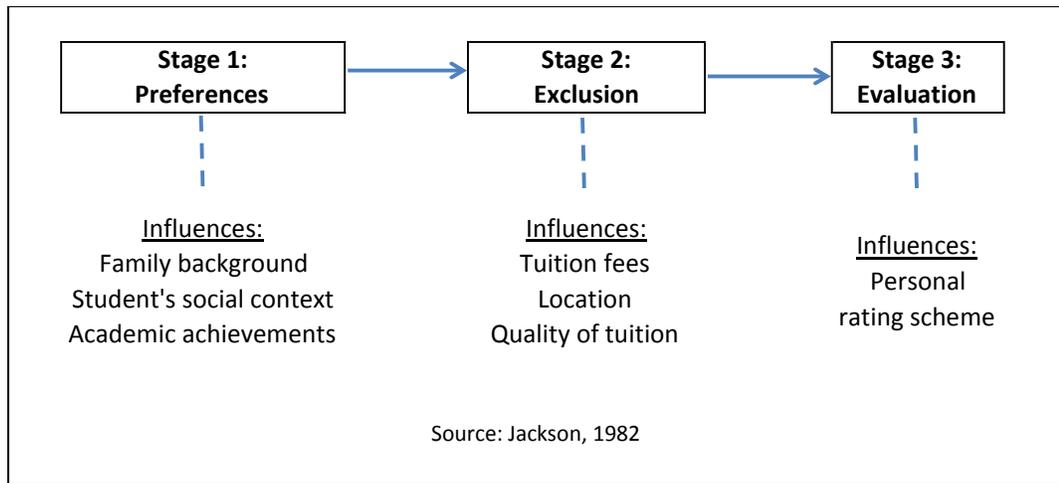
Figure 3.1: The Jackson Model

As illustrated from the above diagram, this model puts forward that students goes through a three-stage process to decide on his/her preferred HE. In Stage 1, the student would shortlist some preferences based on academic achievements to date and the influence of parents, and in Stage 2, some of those initial preferences may be eliminated based on the availability of resources on the part of the student (Jackson, 1982). Although the rational conclusion would be decide at the end of the second stage, given that students' expectations are often unrealistic, they often ignore accurate information, and hence, their choices may not always be rational. Therefore, Jackson (1982) added the third stage, where students would base their final choice on fairly random personal preferences. This is primarily a student-based model.

b) The Chapman Model

This model has two stages: Pre-search and search. In the first stage, students'
expectations of university life are affected by their socio-economic status and
academic prowess, in addition to external influences from loved ones and
institutional features, and in the second stage, they would gather information from a
variety of sources regarding the different HEIs available in order to arrive at their
final decision (Chapman, 1984). In contrast to Jackson's model, this model has a
greater focus on the institution (Vrontis *et al,* 2007).

a) Hossler and Gallagher's Model

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) introduced a tri-phase model, which builds on Jackson's initial findings, but highlights the interaction between individual and organisational factors that results in the final choice, an element that is not present in Jackson's model (See Figure 3.2 below). In the first phase, which is the 'Pre-Disposition' stage, universities have a direct influence on the choice of students; in Phase 2 it is a moderate influence and in Phase 3, the universities only have a minor influence (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987).

PHASE 1: PRE-DISPOSITION

Student Characteristics → School / College Characteristics, Siginificant Others, Educational Activities → Predisposition Towards Attendance → College Search, Other

PHASE 2: SEARCH

Student Preliminary College Values ↔ Student Search Activities, College & University Search Activities → Choice Set, Other

PHASE 3: CHOICE

Choice Set → Choice
College & University Courtship Activities (Communication Strategies)

Source: Hossler and Gallagher, 1987

Figure 3.2: Hossler and Gallagher's Model

b) The Hanson and Litten Model

In 1989, Hanson and Litten introduced a model, which combines the ideas put forward by Jackson (1982) and Chapman (1984).
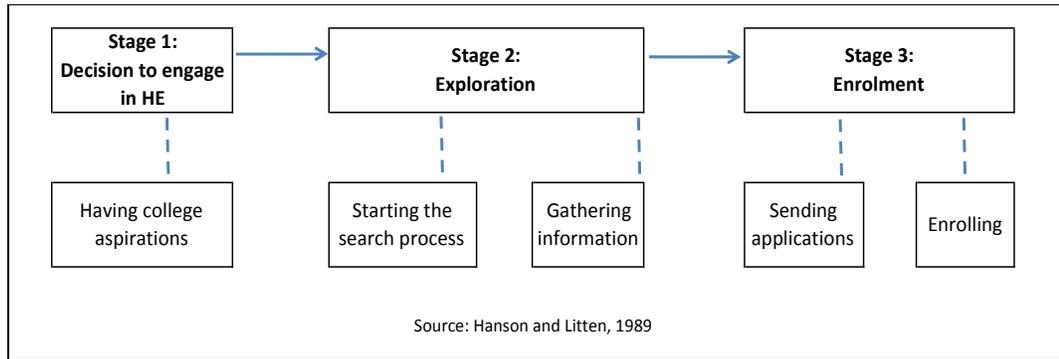
Figure 3.3: The Hanson and Litten Model

Like the others, this model too has three stages, but with five processes that highlight different factors affecting choice of HEI, such as ethnic and cultural backgrounds, high school compositions, parental social backgrounds, environmental socio-economic conditions, individual personality, availability of scholarships and marketing activities carried out by the HEIs, to name a few (Hanson and Litten, 1989).

c) Vrontis *et al's* Student Choice Model for Developed Countries

In an attempt to design a more conceptually appropriate framework for HE, Vrontis *et al* (2007) developed a student-choice model for developed countries, by combining the models of Jackson, Chapman, and Hanson and Litten, which considers the decision process and influences on choice.

Student Characteristics

Income/Resources
Socio-economic status
Parent's education levels
Family
culture/background
Ethinicity and religion
Gender

High School

Social composition
Quality
Curriculum
Programmes

Influences / Media Used

Parents
Counsellors at high school
Peers / Friends
Publications
College officers
Other media

College Aspirations | Search Process | Information Gathering | Sending Applications | Enrolling

Personal Attributes

Class rank
Academic ability/aptitude
Students' academic achievements
Self-image
Personal values
Benefits sought
Personality
Lifestyle / Social context
Educational aspirations

Environment

Occupational structure
Economic conditions
Cultural conditions

Public Policy

Aid (amount and eligibility)

College Characteristics

Price / Cost (financial aid)
Size
Programmes / Programme availability
Ambiance
Control (public/private)
Location

College Actions

Recruitment activities
Academic / Admissions policy
Admit / Deny
Aid granted (amount, package)
Written information
Campus visit
Admissions / Recruiting

Source: Vrontis *et al, 2007*

Figure 3.4: Vrontis *et's* Student Choice Model for Developed Countries

d) Blackwell *et al's* Consumer Decision-Process Model

Blackwell *et al* (2012) has attempted to further refine the decision-making model put forward by Vrontis *et al* (2007) by explaining the relevant stages and influences in greater detail.
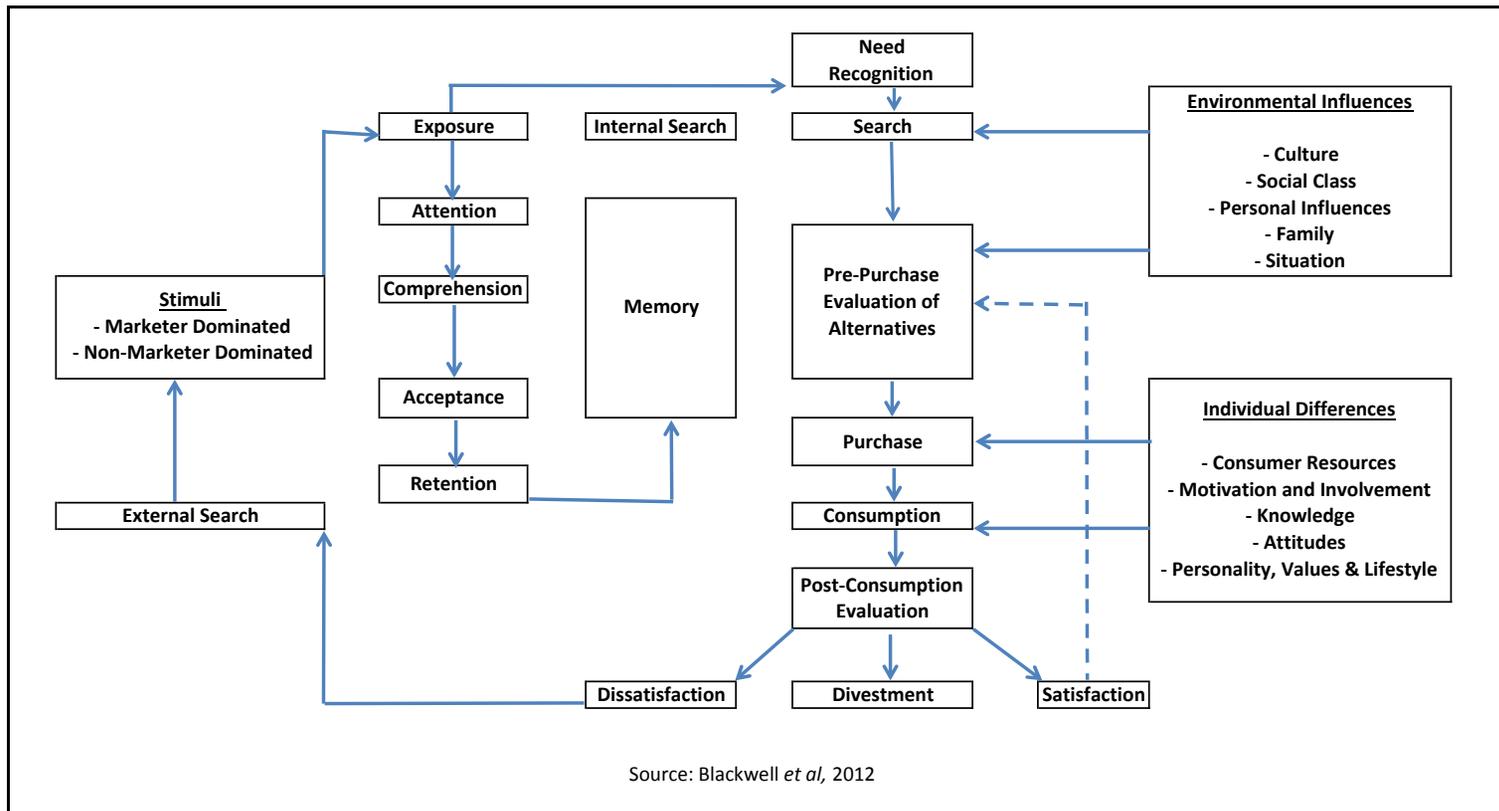
Figure 3.5: Blackwell *et al's* Consumer Decision Process Model

It should be noted, however, that this particular model has been critiqued for incorporating a certain degree of vagueness in the role of the environmental influences and individual differences. For instance, the model puts forward the notion that certain variables in the external environment do influence behaviour, but the manner by which they actually affect the behaviour is not specified (Louden and Della Bitta, 1993). Furthermore, it ignores the fact that these environmental influences and individual differences could have an impact on other processes such as how the consumer is exposed to and perceives the marketing stimuli (Bray, 2008).

In an attempt to overcome these weaknesses and make the study more relevant to a developing nation, the researcher has combined the models of Vrontis *et al* (2007) and Blackwell *et al* (2012) and developed a new model, which is presented next.

e) Weerawardane's Student Consumer Decision-Process Model

The researcher has combined the models of Vrontis *et al* (2007) and Blackwell *et al* (2012) and developed a new model, which, in the researcher's opinion, makes it more comprehensive for readers to understand the decision-making process of the student consumer of HE.

Stage 1: Need Recognition	Stage 2: Information Gathering	Stage 3: Pre-purchase Evaluation of Alternatives	Stage 4: Purchase	Stage 5: Post-Consumption Evaluation

Stimuli

Marketer-dominated

- Presentations and career guidance workshops conducted by HEIs to school students
- Advertisements

Non-marketer dominated

Personal Characteristics	Environment
- Academic performance and achievements at school - Educational aspirations - Career prospects - Socio-economic status - Family background - Parents' education levels - Ethinicity and religion - Gender	- Occupational structure - Economic conditions - Cultural conditions - Political enviroment (student loan schemes, educational grants and subsidies) - Social composition - Quality of curriculum at school

Influences / Sources

- Parents / Relatives
- Friends
- Teachers
- TV / Radio
- Newspapers
- Hoardings
- Social media
- Educational expos
- Brochures
- Career guidance workshops at school
- Promotional merchandise

Reputational Factors	Recommendations	Campus-related Factors	Convenience Factors	Financial Factors
- Accreditation of institute by professional body - University ranking - Institutional reputation - Quality of lecture panel - Pass rates - Number of prizewinners produced - Portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute	- Recommendations by friends / relatives / teachers - Graduate testimonials	- Facilities available - Class size - Extra-curricular activities	- Different study modes available (full/part-time; face-to-face, distance- and/or blended learning) - Distance from home to the institute - Availability of campuses in multiple locations - Programme duration	- Programme cost -Discounts / Scholarships offered - Payment plans

- Follow-up telephone/email enquiry
- Campus visit
- Infrastructure
- Ambiance

Satisfaction / Dissatisfaction

The outcome of Stage 5 may potentially influence Stages 2 and 3 of a new consumer

Figure 3.6: Weerawardane's Student Consumer Decision-Process Model

The researcher puts forward that in the context of the HE sector, there are five key stages in the student consumer's decision-making process:

I. Need Recognition

During the first stage, the student's need for higher education is recognised. This could happen in two ways. Firstly, the recognition of this need could be stimulated by marketer-lead factors. For instance, HEIs often conduct career guidance workshops in schools to students reading for their GCE O/Ls and A/Ls, which could be the point where the students are made aware that higher education is, in fact, necessary. During school, students may also be exposed to advertisements on various sources of media, which may further make them realise the need for higher studies.

Secondly, the recognition for the need for higher education may be triggered by non-marketer-dominated factors, such as personal characteristics and environmental factors. During school, students have various aspirations, inspired by teachers, peers and parents and also by their own academic achievements (Paulsen, 1990). These aspirations lead to a set of needs, and such unfulfilled needs are usually the catalysts for the initiation of the decision-making process of any student. The type of need that motivates the students to seek HE varies. For instance, students from developed nations are driven primarily by esteem or self-actualisation needs because these nations are typically influenced by superior technology and infrastructure; high quality labour; higher levels of education; greater access to information and economic environments with a higher degree of stability, characterised by high per capita income levels and low inflation; (Vrontis *et al*, 2007; Keegan and Schlegelmilch, 2001). Accordingly, students from developing nations would be likely to be motivated by needs that are ranked lower in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, such as physiological needs due to the different economic and socio-cultural backgrounds prevailing in these nations (Vrontis *et al*, 2007). Other personal factors like the level of education of parents, desire to help one's family, ethnicity, religious

beliefs and gender may also have an influence on the need for higher education (Bui, 2002; Phinney *et al, 2006)*. For instance, Bui (2002) found that students with parents of lower educational levels were more likely to pursue higher education because they wanted to gain more respect and make their parents proud. Another example from the researcher's own experience is where certain students from Muslim religious backgrounds seek gender-segregated classes as they tend to be more conservative, which may significantly limit their choice of higher education as most institutes in Sri Lanka do not offer this option. In such situations, these students may choose certain qualifications by default to suit their religious and cultural requirements, or, due to cultural restrictions on working, these students may avoid higher education altogether. Furthermore, environmental factors such as the economic condition of the country, occupational structure, social composition, quality of the curriculum at schools and the political environment which facilitates student loans and subsidies for education may also play an important role in helping students recognise their need for higher studies.

On the other hand, from an institutional point of view, an HEI would stand to profit only if its programmes meet the expectations of the student consumer. In order to gain an understanding regarding the exact needs of the students and the communication channels that should be used to pitch solutions to these needs, HEIs should to invest on adequate market research, which would very beneficial in the long-term.

II. Information Gathering

Once the students have realised their need for HE, they will then initiate the process of gathering information on how best they can satisfy this need. According to Palmer (2001), students first begin by conducting an 'internal search' based on what they already know through on their own experiences, and if this information is inadequate, then they move on to an 'external search' where they rely on various other sources of information.

The external information could be based on recommendations of parents, relatives, friends and school or tuition teachers, or could be from sources originating from the HEIs, such as advertisements on TV, radio, newspapers, social media and hoardings, prospectuses, brochures, educational expos, promotional merchandise like key tags, notebooks, pens and bookmarks, and career guidance workshops and seminars.

One of the most common issues, however, is that HEIs often present an overload of information in their promotional material, be it hoardings, pull-up banners, leaflets, press advertisements and even in backdrop artworks in stalls at educational expos. The 'information-overload' factor also occurs in other ways too at educational expos; there are so many HEIs who approach prospective students and parents, and provide stacks of leaflets and offer lengthy counselling sessions that the students are most likely to leave the expo twice as confused. The increased use of superlatives in marketing material, such as 'best', 'unparalleled', 'unique', and 'outstanding', also makes it difficult for students to make meaningful comparisons between HEIs. That being said, if the HEIs are able to put in place effective promotional strategies where the information desired by the student consumer is effectively communicated through the most popular channels, there is no doubt that the HEIs would be able to reap the benefits. The factors of availability of and access to information are very important in this stage so that students have a wider choice in terms of 'what' and 'where' to buy, and HEIs in developing nations should make a special effort to facilitate this as their marketing channels may not be as extensive as those of developed nations.

III. Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives

Once students have gathered a sufficient amount of information, they will then proceed to assess the potential HE qualifications and HEIs based on self-established criteria, and according to Galotti (1995), they would rank the HEIs according to self-perceived levels of importance. However, White (2007) has opposed Galotti's theory and has agreed with Jackson (1982), in stating that students' may not always act in such a rational manner.

The researcher has identified some of the criteria that may be used by students and has classified them as reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related factors, convenience factors and financial factors. Reputational factors may include the accreditation of the institute by the relevant professional body, university ranking, institutional reputation, quality of the lecture panel (i.e. experience and qualifications), the number of prizewinners produced on a local and global scale (mostly applicable for professional qualifications) and the portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute as this would be an indicator of the institute's capabilities with regard to delivering the programmes of interest. Recommendations by friends, relatives and teachers and graduate testimonials may also help them to narrow down their choices. The strength of marketing, such as the quality of information provided by institutional staff, persistence in following up on student enquiries and the attractiveness of brochures, is another set of criteria that may be used by students in narrowing down the choice of HEIs. Students may also consider campus-related factors such as the facilities available, number of students accommodated per class and extra-curricular activities available at the institute when evaluating their alternatives. Furthermore, their final selection of qualification and institute may be determined by convenience factors, such as the different study modes available. Some students may wish to pursue their studies whilst working, and hence may seek part-time study options, whereas others may prefer full-time courses. Although only face-to-face courses are available at undergraduate level in Sri Lanka, there may be students who seek distance-learning or even blended learning courses, even at undergraduate level. Other convenience factors that may be considered may

include the distance from home to the institute and the availability of campuses in different locations. Moreover, even the duration of the programme may be the defining factor in a student's choice of higher education qualification and institute. Last but certainly not least, students would most likely evaluate their alternatives based on financial factors such as the programme cost, and the availability of discounts, scholarships and payment plans such as cash or credit card payments, instalment plans or student loans. For instance, consumers of developed nations would have higher levels of disposable income, which would mean they could afford most courses they would like to do (Vrontis *et al,* 2007); however consumers of developing nations such as Sri Lanka would be a lot more cost-conscious when choosing the qualification, and special consideration would be given to the timing of the purchase because the consumers may need to plan their finances for the duration of the programme.

It is also important to note that the lack of regulation in the private HE sector in Sri Lanka and unethical marketing practices by some HEIs could result in students eliminating genuinely good HEIs, which is an issue that should be combatted. Moreover, HEIs should also strive to correctly identify the criteria important to students, because these criteria can be directly identified with elements of the HEIs' marketing mix, which could then be tweaked to aptly meet the demands of the consumer (Al-Fattal, 2010).

IV. Purchase

This stage analyses how students arrive at their final purchase decision after evaluating their alternatives in the previous stage. Before deciding to make the final purchase, students would engage in a deeper evaluation. In doing so, they may wish to contact the HEI via telephone or e-mail to seek clarifications regarding certain matters, or they may even pay a visit to the campus. If and when they do physically visit the campus, they may assess the infrastructure and ambiance to gauge if it meets (or exceeds) their expectations. The institutional marketing staff handling the enrolment process could also make or break this crucial purchase decision, as they may be the students' first contact point with the university, and HEIs would do well to invest on training and recruiting personnel with the correct personalities to handle this function (Stott and Parr, 1991; Dennis, 1998).

V. Post-Consumption Evaluation

HEIs should ensure that students have a satisfactory experience so that they would feel that the information they obtained during the pre-purchase stages was accurate and not mere marketing hype. The level of satisfaction depends to what extent the students' expectations were met (Kotler *et al,* 2010). Students would consider whether they made the correct decision in choosing this programme, what they got out of it and whether there was value for money, and if the students were satisfied with their experience at the HEI, then they would genuinely promote the programme, which is the best form of marketing for the HEI as they would be contributing towards building the HEI's brand and reputation and helping with the retention of current students, whereas dissatisfaction would result in negative word-of-mouth, which would travel further and faster and result in harmful consequences for the HEI (Al-Alak, 2006; Al-Fattal, 2010; Kotler *et al,* 2010). As such, the outcome of Stage 5 (i.e. satisfaction or dissatisfaction) has the potential to influence Stages 2 and 3 of a new consumer.

3.3.   MARKETING MIX

First coined in 1953 by Neil Borden, the marketing mix was refined to what it is today by Jerome McCarthy (Investopedia, 2017). It is a marketing model that is used by business entities and HEIs alike, where the elements can be controlled and adjusted in a manner so as to ensure customer satisfaction and hence, profitability. In the context of the education sector, the marketing mix is best used with the extended mix, i.e. with 7P's instead of the traditional 4P's (Palmer, 2001). The extended marketing mix developed by Kotler and Fox (1995) for the education sector is as follows:

Figure 3.7: 7P's Marketing Mix - Kotler and Fox (1995)

Ivy and Naude (2004) have suggested a slightly varied version – Programme, Prospectus, Price, Prominence, People, Promotion, Premiums"; Gray (1991) and Coleman (1994) have also put forward their versions of "5P" models, but all these models are very similar each other, just classified somewhat differently. While all the above-mentioned models seem to be adapting and building on McCarthy's 4P marketing mix, there have been other researchers who have named such adapted

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models differently, such as Ho and Hung's mix (2008, cited in Al-Fattal, 2010 at p.21) – "Living, Learning, Reputation, Economy and Strategy." For the purposes of this research, however, the marketing mix put forward by Kotler and Fox (1995) illustrated in Figure 3.7 above will be examined in the context of the HEIs being studied.

3.3.1. Programme

This is the first element of the particular marketing mix being discussed here and the sub-topics of entry requirements, recognition and accreditation, job placements and internships, and language of delivery are covered.

In order to decide which programme(s) to offer, an institution should first identify a particular segment of the market, identify the needs of that target segment and then design its programmes to suit those needs. For a HEI, differentiation could come in the forms of quality and specialisation in various fields. Moreover, marketing an educational programme can be more challenging than marketing a mere product because education, being a service, is an experience, and hence, cannot be physically inspected by the prospective customer before purchase (Amaral and Magalhaes, 2007). This lack of 'tangibility', however, could be circumvented by providing printed materials such as tutorials, textbooks and CDs containing practice exams, and in fact, this has been recommended by Gibbs and Knapp (2002) as it helps with getting the 'product' across to the consumer.

3.3.2. Price

The price of the programme, which is the second element of the marketing mix, usually relates to the tuition fees charged by the HEI. For private HEIs, these tuition fees are the only source of revenue and as such, it is important for HEIs to get the pricing right so that lecturer fees, administrative staff fees, operational overheads,

and marketing and other ancillary costs are covered, whilst simultaneously earning a profit margin as well.

A range of factors must be considered when setting the price of the programme: The ranking and reputation of the university, duration of the programme, overheads and other costs to run the programme, facilities provided, income levels of the target market and the extent of competition existing in the market. For instance, if the university has a high ranking, or the lecture panel is highly acclaimed, then it may be logical for the HEI to charge a premium on its programmes as consumers often associate quality with price. However in Sri Lanka, the level of competition in the HE market is cut-throat, with everyone discounting their programmes by providing various offers like registration fee waivers or offering scholarships, and as such, charging very high fees would not be prudent. The best way to enter the market would be to adopt a strategy of penetration pricing, but unless the HEI has existing economies of scale, this would be unfeasible in the long-term. Moreover, Sri Lankan consumers tend to be quite cost-conscious, so low to medium prices would be the best strategy to adopt. However, with no regulation for the private HE sector, there is a danger of the stability of the overall sector crashing if price wars take place between HEIs.

3.3.3.   Place

While 'place' in the traditional sense refers to the physical location where the lectures are being conducted, developments in technology such as the introduction of e-learning systems such as MOODLE platforms, distance learning programmes and podcasts have resulted in geographical and physical limits being stretched beyond the traditional norms. Offering such virtual programmes could be a way of differentiation for HEIs and may result in added convenience to students, especially if they live far away, or have other commitments and are unable to attend physical lectures.

In Sri Lanka, however, HEIs usually tend to opt for face-to-face teaching at campuses in main cities, like Colombo, Kandy and Galle, as e-learning is still a relatively new concept here. Furthermore, given the fact that students in rural areas only have limited access to computers and wifi and are not as IT literate as those in Colombo, e-learning systems may not be very practical at this point in time. However, with most professional qualifications shifting towards a computer-based examination structure, HEIs are compelled to incorporate a degree of online learning to their delivery models.

3.3.4.   *Promotion*

'Promotion' essentially refers to the organisation's communication strategy to reach out to its target market and has been classified into four main categories, namely, advertising, sales promotions, public relations and personal selling (Filip, 2012).

Advertising could be further classified as print and electronic media advertising. Print media advertising could include brochures, press ads, banners and hoardings, while electronic media advertising could be through radio ads and endorsements, LED screen-hoardings, Youtube videos, Google ads, search engine optimisation, blogs and social media marketing through platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn. Some of these channels are used solely as student recruitment tools, whereas others such as blogs are used mostly for the purposes of internal communication and conveying educational information (Constantinides and Stagno, 2012).

The HE sector in Sri Lanka is primarily a parent-funded one, and having recognised this, HEIs tend to target parents through press advertisements, so much so that if one picks up a copy of The Sunday Times, one of the most popular English newspapers in Sri Lanka, the Education Section of the newspaper is easily the biggest section, with around 20-25 pages dedicated to HE alone. Although there have not been any studies conducted in Sri Lanka to analyse the effectiveness of print advertising, in a study conducted by GfK Panel Services, which is a global research company

specialising in ROI studies, it was found that in comparison to advertising through radio, TV and online banners, print advertising had the highest ROI of 120%, which indicates that for every euro invested by the client, a return of €1.20 is generated (Grimm, 2014). The reason for this very high return was said to be because the reader could spend adequate time to properly read and understand the offer and the performance of newspapers was also high because unlike with other forms of media, the reach is created within 24 hours (Grimm, 2014). Moreover, although the circulation of printed newspapers is showing a declining trend in the Western world, statistics on a global scale indicate a 21% growth over the past five years, which is largely attributed to increases from Asia (World Press Trends Database, 2017). This growth is apparent even in Sri Lanka, with an 80% increase in the circulation of daily newspapers and a 41% increase in the circulation of weekly newspapers from 2012 to 2016 (Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2017). Therefore, the strategy of advertising in newspapers appears to be justifiably smart in the context of Sri Lanka.

Radio advertisements are fairly popular as many HEIs use this medium during peak enrolment periods. A study conducted by Nielson Catalina Solutions in New York (2014) has revealed that radio ads generate a $6 return within 28 days for every dollar spent and that brand share was increased by 9% when the consumer purchased the goods within one day of hearing the ad, versus the 3.4% increase when the purchase took place within 28 days of hearing the ad. However, this was in respect of consumer goods, and there has not been any research done in Sri Lanka to analyse the return on spend by HE clients.

Social media marketing is another key component of the marketing strategies of Sri Lankan HEIs, and this is mostly aimed at targeting the younger generation. With Facebook's facility to customise sponsored advertisements by region, age and specific interests, HEIs are able to reach their target audiences more effectively. By posting engaging content, HEIs induce users to 'like', 'share' and 'comment' on various posts, which would generate traffic to their pages, which would contain a lot of information regarding the institute and the courses. Instagram is also popularly used nowadays, but this platform would be more likely to contain interesting pictures

(of the university, its students, events etc), as opposed to much factual content. The websites of HEIs also carry links to their social media sites. According to a recent study conducted by Bazaarvoice (2012), atleast 51% of Gen Y is influenced by opinions and recommendations of strangers on these social media platforms, which is what makes social media such a huge success today. LinkedIn and Twitter are not as popular in Sri Lanka yet, but maybe in years to come, their usage may gradually increase.

Sales promotions that are commonly resorted to by HEIs in Sri Lanka are early bird discounts, registration and/or exemption fee waiver offers, free iPads for instant registrations at educational expos and cash incentives for introducing friends to the programme. PR activity to promote the HEIs could be in the form of sponsoring various school events like Commerce Days, networking events, CSR activities and newspaper articles and interviews. Personal selling and direct marketing activities followed by HEIs in Sri Lanka are presentations through seminars or career guidance workshops to the target market (often while they are still at school), direct mailing, e-mails, text messages and distribution of leaflets outside school examination centres, to name a few.

Branding is also another form of promotions that is being used by HEIs. In fact, Cosser (2002) has emphasised the value of managing an institution's brand, as the reputation and credibility of the HEI is one aspect that is given a lot of importance by prospective students (Barich and Kotler, 1991; Thomson, 2002). The brand helps the organisation differentiate itself from competition and could be communicated through the logo, colours, shapes and catchy slogans (Van der Walt, 1995). In a sense, a brand can communicate what a product cannot; it can reach out better to customers and create greater emotional ties and an element of loyalty (Siguaw, 1999, cited in Beneke, 2011 at p.33). In fact, McNally and Speak (2002, p. 4) have defined a higher education brand as *"…a perception or emotion maintained by a buyer or a prospective buyer describing the experience related to doing business with an academic institution with its product and service"*. HEIs aspire to continuously reinforce their brands in the minds of the general public and the potential consumers,

and they often resort to the use of catchy slogans to achieve this. Moreover, most HEIs often advertise in the local English newspapers even during the off-peak season, i.e. the non-recruitment periods, to ensure that the brand awareness is created and sustained. There are instances where some HEIs do make false claims with regard to their achievements, but it is not a strategy that would be successful in the long-run, because although it may initially attract students, negative word-of-mouth would soon spread and result in loss of reputation for the HEIs concerned.

All these promotional strategies would be successful only if targeted towards the correct segment of consumers. This is why there is often an increase in advertisements in English newspapers and radio stations during May/June because HEIs are targeting the students sitting for the Cambridge and Edexcel O/Ls and A/Ls, while Sinhala and Tamil media are also used in August/September and December/January to target the students sitting for the local curriculum A/Ls and O/Ls respectively.

As a means of circumventing the aspect of 'tangibility' that is lacking due to the nature of the HE sector, HEIs frequently resort to testimonial campaigns by graduates and high performers to communicate the quality of education provided, and they have also introduced open days where students and their parents get the opportunity to visit the campuses to see the buildings and facilities.

3.3.5.   *Processes*

Processes in the context of HE would refer to the administrative systems and procedures of the HEIs (Kotler *et al,* 2002). The processes could range from management, to student enrolment, lecturing and even extracurricular activities (Filip, 2012). As the HE sector is a part of the services sector, processes are of great importance to the consumers and the organisation alike, because the university's success would depend how smoothly its internal processes function. For instance, some HEIs follow Total Quality Management (TQM) systems and ISO processes (Sallis, 2002).

3.3.6.   *Physical evidence*

Physical evidence refers to all tangible aspects of the HEI, including brochures, study material, infrastructure and related facilities (Palmer, 2001). The building infrastructure is the first impression that the prospective students get of the institution, and even simple things like cleanliness, carpeting of the facility and technology used in classrooms go a long way in ensuring a positive corporate image (Gibbs and Knapp, 2002). The interior design and décor of the organisation is also part of the physical evidence; most often, organisations have colour schemes for the office walls, and these colour schemes are also followed in organisational stationery such as letterheads and envelopes. The furniture is also chosen to compliment these colours.

Promotional merchandise is another form of physical evidence. HEIs brand various items such as pen drives, pens, notebooks, bags, bottles, bookmarks, diaries, keytags and mugs just to name a few and prospective students are usually highly taken up with such merchandise.

3.3.7.   *People*

In the HE sector, 'people' are quite possibly one of the most important elements of the marketing mix. This is because the main function of the institution, i.e. teaching, involves a degree of human interaction when delivering the programmes. In addition to that, administrative staff such as those handling the enrolment process are also crucial to the overall operations because they are the first point of contact once the student comes to the institution, not forgetting the marketing staff who initially counselled the students and pitched the programmes.

Current students and graduates are also important 'people' where the HEIs are concerned, because prospective students often consult these parties to get first-hand information about the institution and testimonials carry a lot of weight in this regard. There has been some debate as to the influence of 'people' in the marketing mix,

where Ivy and Naude (2004) have stated that people do not have an influence over student choice, but others like Brassington (2006), Kotler and Fox (1995) and Hollensen (2003) have disagreed stating that the quality of the service delivered depends on the people delivering it and as such, people do indeed have an influence over the choice. The researcher agrees with the latter view because for example, a counsellor would definitely have the power to influence the student to choose a particular programme at an HEI if he/she is adequately persuasive and convincingly sincere while explaining about the programme.

Moreover, when developing and implementing any marketing strategy, firstly, the organisational staff should be trained to have the right attitude and mindset to steer the company towards achieving its strategic objectives (Wright, 1999). HEIs have slowly begun to realise that building customer loyalty through strong relationships is very important in today's competitive environment, and for relationship marketing to be successful, once again 'people' are key (Judson *et al,* 2007). Relationship marketing also involves HEIs carrying out their promises made during the pre-purchase stage, which would help in the attraction and retention of students and keep all stakeholders such as parents, friends and employers happy (Grönroos, 1994; Al-Alak, 2006). Relationship marketing, if done correctly, could be a significant differentiator and hence, a strong competitive advantage for the HEI concerned (Gordan *et al,* 2012).

3.4. SUMMARY

This chapter set out the theoretical framework for the study by discussing the importance of correctly understanding the student needs and their decision-making process and designing an organisation's marketing mix to cater to those needs. The next chapter will examine this framework in the context of the research methodology.

CHAPTER 4 : METHODOLOGY

4.1.   INTRODUCTION

This chapter covers the methodology followed in this study and also discusses topics like research design, sampling and access to data. The main research questions, along with its series of sub-questions are presented and the reader will be taken through the different phases of the research that has been conducted. Lastly, the ethical issues that arose while gathering data for this study will be discussed.

4.2.   RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This particular study conducted to understand the relationship between student choice of HE and the marketing strategies of HEIs in Sri Lanka will be underpinned by three main research questions, the first one focusing on students, the second on HEIs and the third combining both groups. Each of these research questions will have a series of sub-questions:

1. What is the student-consumers' decision-making process when choosing to pursue higher education?

   The first research question investigates the thought process of students and influences on this thought process when they are seeking for a foreign HE qualification in Sri Lanka, and has five sub-questions, which are:

   a. What motivates students to pursue higher education, particularly foreign higher education?
   b. How do students collect information regarding prospective HE qualifications and HEIs?
   c. Based on what criteria do they evaluate the HEIs available?
   d. Who or what influences their final decision?

e. After enrolling, to what extent are the students satisfied about their enrolment choices?

2. How do HEIs market their suite of qualifications?

   This question mainly relates to the strategies employed by the HEIs to attract students. This question has two sub-questions that are framed in the context of the marketing mix:

   a. What are the marketing strategies employed by the HEIs surveyed?
   b. What are the specific elements of the marketing mix that the different HEIs focus on?

3. Is there a relationship between student choice of HE and the marketing strategies of HEIs?

   This question combines the first two research questions to evaluate the relationship between student choice and marketing strategies of HEIs. There are two sub-questions under this final research question:

   a. Which marketing elements directly influence student choice?
   b. What are the marketing elements that correspond with the various stages of the student-consumer's decision process?

4.3.   DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH PARADIGM

Quantitative and qualitative methods of research are two much debated paradigms that exist in educational and social research, which has lead to an almost dichotomous segregation between them (Devine and Heath, 1999).

Through the use of quantitative research methods, which originated from positivistic and scientific traditions, researchers are able to quantify and statistically generalise the research findings on the entire population, simply based on a representative sample (Sarantakos, 2004). This results in a greater degree of objectivity as the findings are interpreted through statistical analysis; however, these quantitative methods fail to capture various intangible aspects such as social behaviour and sometimes impose opinions on respondents that they may not have otherwise given, which reduces the flexibility of responses (Sarantakos, 2004).

Qualitative research methods, on the other hand, originate from interpretative and naturalistic traditions, and capitalise on factors like body language and produce better interpretative results, thereby countering any response errors that may have arisen through quantitative data collection methods (Al-Fattal, 2010). There is greater flexibility for respondents, and the occurrence of non-response error could also be minimised. The results of qualitative studies are more realistic because they look into specific cases and avoid generalisations. However, subjectivity and bias on the part of the researcher could potentially affect the reliability of results (Al-Fattal, 2010).

Based on the pros and cons of both methods, the researcher has decided to opt for a mixed paradigm, encompassing elements of both quantitative and qualitative methods, the main reason being to combine the advantages of both, while simultaneously offsetting the disadvantages, although the latter reason is secondary (Brannen, 1992). Hantrais (2009 at p.109) has pointed out the main advantages of a mixed approach to be, *"complementary, triangulation and facilitation…"* - The quantitative data is complemented by the qualitative data through increased data consistency and is often verified through replication, therefore leading to

methodological triangulation. The researcher believes that these factors would work in tandem with the objectives of this research and the validity of the conclusions would also be increased (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Furthermore, the researcher firmly believes that effective research design is about pragmatism; it should have an open-minded aspect to it, which appreciates the information gathered, irrespective of where it leads to, as it would only assist in broadening the scope and give a better picture of reality, and such a two-dimensional research paradigm would achieve this (Gorard and Taylor, 2004; Pole and Lampard, 2002).

Researchers like Finch and Mason (1993), Gregson and Lowe (1994) and Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995) have also followed a mixed approach in their studies. However, with regard to studies relating to student choice and HE marketing, only Taylor (1992) and Al-Fattal (2010) have used mixed research methodology (White, 2007).

The only issue with combined research methodology is that there could be a potential clash with various philosophical, methodological and theoretical approaches (Hantrais, 2009). With a mixed method, different research paradigms could be used for each of the research questions based on which one suits it more, but the combination of several paradigms used within the same study means there may be epistemological concerns whenever the researcher shifts from one paradigm to another (Brannen, 1992). To counter this, the researcher has designed this particular study in a sequential manner, with the research being broken down into three phases, each following a different approach: Phases 1 and 3 are qualitative, while Phase 2 is quantitative. Moreover, the researcher has ensured that the rigour of both research methods has been maintained and therefore, any potential clashes avoided.

4.4.   RESEARCH DESIGN

A tri-phase approach would be used to answer the research questions, where each phase would logically flow into the next.
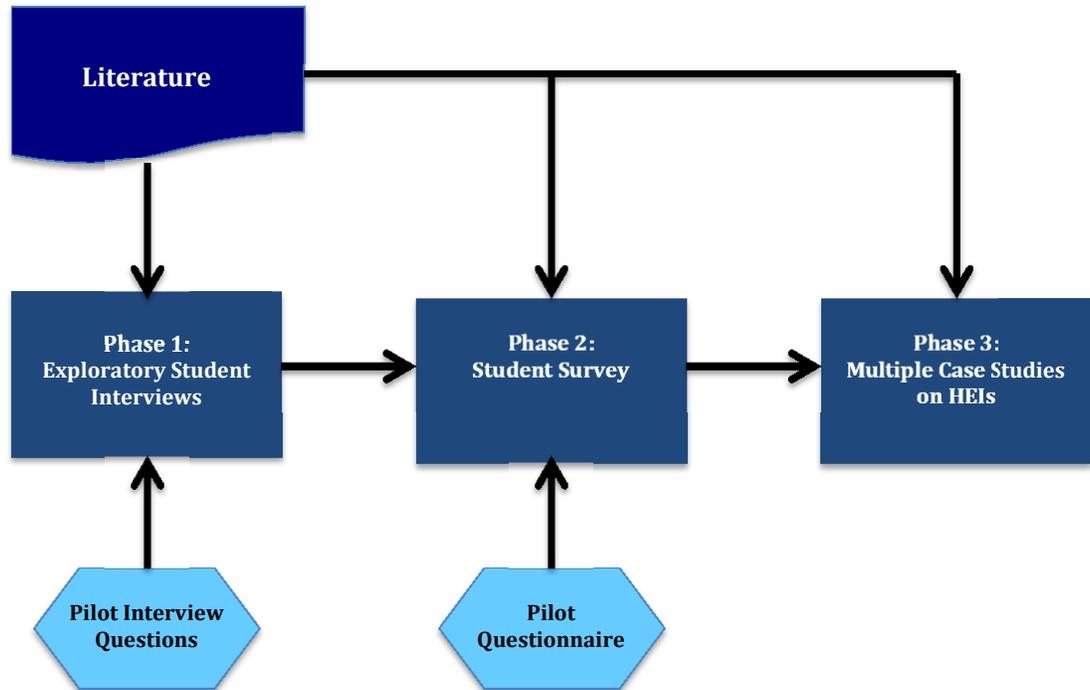
Figure 4.1: Research Process

4.4.1.   Phase 1:

This phase consisted of exploratory interviews with students, supplemented by a pilot study to gain insights into the context and help formulate and develop the interview questions. The aim was to discover information about students' choice of HE qualification and HEI, and given the lack of literature relating to student choice and HE marketing in Sri Lanka, this phase was vital to understand current issues in this regard. The information obtained from the exploratory interviews has helped with the preparation of questions for the questionnaire in Phase 2 and has significantly improved the overall research design. This phase was

phenomenological because the information was drawn from the students' viewpoints and hence, the questions were based on empirical observations.

4.4.2.   Phase 2:

This phase consisted of a survey to gather information regarding student choice of HE and HEIs in Sri Lanka and established patterns based on statistical analysis. As recommended by Babbie (2004), questionnaires were sent out to a sizeable population of current students and recent graduates and a pilot study was also conducted to assist with the development of survey questions. All information gathered was used as a basis for further investigation in Phase 3.

4.4.3.   Phase 3:

The final phase followed an *idiographic* viewpoint and consisted of multiple case studies on the selected HEIs to analyse the effectiveness of marketing strategies. The aim was to further investigate patterns emerging from the survey data by critically evaluating the marketing strategies of those HEIs and thereby establishing a connection between student choice and the marketing strategies followed.

4.5.   SAMPLING

Different methods of sampling have been used throughout the research. Firstly, the researcher has used purposive sampling to select the HEIs based on self-established criteria (Burgess, 1984). The first criterion was based on the individual identity of the HEIs as all of them are currently approaching the market in different ways. The second criterion was the type of qualification offered, i.e. professional qualifications and academic qualfications, and the third criterion was the market position of the HEIs. As such, the researcher engaged in extensive screening and gathered information about these HEIs from their websites, press advertisements, social media pages, promotional brochures and leaflets and also by speaking to marketing

personnel at educational exhibitions. As the researcher was also employed in this sector for several years, this form of information gathering was a regular, almost habitual function, and hence, the researcher already possessed a lot of market information regarding the performance of these HEIs even prior to commencing this formal research. As such, the researcher chose four key institutions in Colombo offering foreign, undergraduate-level qualifications from the UK – two HEIs offer professional qualifications and the other two offer academic qualifications. These HEIs are also the market leaders for the above-mentioned programmes and will be referred to by the pseudonyms of Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta so that their true identities remain anonymous and competition is not unfairly affected. It is also important to mention at this point that the researcher has studied at three of these four institutions and worked at one too, and hence, has first-hand insights into the internal aspects of the programmes delivered. However, the researcher is aware that this may result in bias towards these institutes and has strived to maintain neutrality throughout this study. Furthermore, as the researcher has only relied on non-confidential, non-commercially sensitive information, which is freely available to the public, official consent from the selected HEIs was not required.

The next stage required the researcher to select a sample of students for the pilot interviews. Here, the target population was all the students at these four HEIs, and eight students, two from each HEI, were selected on a random basis based on personal acquaintances. The majority of the students selected agreed to participate in the study.

The third stage (i.e. Phase 1 of the research) was the student interviews, where the researcher resorted to simple random sampling based on personal acquaintances once again. The information gathered from these interviews formed the basis for the questionnaire sent out in Phase 2. Here, five students were selected from each HEI.

The forth stage was the piloting of the questionnaires for students. Simple random sampling was used again based on personal acquaintances and three students were selected from each HEI.

Stage 5 was the administration of the final questionnaires to the students. As the population was very large (total number of students at all these four HEIs amount to around 7500 atleast), it was impossible to include everyone in the survey and as such, students were selected randomly relying on personal contacts to disseminate the survey. Wherever possible, the researcher has attempted to include an ethnically and culturally diverse group of students so that a good cross-section of the student population was covered. The questionnaires were administered through the use of an online questionnaire software called Survey Monkey and paper copies of the questionnaire were also distributed amongst students where they were required (of which the data was later fed into the online software to facilitate ease of data tabulation). The total number of students sampled was 800 (i.e. 200 from each HEI).

The final stage included selecting a sample of marketing personnel from the HEIs and this was done using a 'key informant' sampling strategy based on personal contacts and also by speaking to random staff members representing the HEIs at an educational expo. All information gathered here was general, non-confidential information regarding the HEIs' marketing strategies. Two staff members were approached in each case, and although the researcher made a conscious effort to approach staff holding similar titles, this was not achieved, as some staff members were not available and also because similar designations did not consistently exist across all the HEIs surveyed.

4.6.   ACCESS

As the researcher was employed in the HE sector while the research phase was going on, she felt it would not be ethical to approach the HEIs and request access to their students as those HEIs may feel as though the researcher is attempting to gain information for the HEI she was working for. As such, the researcher relied on personal contacts to disseminate the survey, but this meant that the researcher was not able to access the full population of students.

The researcher also used non-confidential, non-commercially sensitive information, which is freely available to the public, because most HEIs would not consent to disclosing confidential information due to the high levels of competition existing in the market.

4.7. DATA COLLECTION

Burgess (1984) has stated that researchers should be flexible in their approach and select methods that are the most suitable for the research problem under consideration, and hence, the researcher has used a wide range of methods to collect data for this study. The strengths and weaknesses of each of these research tools have also been carefully considered.

4.7.1. Phase 1: Pilot Study and Exploratory Interviews with Students

As mentioned previously, there is a great lack in literature pertaining to student choice and HE marketing in Sri Lanka. As such, the researcher has used Western literature as a base whilst being mindful of the existing gap in the local context. This particular phase, which is qualitative in nature, has acted as the foundation and provided the overall framework for gathering data and the subsequent analysis. Most importantly, it has facilitated a pragmatic approach where emergent findings and unexpected outcomes were welcomed and every attempt was made to delve deep into the respondents' day-to-day lives to understand the deeply-rooted behavioural patterns and thought processes (Thomas, 2009). As flexibility is vital to bring about emergent findings, the researcher has made a conscious attempt to remain flexible throughout this phase.

Pilot Study

A pilot study is a feasibility study conducted on a small-scale to prepare for the actual, bigger study (Polit *et al,* 2001). Here, the researcher carried out a pilot study prior to conducting the exploratory interviews, with the objective of analysing student perspectives and hence, identifying further topics that need to be investigated in this study. Eight students (two from each HEI) were interviewed as part of this pilot study. The interviews were all conducted in English.

Through these piloted exploratory interviews, the researcher obtained feedback regarding the questions and the overall procedure, and hence, was able to identify and rectify certain issues with the interview questions: All unnecessary and ambiguous questions were eliminated, some questions were re-phrased to ensure greater comprehensibility and the overall research design was also improved this way (Janesick, 1998; Balnaves and Caputi, 2001). As such, the researcher was able to ensure that the responses received were fairly specific and directly addressed the question. These exploratory interviews also helped the researcher in improving her questioning techniques and in effectively communicating with the respondents by making them feel at ease.

The schedule for the pilot interview with students was designed around the first research question in section 4.2 and also incorporated concepts arising from the literature. The primary objectives of the interview were to analyse the way by which students choose a HE qualification and HEI and understand the decision-making process. It was a semi-structured interview with six questions, which took into account Blackwell *et al's* (2012) theoretical model in Figure 3.5. Each question has its own series of prompts and probes, which were used to gather more information from the interviewees (See APPENDIX 1: PILOT STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE). The researcher took special care to avoid causing embarrassment to the participants and also avoided any culturally or politically sensitive topics when phrasing the questions.

As the students were selected through personal contacts, almost all of them were familiar with the researcher. As such, the researcher met up with them at a place suggested by the interviewees, mostly at coffee houses. The researcher felt this was a good decision because conducting the interviews at the respective HEIs itself may have put the students in an awkward position and they may have been reluctant to express their true feelings in that environment. The participants all agreed to allow the researcher to record the interviews. In addition to this, the researcher also took notes. The interviews were conducted in the form of free-flowing conversations, and lasted between 30-45 minutes each.

Thanks to the pilot interview, the researcher realised some drastic errors in the formulation of the questions, and re-did the questionnaire and the prompts/probes. Question 1 was modified to ask the student which institute he/she had chosen, and this was mainly to facilitate the presentation of results. Q2 now read as – 'What made you pursue higher education?' as this had broader scope to assess the student mentality prior to choosing higher education. Question 3 in the amended student interview schedule queried on the sources of information, while Question 4 combined the questions in the pilot schedule regarding the options and the factors influencing the final purchase decision. The modified interview schedule also saw the introduction of a new question – 'Q5: How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?' Question 6 remained as it was originally. All these amendments have been incorporated into the modified version of the interview schedule, which can be found in APPENDIX 2: STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.

However, it should be noted that there are also a number of potential issues with pilot studies. For instance, the data gathered from the main survey may be contaminated due to the pilot study (Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). This could happen in two ways: The pilot survey respondents would have already been exposed to the research as opposed to the other respondents, and this may result in participants of the pilot study giving perfect responses during the actual study because they have had more time to understand the type of responses expected by the researcher, or they may

completely fail to demonstrate interest during the repeat run. Secondly, contamination could also occur due to slight mismatches of data caused by the inclusion of results from the pilot study in the main study; this is because the final study may have been slightly amended to include new information that emerged as a result of the pilot study. Furthermore, pilot studies may give false expectations to the researcher with regard to the response rates of the main survey; however, very high response rates for pilot studies should be expected, as there is no statistical foundation and because it is carried out on a very small number of respondents (Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). Moreover, there is also a possibility of the researcher making inaccurate assumptions based on the pilot study (Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001). The researcher remained aware of these issues and in an attempt to counter them, has included neither the results of the pilot study in the final results, nor the same respondents in the main study.

Exploratory Interviews

The exploratory interviews were conducted with the objective of identifying broader themes that can be explored in Phase 2. As such, twenty students were interviewed (five from each HEI) by means of semi-structured interviews to gain insights into their perspectives when choosing a HE qualification and institute and also to understand their thought process during the enrolment and post-enrolment stages. Once again, the language used was English.

The reason as to why the researcher opted for semi-structured interviews was because the questions could be prepared well ahead of time, but at the same time, it allowed the researcher a degree of flexibility so that relevant prompts and probes could be used to assist the participants in understanding the questions. Participants also had the opportunity to request for clarifications. However, the researcher was aware that the success of a semi-structured interview depended on the interviewer's skill in building up on the conversation and probing extra where necessary. Moreover, the interviewer was careful to avoid giving out unconscious signals to the respondents to elicit the responses desired by the interviewer. Lastly, the researcher

understands that it is not possible to 100% guarantee the authenticity and truthfulness of the answers received, but by observing body language, the researcher believes that this can be understood to a certain extent.

As with the pilot interviews, the exploratory interviews were conducted individually, on a one-on-one basis, at a location suggested by the participants, in the form of free-flowing conversations, and lasted between 30-45 minutes each, depending on the responsiveness of each participant. As the participants were personally known to the researcher, there was no need for excessive formalities and the participants were fairly at ease. The interviews were once again recorded with the informed consent of the participants. The final interview schedule can be found in APPENDIX 2: STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE.

4.7.2.   Phase 2: Student Survey

Reason for Choosing a Survey Approach

The researcher opted for a questionnaire approach in Phase 2 of the study in order to support the findings of Phase 1. This was because questionnaires are relatively cheap, easy to administer and ensures objectivity of results (Al-Fattal, 2010). Moreover, as the anonymity of the respondents is usually preserved, the researcher felt that participants might feel more encouraged to provide answers. However, the researcher does acknowledge certain weaknesses of questionnaires as a research tool. For instance, response error may take place when the respondents provide untrue or inaccurate information, which could be due to fear of being penalised for highlighting negative points about the HEI, genuine lack of knowledge or differences in interpretation. Furthermore, non-response error may occur when some of the respondents in the sample do not participate at all in the survey, which may be due to lack of interest or time or other factors that are hitherto unknown. Non-response error may also occur when some respondents skip certain questions. To reduce the occurrence of both these errors, the researcher took special care to explain the purpose of the study to the respondents, both verbally and on the first page of the

questionnaire (Refer APPENDIX 5: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE), and also formulated the questions in simple, unambiguous language as far as was reasonably possible.

This questionnaire was developed with the use of the online survey software called Survey Monkey and a link was e-mailed to the sample of students. Although a small percentage of the surveys were distributed through paper questionnaires, the data collected was then re-entered to the online software for ease of data tabulation. The rationale behind choosing Survey Monkey was because of the many features offered. For instance, with the upgraded package, the researcher was able to build the questionnaire very easily, incorporating tools such as multiple-choice answers, drop down menus, rating scales, ranking and textboxes; customise the overall layout and distribute the survey to 800 students. The researcher was also able to easily extract the responses received as the software facilitated the generation of both summary and individual-response reports so that any trends could be easily analysed.

Questionnaire Piloting

Through the piloting of the questionnaire, the researcher was able to assess the wording and sequence of the questions and amend them as necessary to enhance the response rate. It was indeed a time-consuming process, but since it served in a higher number of benefits with regard to increasing the quality of the final questionnaire, the researcher feels the time consumed was justified.

The pilot questionnaire was administered at the HEI where the researcher was employed, purely for convenience purposes. A sample of twenty students was selected for the pilot questionnaire round, and when the researcher invited them to be participants, they all willingly agreed to do so. The pilot questionnaire (See APPENDIX 4: PILOT STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE) was administered in the same way that the main questionnaire was administered, and was conducted in English as the students' level of competence in English was considered to be fairly high given the fact that they were all studying for UK qualifications. Students were

e-mailed the link of the survey and took an average of 14 minutes to complete the survey. Subsequently, the researcher spoke to each of them individually to get their feedback on the overall questionnaire itself; the ensuing feedback was immensely helpful in fine-tuning the questionnaire. The researcher also ensured to eliminate the data collected from the pilot questionnaire from the final results so that the findings of the final study would not be diluted in any way (Peat *et al*, 2001).

Questionnaire Design

The researcher spent a considerable amount of time in designing and modifying the questionnaire before the final version was sent out to the students. In doing so, the researcher strove to ensure that the questions were clearly phrased, appropriate for gathering empirical data, and covered all the essential areas that were required (Cohen *et al*, 2000). The questionnaire was designed in English.

In order to ensure relevance, the researcher designed the questionnaire based on the themes arising from the exploratory studies and literature review. The researcher classified the questions according to each phase of the decision-making process. Firstly, factors being considered when choosing the qualification were tested. Next, the factors influencing the choice of institute were evaluated, including the sources of information and the range of options available to the students. Perceptions regarding the enrolment and post-enrolment phases were also queried on. Lastly, as Sri Lanka is such a multicultural country, some demographic information regarding the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the students was gathered to enable the researcher to identify if these factors influenced their decision in any way.

The majority of the questions were close-ended so that the data could be analysed statistically; however, a few open-ended questions were also included in order to gain a more in-depth understanding on certain areas. The questionnaire mainly contains questions that use a 5-point Likert scale, which were used to assess the respondents' attitudes on various choice factors by allowing them to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the particular variable. Although critics

of this rating scale to measure attitudes have stated that this may result in a fair amount of confusion for the respondents and also to the researcher during the interpretation of results, the researcher believes that this technique has helped in arriving at conclusions regarding the influence of each of these variables on the final decision (Gorard, 2003).

The final questionnaire sent out to the students can be found in APPENDIX 5: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE. The overall composition of the questionnaire was as follows: Four of the questions were 5-point Likert scale questions, five were dichotomous questions, seven were multiple-choice questions, one was a multiple response question and one was an open-ended question.

The first question was aimed at identifying the HEI selected by the students, while the second question assessed which factors had the most significant influence in the students' decision of choosing that particular qualification. Q2 included eleven factors, which were classified into three groups during the analysis – career, social and academic reasons. Q3 analysed the reasons for choosing the institute and here, thirty-two variables were included, and classified into six clusters during the analysis, viz. reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related reasons, convenience factors and financial factors. In questions 2 and 3, the participants were requested to rate each of the items, ranging from (1) "Not at all important" to (5) "Very important". Q4, which also required the participants to rate each of the items, ranging from (1) "Not at all important" to (5) "Very important", evaluated the sources of information which the students relied on to gather information to make their choice of HE.

Q5 was a standard Yes/No question, which queried on whether students had a set of alternative options to choose from, and the next question (Q6), which was an open-ended one, was also linked to this because the students were requested to indicate how many institutes they (or their parents) physically visited before arriving at their final decision.

Questions 7 and 8 were concerned with analysing the age at which the students decided on the qualification and the age that they actually started studying for that chosen qualification. These questions were asked so that the (a) The researcher could gain an idea as to how early parents and students start deciding on HE options, which will be later cross-analysed with the HEIs' marketing strategies to see if they effectively cater to these segments, and (b) The researcher would be able to identify how mature the students were at the time they start studying towards these qualifications and if any trends can be identified that are specific to Sri Lanka.

Q9 queried on the influence of parents/relatives on the final decision, and by asking the participants to disclose information with regard to their ethnic and religious backgrounds in the last question, the researcher wanted to assess if there was any relationship between the parents being the main deciders versus the religious/cultural backgrounds. Other personal information, such as gender was also evaluated.

Questions 10 and 11 were related to the enrolment process, while Q12-16 were related to the post-enrolment experience. Q10-12, 14 and 16 were multiple-choice questions, Q13 incorporated thirteen variables where the participants were required to rate each of the items, ranging from (1) "Extremely dissatisfied" to (5) "Extremely satisfied" and Q15 was a multiple-response question.

Lastly, Questions 17 and 18 were aimed at identifying any gender- or ethnicity/religion-related trends existing within the sample that could help the researcher's analysis.

Administration

The questionnaire was administered in a consistent, standardised manner so that replication would be facilitated (Al-Fattal, 2010). The researcher clearly explained to the participants the significance of the study and the importance of their responses, which helped in reducing the non-response rate. However, the researcher was aware that the questionnaire, being a bit lengthy, may have been bit of a deterrence to students.

4.7.3.   Phase 3: Multiple Case Studies

Phase 3 of this study consisted of a series of case studies on the selected HEIs in order to answer the second research question (See section 4.2). These case studies provide insights into the marketing strategies of the HEIs and the data was gathered through observation, the analysis of web and print materials and advertisements and also by speaking to the relevant marketing personnel at educational expos. The advantage of the case study approach is that it helped the researcher to be flexible, and proved to be quite a robust research method as an in-depth analysis was required. Moreover, the case study approach facilitated triangulation of data as the researcher resorted to a wide array of sources (Yin, 2003).
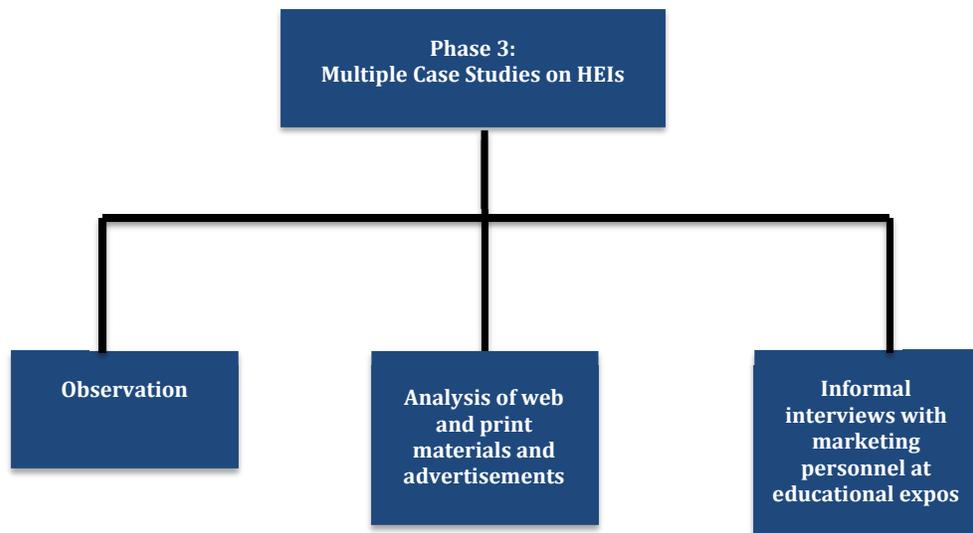
Figure 4.2: Case study research design

Observation

As the researcher was employed in the HE sector and has a good understanding of all the HEIs under consideration, she has been able to observe their marketing activities, communication strategies and internal university life over an extended period of time. As such, observation has facilitated the systematic collection of data through the maintenance of a research diary and was very useful in answering the second research question.

Analysis of web and print materials and advertisements

The researcher has analysed the HEIs' activity in print (newspapers and billboards) and electronic media (website, e-flyers through e-mail campaigns and social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram), branding activity at the institutes and also at educational exhibitions, and printed brochures and flyers over the span of two years. All these sources contained plenty of information about the HEIs and also gave the researcher a clear idea of how the HEIs' were positioning themselves in the market and maintaining their brand identities, which in turn facilitated the comparison between the selected HEIs.

Informal interviews with marketing personnel at educational expos

The researcher also conducted informal interviews with two marketing personnel from each HEI. These interviews were conducted at educational expos and lasted around 10-15 minutes each. The marketing personnel were asked to provide their views as to why students make the choices they make, and what they feel their respective HEIs are well known for and what they are doing right (See APPENDIX 6: INSTITUTIONAL MARKETING PERSONNEL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE). The researcher did not record these interviews, as the interviewees may have felt uncomfortable, so instead, notes were taken down with the informed consent of the interviewees.

4.8. DATA ANALYSIS

This section discusses how the analysis was conducted for all the data gathered from the various methods.

4.8.1. Interviews

The interviews with the students were recorded and as the verbatim transcripts would be very voluminous and time-consuming, the researcher opted for succinct summaries covering the pertinent information (See APPENDIX 3: PARTIAL TRANSCRIPTS OF STUDENT INTERVIEWS). Each interview was replayed around 3-4 times in order to accurately summarise them. This information was used in Phase 1.

The informal interviews with the marketing personnel of the HEIs consisted of rough notes during the interviews, which can be found in APPENDIX 7: EXTRACTS OF INSTITUTIONAL MARKETING PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS). The information from these interviews was mainly used in the case study analysis in Phase 3 and also as a means of cross-verifying the information provided by students in Phases 1 and 2.

4.8.2. Questionnaire

As the questionnaires were administered through the online survey software called Survey Monkey, the final data was easily extracted as the software generated Excel reports containing individual responses of each of the respondents as well as summary responses for each question. As such, the researcher maintained a master tab where all the data was combined and analysed, in addition to also classifying the data based on the HEIs studied, so that any trends specific to each HEI can be analysed. Using Excel, the researcher was able to apply specific formula to easily arrive at and analyse a variety of statistical measures.

The researcher did not allocate special serial numbers or anything of that nature to each questionnaire to identify which HEI it was collected from. This was mainly because as far as the two professional qualifications were concerned, the students were all from the two leading HEIs providing each of those qualifications and as such, it was easily identifiable. Moreover, as far as the academic qualifications were concerned, the questionnaire specified the two HEIs being surveyed so that the respondents could clearly choose the relevant one.

4.8.3. Case Studies

Information regarding each of the HEIs selected is presented in a separate chapter (i.e. Chapters 7-10) and analysed accordingly. The data was categorised based on various themes and the findings were triangulated wherever possible.

4.9. RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF FINDINGS

Reliability of research findings refer to the extent to which the findings are consistent over a period of time and the population has been accurately represented by the sample (Joppe, 2000 cited in Golafshani, 2003 at p.598). Validity refers to the extent to which the research accurately measures that what it was it was intended to measure and also how verifiable the findings are (Joppe, 2000 cited in Golafshani, 2003 at p.599). While it is impossible to ensure perfect reliability and validity, the researcher has strived to achieve an optimum level.

To ensure reliability of the findings, the researcher was extra careful in ensuring the statistical stability and consistency of the sample and accurate recording, analysing and interpreting of data, and this was supported by the detailed research design (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003). Moreover, as far as Phase 3 is concerned, the researcher also ensured to replicate the data collection procedure for each of the HEIs analysed.

In order to gain a thorough understanding of the research area, the researcher analysed a variety of factors from different viewpoints and by doing so, she was able to improve internal validity of the findings. This was further supported by the pilot and exploratory studies that were conducted in the course of the study (Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001; Creswell, 1994). Moreover, the researcher was able to achieve content validity by ensuring that all the possible factors influencing students' choice were considered (Neuman, 1991). External validity was also improved as the samples were randomised and hence, the findings were generalised (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003). The overall validity of the findings were improved through corroboration and triangulation of data whereby the researcher compared the data gathered from the exploratory interviews with students against the data gathered from the questionnaires and also against the information provided by the marketing personnel of the HEIs and the researcher's own observations.

4.10.   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical considerations have a considerable impact on the reliability and validity of research findings, especially since the choices of students and marketing strategies of HEIs are heavily investigated, all of which are highly sensitive information (Baker, 1994).

As Sri Lanka does not have any specific guidelines that need to be adhered to when carrying out studies of this nature, the researcher was free to conduct the research in the usual manner. However, the researcher took special care to ensure that all respondents were informed and willing participants for all/any forms of surveying, including the interviews, and this provision of consent was recorded at the start of the interviews. The participants were informed that they had the right to not answer any questions if they wished and that they could withdraw from the interview/survey anytime. Moreover, as the researcher only relied on non-confidential, non-commercially sensitive information, which is freely available to the public, official consent from the selected HEIs was not required.

Confidentiality of information gathered and anonymity of respondents were also ensured. The participants were informed of this, and the researcher believes this facilitated easier access to information because they may have felt more at ease to remain unidentified in the interviews (particularly in the case of the marketing personnel from HEIs) and also in the survey. Furthermore, the anonymity of the HEIs selected was ensured through the use of pseudonyms – Alpha, Beta, Delta and Gamma. Moreover, the names of the qualifications were also not mentioned, as this would make the HEIs easily identifiable. This was necessary so that market competition would not be unduly affected.

By virtue of profession, the researcher had access to confidential market information; however, such information was used strictly for purposes of this research of which the primary objective was to give the researcher a better understanding of the Sri Lankan HE market. The researcher has also studied at two of the selected HEIs and worked at one, and was careful to remain unbiased when analysing the marketing strategies.

The researcher also seriously took into account issues of academic honesty and integrity and strived to ensure that the research findings are free from fabrication, manipulation or distortion, and that plagiarism is avoided at all costs with ideas and viewpoints being given due credit where necessary.

4.11.   SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the methodological aspects of the study, starting from elaborating on the research questions and the set of sub-questions, all the way through to discussing the mixed-method approach followed, sampling techniques, access to data and analytical techniques. The trustworthiness of the findings has also been assessed, along with the ethical considerations.

The next set of chapters discusses the research findings in detail. Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings from the exploratory interviews in Phase 1 of the research; Chapter 6 discusses the empirical findings from the student survey in Phase 2 of the research; Chapters 7-10 analyses the marketing strategies of the HEIs selected, with one chapter dedicated to each HEI, and Chapter 11 provides a comparative analysis of the HEIs investigated.

CHAPTER 5 : EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM STUDENT INTERVIEWS

5.1. INTRODUCTION

The researcher interviewed twenty students, i.e. five from each HEI selected, in order to gain some insights into the students' decision-making process with regard to the HE qualification and institute. These interviews were semi-structured in nature because it seemed likely that the researcher would not get another opportunity to speak to these students again after the initial interview due to time constraints, and also because semi-structured interviews would allow the students to freely express their views and expand on pertinent issues (Bernard, 1988).

The objective of this chapter is to focus on the factors that influence the thought process of students prior to pursuing higher education, at the point of deciding which qualification and which institute to study at, and also during the post-enrolment period where they would reflect on their initial choices. Simply put, the researcher hopes to analyse the findings of the student interviews in the context of Weerawardane's (2017) stages of the Student Consumer Decision-Making Model (See Figure 3.6). Therefore, the chapter is broken down into four sub-themes, which are,

1. Higher education – To pursue or not to pursue?
2. Influences on the students' decision-making process
3. Significant turning points
4. Post-enrolment reflections

The first sub-theme falls within Weerawardane's first stage of 'Need Recognition', while the second sub-theme encompasses stages 2 and 3 – 'Information Gathering' and 'Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives'. The third sub-theme of significant

turning points will analyse stage 4 'Purchase', while the fourth sub-theme coincides with the last stage of 'Post-Consumption Evaluation'.

5.2.   HIGHER EDUCATION – TO PURSUE OR NOT TO PURSUE

Prior to analysing the students' higher education choice decisions, it is important to understand what their thoughts and aspirations were with regard to higher education before they reached that crucial decision-making point. Phinney *et al* (2006) has pointed out that there is a significant lack of research investigating the reasons as to why students decide to pursue higher education and that there is a possibility that these reasons may vary based on which part of the world the student is from.

The researcher has put forward that the need to pursue higher education can be stimulated in two ways: Marketer-dominated and non-marketer dominated. Marketer-dominated stimuli include seminars and career guidance workshops conducted by HEIs in schools and any advertisements that the students may have been exposed to while they were still in school. Non-marketer dominated stimuli are further broken down into two categories. The first category, personal characteristics, includes future educational and career aspirations, family background, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Environment, which is the second category, includes factors such as the country's political environment (availability of student loans, subsidies), economic conditions, quality of curriculum at school and even the country's occupational structure. As such, this research attempts to investigate these stimuli through the exploratory interview phase.

During the interviews, most students expressed the view that they had aspired to pursue some form of higher education years before they actually enrolled at their respective institutes. Although at the time, they were unsure of which field they wanted to specialise in, their career aspirations were formed during high school years. It was apparent that most of the students had at some point, admired and looked up to educated individuals holding high ranks in society, most likely because of their higher social and economic statuses. Students were encouraged by their

parents, relatives and friends to pursue higher education, and most importantly, the lower the level of parents' education, the greater the motivation and support for the students to achieve high educational status. The students indicated a number of environmental and individual factors that may have triggered their motivation to pursue higher education, such as culture, social class, personal influences, family, situation, consumer resources, motivation and involvement, knowledge, attitudes, and personality, values and lifestyles (Blackwell *et al*, 2002). The researcher has classified these influences as career, social, academic and other reasons.

5.2.1. *Career-related reasons*

The participants were first asked the question of why they decided to study the particular qualifications, and seventeen out of the twenty students interviewed mentioned future career as the strongest reason. They felt that having a UK qualification with global recognition would help them find jobs with greater ease, move up the corporate ladder in due time and result in higher earnings. The preferred jobs indicated by the students were all managerial or higher positions such as business analysts, project managers, chief financial officers and consultants, to name a few, and in today's competitive environment, none of these positions can be obtained without a qualification from a recognised university or professional body.

Participant 2 commented, *"Everyone knows that you can't find a job without a degree. And there are times where even one degree is sometimes not enough, but the employer also requires you to be professionally qualified…"* (Interview: Participant 2)

Participant 4 stated, *"My dream is to be a company CFO someday. And without a solid professional qualification, that is not possible."* (Interview: Participant 4)

Participant 8 went on to explain, *"If only I could know which qualification out there would give me highest chance of earning big bucks, I would choose that."* (Interview: Participant 8)

This suggests a possible area for future research, possibly with the consultation of employers to identify their requirements, which could then be used as a marketing tool to increase recruitment numbers for that particular qualification.

Most of the participants indicated a belief that 'career' and 'security' were strongly correlated, where a high-ranked position would lead to better earnings and overall better standards of living. Given the fact that most of the respondents were residents of Colombo and accustomed to high standards of living, it is a given that they would expect a similar, if not higher standard of living once they begin to earn for themselves. According to a recent research study conducted by the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, over 75% of Gen Y wishes to purchase clothes, cars and tech gadgets to be on par with their friends, and around 50% of them are obliged to use a credit card to purchase basic essentials like food (Cussen, 2017). As the majority of the residents of Colombo are accustomed to a more Western culture, it is likely that these trends hold true in the context of this research as well.

The participants also indicated a strong desire to become financially independent without having to depend on their parents.

"My parents have done so much for me, and I really can't expect them to keep supporting me financially. I want to study and get a good job so that I don't have to depend on them and be a burden. Being financially independent would also mean I have more freedom." (Interview: Participant 11)

Interestingly, a few students indicated that although the main reason was career-related, it also had a social reason to it as well, where they would be expected to take over the family business once they have finished their higher studies.

Most students also stated social reasons for their respective choices of HE qualification, 'family' being the most dominant one. As the vast majority, if not all, the students are being funded by their parents for their higher education (atleast at the initial stages), the researcher noted a high level of influence by the families on the students' choice of higher education. In some cases, it could be seen that parents were trying to achieve their unrealised goals vicariously through their children.

Participant 9 said, *"My mother always wanted to be an accountant. However, due to various commitments, she was unable to achieve her dream. I hate accounts, but I am being forced to study it. I feel as if she is trying to achieve her dreams through me."* (Interview: Participant 9)

The researcher also noted that in cases where the parents were not very educated, their children would be pushed harder to pursue higher studies, some in a positive, motivational manner, whereas others in a slightly more forceful manner.

Guilt-tripping the children into choosing a particular qualification also seemed to be a common occurrence.

Participant 7 said, *"My parents are both bankers. They always say there is no point in pursuing any other type of career apart from banking. As such, I was compelled to choose a qualification that would support me in pursuing a career in banking. This is not my first choice though. While I don't necessarily hate banking, I would much rather become a lecturer. But even casually mentioning this at home would be considered as the height of shame."* (Interview: Participant 7)

Another reason indicated by the participants of the interviews was that they sometimes chose to study for a particular qualification to feel a 'sense of belonging'. For instance, if everyone in the family were qualified, the student may feel as if they

cannot be the only one who has not received a formal higher education (Interview: Participant 20).

One student indicated, *"Where I live, in Negambo, everyone boasts about their children. So if I were the only one who has not studied anything, it would be shameful for my parents..."* (Interview: Participant 11)

Lastly, the notion of 'friends' was deemed to be a significant influence on students being motivated to pursue higher education. While some participants indicated that they chose to study the particular qualification because their friends also chose it, others stated that they saw it as an opportunity to increase their social networks. This is because the opportunities to interact with new people were perceived to be more plentiful in a university environment rather than at school.

As Participant 13 explained, *"My friend chose to study this degree right after his A/L's. I didn't really know what I wanted, so I figured I might as well choose that too, so that way, I would atleast have a friend..."* (Interview: Participant 13)

Participant 16 stated*, "I love to meet new people, and at university, I knew I would be able to do so. I want to work in abroad one day, so I wanted to learn to thrive in a multi-culturally diverse community..."* (Interview: Participant 16)

Participants also expressed the view that receiving a formal higher education would lead to a better social standing, attract a higher level of respect, and place them among the elitists.

5.2.3.   Academic reasons

The students who were interviewed stated that they wished to gain knowledge and achieve a sense of personal growth because they perceived higher education to be a stepping-stone of a fruitful future career.

Participant 7 stated, *"I feel that if I am to have a successful career, I need to be properly educated. The time is passed where a being mindless ape was acceptable."* (Interview: Participant 7)

Interestingly, students indicated that it was their desire to expand their knowledge in a specific domain that acted as a catalyst for their respective choices of higher education.

They also expressed the view that receiving a formal higher education would enable them to be more open-minded about life in general. The university environment would also be a contributory factor in this regard as it facilitated cohabiting with individuals of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and nationalities.

"I have noticed that those who are educated are more liberal and more likely to accept different, newer things in life, even though those concepts may be foreign to them. That's a definite plus!" (Interview: Participant 15)

From all the interviews, one thing was apparent: the participants had certain expectations about higher education, but it is yet to be seen if the HEIs were able to sufficiently match up to these expectations. This will be analysed in detail in the section that discusses post-choice reflections.

Other reasons

Some participants also indicated that pursuing some sort of higher education qualification would give them a sense of achievement.

Participant 12 elaborated on this; *"It can be very demotivating when you miss out on state university by like one mark, but thanks to private higher education, I have been able to prove to myself and to everyone else who has ever doubted me that I have indeed got something that I can be proud of. It was my hard work that got me here. I feel like I am on my way to achieving something that matters."* (Interview: Participant 12)

"I chose Accountancy because it was (is) my passion. And it feels really good to know that I'm following my dream of becoming an accountant!" (Interview: Participant 4)

5.3.   INFLUENCES ON THE STUDENTS' DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The researcher identified a number of factors having the potential to influence the students' higher education decision-making process. Accordingly, this chapter first discusses about the information gathering process and its sources, followed by an analysis of the institute selection criteria broken into the following clusters: Reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related reasons, convenience factors and financial factors.

5.3.1.   *Information gathering process*

The study revealed that gathering information was the most critical activity undertaken by the students and that this phase was the real beginning to the decision-making process once the need has been formed to pursue some form of higher education. In the case of Sri Lankan students, the information gathering activity commences while they are studying for their O/Ls, and becomes a seriously thought-out activity once they get closer to sitting for their A/Ls. This may be a distraction to the student while sitting for those exams, as their teachers and parents would most likely be pressurising them to consider options in terms of future career prospects.

Participant 6 stated, *"It was a bit stressful because if you wanted to get accepted to local universities, you need ridiculously high Z-scores just because we are from Colombo. So even if you get 3 A's, that would still not be enough. Because of this, my parents kept checking the papers and showing me the other options I could consider. All this was while I was studying for my A/Ls."* (Interview: Participant 6)

Participant 1 explained the reason for his choice of private higher education: *"I was never interested in studying at the state universities. They are forever on strike and a 3-year degree would take almost 5 years to complete. The quality of education at private universities is so much better."* (Interview: Participant 1)

It was apparent from the student interviews that private higher education was viewed as a hassle-free, high quality experience.

5.3.2.   Sources of information

Friends and family

Family (i.e. parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins and grandparents) and friends were identified as the main sources of information with regard to higher education qualifications and institutes. These sources of information also came with a series of recommendations, which served as a significant influence. As a collectivist culture is predominant in Sri Lanka, the strength of this influence is no surprise.

Many participants bore testimony to the fact that family got heavily involved in the information gathering process.

"As my cousin sister was already reading for her degree at Gamma Institute, my uncle heavily recommended the institute to my parents. As someone in the family already knew about the institute, we did not do much background research, but went and enrolled straightaway..." (Interview: Participant 11)

"My mother found details of the institute in the newspapers. Subsequently, my father called them and got all the information. He also spoke to his brother who was working at a similar institution and sought clarifications on how to assess quality of the institute, what were the best options etc." (Interview: Participant 17)

One student even went to the extent of explaining how much he relied on these sources of information. He said, *"I never contacted the institute myself. But I assume my parents did, because they had all the information."* (Interview: Participant 3)

Friends of the participants were also an important source of information. Granted, the information obtained from the participants' friends who are of the same age may not

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have been the most reliable; however, it is worthwhile to note that the institutes have created sufficient brand awareness amongst their direct target market, which is indeed a significant achievement. Friends could also include those who are older than the participants who may already be studying at the respective institutes and hence, make recommendations through personal experience. In such cases, the friends of the participants have supplied them with informational brochures and leaflets so that they are able to assess the programmes for themselves. Participants indicated that they were able to gain insights to the internal aspects of the institutes, which they felt was important information, which could influence their final decision.

Participant 16 stated, *"I felt like I was getting inside information and there was a certain thrill in that. Thanks to my friend, I got a thorough understanding of what it was like once you started studying here, and I would say it helped me a lot to decide."* (Interview: Participant 16)

Participant 4 said, *"If you want to get realistic information, then the best thing to do is to speak to someone who is currently studying there. My neighbour told me that the qualification I had in mind might be a bit difficult for me since it is not one of my strengths and that I might be better off choosing something else."* (Interview: Participant 4)

A few participants of the exploratory interview phase indicated that family friends had also contributed to the information-gathering phase by offering their opinions.

Participant 8 elaborated, *"My mother's friends were discussing about private higher education at a dinner party one day. One lady was saying how a professional qualification is better than an academic degree because it is more practical, and another one was saying that her daughter was studying for a business degree at a private university and how good the administration is."* (Interview: Participant 8)

A more direct form of contribution was seen in instances where family friends were approached for advice. In most cases, these family friends were those who were holding top positions in reputed companies and hence, it is likely that they were considered as mentors.

"My father's childhood friend is the CFO of a bank, and he decided to ask him about the best options out there for me." (Interview: Participant 14)

Advice was also sought from family friends who were currently or formerly employed in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka.

"Since my mother's friend's son had previously worked at an institute in Colombo, we asked him about the institutes we were considering. He told us to stay away from certain places. And although I had liked one of those places, we decided that the smart thing to do was to listen to his advice since he had a better understanding of the industry than we did…" (Interview: Participant 10)

The main reason as to why family and friends had such a significant influence over the final choice was because there was an element of trust involved. The researcher noted that in some cases, these sources were blindly trusted, but there were inaccuracies in the information provided, which were not noticed by the participants until it was too late.

Participant 9 stated, *"My older cousin brother told us that we could get a degree and a professional qualification with the qualification offered by Beta Institute. We relied on his word and enrolled, but it was only after a semester or two that we realised that this particular qualification actually did not have the option of a degree and that it was the qualification offered at Alpha Institute that did. But by that time, it was too late to change my decision, so I just continued with what I was studying."* (Interview: Participant 9)

Direct enquiry

Prospective students and their parents often contact the institute directly to inquire about and obtain information about the qualification. Calling, e-mailing, visiting the institute's stall at an educational exhibition, personally visiting the institute itself or speaking to a institutional representative at a seminar or career guidance workshop conducted at schools, all fall under the category of 'direct enquiry'.

The advantage of direct enquiry is that the prospective students and/or their parents get first-hand information directly from the original source with no third party opinions in between. They are able to clarify all their doubts, ask follow-up questions and gain all the information required so that they could evaluate all options available. However, it should be noted that while the information obtained through direct enquiry is first-hand information, not all of it might necessarily be completely true because the institute would always portray information showing them in a good light so that the business is benefited.

A call is probably the easiest and most convenient way for the prospective students and their parents to get information from the institute. In most instances, the call was a means of crosschecking any information already obtained through other sources. 70% of the participants mentioned that they had called the institute at some point during the information-gathering phase.

E-mails were also considered to be an easy option, particularly when browsing the institutional website, where the prospective students were only required to fill in the contact form requesting for more details. Some participants also indicated that they preferred to e-mail the institute so that they could have written confirmation of important information like discounts and scholarship schemes, and sometimes even cross-verify the information obtained over the phone.

"I e-mailed the institute because I thought it would be easier to have the information in black and white, rather than me trying to jot down facts and figures over the phone with the risk of missing out on important things. I did initially call them though. So this way, I was able to double check the details." (Interview: Participant 20)

Several participants indicated that they (or their parents) had visited the relevant institute's stall (and competitor stalls as well) at educational exhibitions held in Colombo. The researcher has noticed that almost every major institute in Colombo participates at the key educational expos, which are the 3-day Edex Main Expo in January, the 3-day Future Minds Expo in June and the 2-day Edex Mid-Year Expo in September. As such, prospective students are able to gauge the validity of the institution by its presence at such exhibitions, because it would mean that the institute is sufficiently well established and is operating on a going concern basis. The look of the stall (i.e. the manner in which it is constructed, with sophisticated structures, elaborate back drops, good lighting and clean furniture) also help students in narrowing down their choices, as it is a reflection of the institute's brand image. Participants also indicated that they were able to get useful brochures and promotional leaflets at these exhibitions, which they could review in the comfort of their homes later on, and that special discounts were being awarded to those who enrolled for the programmes at the educational expo itself.

Participant 15 was one such student who bore testimony to that. *"I visited Gamma Institute's stall at the Edex Expo with my parents. I got all the information I needed and to my surprise, they offered a 50% discount on the course fees if I registered at the exhibition itself. Since I was definitely going to register for this programme anyway, my dad made the payment then and there. I also noticed that some other institutes were giving away tabs for spot registrations."* (Interview: Participant 15)

Personally visiting the institute is another way by which the prospective students directly enquire about the particular qualifications. Participants indicated that this method, although a bit cumbersome to physically travel to the university location, gives visual proof of its existence and condition.

"Anyone can say anything over the phone, but it's a lot harder to lie to your face. That's why I preferred to visit the institute, and my parents and I visited about 5 institutes before we chose one. Some institutes boasted about their facilities on their website, but when we went there, the reality was totally different. We also got a chance to see what the environment was like, whether it was conducive to studies, or overly formal." (Interview: Participant 13)

Some participants also indicated that they had first heard about the qualification and/or institute through a seminar or career guidance workshop conducted while they were still at school. They further mentioned that at the end of these programmes, they were allowed the opportunity to interact with the institutional representatives and get more information as required.

Media

There were a number of information sources classified under media, namely press advertisements, hoardings, radio advertisements, social media advertising and printed materials such as brochures and promotional leaflets. A lot of participants indicated that their parents got to know about the qualification and/or the institute through press advertisements.

"Every Sunday, my parents read the papers after returning from church. The education section of the paper is fairly large and since a lot of institutes advertise their programmes, my parents make it a point to browse through this section." (Interview: Participant 18)

"I don't usually read the newspapers per se, but my parents told me that there are a lot of options higher education-wise in the papers, and because of that, I did go through the education section when I hunting for a course to follow. It helped that my parents had highlighted certain ads!" (Interview: Participant 12)

Moreover, certain institutes advertised heavily in newspapers when compared to others.

Participant 19 indicated, *"Gamma and Delta institutes both advertise so much in the papers. Each of them have atleast 2 full pages every Sunday in both the Sunday Times and the Sunday Observer!"* (Interview: Participant 19)

The researcher noticed that with newspaper advertisements, only the key information was given, without too much detail, and interested parties were requested to call a specific number, drop an e-mail or visit the campus for more information.

Hoardings in prominent locations around Colombo and its suburbs were another important source of information.

Participant 4 stated, *"There was a big billboard right outside my school. Although I initially looked at it because there was a picture of a pretty girl in it, I got used to looking at the new messages that come on it from time to time."* (Interview: Participant 4)

As per the researcher's personal experience, while a hoarding usually does not generate instant enrolments, it does serve as a very effective brand-building tool as its message is subconsciously reinforced in the mind of a regular viewer. Participant 4's statement above further reinforces this observation.

Higher education institutes in Sri Lanka sometimes resort to radio advertising during key enrolment periods. However, as it is quite costly to get airtime during peak hours such as general commuting hours in the morning and evening, only higher education

institutes with very high marketing budgets opt for radio advertising. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned about hearing a radio advertisement by their institutes.

Social media advertising seemed to be fairly effective, atleast in the case of Alpha Institute. Participants mentioned that they had seen either a sponsored ad run by the institute or pictures of events, sometimes with their friends in them, which they placed a 'like' on.

Participant 1 indicated, *"Almost every week, I used to see something on Facebook related to Alpha Institute. Either pictures of some student event, or a poster about their prizewinners or lectures, or a poster highlighting discounts. I have also seen a few short videos which were quite interesting."* (Interview: Participant 1)

Participant 5 elaborated, *"I came across Alpha Institute's page while I was doing my A/Ls. I liked the page, and it's a very active because there are lot of updates on it and something used to pop up on my newsfeed everyday."* (Interview: Participant 5)

Last but not least, the printed materials of the institutes were mentioned as being very rich in detail, visually appealing but very marketing-oriented.

"When I visited their stall at Edex, I got the fee structure and informational leaflets, which were quite helpful. All the contact numbers were there too, in case we needed to call them for further clarifications." (Interview: Participant 20)

"Some of the brochures had pretty pictures of events held by the institute. I found the brochures to be very colourful too. And yes, all the details were there." (Interview: Participant 7)

"I could not find anything negative about the institute in the brochures. But ofcourse the institute would only ever speak good about themselves!" (Interview: Participant 11)

5.3.3.   Institute selection criteria

While the previous sections discussed the information-gathering process and the sources of information, this section analyses the key criteria that were considered by the students when making their final decision. These criteria are classified into the following clusters – reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related reasons, convenience factors and financial factors.

Reputational factors

Reputations factors such as institutional reputation, accreditation status by the professional body and university ranking, were the most frequently indicated by the participants as vital criteria in their selection of a higher education institute.

An institute's image and reputation are very important factors when it comes to influencing a student's enrolment decision as both of these concepts are used as tools by which the institute can position itself in the market (Barich and Kotler, 1991; Dick and Basu, 1994). The institutional image is the students' overall impression of the establishment and is usually measured by tangible aspects such as the look and feel of the building, but intangible aspects such as feelings and attitudes towards the institute can also have a significant impact (Nguyen and Le Blanc, 2001). The institute's reputation, on the other hand, is its social identity and hence, a reflection on its products, quality, performance, and even price (Nguyen and Le Blanc, 2001).

Participant 8 stated, *"I had heard that Beta Institute is known as Sri Lanka's best tuition provider for this particular qualification because they have the highest number of students enrolling and also succeeding at exams on the first attempt…"* (Interview: Participant 8)

Participant 14 elaborated on how important the institute's reputation is to her: *"If the institute consistently delivers its promises, and there are students who I personally know who can testify to this, then I would say the institute has a good reputation..."* (Interview: Participant 14)

Participants also mentioned how important the level of accreditation bestowed upon the institute by the professional body was. This is most likely due to a higher perceived degree of reliability stemming from the accreditation.

"When they say highest ranked, you know that the UK body is giving you a guarantee in terms of quality and pass rates; it's not just the institute who is talking good about themselves. So then you are assured that the institute would not close down anytime soon." (Interview: Participant 4)

"I feel it's always best to opt for an institute with some form of accreditation. It's more reliable that way..." (Interview: Participant 2)

"When I spoke to the staff at the local office, they gave me a list of tuition providers. I picked the highly ranked one because I want to study at a reliable tuition provider and pass my exams..." (Interview: Participant 6)

Moreover, in the context of the higher education institutes offering academic qualifications, the participants indicated that the university ranking was an important criterion in their selection process.

"A university with a higher ranking may mean it's more expensive than the others, but I would always choose one with a high ranking. I felt that this would give me an edge when applying for job, and it actually did. When I applied to this particular company, they told me that they preferred me as a candidate because they felt the quality of my programme was higher because the university I studied at was highly ranked." (Interview: Participant 19)

Another reputational factor that was highlighted by some participants as an important criterion in the selection process was the quality of the lecture panel. The researcher understood that by 'quality of the lecture panel', participants were referring to the skills and abilities of the lecturers to effectively deliver the subject matter in a comprehensive manner. Lecturers holding foreign higher education qualifications and those capable of communicating with the students in a friendly manner were preferred.

Participant 12 mentioned, *"When I was looking into which institutes to study at, I heard that the lecturers at a particular institute were not very qualified in their relevant subject areas. I didn't want to pay a thumping amount to hear nonsense, so I did not enrol at that institute."* (Interview: Participant 12)

"I spoke to a few friends who were studying at the institute I had shortlisted, and they told me that the lecturers were very amicable and were more than willing to re-explain any concept until every single student had understood. That was the main reasons why I picked this institute." (Interview: Participant 4)

Pass rates achieved by the institutes were of particular importance to students choosing to read for a professional qualification. The researcher feels this is because there are several institutes offering the same professional qualification and hence, students need a yardstick to measure performance and evaluate their options.

Participant 8 said, *"I wanted to pass on the first attempt. So I did try to find out a bit about pass rates of the institutes before I enrolled. I checked the institute's website, checked other independent reviewing sites and also asked some people who were studying there."* (Interview: Participant 8)

The criterion of 'the number of prizewinners produced' was only considered by those who chose to read for a professional qualification, but it was not a significant selection criterion for students enrolling at an institute for the first time. However, for students who were continuing with the qualification, when it was time to enrol

for a new semester, this criterion was considered as they had the option of switching to another institute since it was a professional qualification.

Lastly, the portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute was mentioned by some participants as something that they considered at the time of selecting the institute.

Participant 1 stated, *"I feel that institutes that offer a range of recognised professional qualifications are fairly well-reputed and good at what they do. It also gives me more options if I wish to gain some other qualification."* (Interview: Participant 1)

Recommendations

Recommendations provided to students by their parents, relatives, friends, teachers (school or tuition) and even testimonials of graduates were indicated by the participants as a criterion considered by them during selection of higher education.

Participant 5 mentioned, *"My A/L tuition teacher recommended this qualification and institute. He said a lot of his students are studying there and that he has heard good reviews from all of them."* (Interview: Participant 5)

With regard to the influence of graduate testimonials, Participant 14 said, *"I know that graduate testimonials displayed by various institutes may have been slightly modified to the advantage of the institute, but I believe that there must have been some aspect that made the students want to give some form of testimonial. And that did make a difference in my choice."* (Interview: Participant 14)

However, the researcher noted that recommendations, although indicated as a very important source of information by the participants, was not a criterion ranked very high up on their list.

Strength of marketing

The strength of marketing by the respective institutes, measured by the quality of information provided at educational exhibitions, follow-up calls, e-mails and text messages, and the attractiveness of the institutional brochures, has been noted by most students as a positive sign, where they feel that the institute is making a conscious effort to prove to them as to why they are the best institute out there.

Participant 6 stated, *"I visited 2 stalls at the last Edex expo, and I literally experienced two ends of the spectrum. The first stall I visited, the staff were so lack-lustre; they couldn't care less about me. It was a big turn off and halfway through, I didn't even feel like asking them the rest of my questions about the programme, so I just left. The other one that I went to – They even offered me a soft drink! I had one staff member who attended to me, provided all the informational leaflets that I needed, explained the financials to my parents and very clearly explained everything that I wanted to know. My friend who was with me felt that they seemed desperate for business, but I felt that I mattered enough for them to give me their undivided attention, which was, in my opinion, a sign of their marketing done right, and this played a huge role in my final decision."* (Interview: Participant 6)

Persistent calls, e-mails and text messages from the institute were considered as a gross nuisance and several participants mentioned that they made it a point to avoid such institutes.

"I just went once to their stall, and they got all my contact details. From that day onwards until almost a year, that institute would call me once a month or message me a few times a week, trying to persuade me to enrol. It just annoyed me to bits." (Interview: Participant 16)

Participant 20 felt the same. *"I don't appreciate being constantly plagued by any institute with them forcing programmes down my throat. I enquired about the programme, but after they have given me the information I needed, they really need to learn how to maintain boundaries."* (Interview: Participant 20)

A very frustrated Participant 13 said, *"I was getting so many calls that I blocked that number. But then they just call from another number! I will never recommend anyone to even go get information from them, because they will never let you go!"* (Interview: Participant 13)

Although the researcher enquired about the impact of the attractiveness of the institutional brochures on the participants' final decision, only one participant indicated that he considered this aspect seriously.

"I particularly liked how the information was clearly presented and the overall quality of the brochure itself. My dad owns a printing press and I know that printing brochures on high quality paper does not come cheap. To me, it meant that the institute was willing to go the extra mile and not cut corners when it came to quality, and I felt that the institute would give the same attention and care to the delivery of tuition." (Interview: Participant 17)

Campus-related reasons

The researcher was able to gain insights into a number of factors related to the infrastructure and activities of the campus that students seemed to prioritise when choosing an institute.

The facilities available, the technology used in class and the general condition of the building and classrooms were things that was carefully considered by most students.

According to Participant 14, *"If I am paying a premium, then I need top-notch facilities. And by top-notch facilities, I mean clean and spacious classrooms with*

good air conditioning, an extensive on-campus library and access to online resources, a good canteen and study room facilities. I carefully considered Gamma Institute and Delta Institute before I decided on Gamma, and that was on the basis of its facilities." (Interview: Participant 14)

Participant 18 stated, *"I did not know much about computers at the time I had finished school, so I feared qualifications which had computer-based exams. That was why I chose this programme, because it was good for technophobes like me."* (Interview: Participant 18)

Participant 15 said, *"I did not like the buildings of the other institute that I visited. They looked old. But when you look at Gamma Institute, you get a nice, respectable university feeling. What's more, the interior was luxurious!"* (Interview: Participant 15)

Interestingly, the researcher observed a trend in the facilities and building infrastructure. HEIs offering professional qualifications, such as Alpha and Beta Institutes had a relatively lower amount of facilities and poorer infrastructure than HEIs offering degree programmes, such as Gamma and Delta Institutes. This could be due to two reasons. Firstly, the programmes of Gamma and Delta Institutes are priced higher than those of Alpha and Beta Institutes, which means that Gamma and Delta have a higher spending capacity, and hence, they are able to invest a higher amount on infrastructure. Secondly, it could be that the HEIs assume that only students opting for academic programme prefer a more campus-like environment, and hence, no effort is made to provide similar facilities for those opting for professional programmes. According to the exploratory interviews conducted, however, this assumption did not seem to hold true, as students who were studying towards professional qualifications have also indicated their preference for better facilities and infrastructure (Interview: Participants 4, 5, 7, 10).

Participants also indicated that they preferred institutes that promulgated extra-curricular activities.

"I used to do a lot of sports while at school, and I wanted to be active even while studying for my degree. Delta Institute was very famous for all its student events and that was something that I specifically wanted." (Interview: Participant 20)

The size of a class, or the number of students accommodated per class was also indicated as an important criterion by several participants.

Participant 4 said, *"I wanted as much personalised attention as I could get from the lecturers."* (Interview: Participant 4)

Participant 12 elaborated, *"Being in an overly congested class did not seem like an attractive option. I mean, it's not free education; you need a benefit for the price. So I made it a point to look into how many students were put in each class."* (Interview: Participant 12)

On the other hand, some participants indicated that they felt that enrolling at an institute with a big student population was more reliable as it was likely that the institution was well reputed. These participants also mentioned that it gives them the opportunity to interact with more students and build their networks.

Participant 7 stated, *"I want to make as many friends and acquaintances as possible because it's these contacts that will be useful to me someday when I start working, so the more students the college has, the better."* (Interview: Participant 7)

Participant 13 said, *I tried to find out how many students were enrolled at Gamma, and I was amazed to hear about the numbers – over 3500 was what one of my friends said, so I felt like that had to be an indicator of the institute's success."* (Interview: Participant 13)

Convenience factors

The majority of the students pursuing professional qualifications indicated that certain convenience factors like the availability of different study modes were ranked very high up on their list of university-selection criteria. For example, some students indicated that they prefer having the options of full-time and part-time study modes because then they would have the flexibility to start working halfway through the programme and not have it clashing with their studies.

Participant 7 mentioned, *"It was nice to be able to choose between and have the option of switching from full-time to part-time or vice versa, whenever it was convenient to me. Some institutes only offered part-time classes, which was during the weekend. I was not working at that time, so I felt like I would be wasting 5 days at home and also not be able to enjoy the weekend at home with family."* (Interview: Participant 7)

Participant 9 said, *"I was disappointed that the institute I originally wanted to go to only had full-time classes. I was employed and wanted part-time classes. But right now, I have all the flexibility I need at Beta Institute."* (Interview: Participant 9)

Students who chose to read for academic qualifications at Gamma and Delta Institutes unfortunately do not have such a choice because the programmes are only full-time.

The availability of campuses in multiple locations (and the ability to switch between the different locations according to personal convenience) and distance from home to the institute were also considered by certain participants when deciding on the institute. However, these were not indicated as very important criteria as some students mentioned that they travelled especially to Colombo, despite the distance, to obtain what they perceived as higher quality tuition.

Financial factors

The final cluster of criteria evaluated by students in respect of their higher education purchase decision was financial factors. Here, the majority of the participants indicated that affordable tuition fees was a very significant criterion, while the availability of scholarships, special discounts, different payment methods like cash or credit card, and instalment payment plans were of fairly high importance.

According to Participant 11, *"If I had not gotten a 50% scholarship, I may never have even considered studying at this institute because I know my parents would not have been able to afford it."* (Interview: Participant 12)

Participant 18 mentioned, *"For me, even if it was the highest ranked university, the cost is the most important factor. I wanted to choose a university of medium ranking, something that was also fairly affordable, but also of good quality."* (Interview: Participant 18)

5.4. SIGNIFICANT TURNING POINTS

Having discussed Weerawardane's (2017) stages of 'Need Recognition', 'Information Gathering' and 'Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives' in sections 5.2 and 5.3 above, the researcher now turns her attention to the analysis of the fourth stage, i.e. 'Purchase' through the evaluation of the findings from the student survey. This stage is critical for two reasons. Firstly, at this point, the students have been presented with a plethora of choices, but they have not made their final decision yet. Secondly, they would be subject to the realisation that their final purchase decision would be likely to have a significant impact on their future career and other life choices as well, the gravity of which would further stress out any student during this stage. Through the exploratory interviews, the researcher managed to identify certain

significant turning points, which acted as catalysts for students to make their final purchase choice.

The visit to the institute was probably the most significant catalyst in the final purchase decision. This is because it gives students the opportunity to see for themselves and gauge the institute's ambiance, infrastructure, facilities and friendliness of the staff and other students. Their perceptions now become a reality and hence, they are able to make a better judgement about the institute.

"I visited two institutes with my parents before I enrolled here. In some places, the staff was not very friendly, which made me realise that they would not be any friendlier once I get registered. Frankly, this was a big deterrence to my decision. At Beta Institute, everyone was very friendly and I felt instantly comfortable." (Interview: Participant 7)

Students have also assessed value for money, mostly in terms of facilities and have opted for institutes with better facilities and infrastructure, even if it came at a premium (Interview: Participants 14, 15).

An institute's stall at an educational exhibition could be, to a certain extent, an outward manifestation of the institute's values and beliefs, and hence, students are able to reasonably assess the quality of the institute by visiting these stalls.

Moreover, students have pointed out that the level of attention they received and the clarity of information provided while at the institute's stall at educational exhibitions or at the time of enrolment has significantly helped them in decide on that particular institute as their final choice (Interview: Participant 6).

The quality and reputation of the lecturers have also played a role in influencing the students in arriving at the final decision.

"I spoke to a few friends who were studying at the institute I had shortlisted, and they told me that the lecturers were very amiable and were more than willing to re-explain any concept until every single student had understood. That was the main reason why I picked this institute." (Interview: Participant 4)

Students have also expressed the view that enrolment incentives such as scholarships and special discounts, and even other cost factors like the availability of instalment payment plans have helped drastically in making the final call   (Interview: Participants 9, 12, 15)

Interestingly, a key factor stimulating the final purchase decision of students choosing professional qualifications seemed to be the duration of the qualification, and the possibility of gaining two qualifications within the same time frame.

Participant 2 stated, *"The qualification offered at Alpha Institute takes 2 and half years to complete, and that includes the degree as well. When compared with other degrees, which take 3 to 4 years to complete, I would have two qualifications sooner and can start looking for a job while continuing my higher studies. The duration was the winner!"* (Interview: Participant 2)

Lastly, the researcher also noted that certain individuals had a significant influence over the final decisions of the students. This is because when the students are overwhelmed with the choices or unable to reach a decision on their own, they tend to seek the advice of parents, relatives, friends and/or teachers to help them decide. At this stage in the student-consumer decision-making model, it is advice that is sought, as opposed to further information. Another reason as to why students look to their parents to make the final decision could be because their parents are funding their education. Additionally, the influence of parents and family was noticed to be stronger in more restricted cultures. In some instances, students had consulted their friends, who had strongly advised against certain institutions, which brought about the need to venture into an analysis on the final stage of 'Post-Consumption Evaluation'.

5.5. POST-CONSUMPTION REFLECTIONS

Post-consumption reflections are important when determining whether students are satisfied or dissatisfied with their experiences at the institute. This would be mostly due to a gap between the students' initial expectations versus the reality once they actually start studying at the particular institute. It is important to note that the expectation would most often be created due to the information received by the student, be it from various sources of media, word-of-mouth, recommendations or it could have even been something that was communicated directly to the student by the institute.

While one could argue that the students' level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction would have no impact on the institution because higher education customers are unlikely make repeat purchases, atleast not unless the institute offers postgraduate qualifications as well, the researcher argues that the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in Stage 5 'Post-Consumption Evaluation', could in fact be a significant influence on Stage 2 'Information Gathering' and also on Stage 3 'Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives' for a new consumer.

The majority of the students interviewed appeared to be satisfied with their experiences at their respective institutes. Comments of some of the particularly satisfied students are given below.

Participant 3 stated, *"I hated the thought of working at an audit firm and thanks to Alpha Institute's job bank, I had other choices, and am now working at HSBC. They really do help us like that. I think I am quite happy with my choice"* (Interview: Participant 3)

An extremely satisfied Participant 6 said that the institute exceeded her expectations. She further elaborated, saying, *"They haven't even advertised half the good things. The whole experience has been amazing so far – So many student events, both entertaining and educational, superb lecturers, excellent lab."* (Interview: Participant 6)

Participant 13 seemed to echo similar sentiments. *"I will never hesitate to recommend Gamma Institute to anyone, not only because they give me an incentive for doing so, but also because I genuinely feel that they live upto their promises."* (Interview: Participant 13)

Participant 15's comment was after making a cost-benefit analysis of the cost paid versus the facilities and services offered and he arrived at the following conclusion: *"I would say value for money."* (Interview: Participant 15)

However, the level of dissatisfaction amongst some students appeared to be particularly significant and potentially detrimental to the institute's reputation.

Participant 1 stated, *"There was one key incident that made me regret my decision. I requested for a refund because I got dengue haemorrhage fever and was unable to attend classes for more than half the semester. I followed the correct procedure and gave all the supporting documents as well. But it took me about one and a half months to get my refund! And that was also after a million calls by me to remind the staff to do the needful. That was quite disappointing."* (Interview: Participant 1)

Some students have suffered bad experiences due to the cancellation of lectures.

Participant 2 stated, *"Lectures get cancelled quite often, sometimes with prior notice but most of the time, without. I actually like it when lectures get cancelled on short notice. Then I can go have fun with my friends, especially when it is weekday classes that get cancelled, because my parents are a work. My parents really don't like it*

though. They feel that I am wasting time and money and even went and complained to the institute. The situation didn't really change though." (Interview: Participant 2)

Participant 5 had had a similar experience. He said, *"I hate it when classes get cancelled on such short notice. It is very inconvenient as we could not make other plans on that day as we expected the lecture to be held. It's even worse when it gets re-scheduled to another day. I suppose sometimes it is inevitable. However, my lecturer cancels his classes very often and because of this, my lecture schedule is very erratic."* (Interview: Participant 5)

Meanwhile, Participant 9 appeared to have had high expectations due to certain advertised content, but had experience a different reality. He said, *"The paper ads spoke a lot about scholarships and 'rewarding high performance', but as far as I know, no high performance was ever rewarded. The quality of lecturers is quite poor, and everyone has to go get tuition externally, and we have to pay twice then."* (Interview: Participant 19)

A few students provided mixed feedback over a variety of factors.

"There are plenty of student events like parties and trips; the lecturers are good too and staff are friendly. The facilities are an entirely different story though. No study rooms, no proper cafeteria, no toilet paper in the washrooms. [….] Our textbooks always get delayed and sometimes it's only a week before exams that we get them, which is bad. [….] Fees started increasing suddenly for no good reason." (Interview: Participant 4)

Participant 12 was a student who had chosen to study at that particular institute due to the size-controlled classes advertised. However, her experience contradicts the information received regarding that. She said, *"Although they promised not to have more than 40 students in a class, for some subjects there are nearly 60, which does make it a bit uncomfortable because some classrooms are a bit small."* (Interview: Participant 12)

She did have some positive feedback too, though. *"The lecturers are very knowledgeable and friendly, so we can approach them anytime."* (Interview: Participant 12)

Participant 10's experience too was mixed. He said, *"The information in the brochures was fairly accurate. As in, there were no outright lies, but I think the truth was slightly stretched in some places."* (Interview: Participant 10)

Overall, although the majority of the participants expressed the view that they were happy with the overall experience thus far, it may have been due to the variety of student events and activities organised by the institutes concerned and also because the students may have made new friends and were enjoying that new experience. This caused the researcher to ponder whether the institutes are able to distort the students' true (negative) experiences by distracting them with other positive experiences, which may or may not be that significant, which lead the researcher to re-think the validity of the information relating to the post-consumption evaluation (Al-Fattal, 2010). The researcher is also aware that confirmation bias may have occurred, where the students' may have provided positive feedback to convince themselves that they had made the right decision with regard to their higher education choices (Evans, Barston and Pollard, 1983).

5.6.   SUMMARY

The phase of exploratory interviews conducted on a sample of twenty students from the four HEIs surveyed laid the foundation for further statistical analysis of the student-consumers' decision-making process. As such, this chapter has provided clarity on the following matters:

- Understanding the thoughts of students when they were in the stage of wondering whether or not to pursue higher education – The researcher classified these reasons as those that were related to career, society, academic and other factors.

- Identifying the influences on the students' decision-making process and analysing the extent of influence of these various sources on students – The researcher discussed the influence of friends and family, direct enquiry, and media and also analysed the institute selection criteria of reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related reasons, convenience factors and financial factors.

- Identifying and discussing the significant turning points, i.e. the catalysts, for the final purchase decision

- Reviewing their experiences after they have enrolled at their respective institutes – Here, the researcher indicated that the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction achieved at the 'Post-Consumption Evaluation' stage could potentially be an influence on the 'Information Gathering' and 'Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives' stages of another consumer

Accordingly, the following chapter will discuss Phase 2 of the overall study, where the data from the student survey will be analysed in greater depth.

CHAPTER 6 : EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM THE STUDENT SURVEY

6.1.   INTRODUCTION

This chapter goes into an in-depth analysis of the findings from the student questionnaire distributed amongst students from the four HEIs selected. The response rates and possible reasons for the occurrence of non-response and response errors are also discussed here.

In order to ensure a comprehensive analysis, the findings are categorised into five sections, namely,

  i.   Influences on the choice of qualification
  ii. Influences on the choice of institute
  iii. Sources of information
  iv. Post-enrolment reflections
  v.   Age analysis

Each of these areas will be analysed from a bird's eye point of view through summary findings using simple statistical measures such as mean, frequency and standard deviation. Additionally, a comparative analysis of the individual findings across the four HEIs has also been incorporated into each of the above sections to identify and emphasise key differences and trends.

6.2. RESPONSE RATES

The questionnaires were distributed to a total sample of 800 students divided equally amongst the four HEIs. The response rates were as follows:

Table 6.1: Response rates

HEI	n	No. of Responses	Response Rate
Alpha	200	131	65.5%
Beta	200	98	49.0%
Gamma	200	112	56.0%
Delta	200	135	67.5%
Total	**800**	**476**	**59.5%**

Despite these response rates, it should be noted that some of the participants did not respond to all the questions in the survey.

The overall response rate of 59.5% could have been due to a number of reasons. Firstly, at the time of administering the survey, the researcher was aware that the questionnaire was fairly lengthy, and that it may be a significant deterrent to the students. However, being such an in-depth study, the researcher was compelled to examine all the reasons that could possibly have had an influence on student choice of HE and HEI, and although some unnecessary questions were eliminated, the questionnaire still remained fairly lengthy. The researcher is nevertheless satisfied with the responses received, because she was able to draw solid conclusions and identify trends. Secondly, respondents may have been reluctant to participate in this study for fear of being penalised by their respective institutes. The researcher informed all the participants that their responses would remain anonymous and that even the researcher herself would not be able to identify them. Despite this, however, there have still been a number of students who were not convinced. Moreover, the researcher is aware of the fact that response error may have occurred here too, but she believes that its impact may have been countered to a certain extent through the exploratory interviews conducted.

The student survey was administered through a mix of paper and e-questionnaires, each of which had their own positive and negative attributes. Paper questionnaires generated a much higher response rate as the students filled them out instantly and handed them over; however, the researcher was required to manually input the date into an Excel worksheet, which was quite time-consuming and while the researcher was careful when entering the data, there is a small possibility that a few responses could have been input incorrectly due to human error. The online questionnaires, which were generated through Survey Monkey, were a lot easier to administer in comparison, as the researcher was only required to circulate a web link. However, the response rates here were much lower, and as the survey was sent to a few selected students, who were then required to circulate it amongst their peers, the researcher was unable to personally give reminders to each of the respondents to improve the response rates.

6.3.   INFLUENCES ON CHOICE OF QUALIFICATION

The researcher identified eleven potential reasons for choosing the qualification and each of the respondents were asked to rate them according to their perceived levels of importance on influencing their final decision. The survey findings for each of the individual HEIs are presented below with ratings greater than 40% highlighted in order to enable ease of analysis, which is then followed by a summary of the combined findings where the eleven reasons are grouped into three clusters – career, social and academic reasons.

Table 6.2: Alpha Institute – Influences on choice of qualification

ALPHA					
Influences on choice of qualification	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
Greater employability and career prospects	74%	23%	3%	0%	0%
Increased financial stability	56%	40%	4%	0%	0%
Global recognition	83%	12%	5%	0%	0%
Meeting new people	38%	25%	35%	2%	1%
Friends' choice	3%	12%	23%	20%	42%
Parents' decision	5%	5%	54%	22%	14%
Personal growth and gaining knowledge	68%	29%	2%	0%	0%
Possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications	30%	19%	19%	26%	5%
Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously	40%	36%	5%	3%	16%
Relaxed entry requirements	6%	37%	37%	11%	9%
No other choice	1%	8%	22%	15%	55%

Table 6.3: Beta Institute – Influences on choice of qualification

Influences on choice of qualification	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
Greater employability and career prospects	70%	30%	0%	0%	0%
Increased financial stability	65%	26%	9%	0%	0%
Global recognition	64%	36%	0%	0%	0%
Meeting new people	6%	44%	35%	15%	0%
Friends' choice	48%	28%	13%	3%	8%
Parents' decision	0%	46%	18%	31%	5%
Personal growth and gaining knowledge	71%	24%	5%	0%	0%
Possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications	20%	44%	24%	12%	0%
Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously	0%	6%	73%	11%	9%
Relaxed entry requirements	6%	12%	41%	19%	21%
No other choice	0%	0%	20%	9%	71%

Table 6.4: Gamma Institute – Influences on choice of qualification

GAMMA					
Influences on choice of qualification	**Very important**	**Important**	**Neutral**	**Somewhat important**	**Not at all important**
Greater employability and career prospects	50%	44%	4%	0%	2%
Increased financial stability	34%	54%	10%	2%	0%
Global recognition	73%	16%	11%	0%	0%
Meeting new people	13%	42%	32%	8%	5%
Friends' choice	6%	5%	38%	5%	47%
Parents' decision	5%	28%	30%	27%	9%
Personal growth and gaining knowledge	64%	23%	13%	0%	0%
Possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications	0%	57%	4%	13%	26%
Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously	15%	28%	19%	9%	29%
Relaxed entry requirements	0%	31%	30%	14%	25%
No other choice	1%	4%	23%	5%	67%

Table 6.5: Delta Institute – Influences on choice of qualification

DELTA					
Influences on choice of qualification	**Very important**	**Important**	**Neutral**	**Somewhat important**	**Not at all important**
Greater employability and career prospects	52%	40%	4%	0%	4%
Increased financial stability	32%	55%	10%	4%	0%
Global recognition	73%	14%	13%	0%	0%
Meeting new people	12%	38%	37%	8%	5%
Friends' choice	5%	5%	38%	4%	48%
Parents' decision	5%	31%	30%	24%	10%
Personal growth and gaining knowledge	63%	20%	17%	0%	0%
Possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications	0%	55%	4%	11%	31%
Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously	14%	24%	19%	7%	35%
Relaxed entry requirements	0%	30%	25%	13%	32%
No other choice	1%	2%	23%	5%	69%

Table 6.6: Summary of findings – Influences on choice of qualification

Reasons for Choice of Qualification		n	Mean	Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores (5)	Highly Negative Scores (1)	SD	Cluster Aggregated Mean
Career	Greater employability and career prospects	466	4.54	3	287	7	0.70	4.52
	Increased financial stability	464	4.34	4	212	0	0.69	
	Global recognition	460	4.66	1	340	0	0.62	
Social	Meeting new people	463	3.60	5	84	12	0.96	3.01
	Friends' choice	465	2.55	10	64	176	1.44	
	Parents' decision	465	2.88	8	17	46	1.02	
Academic	Personal growth and gaining knowledge	466	4.57	2	309	0	0.66	3.06
	Possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications	465	3.20	6	58	75	1.30	
	Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously	459	3.09	7	86	105	1.41	
	Relaxed entry requirements	464	2.78	9	14	100	1.17	
	No other choice	460	1.67	11	3	299	0.98	

6.3.1.   Career-related reasons

Of the eleven reasons examined, three were career-related reasons. 'Global recognition' of the qualification scored the highest mean rating of 4.66 and was ranked first, followed closely by 'greater employability and career prospects', which scored 4.54, ranking third overall (See Table 6.6). Global recognition also had 340 highly positive scores (score of 5), which was the highest of its kind, with no highly negative scores. This indicates that students have correctly identified that along with the increase of globalisation, jobs are becoming increasingly multinational, and as such, they place a higher value on qualifications that are globally recognised as they feel that those qualifications would offer them better career prospects. This trend is consistent across each of the HEIs surveyed, with 'greater employability and career prospects' and 'global recognition' being rated as 'very important' by the vast majority of students of all four HEIs.

'Increased financial stability' scored a mean rating of 4.34 and was ranked fourth (See Table 6.6). Accordingly, this reason appears to be of high importance, and the fact that this reason recorded absolutely no negative scores at all further justifies this. The majority of students from Gamma and Delta Institutes (54% and 55% respectively) have indicated 'increased financial stability' as 'important' (as opposed to 'very important' indicated by students of Alpha and Beta Institutes), which could be ascribed to the fact that Gamma and Delta Institutes target students from the upper ends of society who would be more affluent, and therefore less likely to choose a qualification to improve their economic status (See Table 6.2, Table 6.3, Table 6.4 and Table 6.5).

All three of these career-related reasons had the lowest standard deviations – Global recognition – 0.62, increased financial stability – 0.69 and greater employability and career prospects – 0.70, which indicates that most of the students surveyed shared the same attitude towards these factors.

Overall, career-related reasons recorded the highest cluster mean of 4.52, which indicates that students clearly had in mind future plans at the time of choosing a particular higher education qualification. This also re-affirms the findings from the exploratory phase.

6.3.2.   Social reasons

There were three social reasons that were examined. Amongst these reasons, 'friends' choice' scored almost the lowest mean rating of 2.55 and ranked tenth out of the eleven reasons on the overall list (See Table 6.6). This indicates that students do not seem to be choosing HE qualifications based on their friends' choices. However, the researcher noticed a difference in this choice when comparing it across the individual HEIs under scrutiny. Interestingly, although the majority of the students who chose to study at Alpha, Gamma and Delta Institutes have indicated that friends' choice was not at all important when choosing a particular higher education qualification, this is clearly not the case at Beta Institute; 48% of Beta's

students have indicated that their friends' choices were in fact 'very important' to them, with 28% mentioning it as 'important' (See Table 6.3). These findings are consistent with the current market trend, as students choosing the particular qualification offered by Beta Institute have been seen to enrol with groups of friends immediately after their O/Ls (while awaiting results). Although this 'herd' mentality, so to speak, does increase the number of initial registrations, it does not work so well where progression with the qualification is concerned, because the rate of dropouts is fairly high, according to sources at the local office of this particular professional body.

'Meeting new people', ranked highest of the three social reasons scored a mean rating of 3.60, which indicates a moderate level of influence on the choice of qualification. It also recorded a greater number of highly positive scores than highly negative scores. Overall, it has been ranked fifth, with a moderate standard deviation of 0.96.

The level of importance of parents' decision on choice of qualification has scored a low mean rating of 2.88, which corresponds with the findings presented in Table 6.7 below, which indicates that only 19% of the students' parents have made the final call.

Table 6.7: Who made the final decision? (Q9)

Response	Number	%
You	361	81%
Your parents	84	19%
	445	100%

Pimpa (2004) put forward that in an Asian context, parents and friends have a significant influence on student choice of higher education. In Sri Lanka, since it is a parent-funded market, it is almost as if the parents and students were one decision unit. Therefore, although the findings of the student survey did not show an excessively significant influence of the parents, it is possible that most of these students may have thought that it was their own decision, when in fact it was actually influenced by their parents who were sponsoring their education. This influence was also confirmed through the exploratory interviews, and hence, Pimpa's findings are further re-affirmed.

6.3.3.   Academic reasons

There were five academic-related reasons examined under the reasons for choice of qualification. 'Personal growth and gaining knowledge' scored the highest mean rating of 4.57 in this cluster and recorded 309 highly positive scores with zero highly negative scores (See Table 6.6). It also scored the lowest standard deviation of 0.66 amongst these five reasons. It is clear from these ratings that Sri Lankan students appreciate knowledge and seek qualifications that help them expand their knowledge. Moreover, the ambition of achieving personal growth signifies a need to satisfy esteem needs, and this reason was ranked second overall, which was higher than the ranking of 'financial stability'. Accordingly, this contradicts the findings of Vrontis *et al* (2007) who put forward that it is only the student-consumers of developed nations who are driven by esteem needs and that consumers of developing nations are more likely to be driven by needs that are ranked lower on Maslow's hierarchy.

'Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously' achieved a mean rating of 3.09 and a slightly higher number of highly negative scores than highly positive scores, with the second highest standard deviation of 1.41 (See Table 6.6). This means that there was a great disparity amongst the students' who felt that choosing a qualification that offered another qualification simultaneously was beneficial to them

and those who did not feel the same. Accordingly, each of the four HEIs were individually scrutinised, and it was found that 40% of the students who chose to study at Alpha have indicated that this was a very important factor that influenced their choice (See Table 6.2). This could be because whilst reading for the professional qualification at Alpha Institute, they have the opportunity to gain an accountancy degree from a UK university upon completion of the first two stages (i.e. even before they complete the full professional qualification) and they can also gain a postgraduate qualification from another UK university in six months once they complete the professional qualification in full. This also means that Alpha Institute has influenced the mindset of the students and effectively created a need for dual qualifications by promoting these unique partnerships. Other qualifications such as those offered by Beta, Gamma and Delta Institutes currently do not have such in-built partnerships with other bodies, and as such, upon completion of the initial qualification, those students flow into other programmes by claiming exemptions. This explains the variation of responses from Gamma and Delta Institutes, where there are no significant outliers and the students who chose Beta Institute evidently do not value dual qualifications as 73% have indicated this as a 'neutral' influence (See Table 6.3, Table 6.4 and Table 6.5).

The 'possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications' scored a mean rating of 3.20, ranking sixth, and had the second highest standard deviation within the cluster (1.30), indicating a fairly high variation between the responses. This could be because students reading for the qualifications at Beta, Gamma and Delta Institutes often enrol at Alpha Institute after they have completed their first qualification, by claiming exemptions, which also justifies the majority ratings of 'important' on this by students of those three institutes (See Table 6.3, Table 6.4 and Table 6.5).

'Relaxed entry requirements' achieved a mean rating of 2.78, with an extremely high number of highly negative scores, which means that students hardly give any importance to the entry requirements. This could be attributed to all these qualifications having extremely low entry requirements and it being taken for

granted by the students. For instance, students may enrol for professional qualifications even without doing their O/L examinations, whereas the academic degrees offer students an entry pathway by means of a short diploma course if they have not sat for their A/L examinations, all of which effectively mean that almost any student can enrol for these programmes. These relaxed entry requirements encourage students to pursue private higher education and makes it more accessible to all.

There was a very small number of students who indicated that they had chosen their particular qualification simply because they had had no other choice. However, the vast majority have indicated that the factor of 'no other choice' was 'not at all important' because they had, in fact, had a diverse set of options when it came to choosing a higher education qualification. Accordingly, this factor ranked last with a mean attitude rating of 1.67, and recorded a total of 299 highly negative scores (the highest number of all) and a low standard deviation of 0.98. These findings were further substantiated as 70% of the students indicated that they did indeed have a list of qualifications and institutes to choose from, with the majority of them physically visiting two institutes before arriving at their final decision (See Figure 6.2 and Figure 6.3 below).

Figure 6.2: Did you have a choice of qualifications and institutes?

80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

Did you have a list of qualifications and institutes to choose from? (Q5)

70%   Yes

30%   No

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How many institutes did you or your parents physically visit before arriving at your final decision? (Q6)
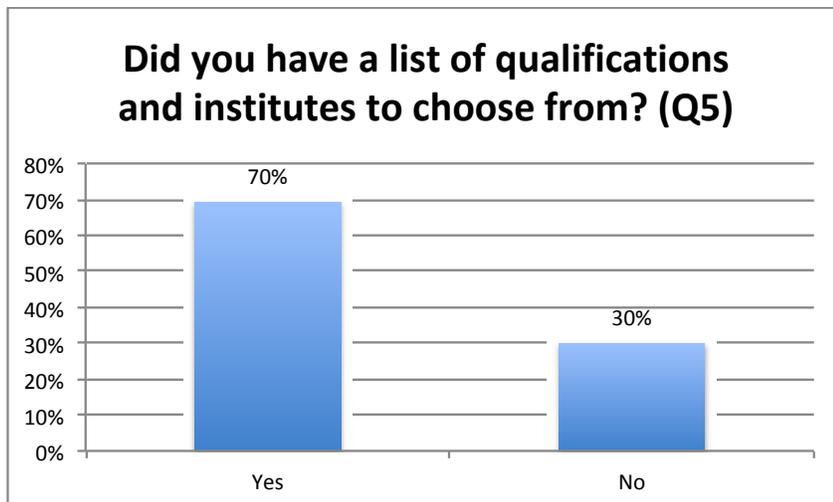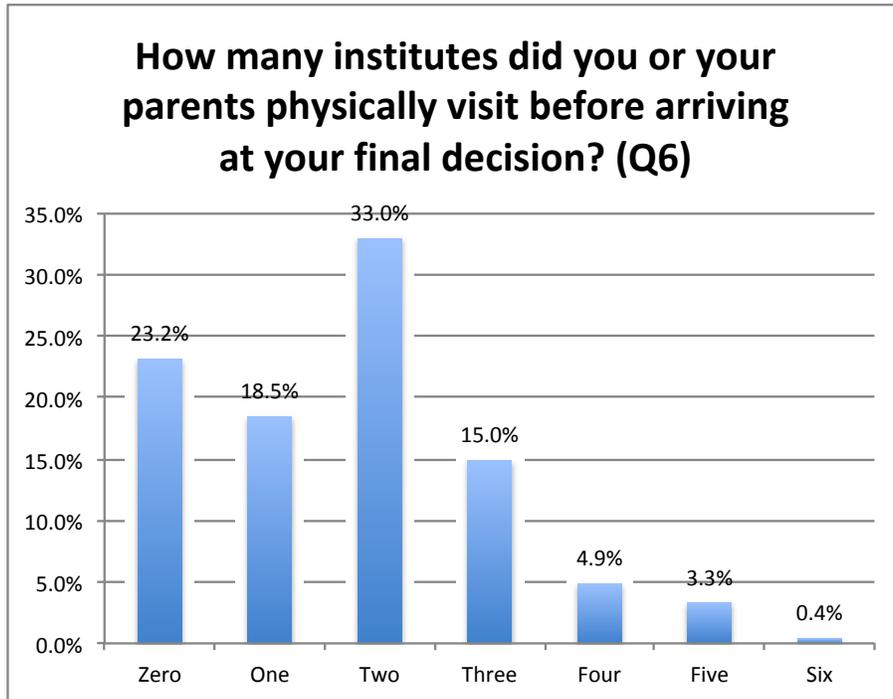
In conclusion, the researcher has observed a pattern in the ranking of reasons. Career-related reasons recorded the highest cluster aggregated mean of 4.52, academic reasons ranked second with an aggregated mean of 3.06 and social reasons followed close with an aggregated mean of 3.01 (See Table 6.6). From the analysis above, where the reasons in each cluster were individually examined, it is apparent that the aggregated means reflect the individual cluster values in a consistent manner. For instance, the three reasons under the 'career' cluster, i.e. 'global recognition', 'greater employability and career prospects' and 'increased financial stability' are among the top five highest ranking reasons, while the entire cluster itself is also the highest ranked amongst the aggregated cluster means. Therefore, it is evident that career-related reasons were the main motivators behind pursuing higher education and this is also an accurate representation of the mindset of Sri Lankans in general, with the prevalent socio-economic conditions.

6.4. INFLUENCES ON CHOICE OF INSTITUTE

This section is important because it considers the evaluation criteria of students when choosing an institute to study the particular qualification. The researcher has identified thirty-two potential reasons and respondents were asked to rate them according to their perceived degrees of importance on influencing their final decision. The survey findings for each of the individual HEIs are presented below with ratings greater than 40% highlighted to enable ease of analysis, which is then followed by a summary of the combined findings where the reasons are grouped into six clusters – reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related reasons, convenience factors and financial factors.

Table 6.8: Alpha Institute – Influences on choice of institute

Influences on choice of institute	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
ALPHA					
Accreditation status by the professional body	80%	18%	2%	1%	0%
University ranking	48%	36%	11%	4%	1%
Institutional reputation	64%	28%	8%	0%	0%
Quality of lecture panel	74%	13%	12%	1%	0%
Pass rates	36%	34%	26%	5%	0%
Number of prizewinners produced	17%	26%	36%	20%	2%
Portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute	29%	42%	9%	11%	8%
Recommendation by friends/relatives	11%	25%	40%	17%	7%
Recommendation by teachers	16%	30%	36%	9%	9%
Parents' choice	2%	20%	38%	18%	23%
Graduate testimonials	7%	57%	11%	15%	10%
Quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions	39%	31%	17%	12%	2%
Persistent calls / e-mails / SMS from institutional marketing personnel	9%	24%	29%	13%	24%
Attractiveness of brochures	6%	12%	52%	20%	11%
Campus visit	16%	26%	35%	17%	6%
Clear explanations when speaking to the institute staff at the campus	37%	36%	22%	4%	2%
Facilities available	55%	23%	18%	3%	1%
Technology used in class	41%	29%	23%	7%	1%
Institute buildings and classrooms	48%	22%	18%	11%	1%
Class size	13%	25%	30%	27%	5%
Total number of students at the institute	3%	35%	31%	19%	11%
University rules and regulations	7%	39%	37%	14%	3%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	15%	29%	39%	14%	2%
Graduation ceremony	24%	25%	28%	9%	13%
Availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time	36%	57%	2%	5%	0%
Availability of campuses in multiple locations	22%	45%	29%	0%	3%
Possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme	39%	27%	19%	9%	6%
Distance from home to the institute	33%	28%	22%	10%	7%
Availability of scholarships	37%	30%	24%	7%	2%
Special offers / Significant discounts on course fees	32%	38%	12%	15%	2%
Affordable tuition fees	48%	40%	12%	1%	0%
Availability of instalment payment plans / student loan schemes	30%	26%	29%	9%	5%

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Table 6.9: Beta Institute – Influences on choice of institute

Influences on choice of institute	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
BETA					
Accreditation status by the professional body	47%	39%	15%	0%	0%
University ranking	32%	26%	9%	24%	9%
Institutional reputation	52%	48%	0%	0%	0%
Quality of lecture panel	81%	9%	9%	0%	0%
Pass rates	26%	57%	17%	0%	0%
Number of prizewinners produced	0%	30%	49%	8%	12%
Portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute	0%	59%	19%	0%	21%
Recommendation by friends/relatives	0%	68%	32%	0%	0%
Recommendation by teachers	0%	47%	53%	0%	0%
Parents' choice	0%	41%	38%	21%	0%
Graduate testimonials	27%	32%	36%	0%	6%
Quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions	52%	36%	12%	0%	0%
Persistent calls / e-mails / SMS from institutional marketing personnel	0%	17%	41%	14%	28%
Attractiveness of brochures	0%	12%	46%	14%	28%
Campus visit	0%	53%	25%	13%	9%
Clear explanations when speaking to the institute staff at the campus	0%	65%	14%	22%	0%
Facilities available	33%	58%	0%	9%	0%
Technology used in class	46%	34%	12%	8%	0%
Institute buildings and classrooms	47%	44%	8%	0%	0%
Class size	41%	32%	18%	9%	0%
Total number of students at the institute	0%	20%	41%	27%	12%
University rules and regulations	0%	52%	39%	0%	9%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	0%	32%	53%	15%	0%
Graduation ceremony	27%	27%	19%	0%	28%
Availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time	52%	39%	9%	0%	0%
Availability of campuses in multiple locations	27%	18%	46%	0%	9%
Possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme	33%	36%	22%	0%	9%
Distance from home to the institute	39%	23%	29%	0%	9%
Availability of scholarships	42%	19%	27%	12%	0%
Special offers / Significant discounts on course fees	0%	39%	49%	12%	0%
Affordable tuition fees	27%	39%	34%	0%	0%
Availability of instalment payment plans / student loan schemes	0%	60%	31%	0%	9%

Table 6.10: Gamma Institute – Influences on choice of institute

GAMMA					
Influences on choice of institute	**Very important**	**Important**	**Neutral**	**Somewhat important**	**Not at all important**
Accreditation status by the professional body	55%	41%	0%	4%	0%
University ranking	53%	38%	4%	5%	0%
Institutional reputation	69%	26%	5%	0%	0%
Quality of lecture panel	56%	39%	0%	0%	5%
Pass rates	30%	43%	13%	8%	5%
Number of prizewinners produced	0%	58%	21%	13%	8%
Portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute	24%	41%	26%	0%	10%
Recommendation by friends/relatives	4%	77%	10%	4%	5%
Recommendation by teachers	9%	53%	21%	8%	8%
Parents' choice	5%	36%	37%	13%	8%
Graduate testimonials	15%	48%	20%	13%	5%
Quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions	12%	53%	14%	11%	9%
Persistent calls / e-mails / SMS from institutional marketing personnel	1%	10%	43%	4%	42%
Attractiveness of brochures	4%	6%	49%	12%	30%
Campus visit	21%	32%	24%	19%	5%
Clear explanations when speaking to the institute staff at the campus	36%	54%	5%	0%	5%
Facilities available	45%	38%	12%	0%	5%
Technology used in class	50%	36%	9%	0%	5%
Institute buildings and classrooms	41%	30%	18%	7%	5%
Class size	11%	49%	21%	5%	15%
Total number of students at the institute	7%	36%	32%	10%	15%
University rules and regulations	4%	55%	21%	9%	11%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	17%	52%	20%	7%	5%
Graduation ceremony	8%	52%	7%	5%	27%
Availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time	41%	42%	5%	0%	12%
Availability of campuses in multiple locations	7%	53%	17%	11%	12%
Possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme	28%	27%	40%	0%	5%
Distance from home to the institute	17%	43%	14%	9%	16%
Availability of scholarships	14%	50%	11%	8%	17%
Special offers / Significant discounts on course fees	9%	45%	21%	4%	21%
Affordable tuition fees	25%	70%	0%	0%	5%
Availability of instalment payment plans / student loan schemes	24%	37%	16%	9%	13%

Influences on choice of institute	DELTA				
	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
Accreditation status by the professional body	56%	42%	0%	2%	0%
University ranking	53%	40%	2%	5%	0%
Institutional reputation	72%	24%	4%	0%	0%
Quality of lecture panel	57%	38%	0%	0%	5%
Pass rates	32%	41%	13%	9%	5%
Number of prizewinners produced	0%	57%	21%	13%	9%
Portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute	21%	43%	27%	0%	9%
Recommendation by friends/relatives	2%	78%	12%	2%	5%
Recommendation by teachers	8%	58%	19%	7%	9%
Parents' choice	5%	38%	38%	11%	9%
Graduate testimonials	20%	44%	19%	11%	5%
Quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions	11%	52%	15%	13%	9%
Persistent calls / e-mails / SMS from institutional marketing personnel	2%	9%	40%	2%	47%
Attractiveness of brochures	4%	5%	49%	12%	30%
Campus visit	21%	26%	25%	24%	5%
Clear explanations when speaking to the institute staff at the campus	36%	55%	5%	0%	5%
Facilities available	48%	35%	12%	0%	5%
Technology used in class	51%	36%	9%	0%	5%
Institute buildings and classrooms	43%	28%	17%	8%	5%
Class size	16%	45%	19%	4%	16%
Total number of students at the institute	12%	32%	29%	11%	16%
University rules and regulations	2%	58%	20%	9%	11%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	16%	53%	18%	8%	5%
Graduation ceremony	9%	53%	5%	5%	28%
Availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time	47%	37%	5%	0%	11%
Availability of campuses in multiple locations	6%	54%	17%	10%	12%
Possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme	27%	27%	41%	0%	4%
Distance from home to the institute	20%	39%	13%	9%	18%
Availability of scholarships	12%	50%	11%	7%	20%
Special offers / Significant discounts on course fees	10%	43%	19%	2%	25%
Affordable tuition fees	24%	71%	0%	0%	5%
Availability of instalment payment plans / student loan schemes	23%	41%	14%	8%	13%

Reasons for Choice of Institute		n	Mean	Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores (5)	Highly Negative Scores (1)	SD	Cluster Aggregated Mean
Reputational factors	Accreditation status by the professional body	460	4.54	2	279	0	0.65	4.09
	University ranking	455	4.16	7	214	10	1.03	
	Institutional reputation	459	4.61	1	298	0	0.57	
	Quality of lecture panel	463	4.54	3	308	11	0.81	
	Pass rates	460	3.95	11	144	11	0.96	
	Number of prizewinners produced	459	3.23	27	21	34	1.00	
	Portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute	458	3.59	15	89	53	1.18	
Recommendations	Recommendation by friends/relatives	462	3.55	17	21	20	0.85	3.39
	Recommendation by teachers	461	3.44	23	40	31	0.98	
	Parents' choice	461	3.02	29	13	49	1.01	
	Graduate testimonials	452	3.56	16	75	30	1.09	
Strength of marketing	Quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions	459	3.79	13	127	24	1.11	2.92
	Persistent calls/e-mails/SMS from institutional marketing personnel	461	2.43	32	15	163	1.21	
	Attractiveness of brochures	461	2.53	31	17	111	1.06	
Campus-related reasons	Campus visit	462	3.33	25	70	28	1.12	3.63
	Clear explanations when speaking to the institute staff at the campus	447	3.96	10	127	13	0.95	
	Facilities available	463	4.22	4	214	12	0.94	
	Technology used in class	459	4.19	6	216	12	0.98	
	Institute buildings and classrooms	464	4.08	9	209	12	1.05	
	Class size	457	3.46	22	88	43	1.20	
	Total number of students at the institute	460	2.99	30	27	63	1.12	
	University rules and regulations	459	3.32	26	16	39	0.98	
	Extra-curricular activities at the institute	465	3.50	21	59	14	0.95	
	Graduation ceremony	463	3.21	28	78	109	1.42	
Convenience factors	Availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time	450	4.20	5	197	25	1.00	3.76
	Availability of campuses in multiple locations	457	3.51	20	70	41	1.10	
	Possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme	457	3.79	12	146	27	1.10	
	Distance from home to the institute	460	3.55	18	124	58	1.30	
Financial factors	Availability of scholarships	461	3.61	14	118	46	1.23	3.66
	Special offers / Significant discounts on course fees	464	3.36	24	65	58	1.20	
	Affordable tuition fees	449	4.13	8	142	11	0.80	
	Availability of instalment payment plans / student loan schemes	442	3.53	19	89	44	1.18	

6.4.1. Reputational factors

The 'institutional reputation' (i.e. the HEI brand name) seems to be the clear winner amongst all the reasons for choice of HEI with a mean rating of 4.61, the second highest number of highly positive scores and the lowest standard deviation of 0.57, all of which indicate a consistent pattern in the level of perceived importance (See Table 6.12).

'Accreditation status by the professional body' has been ranked as the second most important reason for choosing the higher education institute. This reason has scored a mean rating of 4.54, a high number of highly positive scores (279) and a low standard deviation of 0.65 (See Table 6.12). For institutes offering professional qualifications, the respective professional body awards varying levels of accreditation, which is a quality assurance given to students that the institution concerned is achieving pass rates higher than world pass rates and is being continuously monitored by the respective professional body. Interestingly, although 'accreditation status' is something that is only applicable to institutes offering professional qualifications such as Alpha and Beta Institutes, the students of all four HEIs have nevertheless indicated this as 'very important', which would mean that even if those currently studying for academic qualifications were to choose a professional qualification, they too would choose an institute which is highly accredited (See Table 6.8, Table 6.9, Table 6.10 and Table 6.11). Therefore, as far as professional qualifications are concerned, it can be reasonably concluded that accreditation plays a major role when students are choosing the HEI.

For HEIs offering academic degrees, the ranking of the university within the UK, and sometimes the global ranking, would be the key competitive advantage. 'University ranking' has been ranked seventh with a mean rating of 4.16 and 214 highly positive scores, which indicates that it is quite important to most students (See Table 6.12). As 'university ranking' is only applicable to Alpha, Gamma and Delta Institutes (Alpha because there is a degree offered alongside the professional qualification), this would explain why Beta Institute did not score high for this

particular parameter (See Table 6.9). Moreover, some parents do look for UGC approval where the degrees are concerned, but since almost all of these UK universities are included in the Commonwealth Universities Yearbook (published by the Association of Commonwealth Universities) or the International Handbook of Universities (published by the International Association of Universities), they would all be 'UGC-Recognised' and therefore this is not a barrier when attracting students ('UGC-Approved' status is only granted to state universities).

Next, the 'quality of the lecture panel' has been rated as the third most important factor when it comes to choosing the higher education institute (See Table 6.12). With a mean rating of 4.54 and a low standard deviation of 0.81, students across all four HEIs have consistently indicated that this is something they specifically look for. In the context of HEIs offering professional qualifications, this is especially important, as students sometimes switch institutes to study under certain lecturers who are perceived as experts for certain subjects having produced multiple Sri Lankan and world prizewinners at consecutive examination sessions, and this influence is apparent with ratings of 'very important' exceeding 70% for each of Alpha and Beta Institutes (See Table 6.8 and Table 6.9).

'Pass rates', 'portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute' and 'number of prizewinners produced' have all scored meagre mean ratings of 3.95, 3.59 and 3.23 respectively, which seem to indicate that students do not give much importance to these factors (See Table 6.12). However, market intelligence suggests that these three factors are used by HEIs, notably by those offering professional qualifications, to boost their brands and highlight their core competencies. This will be discussed in greater detail in the case study analysis chapters.

Overall, this cluster scored the highest aggregate mean of 4.09, which indicates that reputational factors indeed play a key role in student choice of institution.

6.4.2.   Recommendations

The findings of the survey showed that recommendations by friends/relatives and teachers, parental choice factors and graduate testimonials have a minimal impact on students' choice of institute, with each of these factors scoring mean ratings ranging from 3.02 - 3.56, and the overall cluster scoring a mean of 3.39.

In the cross-institutional analysis however, 'recommendations by friends/relatives and teachers' have been rated as 'important' by the majority of students from Beta, Gamma and Delta Institutes (See Table 6.9, Table 6.10 and Table 6.11). This could have been due to two reasons. In the case of students from Beta Institute, there are several tuition providers offering this same qualification, and hence, the students may seek recommendations to make the final decision; these recommendations given may be based on the institute's accreditation levels. In the cases of Gamma and Delta Institutes, although they are the only ones of their kind offering degrees from those two particular universities, there are over 50 private educational institutions with atleast half of them offering identical degrees from different UK universities, which may be the reason to seek recommendations so that the final decision can be arrived at more easily. Students who choose to read for the professional qualification offered at Alpha Institute would have no other choice but to study it at Alpha due to the lack of other established tuition providers; hence recommendations would not be required here, which is evident from the survey findings too (Table 6.8).

6.4.3.   Strength of marketing

This cluster recorded the lowest aggregate mean of 2.92, with most of the individual factors ranking at the bottom of the overall list. 'Persistent calls/emails/SMS from institutional marketing personnel' ranked the lowest (mean of 2.43) and 'attractiveness of brochures' followed suit with a mean of 2.53 (See Table 6.12). From the exploratory interviews, a key theme that emerged was that students often get annoyed when HEIs constantly follow up and continue sending enrolment information very frequently. Therefore, this is reflected accurately from the

questionnaire responses as well. The look and feel of the marketing brochures and leaflets are also clearly not reasons drawing students to any particular HEI.

The 'quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions' is also not a game-changing reason in influencing the students to choose the institute, as indicated by the mean rating of 3.79. However, this factor scored a fairly high number of highly positive scores (127), and recorded a moderately high standard deviation of 1.11, which could mean that some students perceive this as important; the majority of students at Beta Institute have indicated this as 'very important' and the majority at Gamma and Delta Institutes have rated it as 'important' (See Table 6.9, Table 6.10 and Table 6.11).

6.4.4. Campus-related reasons

Among the ten campus-related reasons examined, 'facilities available' and 'technology used in class' topped the cluster with mean ratings of 4.22 and 4.19 respectively (See Table 6.12). Although 'extra-curricular activities' were not highly ranked overall, the majority of students from Gamma and Delta Institutes have indicated 'extra-curricular activities' as 'important' (See Table 6.10 and Table 6.11), which signifies that students choosing academic qualifications often desire the complete university experience with a good balance of academia and social activities. Gamma Institute in particular has a very wide range of extra-curricular activities for its students, which are discussed in more detail in the case study analysis.

However, reasons such as visiting the campus, clarity of explanations by the staff, institutional infrastructure, class size, university rules and regulations, and availability of a graduation ceremony all had neutral ratings, while the total number of students at the institute had a mean rating of 2.99. Given all these low rankings which were also consistent across each of the individual HEIs, it is unsurprising that this cluster scored the third lowest aggregate mean of 3.63.

6.4.5. *Convenience factors*

The researcher identified four convenience factors that may be considered by students when choosing an institute. Of these, 'availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time' achieved a mean attitude rating of 4.20, a high number of highly positive scores (197) and was ranked fifth overall. It is understandable that students would prefer this kind of flexibility to suit their different schedules – some students may be already employed, whereas others may be studying full-time. However, it should be noted that only Alpha and Beta Institutes offer this kind of flexibility.

Interestingly, 'availability of campuses in multiple locations' and 'distance from home to the institute' were not considered to be very important from an overall perspective with mean ratings of only 3.51 and 3.55 respectively. This is most likely due to the fact that if the HEI were considered to a highly reputed one, students would travel any distance to study at that particular HEI. This was further confirmed in the exploratory phase. However, 'availability of campuses in multiple locations' recorded high positive ratings when analysed individually from each HEI.

The 'possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme' would be mostly applicable to the academic programmes, as professional qualifications can in any case be studied from anywhere in the world, or even self-studied. It scored a neutral mean rating of 3.79, which was consistent with the previous exploratory findings where a few students indicated that the main reason why they choose to study foreign higher education qualifications in Sri Lanka was because they preferred to remain in the country, so the option of transferring overseas was irrelevant to them.

Although this cluster scored an aggregate mean of 3.76, which was incidentally the second highest, as the individual parameters were not ranked very high in terms of perceived importance, this cluster cannot be said to be a very significant influence on choice of HEI.

6.4.6.   Financial factors

Sri Lanka, being a cost-focused, parent-funded market, would mean that the consumers of higher education, be it students or parents, would naturally be more inclined to consider financial factors when choosing a HEI. This cluster is underpinned by four reasons, of which the affordability of tuition fees ranked the highest, with a mean of 4.13 and a high number of highly positive scores (142). 'Availability of scholarships' scored a mean rating of 3.61, and 'special offers/significant discounts on course fees' scored a mean rating of a mere 3.36, which is interesting because although the students have indicated that they do not attach much importance to this, it has been noted that once students have chosen a particular higher education qualification, they tend to gravitate towards the institute which offers them the highest scholarship and the greatest discounts on course fees. 'Availability of instalment payment plans/student loan schemes', ranking nineteenth, also does not appear to be of significant importance to the students, possibly because student loan schemes are not very popular in Sri Lanka yet, despite almost every leading commercial bank offering such loan schemes. This particular cluster ranked third with a mean rating of 3.66.

6.5.   IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Understanding the information gathering process is vital in order to be able to gain clarity on the decision-making process of students when it comes to choosing the higher education qualification and institute. As such, the researcher identified eighteen potential sources of information from which the students may get information regarding the qualification and institute, and the respondents were asked to give an importance rating to each source. Similar to the previous sections in this chapter, the findings for each HEI separately are presented below, along with a summary of the combined findings grouped into five clusters – recommendations, direct inquiry, marketing collateral, media and school promotions.

Table 6.13: Alpha Institute – Importance of different sources of information

ALPHA					
Sources of information	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
Friends	11%	21%	53%	6%	9%
Parents / Relatives	25%	34%	22%	15%	4%
School teacher	22%	22%	40%	11%	6%
Tuition teacher	23%	29%	34%	7%	7%
Telephone / e-mail enquiry	27%	29%	24%	7%	13%
Educational exhibition	33%	23%	28%	3%	12%
Brochures	12%	15%	57%	12%	4%
Banner at an event	11%	9%	54%	6%	20%
Promotional merchandise such as notebooks, keytags, bookmarks etc	14%	27%	24%	14%	21%
Billboard	19%	27%	28%	9%	17%
Press ad	8%	25%	34%	8%	25%
Institutional website	42%	26%	11%	8%	14%
Facebook ad	25%	28%	19%	12%	16%
Youtube video	15%	20%	27%	20%	18%
Google ad	20%	12%	19%	28%	21%
Radio ad / endorsement	14%	15%	32%	11%	29%
Seminars / Career guidance workshops at school	18%	38%	23%	7%	13%
Inter-school competitions	35%	25%	20%	11%	9%

Table 6.14: Beta Institute – Importance of different sources of information

Sources of information	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
BETA					
Friends	12%	79%	9%	0%	0%
Parents / Relatives	0%	47%	53%	0%	0%
School teacher	0%	43%	45%	12%	0%
Tuition teacher	0%	64%	23%	12%	0%
Telephone / e-mail enquiry	0%	55%	6%	12%	27%
Educational exhibition	0%	53%	38%	0%	9%
Brochures	0%	32%	42%	17%	9%
Banner at an event	0%	32%	8%	5%	55%
Promotional merchandise such as notebooks, keytags, bookmarks etc	0%	18%	34%	0%	48%
Billboard	0%	31%	21%	22%	27%
Press ad	0%	31%	33%	36%	0%
Institutional website	20%	23%	31%	27%	0%
Facebook ad	0%	27%	38%	35%	0%
Youtube video	0%	9%	43%	0%	47%
Google ad	0%	12%	41%	0%	47%
Radio ad / endorsement	0%	9%	44%	6%	41%
Seminars / Career guidance workshops at school	0%	85%	6%	9%	0%
Inter-school competitions	0%	17%	35%	48%	0%

Table 6.15: Gamma Institute – Importance of different sources of information

Sources of information	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
GAMMA					
Friends	0%	43%	33%	12%	13%
Parents / Relatives	14%	33%	37%	16%	0%
School teacher	0%	58%	18%	14%	10%
Tuition teacher	0%	51%	30%	4%	15%
Telephone / e-mail enquiry	0%	31%	32%	7%	30%
Educational exhibition	11%	42%	17%	17%	13%
Brochures	4%	40%	18%	25%	13%
Banner at an event	0%	25%	34%	12%	29%
Promotional merchandise such as notebooks, keytags, bookmarks etc	0%	14%	40%	9%	38%
Billboard	0%	27%	39%	11%	23%
Press ad	0%	27%	35%	28%	10%
Institutional website	36%	38%	15%	6%	5%
Facebook ad	4%	44%	21%	17%	14%
Youtube video	4%	35%	35%	12%	14%
Google ad	4%	21%	49%	0%	26%
Radio ad / endorsement	0%	26%	43%	7%	24%
Seminars / Career guidance workshops at school	7%	50%	26%	5%	12%
Inter-school competitions	4%	63%	14%	0%	19%

DELTA					
Sources of information	Very important	Important	Neutral	Somewhat important	Not at all important
Friends	0%	45%	31%	13%	12%
Parents / Relatives	13%	34%	33%	19%	2%
School teacher	0%	56%	20%	14%	10%
Tuition teacher	0%	45%	35%	5%	15%
Telephone / e-mail enquiry	0%	31%	32%	6%	30%
Educational exhibition	9%	42%	17%	20%	12%
Brochures	4%	40%	18%	26%	12%
Banner at an event	0%	24%	38%	10%	28%
Promotional merchandise such as notebooks, keytags, bookmarks etc	2%	12%	45%	6%	36%
Billboard	0%	24%	43%	11%	22%
Press ad	0%	30%	30%	30%	10%
Institutional website	40%	32%	15%	7%	6%
Facebook ad	4%	45%	19%	17%	15%
Youtube video	2%	38%	31%	13%	16%
Google ad	3%	23%	44%	1%	29%
Radio ad / endorsement	1%	27%	40%	8%	24%
Seminars / Career guidance workshops at school	6%	53%	25%	5%	12%
Inter-school competitions	4%	65%	13%	0%	18%

Table 6.17:Summary of findings - Importance of different sources of information

Sources of Information		n	Mean	Rank Order	Highly Positive Scores (5)	Highly Negative Scores (1)	SD	Cluster Aggregated Mean
Recommendations	Friends	460	3.31	6	26	40	1.00	3.36
	Parents / Relatives	459	3.49	2	64	7	0.94	
	School teacher	460	3.30	8	28	31	1.00	
	Tuition teacher	439	3.34	4	30	40	1.03	
Direct inquiry	Telephone / e-mail enquiry	453	2.94	11	35	111	1.31	3.14
	Educational exhibition	459	3.34	5	65	53	1.19	
Marketing collateral	Brochures	464	3.02	10	24	44	1.05	2.69
	Banner at an event	453	2.56	17	14	144	1.23	
	Promotional merchandise such as notebooks, keytags, bookmarks etc	451	2.48	18	19	158	1.25	
Media	Billboard	451	2.81	13	24	99	1.21	2.94
	Press ad	452	2.84	12	10	55	1.04	
	Institutional website	450	3.76	1	159	30	1.23	
	Facebook ad	455	3.11	9	41	54	1.18	
	YouTube video	452	2.80	14	26	103	1.22	
	Google ad	453	2.64	15	34	135	1.27	
	Radio ad / endorsement	450	2.61	16	19	131	1.21	
School promotions	Seminars / Career guidance workshops at school	460	3.46	3	38	45	1.06	3.38
	Inter-school competitions	446	3.30	7	54	52	1.19	

6.5.1.   Recommendations

Here, the researcher has taken into consideration the influence of recommendations of friends, parents/relatives, schoolteachers and tuition teachers. The reason for the classification between school and tuition teachers is due to the fact that the researcher is aware that most HEIs have partnered with either, mostly through personal incentive schemes to the teacher concerned, and hence, it is important to understand which category has a greater influence.

From the students' perspective, information obtained from parents/relatives does not appear to be highly significant, with a mean rating of only 3.49, although it was ranked second overall. This source of information also recorded the lowest standard deviation of 0.94, and was also the only source to have a variation less than 1.00 (See Table 6.17). However, this mean rating is a bit worrying from an institutional point of view as most of the print media campaigns by these HEIs target the parents, and if the parents/relatives are not seen to be driving their children to pick certain qualifications and institutions, this may mean that the level of awareness created by the print media campaigns is not sufficient and hence, the campaigns are not quite successful. 47% of the students from Beta Institute rated this source as 'important', and this could be because this qualification is well known in Sri Lanka, especially among the Gen X population (i.e. the parents of these students), and that particular professional body even celebrated 50 years of operations in Sri Lanka (See Table 6.14).

Among the teachers, the recommendations of tuition teachers as a source of information are slightly higher, ranking fourth with a mean rating of 3.34. However, this rating too is not high enough, given the efforts made by the HEIs to partner up with prominent tuition teachers who often produce island rankers, who promote these HEIs within their classes. The students of all the HEIs, except those of Alpha Institute, have given fairly high ratings (64%, 51% and 45% for Beta, Gamma and Delta Institutes respectively) for recommendations from tuition teachers, which is a tad puzzling because Alpha Institute too has partnered with a lot of tuition teachers

(See Table 6.14, Table 6.15 and Table 6.16). However, it is possible that the students who were part of this study did not experience such marketer-influenced recommendations since these partnerships were a more recent strategy.

Recommendations from schoolteachers were only ranked eighth, with a mean attitude rating of 3.30 and a low degree of variation between the highly positive and highly negative scores. Most often, the partnership strategy is not possible with schoolteachers, especially in the case of government schools, which justifies these scores to a certain extent.

Although we saw in section 6.3.2 that the *influence* of friends' when choosing the higher education qualification was very low (mean rating of 2.55, ranking tenth out of the eleven reasons), friends as a *source of information* was considered to be slightly more important, ranking sixth with a mean rating of 3.31 and a comparatively low standard deviation of 1.00 (See Table 6.17 above).

Despite these neutral ratings, this cluster scored the second highest aggregate mean of 3.36, which indicates that in the context of this study, recommendations are considered to be a fairly important source of information for the students.

6.5.2.   Direct inquiry

When it comes to direct inquiries, educational exhibitions seem to be a significant source of information. In Colombo, there a number of educational exhibitions that take place each year, namely Edex Main Expo in January, Future Minds Expo in June and Edex Mid-Year Expo in September and these exhibitions are timed to coincide with key examinations. For example, expos in January target the students who are immediately after their local O/Ls who are awaiting results, expos in June are aimed at Cambridge and Edexcel O/L and A/L students who have just completed their exams, and expos in September target students who have just completed their local A/L exams. Almost all HEIs participate at all of these expos. Other educational expos include the Education UK Exhibition and the Australian Education Fair, which

are mostly aimed at students who wish to travel abroad for their higher studies. As such, it is no surprise that 'educational exhibitions' have been ranked as the fifth most important source of information, albeit with a neutral mean attitude rating of 3.34 (See Table 6.17).

Telephone/e-mail inquiries are not ranked very high on this list (eleventh) with a mean rating of 2.94, and a high number of highly negative responses (111), which could mean that students do not seem to resort to this source of information in the initial stages of the decision-making process. This was confirmed in the exploratory interviews as well, where students indicated that they mostly use this form of communication to obtain follow-up information when they are evaluating their alternatives.

The aggregate mean for this particular cluster was 3.14, and hence, not a significant source of information.

6.5.3. Marketing collateral

Marketing collateral seems to be fairly unimportant as a source of information, with 'promotional merchandise' ranking last and scoring a mean rating of 2.48, which is the lowest in that cluster; 'banner at an event' ranking seventeenth with a mean rating of 2.56, and 'brochures' ranking tenth with a mean rating of 3.02 (See Table 6.17). 'Promotional merchandise' and 'banner at an event' also had very high numbers of highly negative scores; 158 and 144 respectively. It is interesting to note that brochures were ranked so low given the fact that they usually contain a fair amount of information, often with attractive images. Therefore, although Pasternak (2005) has found that a HEIs' printed material such as brochures can be very influential, it is clear that this is not the case in Sri Lanka.

Given all these low ratings, it is no surprise that the cluster of 'marketing collateral' had the lowest aggregate mean of 2.69. It is quite likely that HEIs are aware that marketing collateral such as banners and merchandise do not contribute very

significantly in terms of information dispersion, but use them nevertheless to maintain and establish brand presence.

The cluster of 'media' includes all forms of print and electronic media, which the HEIs use to communicate to the public regarding the programmes they offer. Each of these media channels are targeted at different segments of the population – for instance, print media such as press ads are aimed at parents, whereas social media platforms are mostly for the younger generations.

The HEIs' websites have been ranked as the number one source of information for students seeking private higher education in Sri Lanka, with the highest (in relative terms) mean rating of 3.76 and a high number of highly positive scores (159) (See Table 6.17). Although there has been some debate as to whether other forms of digital media such as Facebook have caused websites to become obsolete (Pristley, 2017), the findings of this study have clearly shown that the website is still very important as a source of information. In fact, 'Facebook ads' are only ranked at ninth place with a mean rating of 3.11, which further confirms this. However, given the fact that it is a very cost-effective form of advertising, HEIs do engage in a lot of Facebook promotions.

Other forms of media, such as 'press ads', 'billboards', 'YouTube videos', 'Google ads' and 'radio ads/endorsements' were all ranked between 12-16, with low mean ratings of 2.84, 2.81, 2.80, 2.64 and 2.61 respectively (See Table 6.17). The standard deviation for all these sources remained fairly similar, ranging from 1.04 - 1.27, and the aggregate cluster mean was the second lowest at 2.94. However, these low ratings are perfectly justifiable because all these sources, with the exception of the institutional website, can only communicate a limited amount of information due to inherent restrictions of the various platforms. Therefore, it would be unreasonable to expect students to rely on these particular sources for all the required information. Moreover, channels like press ads are mostly targeted towards parental audiences,

while the rest of the media channels are used to create brand awareness rather than act as sources of information.

6.5.5.   *School promotions*

In terms of the school promotions cluster, 'seminars/career guidance workshops at schools' scored a mean rating of 3.46 and was ranked third overall, which means that students consider this to be a comparatively important source of information regarding future higher education prospects (See Table 6.17). 'Inter-school competitions' organised by these establishments have moderately contributed as information sources, as indicated by its mean rating of 3.30 and ranking seventh. Standard deviation is moderate (1.19), which signifies that there is not much variation between the students' responses. Lastly, this cluster recorded the highest aggregate mean of 3.38, and although this mean rating too was neutral, it was nevertheless the most important cluster of all the information sources.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that no cluster or individual source has a scored a mean of over 4, which means students tend to rely on a range of sources instead of being heavily dependent on any one source. This would also mean that the quality of information reaching the students is better because it comes from a variety of sources, which would dilute any bias.

6.6. POST-ENROLMENT REFLECTIONS

This section investigates the student-consumers' experiences, views and attitudes about the enrolment process, and also assesses if their expectations were met while they were studying at the respective HEIs. Accordingly, the findings are broken down into two broad categories – Views on the enrolment process (i.e. The enrolment experience) and the level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction arising post-enrolment (i.e. Expectations Vs Reality).

6.6.1. The enrolment experience

Here, the researcher investigated the students' views on the enrolment and the registration process.

Figure 6.4: Provision of information before enrolment

Did the institute provide you with the required information before enrolment? (Q10)

Yes: 92%
No: 8%
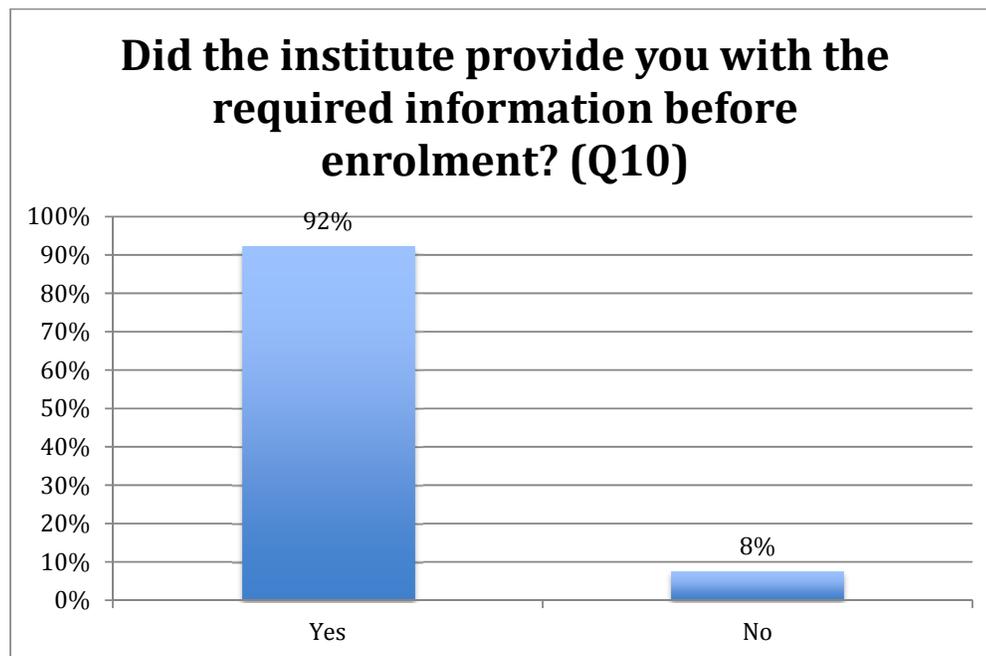
92% of the students have agreed with that they had been provided with all the information they requested for prior to enrolment (See Figure 6.4 above). However, 8% of the students have indicated that they were not provided with all the information at the time of enrolment. In the researcher's personal experience, sometimes the HEIs do not feel the need to disclose everything, especially when the students do not specifically inquire about certain things, and in other instances, the HEIs may leave out the fine print and highlight only the positives, so this could explain why 8% of the students felt they were not informed regarding certain matters.

To further investigate the students' views regarding the enrolment process, the respondents were asked to give some feedback on the enrolment process – whether they felt it was 'very smooth', 'average; can't complain', 'complicated and messy' or a 'waste of time'.

Figure 6.5: Feedback regarding the enrolment process
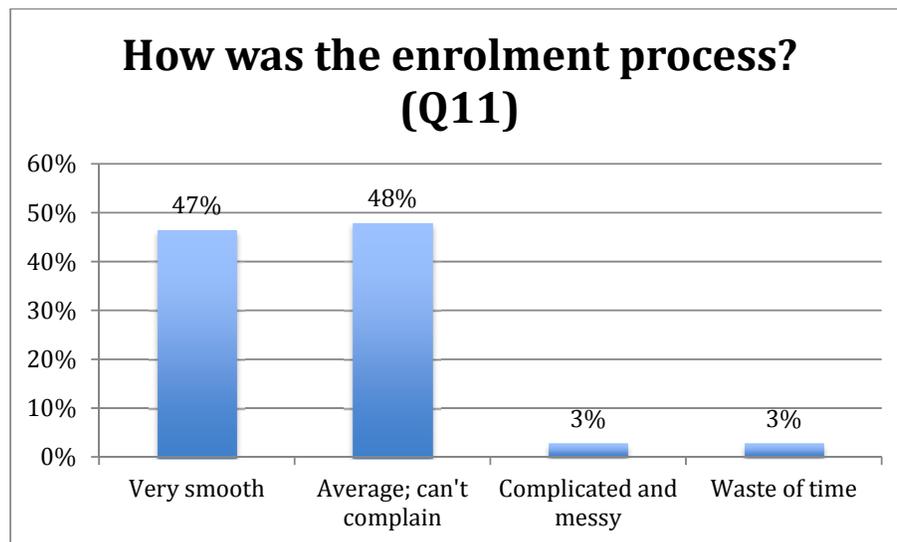
While the majority of students seemed satisfied with the enrolment process, it is interesting to note that 47% felt it was 'very smooth' and 48% felt it was average with nothing major to complain about (See Figure 6.5 above). With the exception of a very small percentage of students who felt the enrolment process was 'complicated

and messy' and a 'waste of time', all the HEIs surveyed were in general doing a good job with managing their enrolment processes. The researcher feels that these negative ratings may be attributed to infrequently occurring mishaps.

6.6.2.   Expectations vs. Reality

Students were also asked if their initial expectations of the HEI were consistent with the actual situation, which they discovered once they started studying there.

Figure 6.6: Were your expectations met?
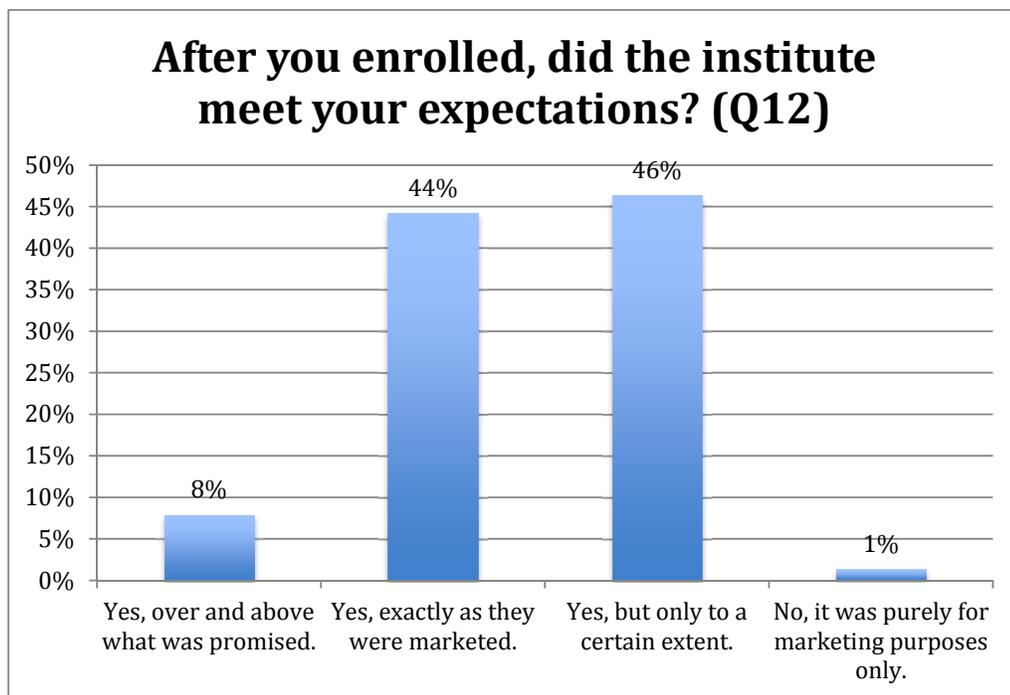
The majority of students seemed to be rather positive, with 44% indicating that they felt that the institute successfully met their expectations, exactly as they were marketed. 46% of the students indicated that they felt that their expectations were only met 'to a certain extent', which seems to indicate that the HEIs may have opted for selective disclosure or over-emphasising their positives (whilst covering their negatives).

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8% of the students indicated that their expectations were met 'over and above what was promised', and 1% indicated their displeasure over the fact that the attributes highlighted were 'purely for marketing purposes only' (See Figure 6.6 above), but again, the researcher is aware that there are often a few highly positive and highly negative sentiments coming out.

The findings on specific factors relating to post-enrolment satisfaction are given below.

Table 6.18: Alpha Institute – Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction

ALPHA					
Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction	Extremely satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Extremely dissatisfied
University rules and regulations	9%	23%	60%	9%	0%
Class size	0%	28%	60%	7%	5%
Quality of tuition	19%	53%	28%	1%	0%
Student support	12%	15%	50%	20%	2%
Provision of study material	31%	27%	15%	23%	4%
Tuition fees	7%	29%	39%	24%	2%
Facilities available	0%	24%	21%	34%	21%
Technology used in class	7%	17%	23%	40%	13%
Institute buildings and classrooms	3%	16%	44%	19%	18%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	3%	25%	38%	14%	20%
Graduation ceremony	24%	29%	35%	9%	3%
Friendliness of lecturers	32%	48%	20%	0%	0%
Friendliness of admin staff	22%	45%	27%	2%	5%

Table 6.19: Beta Institute – Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction

BETA					
Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction	Extremely satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Dissatisfied	Extremely dissatisfied
University rules and regulations	0%	51%	49%	0%	0%
Class size	11%	50%	24%	15%	0%
Quality of tuition	5%	90%	5%	0%	0%
Student support	0%	84%	11%	5%	0%
Provision of study material	12%	83%	5%	0%	0%
Tuition fees	9%	50%	41%	0%	0%
Facilities available	0%	48%	45%	6%	0%
Technology used in class	0%	80%	20%	0%	0%
Institute buildings and classrooms	0%	81%	14%	5%	0%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	9%	36%	55%	0%	0%
Graduation ceremony	0%	44%	56%	0%	0%
Friendliness of lecturers	24%	61%	15%	0%	0%
Friendliness of admin staff	18%	68%	14%	0%	0%

Table 6.20: Gamma Institute – Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction

GAMMA					
Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction	**Extremely satisfied**	**Satisfied**	**Neutral**	**Dissatisfied**	**Extremely dissatisfied**
University rules and regulations	8%	49%	31%	5%	7%
Class size	7%	55%	7%	19%	12%
Quality of tuition	17%	54%	7%	17%	6%
Student support	6%	47%	10%	27%	11%
Provision of study material	7%	3%	88%	1%	1%
Tuition fees	17%	57%	18%	2%	5%
Facilities available	11%	30%	27%	9%	23%
Technology used in class	9%	28%	26%	20%	17%
Institute buildings and classrooms	12%	43%	19%	20%	5%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	13%	36%	22%	24%	5%
Graduation ceremony	29%	57%	7%	2%	5%
Friendliness of lecturers	17%	44%	26%	8%	5%
Friendliness of admin staff	18%	44%	27%	11%	0%

Table 6.21: Delta Institute – Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction

DELTA					
Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction	**Extremely satisfied**	**Satisfied**	**Neutral**	**Dissatisfied**	**Extremely dissatisfied**
University rules and regulations	12%	46%	31%	5%	6%
Class size	8%	50%	6%	23%	13%
Quality of tuition	17%	51%	6%	21%	5%
Student support	5%	43%	12%	30%	10%
Provision of study material	2%	3%	78%	15%	2%
Tuition fees	22%	57%	16%	0%	5%
Facilities available	3%	2%	26%	43%	26%
Technology used in class	9%	27%	26%	23%	16%
Institute buildings and classrooms	10%	41%	20%	24%	5%
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	13%	31%	22%	30%	5%
Graduation ceremony	28%	57%	9%	1%	5%
Friendliness of lecturers	17%	41%	23%	12%	6%
Friendliness of admin staff	21%	43%	24%	12%	0%

Table 6.22: Summary findings - Influences on post-enrolment satisfaction

Post-Enrolment Satisfaction	**n**	**Mean**	**Rank Order**	**Highly Positive Scores (5)**	**Highly Negative Scores (1)**	**SD**
University rules and regulations	449	3.45	6	34	14	0.83
Class size	444	3.27	8	28	34	1.05
Quality of tuition	447	3.76	4	67	12	0.92
Student support	449	3.24	9	27	26	1.04
Provision of study material	452	3.39	7	60	9	0.91
Tuition fees	452	3.63	5	63	13	0.92
Facilities available	449	2.69	13	15	83	1.13
Technology used in class	442	3.03	12	29	52	1.15
Institute buildings and classrooms	447	3.23	10	29	34	1.06
Extra-curricular activities at the institute	447	3.17	11	42	36	1.10
Graduation ceremony	450	3.79	3	96	15	0.92
Friendliness of lecturers	447	3.83	1	102	13	0.94
Friendliness of admin staff	447	3.80	2	89	6	0.88

It was, however, interesting to note that all the parameters (with the exception of 'facilities available' which scored a mean rating of 2.69) achieved mean attitude ratings between 3.03 - 3.83, thereby indicating a majority of neutral scores, and there were no parameters that were indicated as very positive or very negative game-changers when it came to influencing the level of post-enrolment satisfaction.

Upon analysing the extent to which the expectations of students matched the reality, the researcher also investigated as to whether the students' level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction would affect their decision to recommend the institute to a prospective student.

Figure 6.7: Recommending the institute to others
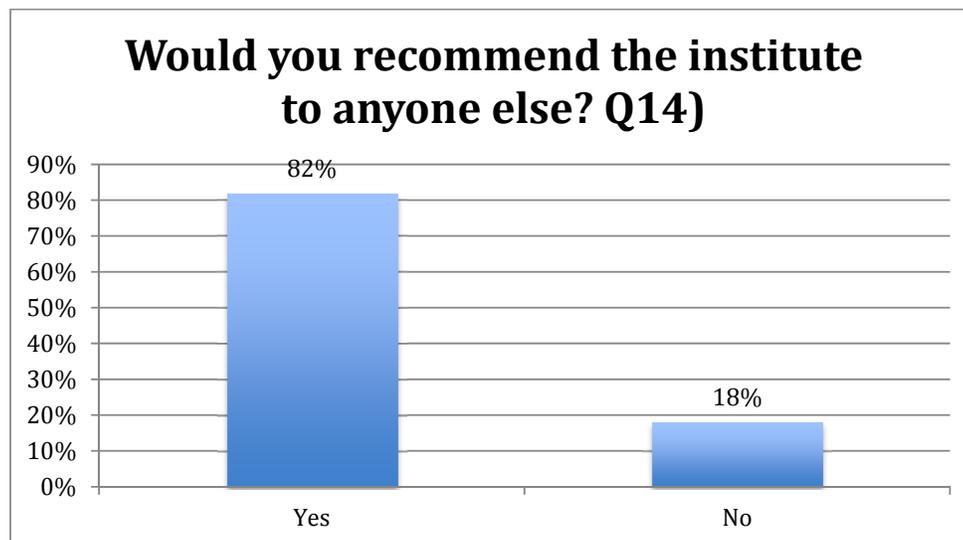
82% of the students surveyed have clearly indicated that they would definitely recommend the institute to others. They were also required to indicate the reasons for the above answer, and as they were given the option of choosing multiple reasons, the researcher has presented the findings in whole numbers as opposed to percentage values. However, not every respondent chose to provide answers to this particular question.

Reasons for giving positive or negative recommendations about the HEI (Q15)
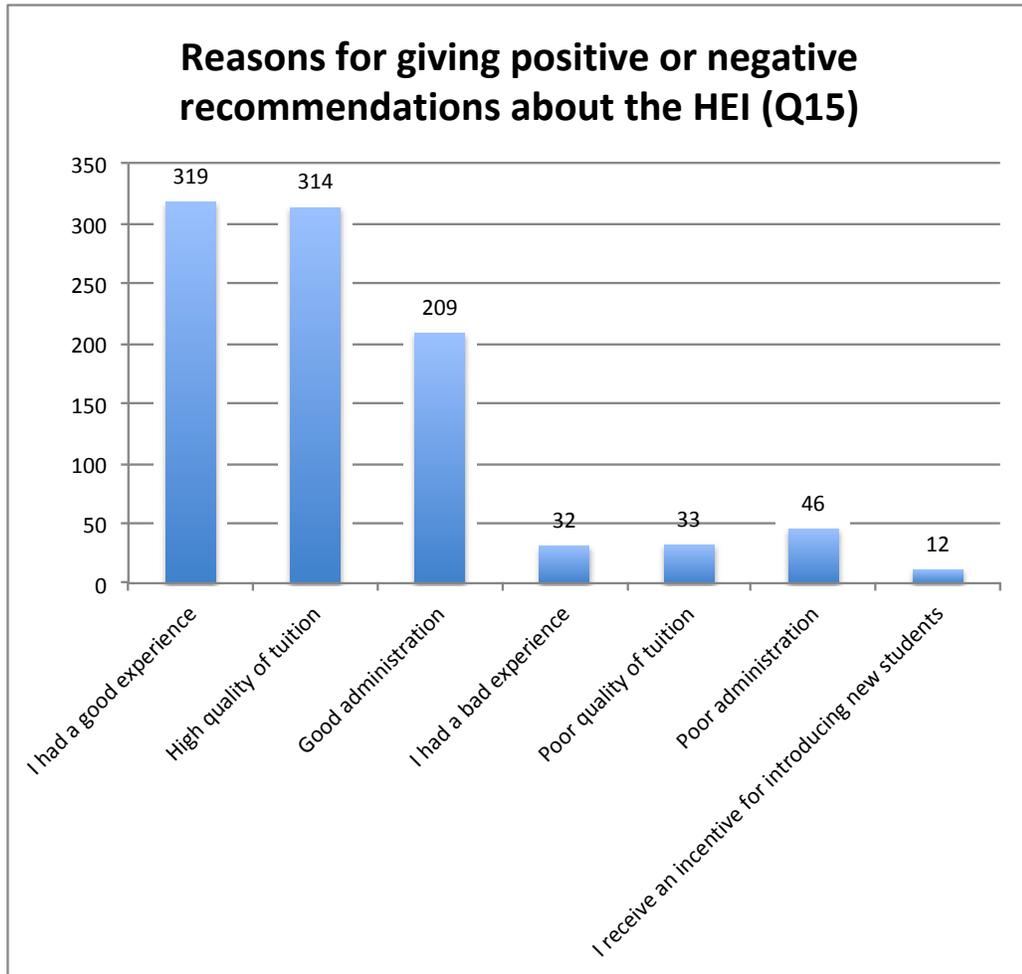
The majority of the students have expressed the view that they have had a good experience thus far, have experienced a high quality of tuition and that they were also happy with the administration there (See Figure 6.8 above). Due to this level of satisfaction, they seem to be proponents of the institute. However, a small number of students have stated that they have had a bad experience, were not happy with the quality of tuition provided and felt the administration was poor. In order to examine this at grass-root level, the findings from the individual HEIs are presented below.

Reasons for giving positive or negative recommendations about the institute	Frequency			
	Alpha	Beta	Gamma	Delta
I had a good experience	85	98	59	77
High quality of tuition	77	81	82	73
Good administration	73	85	25	28
I had a bad experience	19	0	7	7
Poor quality of tuition	0	0	5	28
Poor administration	22	0	5	20
I receive an incentive for introducing new students	0	0	4	8

As apparent in Table 6.23 above, Beta Institute had zero negative ratings for 'I had a bad experience', 'poor quality of tuition' and 'poor administration', and to further support its positive ratings, it is interesting to note that no student had mentioned that they receive an incentive for introducing new students. This means that students genuinely recommend Beta Institute to others purely based on their positive experiences and not due to any incentives offered by Beta.

The staff member who was interviewed by the researcher stated the following with regard to the perceived levels of student satisfaction.

"We actually have very few complaints, and even when it comes to student events and things like that, the level of participation is very high. So that means the students are happy. Pass rates are very good, so even the parents are happy. Come to think of it, we should probably publish some student satisfaction ratings or something. It might be good marketing!" (Interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute)

However, the same staff member also pointed out a key issue that may have potentially affected the students' experience at Beta Institute, although this was not revealed in the student survey.

"Recently, this qualification underwent a major structure change, with all exams being shifted to a computer-based platform, case study exams being introduced for three levels and to top this off, the professional body also increased the pass mark from 50 to 70, which really scared the students. Sri Lankan students are by default not hardwired to deal with case study exams because they have never experienced it before; neither do they have prior experience with writing for exams online. So what happened as a result was that fail rates increased, and then dropout rates increased, and word was getting out that this qualification is now impossible to pass, and we had to literally stand on our heads to rectify the situation. We had to invest in developing and enhancing our computer labs, introducing online mock exams instead of our usual paper mocks, and basically change their mindset about the whole thing. This was the biggest issue we faced, and I wouldn't say that we have recovered from it 100%, but we are getting there. I fervently hope that this is the last time so many drastic changes are introduced at once." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute)

On the other hand, some students from Delta Institute felt that the quality of tuition and the administration were poor. However, some have also confirmed that they receive an incentive for introducing new students, which could actually be clouding their true judgement, and this may explain the high scores for 'I had a good experience' and 'high quality of tuition' at Delta Institute.

Moreover, when the researcher inquired from the staff member of Delta during the interview phase as to what her thoughts were on the students' level of post-enrolment satisfaction, her response was as follows:

"I think my opinion here may be rather biased because I would always say yes!" (Interview: Marketing personnel of Delta Institute)

This statement clearly indicates that the institute is either blissfully ignorant of the issues that its students are facing, or that they are purposely overlooking them since they feel they it is not very important. Either way, the researcher believes that this is

a definite area of improvement for Delta Institute as it has the potential to have future repercussions if not addressed immediately. Some students at Alpha Institute too felt that the administration was poor, so this is definitely an area that all these institutes could work on improving.

Gamma Institute did not have significantly high scores for the negative reasons. The above findings were further substantiated as the staff member of Gamma Institute who was interviewed also stated that she felt that the students were satisfied to a great extent.

"We haven't had many complaints about lecturers or the programme itself. We also have plenty of events for our students, because we believe in a balance between the academic side and the fun side. We do invest a lot in these kinds of things actually. The downside is that students sometimes have so much fun and they get involved in every single activity there is, that they sometimes neglect their studies, which is bad. But I'm sure the satisfaction factor is there! Some of the students who drop out or who are unable to pass exams on the first go due to weak English language proficiency tend to grumble that we do not facilitate teaching in Sinhala or Tamil, but this is an internal British degree; we have standards to adhere to, and unfortunately, we as an organisation, are not willing to compromise on the quality of our programme on any grounds." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Gamma Institute)

Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that Gamma's students would give positive recommendations to the public.

Moreover, 66% of the student surveyed indicated that they would be likely to return to the same institute to study a postgraduate or any other qualification (See Figure 6.9 below)

Would you return to this institute to study a postgraduate or any other qualification? (Q16)
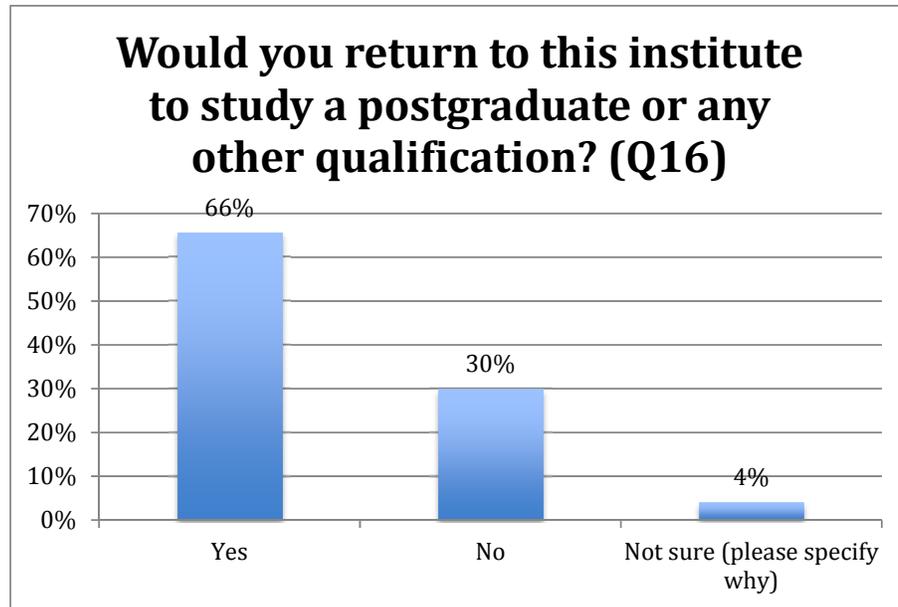
4% have indicated that they were not sure, and the reasons listed were as follows:

- *"I haven't planned my future yet"*
- *"Depends on the options available elsewhere"*
- *"No plans yet"*
- *"Not decided"*
- *"Done with studying"*
- *"Management isn't my main field of career"*
- *"Prefer self-study"*
- *"No more studies"*
- *"Want to do marketing next"*
- *"Cause I live abroad now"*

- *"I stopped"*

- *"My choice isn't there"*

- *"Networking here might not be as much as you expect at a postgrad level"*

From the reasons specified above, it is apparent that the majority of the students who stated that they were unsure have not given much thought to what they were going to do next; very few responses indicated that the students had given conscious thought to the matter.

Overall, there were a higher percentage of students who indicated that their expectations were met to a great extent (See Figure 6.6), and a clear majority who indicated that they would indeed recommend the institute to a prospective student (See Figure 6.7). Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that there is indeed a link between the level of post-enrolment satisfaction and the likelihood of positive recommendations and vice versa for the negative side.

6.7. AGE ANALYSIS OF STUDENT-CONSUMERS

This study also sought to identify the age at which students *decide* to pursue higher education and the age at which they actually *start pursuing* higher education. Moreover, the researcher wanted to assess if there was a difference in the latter in Sri Lanka and in developed countries such as the UK.

Research by HESA UK (2013, cited in Universities UK, 2013 at p.13) has shown a steady increase of 13.9% from 2003/04 to 2011/12 in the percentage of students' aged 20 and under who enrol for higher education qualifications (See Figure 6.10 below). The age group of 21-24 years saw an increase of 10.3%, 25-29 years was a 5.2% increase whereas the category of 30 years and over recorded a 21.7% decrease, thereby clearly indicating that students start pursuing higher education at a very young age (HESA UK, 2013, cited in Universities UK, 2013 at p.13).

Figure 6.10: Students by age group, 2003/04 – 2011/12

Source: HESA

150
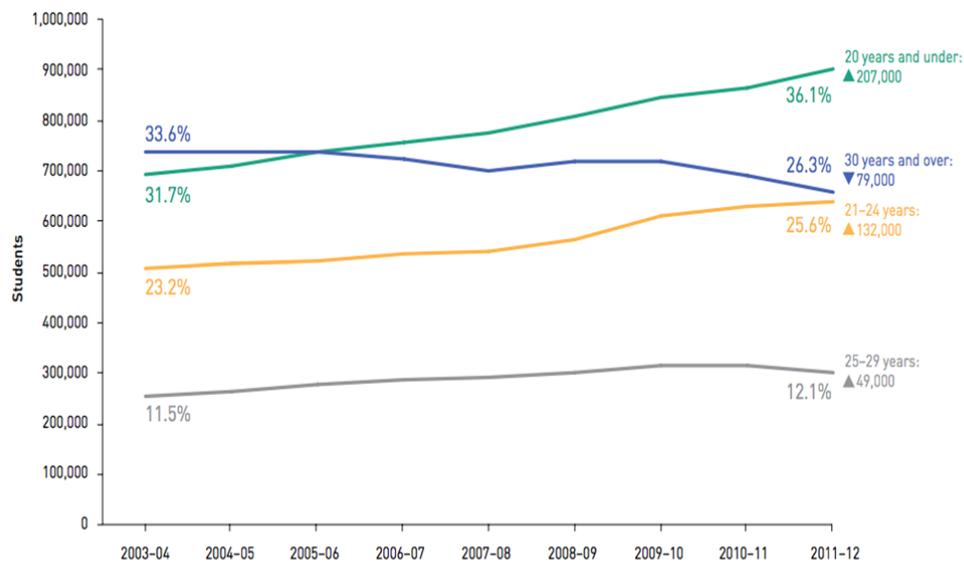
A similar trend can be observed in Sri Lanka as well. Figure 6.11 below indicates that 38% of the students decide to pursue higher education after they received their A/L results, with 21% deciding it while they were awaiting A/L results and 21% deciding it before they sat for their A/Ls. Therefore, the indication by the vast majority appears to be the time period associated with A/Ls, which indicates that the students are between the ages of 17-19 when the need for HE is recognised.

Figure 6.11: The point in time where students decide on pursuing HE

At which point did you decide on this qualification and institute? (Q7)
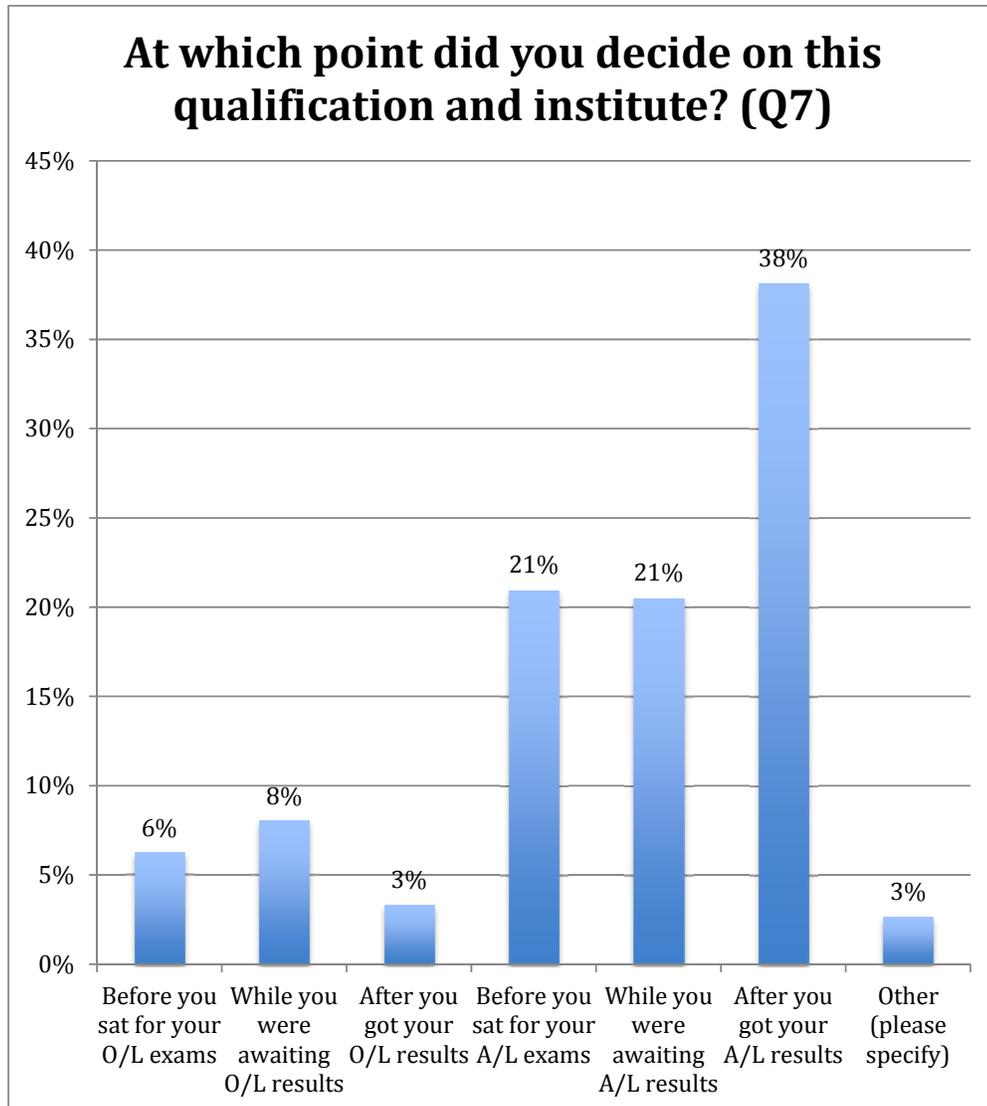
The above trend is further confirmed as 72% of the students indicated that they actually started studying for the qualification when they were between the ages of 18-20 years (See Figure 6.12 below). Moreover, the age distribution is greatly skewed towards the younger age groups.

Figure 6.12: Age at the time of starting to study the HE qualification

How old were you when you actually started studying for this qualification? (Q8)
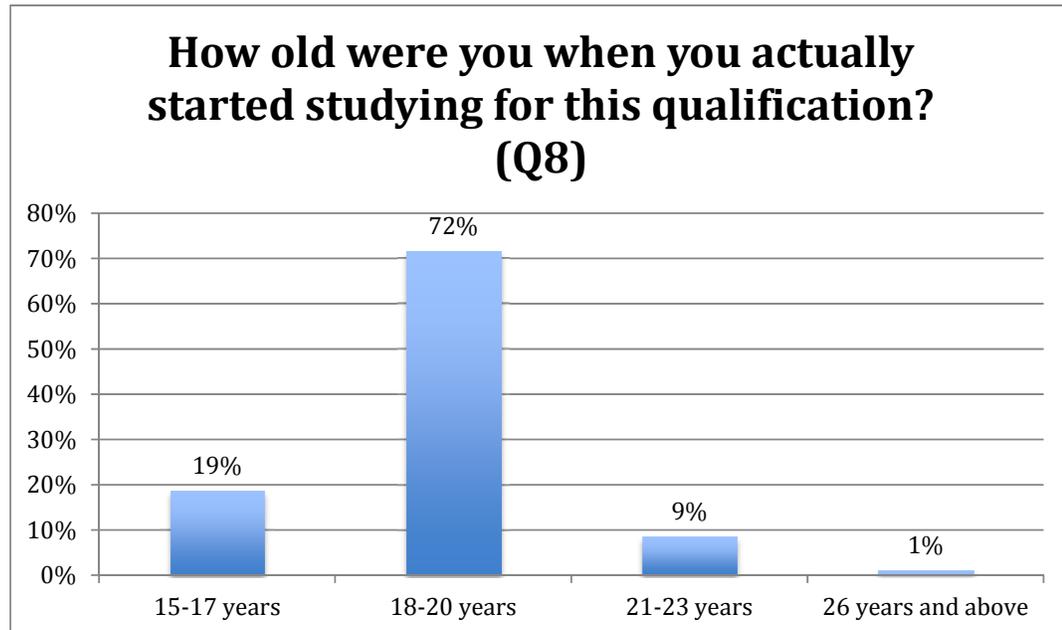
6.8.   SUMMARY

Through the student survey, the researcher was able to investigate the students' thoughts and actions during the higher education choice process, from the point of gathering information and making the purchase decision, all the way through to post-enrolment perceptions. A total of 476 students across the four HEIs responded to the survey, which enabled the researcher to perform cross-institutional comparisons, in addition to establishing overall generalisations using various statistical measures. This phase of the research also enabled the researcher to verify themes arising from the exploratory phase. Accordingly, the survey findings were presented in this chapter in five sections – influences on the choice of qualification, influences on the choice of institute, sources of information, post-enrolment reflections and an age analysis.

According to the findings of the survey, career-related reasons such as 'global recognition' and 'greater employability and career prospects' were the most significant motivators when choosing a higher education qualification. Moreover, the cluster of academic reasons including those such as 'personal growth and gaining knowledge', were ranked second, thereby contradicting the findings of Vrontis *et al* (2007), because this study established that even student-consumers of developing countries like Sri Lanka can be driven by esteem needs. Social reasons were the least important influence on the choice of qualification, but the influence of parents on this decision was not consistent with the findings of the exploratory phase.

Reputational factors including 'institutional reputation', 'accreditation status', 'quality of lecture panel' and 'university ranking' were amongst the highest rankest influences on the students' choice of institute. However, recommendations by parents, relatives, friends and teachers were not seen to have a significant impact on this choice decision. The survey also revealed that constant follow-up calls and e-mails from the institutes were considered a nuisance by the students and did not serve in positively influencing the students to choose the institute. Moreover, although campus-related reasons as a whole were not considered to be a significant

influence on the choice of institute, factors such as 'facilities available' and 'technology used in class' were highly ranked; 'extra-curricular activities' were only found to positively influence the decision of students seeking academic qualifications. Amongst the various convenience factors, only 'availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time' was considered to be a significant influence, and all the other factors scored neutral ratings. Lastly, financial factors were seen as a fairly neutral influence on the choice of institute, with the exception of 'affordability of tuition fees', which was highly ranked.

The institutional website was the option selected by the majority of students across all HEIs as the most useful, significant and convenient source of information. All the other media channels were ranked really low, and this was attributed to the target audiences being different (Eg: Parents) and the main purpose of these channels being to create brand awareness rather than act as information sources. Parents, relatives and teachers were not considered to be very important sources of information, despite the activity carried by the HEIs to create awareness amongst these segments. When it came to friends, however, although they were not seen to be a significant influence on the choice of institute, they were a comparatively more important source of information. 'Educational exhibitions' and school promotions, such as 'seminars/career guidance workshops at schools' were also noted as comparatively important sources of information. Marketing collateral was not considered to be an important source of information by the students.

In terms of factors influencing post-enrolment satisfaction, the friendliness of lecturers and staff topped the list, albeit with neutral ratings; other highly ranked factors included 'graduation ceremony' and 'quality of tuition'. The survey findings also revealed that students were the most disappointed with 'facilities available' as the expectations here had been rather high, but surprisingly, they were fairly neutral about 'tuition fees', despite exploratory findings to the contrary. The majority of the students have indicated that they would recommend their institutes to others as they had had a good experience, felt that the quality of tuition was high and that the administration was good, whereas a small percentage had indicated that they were

not happy about their post-enrolment experience due to various reasons, as a result of which they would either not recommend the institute at all or give negative recommendations. Moreover, the provision of incentives by the institutes was suspected to have an influence on positive recommendations.

Lastly, the study also revealed that in Sri Lanka, the majority of students who pursue higher education at undergraduate level are between the ages of 18-20 years, and this trend was seen to be consistent with that of the UK, where there has been an increase in the number of students aged 20 and under who enrol for higher education qualifications (HESA UK, 2013, cited in Universities UK, 2013 at p.13).

The ensuing chapters contain a detailed discussion of each of the HEIs under consideration – Alpha Institute is presented in Chapter 7, Beta Institute in Chapter 8, Gamma Institute in Chapter 9 and finally Delta Institute in Chapter 10, whilst Chapter 11 will comprise a comprehensive summary of the findings of Chapters 7-10.

CHAPTER 7 : EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM INSTITUTE CASE STUDY I

7.1. INTRODUCTION

The next few chapters, commencing from this one, are dedicated towards analysing each of the four HEIs selected. The researcher has placed special emphasis on analysing what these HEIs are doing in order to attract the students, how they are positioning themselves in the market and the overall experience that they are offering to their students. This analysis would directly reflect on student perspectives provided in the first two phases of the research and the researcher hopes to draw some conclusions with regard to the effectiveness of HEIs' marketing strategies on influencing student choice. Each of these chapters would follow a similar structure and present a contextual background to the HEIs and would discuss the HEI's strategies in the context of the marketing mix.

7.2. ALPHA INSTITUTE – A CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Alpha Institute is a private limited company established in 2001 and was the first institute in Sri Lanka to offer tuition for one of the well-reputed UK-based professional qualifications in accountancy. It is currently Sri Lanka's highest accredited institute for that particular qualification and has been so for the past six years. Such accreditation is awarded by the professional body in the UK to learning providers as a guarantee to students that the institute's pass rates for every single subject at consecutive exam sessions exceeds global pass rates. With a student population of over 2500 students, Alpha Institute offers a diverse portfolio of professional and academic qualifications related to Accountancy, Finance and Business Management and also provides tuition for Cambridge and Edexcel O/L and A/L exams.

7.3. ALPHA INSTITUTE – MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE
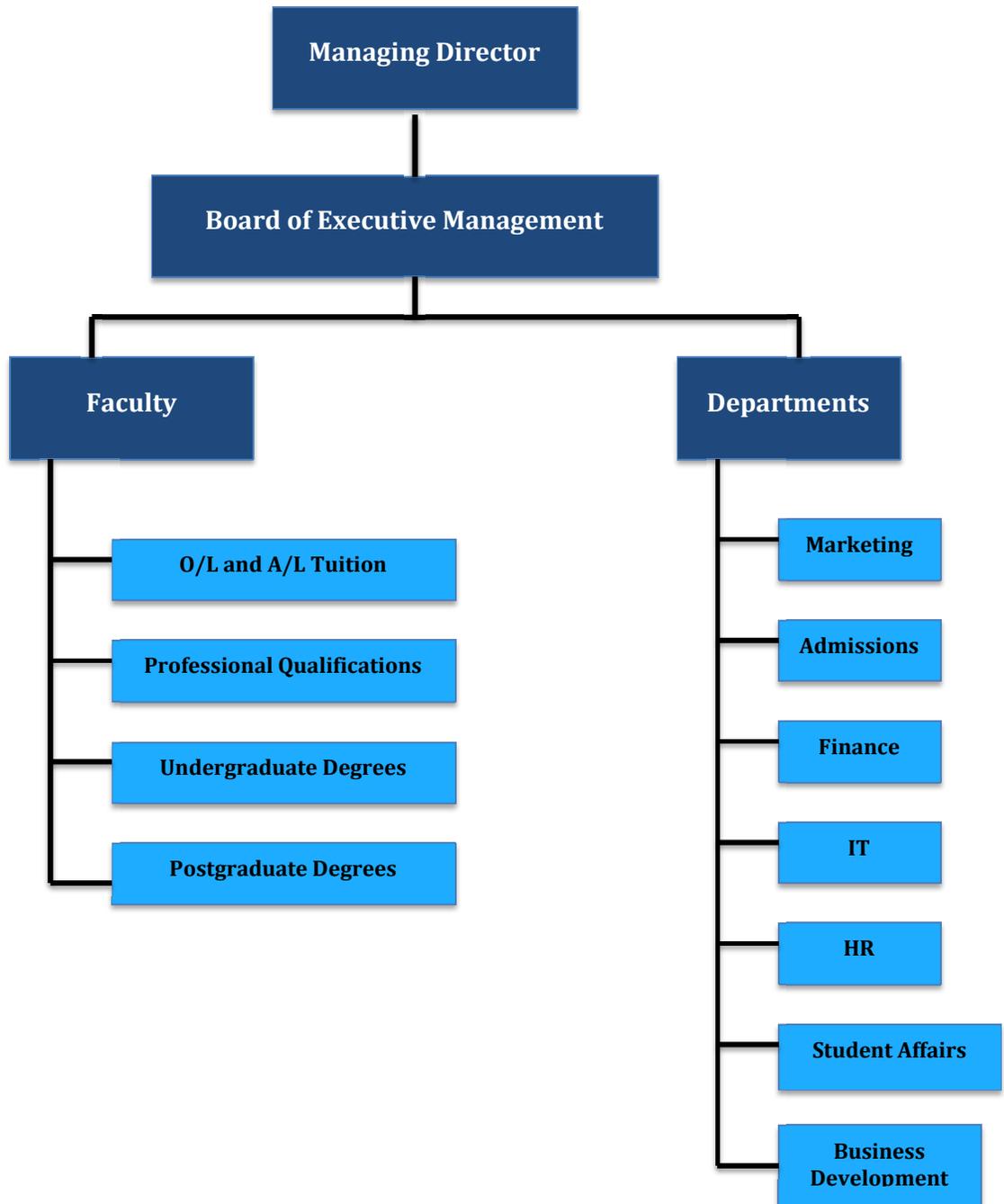
The management structure of Alpha Institute is not a very complicated one. The institute is lead by the Managing Director and the Board of

Executive Management, with two primary sub-divisions – Faculty and Departments. The faculty is further sub-divided by the types of programmes offered, and the departments are also sub-divided according to the range of functions that take place on a day-to-day basis.

7.4. PROGRAMME

As mentioned in section 7.2 above, although Alpha Institute offers a diverse portfolio of qualifications, the programme that is currently under focus is the professional qualification in accountancy. It is a globally recognised professional accountancy body based in the UK, with a growing demand in Sri Lanka and around the world. One of the main advantages and key differentiators of this qualification is that through a series of unique partnerships, students also have the opportunity to simultaneously gain an undergraduate and postgraduate degree from two well-reputed UK universities.

The entry requirements for this professional programme are quite relaxed. Students may join after their O/Ls or A/Ls, irrespective of which stream they followed at school. As such, many students from non-commerce backgrounds sign up for this programme. However, this qualification faces intense competition from other accountancy bodies, all of which have a much higher market share in Sri Lanka. Moreover, as there is a perception that this particular qualification is tough, there is also a threat from other academic qualifications, particularly from UK universities operating in Sri Lanka.

Another key differentiating strategy employed by Alpha Institute that goes hand in hand with the key product offering is its in-house job bank through which students are placed in top conglomerates in Sri Lanka. The marketing personnel interviewed stated:

"We want to mould our students into becoming forward-thinking finance professionals, and for that, they need to have hands-on experience in a corporate

environment. Even if you're qualified, finding a job today is not at all easy, so with our job bank, we are giving them a competitive edge over others. We use this as a promotional tool..." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Alpha Institute)

Alpha Institute has partnered with a number of companies in a variety of industries ranging from (but not limited to) manufacturing, apparel, banking, financial services, airline, hospitality and telecommunications, with a separate team of staff allocated to look into this. As students are required to record thirty-six months of relevant practical experience, this is a real value addition to them. Although certain academics have argued that being employed simultaneously while studying can have a negative impact on pedagogies and pass rates, as this is a professional qualification, this practical experience would actually help the students in addressing case study scenarios at exams (Boden and Nedeva, 2009).

A few students commented on this, saying,

"I wanted to start working when I was in the second stage of the qualification. But it was really difficult to find a job. Then I got to know about Alpha Institute's job bank and I sent my CV to them and I was able to find a job in less than four months. I am so grateful!" (Interview: Participant 2)

"Everyone thinks getting audit experience is compulsory. It's not. I hated the thought of working at an audit firm and thanks to Alpha Institute's job bank, I had other choices, and am now working at HSBC. " (Interview: Participant 3)

7.5.   PRICE

Due to the high levels of competitive rivalry in the market from direct and indirect competitors, Alpha Institute is compelled to maintain its fees at market rates. This makes it quite challenging for Alpha Institute as it needs to adequately compensate its team of experienced lecturers in order to motivate and retain them, in order to managing marketing costs which are quite high, and also managing other overhead costs.

As Sri Lanka is a cost-conscious market, the only way to attract students is by offering significant discounts on course fees and various other waivers on registration, first year subscription and exemption fees (if any). Special scholarships are also awarded on a case-by-case basis to high performers at A/L examinations. After claiming the special offers other than scholarships, the full programme at Alpha Institute would cost approximately LKR 650,000 for the two and a half year duration, inclusive of examination fees. However, there is a significant difference between the pricing structures of professional and academic qualifications in Sri Lanka, where professional qualifications are seen to be more cost-effective in terms of tuition fees. This may be a key factor that influences students to chose professional qualifications over academic qualifications.

7.6.   PLACE

Until early 2017, Alpha Institute had three campuses in the heart of Colombo, and two campuses based out of Colombo. All these were located close to major roads, highways and/or railways facilitating great accessibility. However, it has now downsized its operations in Colombo from three to two campuses, and completely ceased operations at both campuses based out of Colombo.

The main campus is a three-storied building, with each classroom fully equipped with air conditioning and multimedia facilities. Alpha Institute also has two

computer labs, which are Pearson-VUE approved centres where students can sit for their computer-based exams. There are a large variety of restaurants, bistros, coffee shops, pubs, clubs, hotels, malls, supermarkets, theatres and cinemas in the vicinity of the main campus, which is a significant benefit from the perspective of the students. There are also a number of popular sports complexes and parks around the area and students are often found frequenting these places during their spare time.

The rationale for having multiple campuses in Colombo is to cater to the high demand for tuition, as there are four main intakes for a year and the course is delivered through classroom-based tuition; at the moment, there are no online or distance-learning programmes available at Alpha Institute. Students have the freedom to choose to study at whichever location they prefer, and as a means of added flexibility, the institute also offers full-time and part-time delivery models.

With regard to the campuses based out of Colombo, it is always a challenge for the institute to source experienced and competent lecturers from those regions. More often than not, students at those locations prefer lecturers from Colombo, so then the institute is required to provide transportation for Colombo-based lecturers to travel outside for lectures and motivate them to want to travel out of Colombo as well, which pose certain logistical difficulties. This could be the underlying reason as to why operations at these locations have now ceased. In any case, students from out of Colombo have indicated that they prefer to travel to Colombo as they believe the quality of tuition in Colombo is higher, and also because there are more job opportunities available in the city.

One student said:
"I am from Negambo [a city that is about 38 km away from Colombo] *and although the institute has a campus close to my home, I prefer to come for the classes which are conducted in Colombo. This is because Colombo has a lot more activity going on and I have a wider choice of lecturers to choose from..."* (Interview: Participant 1)

Another student stated:

"Previously, I used to live in Kandy [a main city that is about 133 km away from Colombo] *but I realised that there are much more job opportunities in Colombo. So now I am staying in Colombo at a rented apartment and following classes here…"*
(Interview: Participant 4)

It should be noted that although the institute does attract students from all over Sri Lanka, the majority of them are originally from Colombo. Moreover, Alpha Institute attracts around 200 foreign students, mostly from the Maldives, who come to Sri Lanka to study at the campuses in Colombo.

Alpha Institute also has operations overseas, in countries like the Maldives and India through partnerships with existing institutions, and is also looking at entering other markets in the region, such as Bangladesh, Nepal and the Middle East. In these instances, tutors from Alpha Institute visit those foreign campuses to conduct intensive revision courses closer to the exam sessions.

7.7.   PROMOTION

The manner by which the institute communicates with prospective students and their parents is a very important component of its marketing strategy. Firstly, the researcher focuses on defining the target markets of Alpha Institute and giving some context with regard to its key timelines that are important for all promotional activity. Next, the discussion and analysis of Alpha Institute's promotional activities will be classified under the various elements of the promotional mix – advertising, PR and sponsorships, direct marketing, personal selling and sales promotions. Alpha Institute's internal communications strategy will also be discussed here.

7.7.1. *Target markets*

Alpha Institute's main target markets for this particular professional accountancy qualification consist of post-O/L students who are awaiting results and post-A/L students who are awaiting results, who are typically between the ages of 16-20 years, and, as Sri Lanka is primarily a parent-funded market, it is also necessary to create awareness amongst the parents. In addition to this, there is a small percentage of students who come into the programme after completing their degree, at the age of around 23 years; however as that segment of the population is very small and consists of mature student-consumers, this research focuses on the other segments mentioned above.

7.7.2. *Key marketing timelines*

Before discussing the marketing campaigns in length, it is important to set out a few key timelines. Students following the local curriculum sit for their O/L exams in December, with results being released in April, whereas the A/L exams are conducted in August, with results being released by December. Students who follow the Cambridge and Edexcel curricula sit for their O/L and A/L exams in May/June, and receive their results in mid-August. Alpha Institute has four intakes a year, each six months in duration – January intake (for June exams), March intake (September exams), July intake (December exams) and September intake (March exams). Accordingly, in order to attract these target segments, Alpha Institute schedules its marketing campaigns to coincide with these key timelines, mostly a few months before the key exams take place.

7.7.3.   Advertising

Alpha Institute engages in a range of marketing and promotional activity. The most standard way is through advertisements in local newspapers. While the majority of the advertisements are placed in popular English newspapers such as the Sunday Times, Sunday Observer and Daily FT, occasionally ads are placed in Sinhala newspapers such as Mawbima, Lakbima and Lankadeepa, and Tamil newspapers such as Thinakkural and Virakesari. The cost of advertising in newspapers is very high and hence, a significant budget of around Rs. 5-6 million is allocated for this component alone on a per annum basis, according to media sources. Press advertising is directly targeted towards the parents since the students are not expected to be regular readers of newspapers. As such, press ads would most often contain a lot of factual information that parents would look for, such as discounts and scholarships, course duration and accreditation and may not actually be very visually appealing as the reader audience would be mature. Interestingly, Alpha Institute uses the main colours of the particular accountancy body when marketing itself, so that consumers can easily identify Alpha Institute with this particular accountancy body.

Next, Alpha Institute is well known for its billboards in strategic locations such as in close proximity to major schools in Colombo, which have a clear vantage point for motorists passing by. The objective behind outdoor advertising through billboards is not so much to generate instant recruitment. Instead, it serves in reinforcing the brand, making it memorable in the minds of the public through brand recall and thereby making it a household name (Capitol, 2016). For example, just as in the US, people would refer to "Xerox" a document, or have a "Kodak" moment, use a "Kleenex" or even "Google" something, Alpha Institute's marketing strategies over time have been intended towards making the professional qualification's brand synonymous with Alpha Institute, so that any student choosing this qualification would automatically gravitate towards Alpha Institute without second thought. The researcher has observed that all of Alpha Institute's hoardings contain just one key heading or catchy tag line, its contact details, and sometimes an image like a

graduation or student photo to make it look more visually appealing, and hence, the main message is very clear and visible from quite a distance.

Radio ads and endorsements are also used, but not very often as this too is very costly, especially for airtime during peak hours which is 7.00 – 9.00 am and 5.00 – 8.00 pm. However, the exact return on spend (which is fairly high), is hitherto known.

Also falling under the promotional mix element of advertising would be social media activity by Alpha Institute. The main platform currently being used is Facebook, where sponsored ads are used to target audiences categorised by age. Here, Alpha Institute is seen as having very colourful ads with more images to visually attract the younger audiences, and more sophisticated, professional-looking ads to cater to parental audiences. Pictures and videos of student events are also uploaded on the page, which is a resounding success as this greatly increases student engagement. Alpha Institute has also very recently started to be active on Instagram targeting younger audiences, but the researcher is unable to effectively comment on this as there has not been much activity yet on this platform.

During the interview with the marketing personnel of Alpha Institute, the researcher detected a slight note of reluctance to further explain Alpha's marketing strategies, and hence, all the information presented above has been through general observation and the researcher's working knowledge of the industry.

7.7.4.   PR and sponsorships

Alpha Institute also engages in a fair amount of PR activity and sponsorships. For instance, it provides sponsorships for school commerce days, prizegivings, sports days, past pupil dinner dances and similar events. Again, this does not contribute to instant recruitment, but helps in building the brand over a period of time. In addition to this, Alpha Institute ensures that it undertakes a few CSR projects each year to give back to the society, for example providing disaster relief for the victims affected

by the floods, droughts and the recent garbage disaster where a garbage mountain collapsed on a village.

7.7.5. *Direct marketing*

Direct marketing is another form of promotions employed by Alpha Institute. By conducting seminars and career guidance workshops in schools across the island, the institute is able to directly promote its product to the students while they are still at school. Alpha Institute also recently organised an inter-school quiz for A/L commerce stream students, which was the first of its kind in Sri Lanka, and it created a lot of brand awareness amongst the direct target market.

Moreover, in Sri Lanka, as supplementary tuition is very popular and almost a staple in high school education, partnering with prominent tuition teachers who are well known in their relative subject areas has helped Alpha Institute in reaching out to its potential future student base. For example, the institute has partnered up with a key individual who conducts classes for A/L Accounting who has produced several island ranking students. As his classes have a very high demand, with as many as 250-300 students per class, it is very beneficial for the institute when he promotes Alpha Institute's product to his students. These students are provided with institutional leaflets and are offered special discounts and scholarships. The details of all these students are also provided to the institute, and e-mail and SMS campaigns are also carried out. While this may seem like a violation of data protection rights, it should be noted that in Sri Lanka, data protection laws are not strictly enforced and many are not even aware what it means. Distributing leaflets outside exam centres is another popular way of direct marketing. Furthermore, Alpha Institute organises an open day twice a year, where prospective students are invited to participate in order to gain more information regarding the institute.

7.7.6.   Personal selling

Alpha Institute also engages in personal selling at educational exhibitions such as Edex Expos in January and September, and Future Minds Expo in June. Potential students and their parents are provided with all the information they would require to make the decision, including information about the qualification and institution, fee structures, class timetables, brochures containing testimonials of graduates and prizewinners, to name a few. Personal selling also takes place when information is provided to potential students and parents when enquiries come through e-mail via the company website or calls. Alpha Institute has trained its front office staff to be warm, friendly and informative so that the potential customers feel at ease when obtaining information regarding the qualification and institute.

7.7.7.   Sales promotions

As mentioned in section 7.5 above, as sales promotions, Alpha Institute offers the initial registration fee and first year subscription fee free of charge during key enrolment periods. To top it off, students are also provided with original UK-printed study material (i.e. study text and revision kit) free of charge for every subject. Moreover, sometimes discount coupons are issued at educational expos where students can redeem them at certain, specified intakes.

7.7.8.   Internal communication

In terms of internal communication strategies with existing students, Alpha Institute regularly posts about events and other activities on its Facebook page, and prior to the commencement of each semester, every student is sent a copy of the timetable via post. Moreover, during lectures, the lecturers also verbally inform the students regarding exam entry deadlines, student events and so on.

7.8.   PROCESSES

At Alpha Institute, there are a few key processes that should be particularly emphasised in the context of this study.

7.8.1   Enrolment

Firstly, the enrolment process is very important because it involves using that extra bit of convincing ability to get the student to make the final decision to enrol at the institute. Once that decision has been made, the manner by which the student is taken through the enrolment process also creates an impression of the HEI in the minds of the students and their parents. Hence, the institute-student relationship is very important at all stages in the student enrolment process.

During the interview with the marketing personnel of Alpha Institute, the following perspective by the institute was revealed:

"The enrolment process is one of the most important internal processes that we have. All the hard work that the marketing team puts in would go to waste if we did not do our jobs properly and process their applications properly. Ofcourse the enrolment process is linked to some other processes as well, for example the IT lab staff are the ones who register the student online with the professional body; we only handle the enrolment with Alpha Institute. But here's the thing, if someone else, like the marketing team for example, messes up, students would not realise that, but if we mess up their registration, that they do notice, and could really affect Alpha's reputation among the students." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Alpha Institute)

At Alpha Institute, 51% of the students mentioned that the enrolment process was "very smooth", 43% said it was "average; can't complain", while only 6% stated that it was "complicated and messy" (See Figure 7.2 below). These student ratings further support the importance placed on this particular internal process by Alpha Institute and also indicate that the process that Alpha Institute currently has in place in respect

of handling student enrolments appears to be fairly satisfactory, with room for improvement

Enrolment process at Alpha Institute

Category	Percentage
Very smooth	51%
Average; can't complain	43%
Complicated and messy	6%
Waste of time	0%
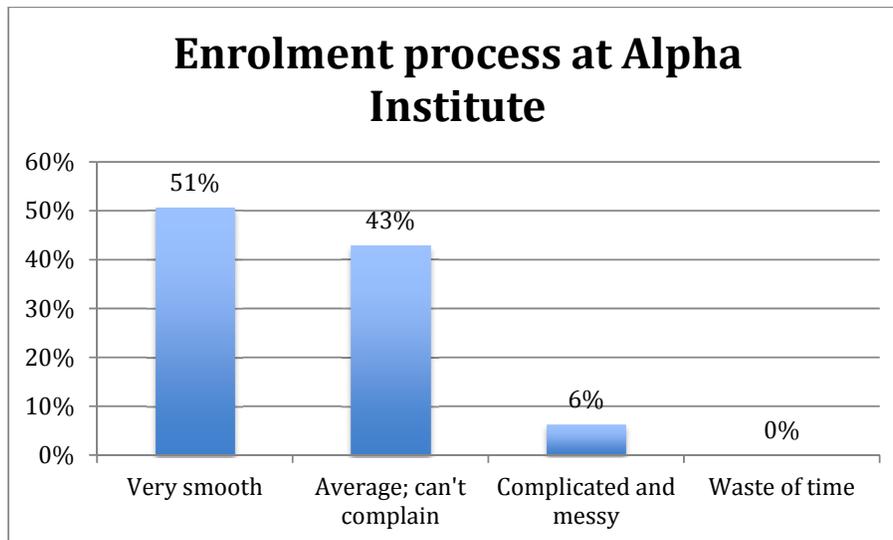
During the interview phase, students indicated the following:

"At the time I was enrolling, the phone kept ringing in the office and my counsellor was compelled to answer it. I found this a bit distracting." (Interview: Participant 3)

"When I came to the institute that day, I was not sure whether I would actually choose to study this qualification. But the sir who spoke to me explained the whole programme very clearly, and then my parents and me decided to register. The registration process was very easy. All we had to do was submit the required documents (which we had already brought with us), fill in a form and make the initial payment, and then within 2 weeks, I received an email with my registration number." (Interview: Participant 2)

Alpha Institute's standard policy is such that refunds on course fees are not permitted (except in certain extenuating circumstances), but a 100% refund of the examination fees are allowed provided the student has not already been entered for the relevant exams. Students requesting for a refunds are required to submit a letter stating the reason for doing so, along with proof of medical records or similar evidence where applicable. Once a refund request has been approved by the management, it is sent to the finance department for processing and the students are contacted when the refund is ready for collection, which is usually within a few weeks of submitting the initial request.

However, one student has indicated that this process could take an unnecessary long time.

"I requested for a refund because I got dengue haemorrhage fever and was unable to attend classes for more than half the semester. I followed the correct procedure and gave all the supporting documents as well. But it took me about one and a half months to get my refund! And that was also after a million calls by me to remind the staff to do the needful. That was quite disappointing." (Interview: Participant 1)

Although the questionnaire sent out in the course of this study did not examine such internal processes in detail, it is evident that this particular process at Alpha Institute needs to be re-evaluated because such negative feedback would destroy the institute's 'word-of-mouth' reputation, because bad word-of-mouth spreads much faster than good word-of-mouth (Bruce and Edgington, 2008).

7.8.3   *Lecturing*

Alpha Institute's original lecture panel consisted of about six full-time, very experienced individuals who are well known in the professional education industry, and some part-time lecturers who were employed in the corporate sector. Upto a few years ago, the recruitment policy was very selective and rigorous, and fairly minimal due to the existing pool of talent. However, due to management issues in recent times, most of the full-time lecturers have now resigned, and the new recruitment policy is more focused on fresh graduates, rather than on older, more experienced individuals. The main reason behind this is to curtail costs in terms of lecture fees as less-experienced tutors can be paid lower hourly rates. To make matters easier and more flexible for the institute, all lecturers now have a six-month renewable contract. Alpha Institute rarely advertises for new lecturers, as the management headhunts high-performing students and directly approaches them. When CV's are randomly received from other interested candidates, they are called in for an interview, where they would also be required to conduct a demonstration lecture.

The researcher is a bit sceptical of this approach because 'experience' is not something that should be discounted in any industry, and especially not in the higher education industry. Moreover, whilst winning a prize is a good demonstration of the student's academic prowess, it is not a manifestation of one's ability to teach others. As such, the effectiveness of this new strategy is yet to be witnessed and could possibly be an area for future research.

7.8.4   Class cancellations

Although Alpha Institute strives to achieve a zero cancellation policy, sometimes the lecturers would need to cancel the classes due to inevitable circumstances. In the event of such last-minute cancellations, Alpha's student affairs team is required to send a text message to or call the students and inform them of this. However, due to delays, there have been instances where some students only received this message after they entered the premises, which resulted in a horde of angry parents storming in to complain.

"I hate it when classes get cancelled on such short notice. It is very inconvenient as we could not make other plans on that day as we expected the lecture to be held. It's even worse when it gets re-scheduled to another day. I suppose sometimes it is inevitable. However, my lecturer cancels his classes very often and because of this, my lecture schedule is very erratic." (Interview: Participant 5)

"I actually like it when lectures get cancelled on short notice. Then I can go have fun with my friends. My parents really don't like it though." (Interview: Participant 2)

As indicated by the students in the exploratory interviews, Alpha Institute should look into improving the class cancellation policy and process. They could perhaps reconsider renewing the contracts of lecturers who cancel their classes on a regular basis.

7.8.5.   Computer-based examinations

This is another key process of Alpha Institute that was examined in detail by the researcher. The first four subjects of this professional qualification are assessed through on-demand computer-based examinations (on-demand signifying that students are able to sit for the exam on a date and at a time convenient to them, as opposed to the other subjects for which an exam date is fixed by professional body). The procedure that needs to be followed by any student when booking an exam is

that he or she needs to fill in a form available at the office, check with the IT lab regarding the availability of time slots on the preferred day, and make the relevant payment. On the day of the exam, the students are required to arrive half an hour prior to the scheduled time, with their national ID cards and exam payment receipts. Students are not permitted to sit for their exams without producing valid identification. Students are allowed to re-schedule their exams if they wish to do so, but a re-scheduling fee of LKR 3,500 is charged so that students are deterred from re-scheduling. Students also have the option of attempting upto three practice mock exams prior to their exam and this is done free of charge. The slots need to be booked through a process identical to the one mentioned above. Separate teams of staff have been allocated to verify student details, run the exams, invigilate and troubleshoot when any tech problems arise.

7.9. PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

All of Alpha Institute's buildings are painted white externally and a number of panels highlighting its portfolio of qualifications are displayed, along with colourful pictures of graduates. However, the institute is currently undergoing a change to its usual external branding strategy, where the management has decided that a more corporate look with less graphical images is preferred. Internally, the walls are painted blue and orange, which are the institute's corporate colours. The lobby has sofas to match, and all the office cabins and classrooms also follow the same theme with matching furniture. Moreover, every classroom is fully equipped with state-of-the art multimedia equipment and air conditioning. On every staircase landing, there are portraits with testimonials from high-performing students and graduates, and lecturers who have produced prizewinners for multiple sessions; the lift is also branded internally and externally.

In terms of corporate branding, while the staff members do not have a uniform, Alpha Institute-branded t-shirts have been provided to the staff to wear whenever the occasion permits. All company business cards, letterheads, envelopes and tickets for

student events bear the Alpha Institute logo, with the promotional leaflets and brochures often taking on the corporate colours of the professional body.

In terms of promotional merchandise, Alpha Institute has pens, notebooks, bookmarks and key tags branded with its logo, and these items are distributed to prospective students at seminars and career guidance workshops conducted in schools.

7.10.   PEOPLE

Being an educational institute, lecturers form the most integral part of the business. They are the ones who directly interact with the students and leave a lasting impression by ensuring that they pass on the first attempt, which serves as a powerful marketing tool. In fact, 74% of the students of Alpha Institute have indicated that the quality of the lecture panel was a very important consideration that influenced their decision in choosing to study at Alpha Institute (See Table 6.8 in section 6.4 above). Alpha Institute has profiled each of its lecturers on its website, giving details of their credentials and industry experience, and a photograph of each of the lecturers dressed in professional attire can also be found there, so that prospective students and parents are able to find out all the information they need regarding the quality of the lecture panel. Alpha Institute considers its lecture panel to be a significant competitive advantage that distinguishes it from its competitors, and as such, Alpha Institute is very selective in recruiting lecturers, and only hires those who have adequate corporate exposure, and professional qualifications in accountancy and finance, with additional academic qualifications being an added advantage. As being a lecturer at Alpha Institute is a highly sought-after job, most of the time, the institute does not have to advertise for lecturer vacancies, as interested candidates would have sent in their CVs expressing interest. The potential candidates are then called in for an interview, where they would also be required to conduct a demonstration lecture. Based on this, new lecturers are selected and receive a six-month renewable contract.

According to Alpha Institute's staff member who was interviewed,

"We usually headhunt. In addition to that, we get our high-performing students to be under-study tutors, so that they can learn from experienced tutors. Everyone has renewable contracts and this works for Alpha Institute because the lecturers too have the flexibility to decline classes when it conflicts with their other commitments, and it gives us the opportunity to try out new lecturers who sometimes end up producing prizewinners." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Alpha Institute)

Alpha Institute's marketing and administrative staff members are also very important because they too communicate directly with the student and are the first point of contact that the student has with the institute. In order to ensure that these staff members possess the correct mindset and attitude to be able to interact with students in a friendly, professional manner, Alpha Institute conducts training sessions a few times a year.

Last but certainly not the least, as current students are very important ambassadors, Alpha Institute organises a range of student events each year, such as an Annual Dinner Dance, Day-Out, Sports Day and religious and cultural events such as Sinhala and Tamil New Year, Ifthar and Thaipongal festivities, and a Pirith ceremony for Vesak. Alpha Institute also hold an Annual Graduation and Awards Night where graduates and prizewinners are recognised for their outstanding academic and extra-curricular achievements.

As part of Alpha Institute's relationship marketing strategy, students are considered to be part of the Alpha family (Yang *et al, 2008).* Most senior staff members know students by their names and the students know that they can meet lecturers and other staff members at any time without prior appointments, and an informal, friendly culture is encouraged at Alpha Institute. In fact, one of Alpha Institute's key differentiators is that students consider it to be their *"…home away from home."* (Interview: Participant 2) Alpha Institute can be said to have a high level of 'relationship quality', which has been defined by Al-Alak (2006) as perceptions held

by customers of the behaviour of individual employees, where behaviour refers to the extent of warmth, friendliness, respect and empathy demonstrated.

Moreover, to ensure that students are given the opportunity to voice their concerns and make suggestions, an evaluation is conducted per subject, thrice every semester (De Shields *et al,* 2005). The first evaluation, which is conducted in the fifth week after lectures have commenced, assesses the basic processes such as student perspectives on the enrolment process, efficiency of staff attitudes and general classroom facilities. The second evaluation, which is conducted in the middle of the session, assesses the lecturers' punctuality, lecture delivery methods and efficiency and also inquires about desired areas for revision. Through this, all students get the opportunity to give individual feedback regarding the lecturers for each subject. While there is a possibility of bias occurring with this type of evaluation tool, it is still a useful mechanism for Alpha Institute to assess lecturer performance so that they can renew the contracts of lecturers that satisfy student expectations (Popli, 2005; Liaw and Goh, 2003). The final course evaluation, conducted in the last week of lectures, requests for overall feedback on the lecturers' performance, coverage of syllabus and overall satisfaction with the course. These feedback forms are first screened by a manager in the Student Affairs department, and any anomalies are then brought to the attention of the Managing Director, who puts in place a mechanism to bring about timely remedial action.

7.11.   SUMMARY

This chapter has gone into an in-depth case study analysis of the marketing strategies employed by Alpha Institute to attract prospective students (and retain current students). This case study analysis has also been successful in establishing connections between findings from the exploratory interview and student survey phases.

While the standard 7Ps model has been applied here, it is clear that Alpha Institute places special emphasis on some elements over others, which reinforces Maringe's (2005) view that a blanket approach cannot be followed when applying any of the marketing theories to all institutions as each HEI would adopt different marketing strategies to suit their respective corporate objectives.

CHAPTER 8 : EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM INSTITUTE CASE STUDY II

## 8.1.	INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the second HEI (i.e. Beta Institute) chosen for the purposes of this study. Firstly, a contextual background to the HEI is presented, and its marketing strategies to attract students are analysed in the context of the marketing mix.

## 8.2.	BETA INSTITUTE – A CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Beta Institute, established in 2002, is a private limited company offering tuition for another UK-based professional qualification in accountancy. Presently, it is the largest tuition provider for that particular qualification in Sri Lanka. It was awarded the highest form of accreditation by the particular professional body and is an indication of very high levels of quality in tuition, pass rates higher than world pass rates and high student satisfaction ratings. It is no surprise then, that Beta Institute has received the ISO 9001:2008 quality certification for its superior management system. Beta Institute has a student population of over 5000 students and also offers a top up degree in Accounting from a reputed UK university.

Figure 8.1: Beta Institute management structure
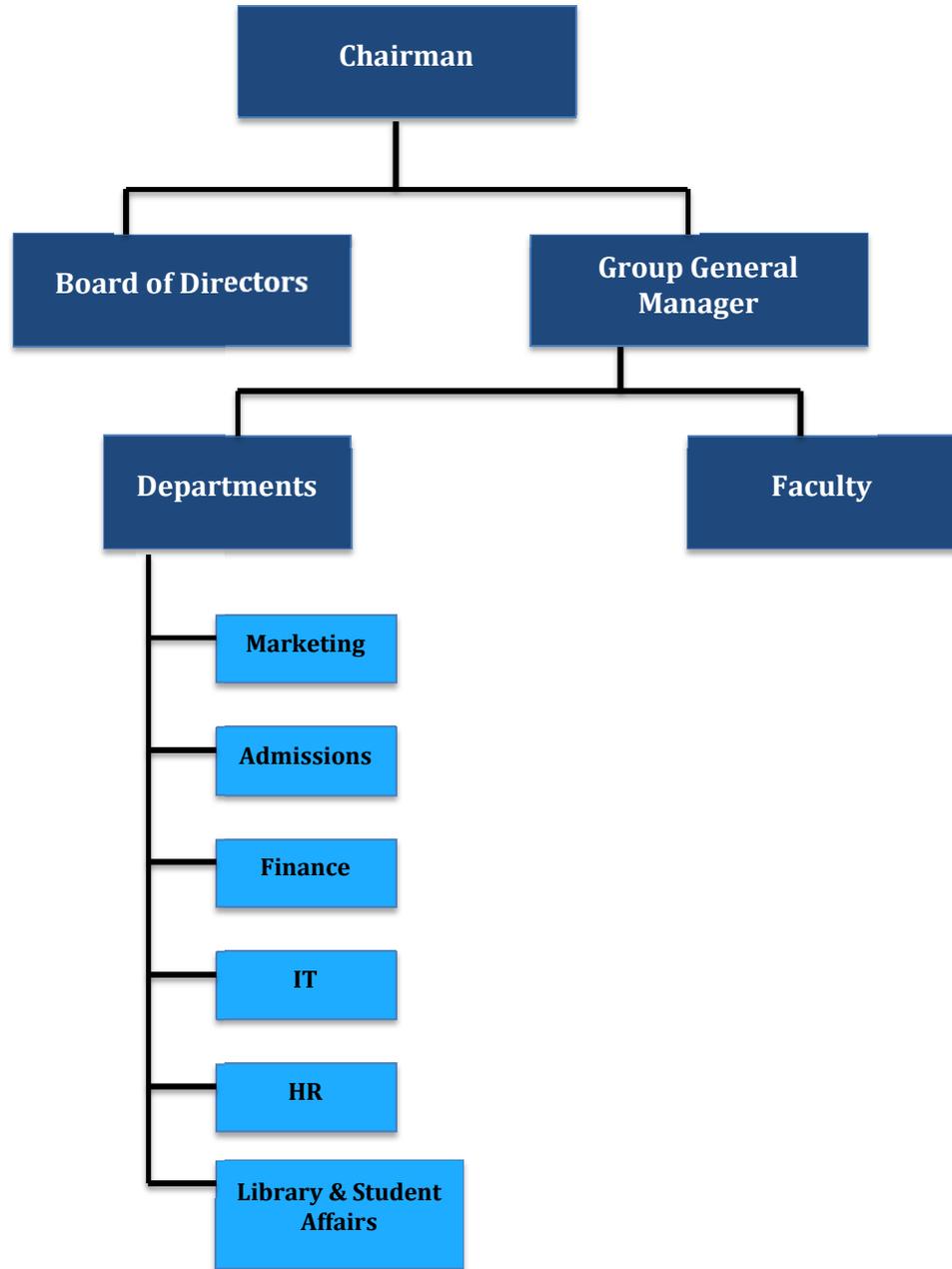
The majority of Beta Institute's Board of Directors and the Chairman are based overseas. As such, the Group General Manager is the key person responsible for the overall operation in Sri Lanka. The rest of the departments and the academic faculty also fall under his purview, with special focus on the marketing department where he is often seen to be directly involved in.

8.4.   PROGRAMME

The main qualification offered by Beta Institute is that of a globally recognised professional accountancy body based in the UK, with Sri Lanka being the second largest market in the world after UK for this qualification, so it is a high priority market for the professional body. Recently, the professional body celebrated fifty years of operations in Sri Lanka and has a large number of members and students.

Similar to the professional qualification offered by Alpha Institute, this professional qualification too has similar, relaxed entry requirements, where students are able to join after their O/Ls, even if they have not attempted (or do not intend to attempt) their A/Ls. However, as expected, this professional qualification too faces direct competition from other accountancy bodies and indirect competition from HEIs offering academic qualifications.

8.5.   PRICE

As in the case of Alpha Institute discussed in section 7.5 above, it is a very competitive environment and in order to battle competition and attract and retain students, Beta Institute has put in place a fee structure that is more or less on par with other tuition providers and significantly cheaper than its academic competitors. As Sri Lanka is a very cost-conscious market, it is not always advisable to charge a premium for quality tuition. However, it is an ongoing battle to charge a level of fees that is not too high to deter students, but at the same time, something that is high enough to allow the institute to be able to adequately compensate the lecturers above

and beyond the market rates so that they remain motivated to perform to the best of their abilities. Beta Institute also incurs significant costs in respect of marketing and overheads such as staff salaries and maintenance of library and other classroom facilities.

Beta Institute offers scholarships to O/L and A/L high performers, based on an interview. The strategy of offering scholarship schemes and discounts in a market with a low to moderate socio-economic status has been generally agreed to be a good one because the likelihood of students enrolling at such institutes would be higher when such financial assistance is offered (Cabrera and Nasa, 2009). Moreover, as the scholarships are primarily offered to high achievers, Beta Institute ensures that it attracts keen students who would be capable of progressing with the qualification. Unfortunately, the prevailing competitive market conditions do not permit Beta Institute the luxury of further reducing fees for students who are under-privileged and of low economic status. Accordingly, the total cost that a student would incur to follow the professional qualification at Beta Institute would be around LKR 512,000, inclusive of examination fees over the two-three year period.

8.6.   PLACE

Beta Institute has a state-of-the-art three-storied campus facility in the heart of Colombo, in fact, just minutes away from Alpha Institute. It is also interesting to note that Beta Institute initially commenced operations in a temporary building. However, due to increasing demand and success in pass rates, the management of Beta Institute decided to move to a facility fully owned by them, in the location it is today. Although the institute attracts students from across the island, it has not yet established campuses in cities outside Colombo. Beta Institute has a fully equipped library and a computer lab, which is a Pearson-VUE licensed centre for computer-based exams. The classrooms are all air conditioned and has multimedia facilities. Beta Institute also has four air-conditioned auditoriums and a cafeteria. Moreover, as it is located in the same area as Alpha Institute, students have access to a number of

leisure and entertainment activities, with plenty of restaurants, coffee stops, cinemas and malls nearby.

The institute has four main intakes for a year and the course is delivered solely through classroom-based tuition. Although there is no online-based learning available at Beta Institute at present, there are plans in the pipeline to do so in the near future. The institute also offers full-time and part-time delivery models so that students can study at their convenience.

8.7.   PROMOTION

Through this case study analysis, the researcher hopes to analyse the promotional strategies of Beta Institute, commencing with defining its target markets and key marketing timelines. The elements of the promotional mix will also be discussed separately here.

8.7.1.   *Target market*

As in the case of Alpha Institute, Beta Institute's main target segments are the students who are after their O/Ls and A/Ls, typically between the ages of 16-20 years, and their parents. It is important to note that Beta Institute mostly focuses on students following the local curriculum and not so much the UK curriculum. This is because research done by Beta Institute has shown that the majority of the students who follow the UK curriculum for their O/Ls and A/Ls tend to go overseas to pursue higher studies, and as such, the management of Beta Institute feels it more prudent to invest in marketing to students following the local curriculum (Interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute).

8.7.2. Key marketing timelines

Beta Institute's main intakes for the year are in September, December, February and June, which once again coincide with the local examination cycles, as well as the professional body's exam cycles.

8.7.3. Advertising

Beta Institute runs a moderate amount of press advertisements to target the parents, with the majority of them being in major English newspapers such as the Sunday Times, Sunday Observer and Daily FT and in popular business magazines such as LMD and Echelon. A few ads can also be found in Sinhala newspapers such as Lankadeepa. According to media sources, Beta Institute spends around Rs. 2 million on print media advertising each year. Although Beta Institute's intention is to deliver the key information to the readers (i.e. parents), the researcher is of the view that their ads are a bit too cluttered and contains an overload of information which might make it difficult for the readers to instantly capture the main message. The vast number of colours used in these ads does not help the cause either.

Beta Institute does not have any billboards in Colombo and its suburbs. According to Beta Institute's marketing personnel interviewed,

"We do not use billboards to advertise because we have realised that for a billboard to be truly impactful and memorable, it needs to contain six words or less, and for us to convey what we need to convey in such a few words is close to impossible. But since it is pointless to display so much text on a billboard when the passers-by only glance at it for a few seconds at max, we have decided not to opt for this form of advertising. The other reason is that having one or two billboards is pointless. In order for a campaign to truly make its mark, you need to have atleast ten billboards, which comes at a great cost. We also feel that we do not need to engage in much brand building for the professional qualification itself since the local office is

actively doing this for our market...." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute)

Radio ads are also not something that Beta Institute invests in. When enquired as to why this is, Beta Institute's marketing personnel stated that as the return on investment is fairly low and sometimes even immeasurable, they prefer to engage in direct marketing or other forms of advertising that gives direct returns.

In terms of social media, Beta Institute does have its Facebook page. However, apart from a few posters being uploaded occasionally, and pictures and videos of student events, there is no other significant activity that takes place on social media for Beta Institute, which is a pity, because social media is a sure-fire way of creating awareness amongst the younger generations.

8.7.4. *PR and sponsorships*

Beta Institute sponsors a lot of school activities. For instance, it would sponsor the t-shirts of the cricket teams of boys' schools, and those t-shirts would contain Beta Institute's branding. Moreover, it provides sponsorships for various school events such as commerce days, prizegivings, drama competitions, and sporting events to name a few. Of the many CSR projects undertaken by Beta Institute, the fundraiser for cancer patients in Sri Lanka, which takes place every year, is definitely the largest CSR project on Beta's calendar. In 2017, the students of Beta Institute also raised funds in aid of the flood victims.

8.7.5. *Direct marketing*

Beta Institute engages in career guidance seminars and O/L and A/L revision seminars in schools. The contact details of these students are captured at these seminars and the institute sends out text messages to students for the first few intakes after they conclude their O/L or AL exams. Moreover, Beta Institute also conducts corporate trainings at top corporate bodies, and offers special discounts for participants at these trainings.

8.7.6. *Personal selling*

Interestingly, Beta Institute does not participate at educational expos. It is probably one of the few HEIs in Colombo who does not, and the researcher was keen to explore the reasons for this.

"We also do not participate at educational expos. The issue with educational expos is that competition is very high and any prospective students are engulfed in a sea of qualification options, which confuses them. We do not want to add to their confusion. It's as simple as that. And the benefit of this does not justify the cost of participating and constructing the stall. The professional body has its own stall, and once a student chooses this qualification, we are sure that they will choose Beta Institute because we would have already reinforced this choice while they were still schooling..." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute)

Another form of personal selling occurs when prospective students and their parents call, e-mail or visit Beta Institute to obtain more information. In the event of personal visits, the prospective students and their parents are provided with promotional brochures, class timetables and the fee structure, in addition to a detailed explanation and tour of the campus.

8.7.7. Sales promotions

At Beta Institute, students are provided with original UK-printed study material (i.e. study text, revision kit and objective test question CD) free of charge for every subject. Sometimes, Beta Institute also waives off the initial registration fee and first year subscription during peak enrolment seasons.

8.7.8. Internal communications

Beta Institute communicates with its existing students through text messages, and by posting details of activities on its Facebook page. At the end of every session, each student is given a copy of next session's timetable.

8.8. PROCESSES

The researcher has focused on a few key processes at Beta Institute, which are of particular importance to this study. The questionnaire sent out did not investigate each of these processes in depth; however, the researcher was able to gauge a general idea through the exploratory interview phase of the study.

8.8.1. Enrolment

At Beta Institute, the enrolment process is considered to be of prime importance because it is the turning point in the students' decision-making process. The staff at the information desk at the reception receives specialised etiquette training so that prospective students and parents walking in are warmly greeted and attended to, and are required to be always updated about any and all changes to the qualification so that they are able to convey accurate information to the prospective students and their parents.

"The first impression is always a lasting one, and at Beta Institute, we want to have that effect. Even if the student does not enrol for our programme in the end, if we give them the attention they require and deserve, and if we ensure that they have a good experience even for that short period of time, then our time and effort would not be wasted because that student will most definitely pass the word to his/her friends and family. And this will give us benefits in the long-term. So I feel the enrolment process is very important because it is the turning point in the students' decision-making process. This is why all our staff at the reception desk have to go through a mandatory etiquette training to ensure that the customers are greeted in the right way. There are a number of other trainings too, like on changes to the qualification, for example." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute)

In fact, students tend to compare the welcomes they receive.

"I visited two institutes with my parents before I enrolled here. In some places, the staff was not very friendly, which made me realise that they would not be any friendlier once I get registered. Frankly, this was a big deterrence to my decision. At Beta Institute, everyone was very friendly and I felt instantly comfortable…" (Interview: Participant 7)

At Beta Institute, 51% of the students mentioned that the enrolment process was "very smooth", 44% said it was "average; can't complain", while only 4% stated that it was "complicated and messy" and 1% commented that it was a waste of their time (See Figure 8.2 below). This indicates that Beta Institute's enrolment process is quite satisfactory.

Enrolment process at Beta Institute
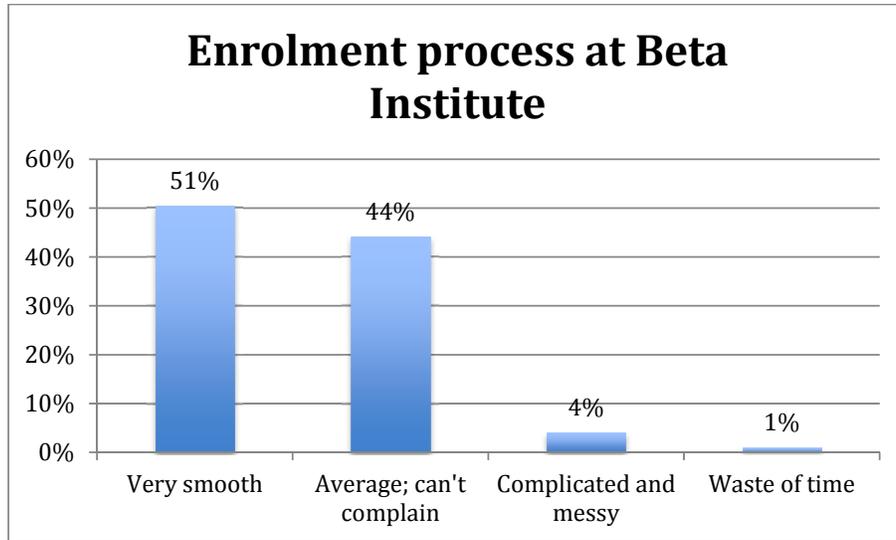
These findings were also consistent with those of the exploratory phase. One student stated,

"My enrolment was completed in less than ten minutes. The staff member who handled it was very efficient. I was provided with all the information that I needed..." (Interview: Participant 9)

8.8.2.   Refunds

Beta Institute permits refunds on course and exam fees, provided that the student can produce evidence in favour of their claim, and a written request from their parents. All refunds are processed within seven working days. Alternatively, students have the option of transferring those fees to the next session.

One student stated:

"Due to being accepted to Sri Jayawardenapura University, I was unable to go for classes one semester. So I requested for a refund. However, the staff at Beta Institute suggested that I instead defer that amount to the next semester since I was hoping to

follow classes again, so that was fine by me. The whole thing just took about half an hour to get sorted…" (Interview: Participant 8)

8.8.3.   *Lecturing*

Beta Institute's current lecture panel has been with the institute for the past decade or so and is a very experienced group of individuals, who are very well known in the higher education industry. As such, the institute does not really advertise for new recruits, as there are no major vacancies available.

"Our lecture panel is a very senior group of individuals and definitely industry veterans. They are our pride and pillar of success. We receive plenty of CVs without even advertising, so we save all of these, and when we have a requirement, we review the candidates to assess their skills, qualifications and experience, and we also audition them." (interview: Marketing personnel of Beta Institute)

However, according to Beta Institute's recruitment policy, all prospective candidates would be interviewed and then auditioned where they would be required to conduct a demonstration lecture. If successful, they would be signed up on the basis of renewable short-term contracts of six months to one year.

8.8.4.   *Class cancellations*

At Beta Institute, students are informed of class cancellations through a text message, and sometimes a call if it is on very short notice.

A student stated:
"Classes get cancelled only very very rarely. I have been studying at Beta Institute for one and a half years now, and I think classes have gotten cancelled only about thrice. During all of these times, if I remember correctly, I received an SMS from the

institute, stating that the particular was cancelled and the re-scheduled date was also communicated via the same text message…" (Interview: Participant 10)

8.8.5.   Computer-based examinations

The structure of this particular qualification is such that the majority of the subjects are assessed through on-demand computer-based exams. As on-demand exams allow students to sit for these exams on a date and at a time convenient to them, there is a significantly important back-end process that takes place at Beta Institute in this respect.

Students of Beta Institute are required to make the exam payment and fill in a form indicating their preferences of dates and times (atleast three preferences) to sit for a particular exam and this form is subsequently sent to the examination department who does the allocation according to availability. The students are then informed of the date and time via text message. Beta Institute has allocated separate teams of staff to manage these processes, in addition to running the exams, invigilation and troubleshooting when any IT problems arise.

All students are required to be present for the exam half an hour before the scheduled time and are required to produce their national ID cards and exam payment receipts, without which they would not be permitted to attempt the exam. Students are allowed to re-schedule their exams up to twenty-four hours prior to the exam, at no extra charge.

As each student is provided with a CD containing practice questions for each subject, they have the luxury of practicing for exams at their homes. However, if they wish, they may also attempt these exams at Beta Institute's library.

8.9.   PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Beta Institute takes on its corporate colours externally and internally. The exterior of the building is painted blue and white, and a clear, simple name board in white lettering can be found. The interior of the building, including its classrooms, also follows the same colour scheme, and here, internal branding is fairly prominent. Every classroom contains posters of high-performing students with testimonials, and of lecturers who produce prizewinners. Such posters can also be found in places where students usually congregate, such as the cafeteria, library and lobby. The lift is also branded. The aim of Beta Institute is to reinforce in the minds of the students that it is the best tuition provider for the particular professional qualification in the country. Each classroom is equipped with air conditioning and multi-media facilities, and Beta Institute also has four auditoriums.

Beta Institute has provided official t-shirts to its staff members and students to wear at events representing Beta Institute. Moreover, all company business cards, letterheads, envelopes and tickets for student events bear the Beta Institute logo. Beta Institute also distributes promotional merchandise in the form of branded pens, notebooks, bags and even t-shirts to prospective students.

8.10.   PEOPLE

As with all educational institutes, lecturers are at the core of the operation at Beta Institute. The lecturers are held largely responsible for the students' performance at exams and as such, Beta Institute carefully scrutinises potential candidates during the interview process. The main criteria for making it to the lecture panel of Beta Institute are being academically and professionally qualified, experienced in the corporate domain and being known in the higher education field is an added advantage. Similar to Alpha Institute, an informal culture is adopted at Beta Institute where students are allowed to freely approach lecturers to clear their doubts or even for a friendly chat.

Beta Institute considers its marketing and administrative staff members as two high priority groups of stakeholders because they are the face of the organisation, atleast at the initial point of contact and can directly influence the crucial decision-making process of prospective students. As such, a number of training sessions are arranged throughout the year, most often in locations out of Colombo.

Beta Institute considers its student body as THE most important stakeholders of its operations. In order to ensure that students have a balanced experience with the right mix of strong academic support and extra-curricular and sporting activities, Beta Institute has in place a very strong Student Council lead by an able team of students. During the year, this team of students organises a number of events such as an Annual Dinner Dance, Sinhala and Tamil New Year festivities, Vesak and Ifthar celebrations and Christmas parties. Beta Institute also sends teams to participate at events organised by the Students' Society of the professional body such as quiz competitions and sports days. Students are encouraged to provide feedback regarding lecturers and the administration of the course in general, with a formal evaluation being conducted four times a year, at the end of every session. Feedback regarding lecturers includes querying on clarity of delivery, coverage of syllabus on time, extent of revision carried out and friendliness and professionalism of lecturers.

8.11.   SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher has discussed Beta Institute's marketing strategies in detail and identified what the institute does to attract prospective students, which further buttressed the findings from the first two research phases. The analysis has also shown that Beta Institute focuses more on certain elements of the 7P's model, but some similarities exists between the approach followed by Alpha Institute, who is its direct competitor.

CHAPTER 9 : EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM INSTITUTE CASE STUDY III

9.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the first of the two HEIs offering academic qualifications (i.e. Gamma Institute). The researcher will first provide some background information to Gamma Institute, followed by an analysis of the marketing strategies followed to attract the target market.

9.2. GAMMA INSTITUTE – A CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Gamma Institute was established in 2000 as a partner institution offering degrees from a reputed UK university. In conjunction with its Malaysian partner, Gamma Institute now offers a number of internal British degrees in the fields of Business, IT and Law. It claims to be the largest provider of transnational educational programmes in Sri Lanka and has recently launched a series of postgraduate qualifications as well in Business, IT and Law.

9.3. GAMMA INSTITUTE – MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

Figure 9.1: Gamma Institute management structure
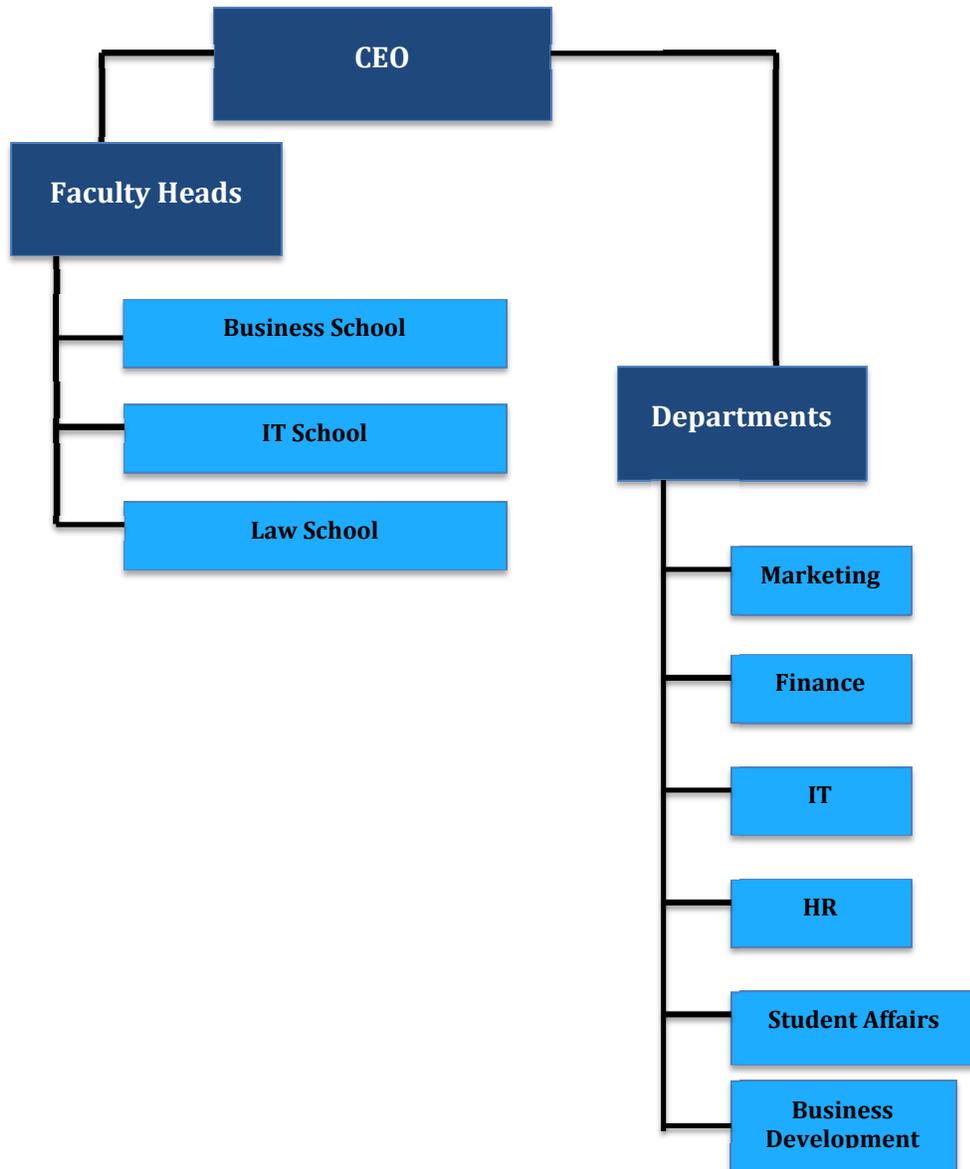
Gamma Institute's management structure is fairly simple. It is lead by the CEO and the three faculty heads in charge of the Business School, School of IT and Law School. Each school has its own panel of lecturers. The administrative departments of marketing, finance, IT, HR, student affairs and business development fall directly under the purview of the CEO, with respective heads of departments for those functions.

9.4. PROGRAMME

Although Gamma Institute offers many undergraduate degrees across three main disciplines as mentioned in section 9.2 above, for the purpose of this study, the researcher will only be focusing on the Business degrees offered.

The UK University has a rich history, given the fact that it was founded in the early 1900s and has been ranked among between 100-105 according to the 2017 Times UK University League Tables (The Complete University Guide, 2017). Despite this ranking, however, Gamma Institute is still a very much sought-after institute due to its reputation for stellar facilities and quality of academic delivery.

The entry requirements are two-fold: Students after their A/Ls can enrol for a degree in Business, Law or IT irrespective of the stream studied in school; alternatively, students who are after their O/Ls (who do not have A/Ls) may follow a short foundation diploma at Gamma Institute and subsequently enrol for the degree programme. The structure of all the degree programmes are the same – three years of full-time study with a summer break from May – September.

Similar to the other qualifications discussed in previous chapters, Gamma Institute's degree programmes too are delivered solely in English. However, the discussion with the institute's staff indicated that the language of instruction is sometimes an issue for the students.

"Language is sometimes an issue. Being a British degree, a very high standard of English is expected. However, a small percentage of students who enrol have a very poor level of English. All our lectures are conducted in English and we do not explain any concepts in Sinhala or Tamil, and the textbooks are all written by British or Western authors so it's a very high standard of English there too. We don't encourage students to talk in other languages apart from English while on campus for the same reason. We do provide additional English language classes for those who require it and these classes are conducted free of charge too. Sadly, a lot of students who really need it are reluctant to go for it because they feel ashamed. So they basically drop out when they get stuck due to language issues! (Interview: Marketing personnel of Gamma Institute)

Furthermore, Gamma Institute too faces direct competition from other institutions offering academic programmes such as Delta Institute, and indirect competition from HEIs offering professional qualifications such as Alpha and Beta Institutes.

9.5.   PRICE

Gamma Institute prices its degrees at a premium price as it targets the slightly more upscale markets. However, Gamma Institute does throw in a variety of incentives to induce recruitments, such as scholarships to students who achieve good A/L results, cash incentives to current students who introduce their friends to the institute, sibling discounts, special discounts to students who enrol at educational expos, discounts for full payments and discounts for students who have represented Sri Lanka for sports. The total cost, before any substantial discounts, would amount to approximately LKR 1.2 million (all-inclusive) for the three-year period. As discussed in the two previous chapters, it is apparent that the cost of such academic programmes is almost double the cost of a professional programme. That being said, the quality of facilities provided is far better with HEIs offering academic qualifications, and this aspect will be discussed in the subsequent sections in this chapter.

9.6.   PLACE

Gamma Institute is based in Colombo, once again in the heart of the city. It has one campus housing the IT and Business Schools, which is the main campus, but Gamma Institute also occupies one floor in a neighbouring building where the Law School is situated. Both locations have their own libraries, IT labs, cafeterias and parking lots, and have multimedia-equipped classrooms with air conditioning.

9.7.   PROMOTION

Gamma Institute places a lot of importance on its communication strategy, as it is a key component of the strategic marketing plan. As such, the researcher will first define Gamma's target markets, along with key timelines and intakes, which would then be followed by a discussion of its promotional activities, which would be further broken down and analysed in the context of the promotional mix, i.e. advertising, PR and sponsorships, direct marketing, personal selling and sales promotions.

9.7.1.   Target market

Unlike the HEIs offering professional programmes that include post-O/L students in their target market, Gamma Institute's target market comprises the students who are after their A/Ls, typically around the ages of 18-19 years, and their parents, since it is a parent-funded market. The indirect segment of students after O/Ls are approached through seminars conducted in schools with the sole intention of creating brand awareness, with the aspiration that they will better understand their HE choices at the point they decide to choose it after their A/Ls.

9.7.2. Key marketing timelines

The Business School of Gamma Institute has four intakes throughout the year, in January/February, June, September, November. The reason for the somewhat irrational spread is because the management of Gamma feels that some intakes have a bigger demand and as such, it is necessary to have two intakes closer to each other so that potential students would not be required to wait. The marketing campaigns are carried out as usual while the students are still in school.

9.7.3. Advertising

Gamma Institute advertises extensively on a variety of platforms. For instance, it occupies around three or four full-page colour advertisements on all the English newspapers every Sunday, i.e. the Sunday Times, Sunday Observer and Island, in addition to a few Sinhala newspapers as well. It should be noted that advertisements are usually the most expensive in the Sunday newspapers and according to media sources, Gamma's annual press advertising budget is approximately LKR 15 million, which seems justified. The institute is also seen to advertise in the English daily newspapers such as the Daily FT, Daily News and Daily Mirror.

The staff member from Gamma Institute who was interviewed confirmed the same:
"The newspapers are what we find the most effective to build our brand. I don't know if you have seen some of our ads, but we make sure to advertise almost every Sunday in the major English papers like Sunday Times and Observer." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Gamma Institute)

Moreover, Gamma Institute also advertises its programmes in high-end magazines such as Echelon, Business Today and Hi Magazine. In all of its press advertisements, Gamma Institute follows a consistent template with their corporate colours and apart from a few changes now and then to the content of the advertisements, the ads are more or less identical every semester. This is to ensure brand recollection by the consumers and also to preserve the identity of the brand.

Gamma Institute does not seem to advertise its programmes on billboards, possibly because billboards are not very productive, given the limited textual content that can be included. Gamma Institute is also not very active on social media although it does have a presence on platforms like Facebook. It does not engage in sponsored advertisements on Facebook, nor does it do much to engage the youth; for instance photographs of student events are never uploaded to Gamma Institute's official Facebook page; only posts that contain corporate information are posted, that too fairly infrequently.

Radio advertising however, is another story. A few months before every intake, Gamma Institute always advertises on popular English radio stations during peak hours.

9.7.4.   *PR and sponsorships*

The management of Gamma Institute places a high degree of emphasis on CSR activities and the Student Activity Club of Gamma is required to drive some of these campaigns each year. For instance, Gamma Institute conducts a 'Blood Drive' twice or thrice a year, where students are encouraged to donate blood. Moreover, every Christmas, the Student Activity Club visits an orphanage or a Home for Special Needs Children or a Home for Elders and spends some time with them, in addition to sponsoring some of their needs, be it clothing or books or dry rations. The Gamma student body also collectively contributed money to help flood or drought victims, and the management of Gamma also get involved in these charitable activities.

In addition to these CSR activities, Gamma Institute also sponsors various corporate and student events such as business conferences, Colombo Model United Nations Conference, Sri Lanka Model United Nations Conference, dinner dances, school events and the like. While most of these activities do not generate instant results in terms of increased student numbers, it no doubt helps in creating awareness about Gamma Institute in the market.

9.7.5. *Direct marketing*

Gamma Institute engages in direct marketing by conducting seminars and career guidance workshops in schools based mainly in Colombo. It also sponsors farewell luncheons organised by schools on the last day of school before the A/L exams. Through all these events, Gamma Institute gets the opportunity to freely interact with students (i.e. its direct target market) and give out information regarding their programmes. Students receive informational brochures, promotional merchandise like pens, notebooks and key tags and even receive promotional discount vouchers to produce during enrolment at a future date.

Gamma Institute also places a high degree of importance on e-mail and SMS marketing. They purchase vast databases containing contact details of students falling within their targeted parameters and send e-flyers through e-mail, and/or send them text messages with special discounts or reminders regarding course commencement dates. As mentioned previously, as there are no significant data protection laws that are strictly enforced in Sri Lanka, this type of activity occurs very frequently and is expected by the consumers.

9.7.6. *Personal selling*

Similar to most HEI's, Gamma Institute too engages in personal selling, at popular educational exhibitions in Colombo, namely Edex in January and September and the Future Minds Expo in June. In addition to this, Gamma Institute also takes part at the Study UK Expo which is organised by the British Council. More often than not, Gamma Institute is a main sponsor at these exhibitions and has a very big stall placed at a very prominent location right at the entrance to the exhibition hall. By virtue of being a sponsor at these events, Gamma Institute would also be featured in the media campaigns conducted by the organisers of these exhibitions.

The researcher interviewed a staff member of Gamma Institute, who stated the following:

"Exhibitions like these work well for us. Especially with the Edex Mid-Year Expo, there is a lot of students who come to get information and the conversion rate of inquiries to enrolment is very high for this particular exhibition." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Gamma Institute)

Moreover, the staff of Gamma Institute are instructed to save the details of any prospective student who contacts them via call or e-mail, and follow-up on a consistent basis to try and persuade the student to enrol. A similar approach is followed for walk-in enquiries. Hence, these are other means by which Gamma Institute engages in personal selling.

9.7.7.   Sales promotions

As discussed in section 9.5, Gamma Institute offers a range of promotional incentives to prospective students, such as scholarships to high performers at A/Ls or sports, cash incentives for referrals, sibling discounts, special discounts to students who enrol at educational expos and discounts for full payments.

9.7.8.   Internal communications

The way by which Gamma Institute communicates with its current student body is mainly through the online student portal, where things like key announcements, timetables and timetable changes, internship opportunities and upcoming student events and activities are communicated.

The researcher will be discussing a number of key processes at Gamma Institute which are important to this study.

It is important to analyse this particular process because the success of Gamma Institute depends on how its staff handles it at the crucial point of enrolment. There have been plenty of instances (not necessarily at Gamma Institute) where students have come to the institute to enrol, but have instead left halfway due to lack of attention or inept service.

Figure 9.2: Feedback regarding Gamma Institute's enrolment process
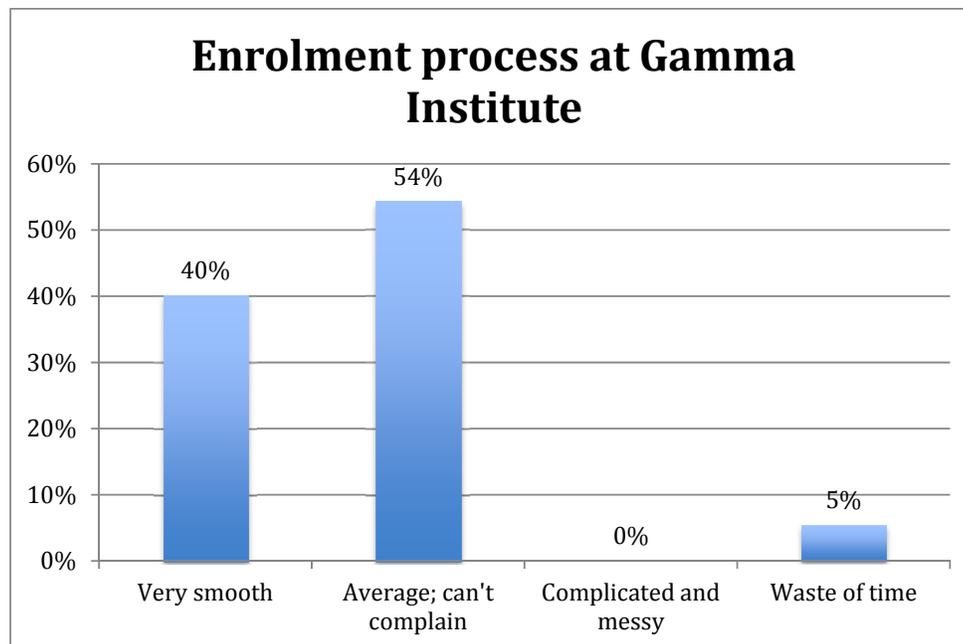
As apparent from the above graph, 54% of the students at Gamma Institute have indicated that there was nothing to complain about regarding the enrolment process, with 40% reporting that their experience was very smooth. No students have felt that

the process was overly complicated, but 5% seemed to think it was a waste of their time. However, the researcher feels that this was due to a random occurrence and was not an actual reflection of Gamma's enrolment process.

Findings from the exploratory phase seemed to be fairly neutral.

Participant 10 said, *"Enrolling was easy. I filled out the application, but I hadn't brought the things to submit, like my O/L certificate, so I had to come back again. That was my fault for forgetting. I thought they would get mad, but they were really nice about it. They located my form easily enough the next week when I went with my certificate copy"* (Interview: Participant 10)

"I had to come back a couple of times because I kept forgetting things. I think processing time was around a month? […] The staff were alright, just your usual friendly, business-like persona. They still smile at me, and even know my name." (Interview: Participant 11)

"It was alright. Nothing to complain about but not particularly fantastic either." (Interview: Participant 14)

9.8.2.   Refunds

At Gamma Institute, refunds hardly ever take place, as the management does not permit refunds under any circumstances whatsoever. While students do on occasion make such requests, the researcher was not able to find information about any student who was successful in his/her refunds claim.

The no-refunds policy does have the potential to reflect badly on Gamma Institute though. For instance, if prospective students hear of this situation, they may arrive at the rightful conclusion that Gamma Institute is very reluctant to release cash once it come to them, which may raise the doubt as to whether the institute is having liquidity issues.

9.8.3.   Lecturing

According to a representative of Gamma Institute, lecturing is considered to be its most important internal process.

"I would say recruiting and managing lecturers [is the most important process]. It's actually a very complicated process. We have to make sure that we hire the correct people, with the right experience and knowledge and very importantly, friendly personalities. Then after we hire them, we have to make sure they are happy – We have to pay them competitive rates, provide the required resources and training and facilitate continuous professional development. The lecturers are the core of our business. Students look up to them, and if the lecturers are happy, then they will go out of their way to make sure that the right message about the institute is conveyed to the students. We have had a bad experience once. The lecturer was not happy about something or other, which I don't think was communicated properly to the management, but instead he started saying negative things about the institute during lectures, so much so that students started moving out to other institutes. It was very detrimental. We could have handled that issue much better from our end, I feel, like we should have looked into that particular lecturer's needs better." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Gamma Institute)

Whenever vacancies for lecturers arise, Gamma Institute advertises them on a popular local job portal called TopJobs.lk and also on the institutional website. Gamma Institute's recruitment criteria are very strict and require each candidate to be academically and professionally qualified, with multiple years of experience in lecturing the particular subject. Gamma's lecture panel has been quite stable over the last five years, with a very low labour turnover, which leads the researcher to believe that pay and perks for the lecturers at Gamma Institute are above market rates.

9.9.   PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Gamma Institute operates two majestic campuses in the heart of Colombo and takes on the appearance of a grey and blue exterior, which are also its corporate colours, and only the main signage is displayed. The walls on the interior are also painted grey, and the sofas are blue. There are lots of brightly lit LED screens placed at strategic locations near the reception, which display images and videos of students, and information regarding Gamma's programmes should anyone wish to click on the screens. Gamma Institute does not have much in terms of internal or external branding as it wishes to maintain a more corporate, professional look. Each classroom can typically accommodate around 40 students and are fully equipped with state-of-the art multimedia equipment and air conditioning.

All staff and students of Gamma Institute are required to be dressed in professional office attire, with no jeans, shorts or flip flops permitted. Corporate branding is prevalent in all institutional stationery like business cards, letterheads, and envelopes, and also in all promotional collateral such as dockets, which seem to be the only form of merchandise done by the institute.

9.10.   PEOPLE

The lecturers of Gamma Institute are only very briefly profiled on the website but they are not mentioned in any brochures or leaflets that are handed to prospective students. However, unlike most other HEIs where the marketing team handles the stall at educational expos and speaks to prospective students and parents, at Gamma Institute, it is the lecturers who are required to manage that function. In the researcher's opinion, this can be both good and bad. On one side, it is good because the lecturers would be better equipped to advise students and their parents better on the programme content. However, it may be a bit degrading for the lecturers to have to work to convince students to choose this programme.

Gamma Institute has in a place a very active Student Activity Club, run by the students themselves. With an executive committee that changes by a democratic election every year where all students get to vote, the Student Activity Club comprises a mix of students across the three faculties. Every year, the Student Activity club organises a range of events: sporting events such as the annual swimming competition, cricket fiesta, badminton competition; cultural and religious events like the Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations, Ifthar and Thaipongal festivities, and a Pirith ceremony for Vesak or Poson; and other events like drama and photography competitions, bake sales, movie nights, and Halloween and Christmas parties. Gamma Institute also organises the largest and only inter-university talent show every year, which is a huge success. It receives hundreds of applications from students from private and state universities all across Sri Lanka in the categories of solo singing, duets, dancing – solo and troupe, and bands. In addition to this, as a means of ensuring that its students are happy, Gamma Institute also has a TV, pool table, ping pong table, foosball and darts board in the cafeterias of both campuses.

Students are also given an opportunity to give their feedback on academic matters such as the examination process, lecture delivery and syllabus coverage, and voice their concerns, if any, and these evaluations are conducted at the end of every academic year. These evaluations are conducted online and the feedback is evaluated by the relevant faculty heads, and any serious concerns are directed to the CEO.

9.11.   SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher conducted a thorough investigation of the marketing strategies employed by Gamma Institute to attract prospective students and ensure the satisfaction of current students. The 7P's model was used when conducting this case study analysis and the researcher was able to understand which elements of the marketing mix was given a higher priority at Gamma Institute. The researcher was also able to draw parallels between the exploratory and survey findings.

CHAPTER 10 : EMPIRICAL FINDINGS FROM INSTITUTE CASE STUDY IV

10.1.   INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the forth and final HEI (i.e. Delta Institute) chosen for the purposes of this study. As the preceding case studies, a contextual background to the HEI is presented, and its marketing strategies to attract students are analysed in the context of the marketing mix.

10.2.   DELTA INSTITUTE – A CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Delta Institute was established in 1991 and is currently the largest tuition provider in Sri Lanka for the programmes from this particular UK university. It is also the highest ranked institute in Sri Lanka of all the HEIs offering degrees from this university.

Prior to its formal incorporation, the institute conducted classes for various external degree programmes of the leading state university located in the central province. Today, it not only offers a variety of undergraduate degrees from this particular UK university in the streams of Business, Management, Finance, Economics and Law, but also offers Engineering, Science and Bio Medical Science degrees from a well-reputed Australian university, where the students are required to transfer to Australia for their final year.

10.3. DELTA INSTITUTE – MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE

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                    ┌──────────────────┐
                    │     Chairman     │
                    └────────┬─────────┘
                    ┌────────┴─────────┐
                    │    President     │
                    └────────┬─────────┘
              ┌──────────────┴──────────────┐
              │ Director of Academic Affairs │
              └──────────────┬──────────────┘
         ┌───────────────────┴───────────────────┐
         │  Assistant Director of Academic Affairs │
         └───────────────────┬───────────────────┘
        ┌───────────────────┼───────────────────┐
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Senior Coordinator Business Programmes	Senior Coordinator Law Programme	Senior Coordinator Australian Programme
Coordinator	Coordinator	Coordinator
Academic Staff - Permanent - Contract - Visiting	**Academic Staff** - Permanent - Contract - Visiting	**Academic Staff** - Permanent - Contract - Visiting
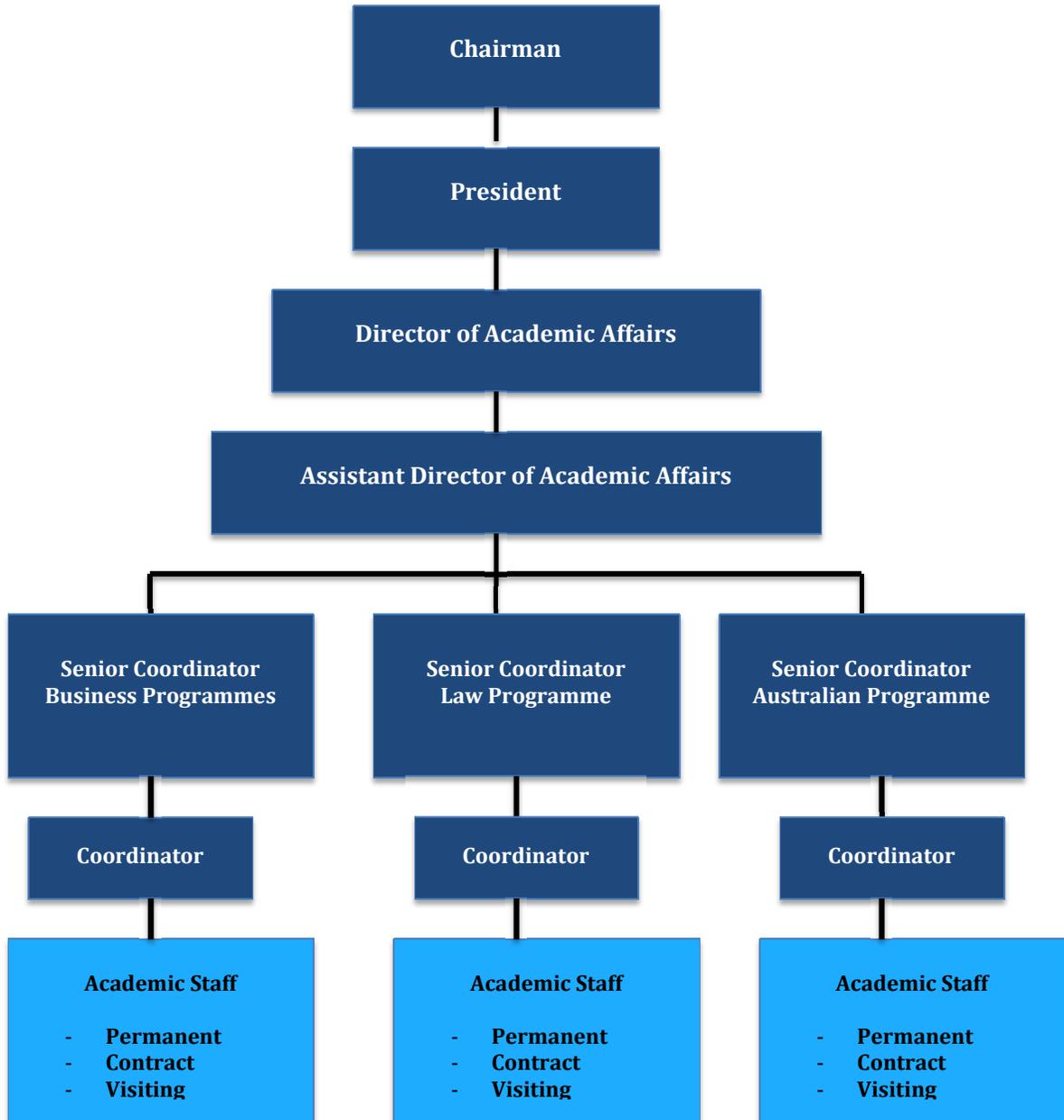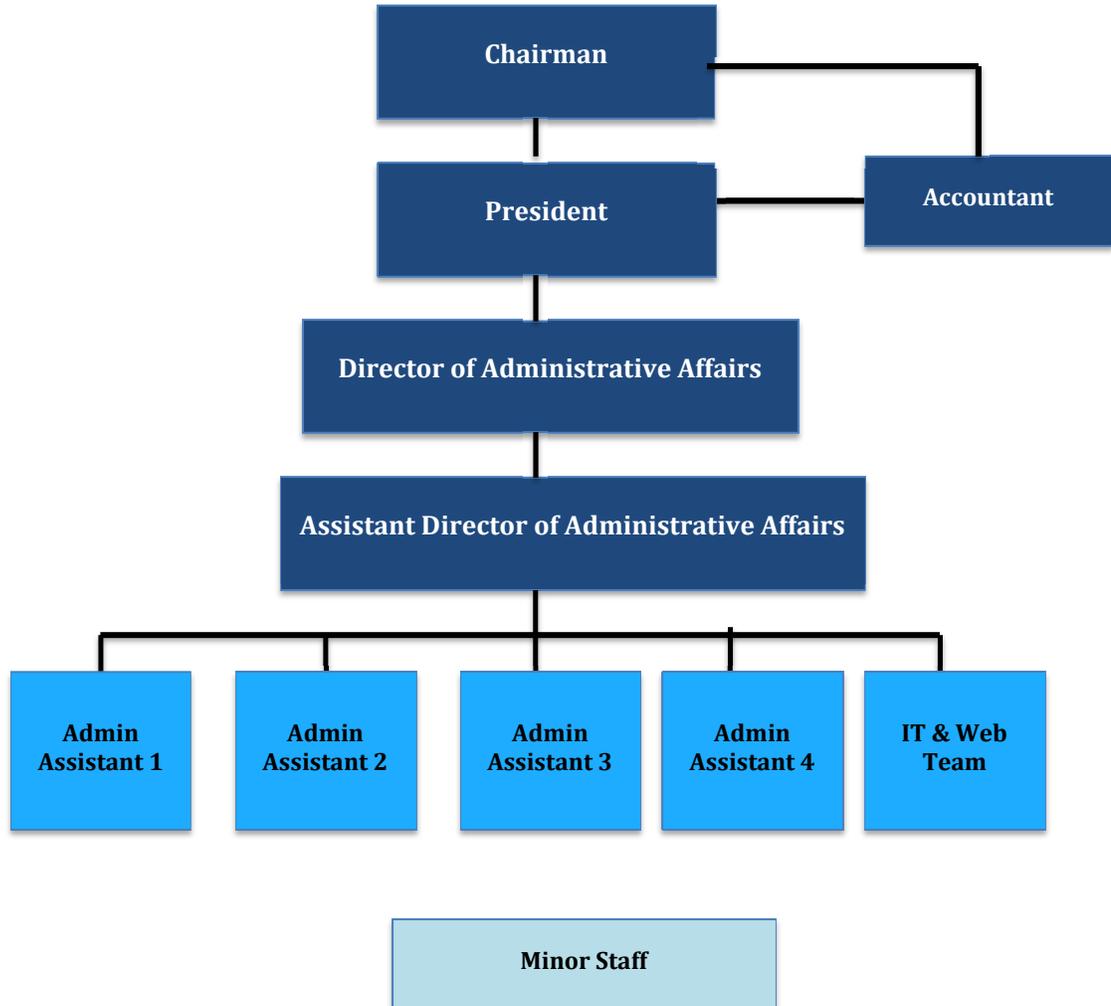
Delta Institute has a very large student body of approximately 3000, which acts as an attraction for prospective students. However, this poses many administrative challenges to Delta Institute's management, and hence, a management structure with several tiers is necessary. As the overall management structure is quite complicated, it is broken down into an academic structure and an administrative structure, with separate teams to oversee the different programmes. The academic structure is further sub-divided into departments for the three key programmes.

10.4.   PROGRAMME

As mentioned in section 10.2 above, Delta Institute offers a large portfolio of qualifications across a range of disciplines and universities. For the purposes of this study however, only the Business-related degrees offered by the UK University will be subject to closer scrutiny.

This university has been ranked among the top three according to the 2017 UK University League Tables (The Complete University Guide, 2017), which makes it the highest ranked UK university present in Sri Lanka. The only disadvantage that Delta Institute faces with this programme however, is that this particular university, being a federal university, does not have a physical university presence and only operates through its constituent colleges. This deters parents and students in some instances as they feel as if they are not affiliated to an actual university.

The entry requirements for the academic programme offered by Delta Institute is similar to those of Gamma Institute, where students are encouraged to join after their A/Ls, but if they do not have A/Ls, then they may follow a short foundation diploma at Delta Institute and subsequently enrol for the degree programme. Moreover, the structure of all of Delta's BSc. degree programmes is the same – three years of full-time study with a summer break from May – September.

Delta Institute's direct competitors are the HEIs offering undergraduate degrees such as Gamma Institute. In addition to these, Delta Institute also faces competition from HEIs offering indirectly competing qualifications, Alpha and Beta Institutes.

10.5. PRICE

As with most academic programmes, and significant competitors like Gamma Institute, Delta Institute too has in place a pricing structure that is more focused towards the more economically stable classes of Sri Lankan society. Being affiliated to a very highly ranked UK university, the fees payable to the university in terms of registration and examinations are quite steep, which is the main reason for the high price. Interestingly, Delta Institute charges a price similar to that of Gamma, approximately LKR 1.2 million for the full three-year programme including examination fees, but its facilities are not even close to that of Gamma's.

Just as every other player in the higher education market, Delta Institute offers scholarships to O/L and A/L high performers. While the true objective of offering scholarships to high performers is to attract students who would be the most capable of completing the programme, the researcher has observed that while Delta Institute makes the same declaration, it in fact offers scholarships to almost every student, just so that the enrolment targets are achieved. As a result, a great percentage of students fail the exams at Delta Institute and even stop following the programme. While the researcher was unable to get the exact statistics of dropout rates, there were findings from the exploratory phase to support this claim.

Participant 16 made the following statements during the exploratory interview phase:
 "I think the programme was too hard for some of my friends though. They failed some exams and then dropped out. There are usually a lot of students who drop out for various reasons, but mostly because they are unable to cope up with the programme because it really is a bit rigorous." (Interview: Participant 16)

10.6. PLACE

For its undergraduate programmes, Delta Institute operates from a three-storied campus in the heart of Colombo, which can easily be accessed by the main road. However, although this campus is located in a central spot, there are hardly any restaurants, malls, cinemas or any other leisure time activity spots nearby. All of these would atleast be a 30-minute drive from Delta Institute, which may not bode too well with the students.

This facility is 100% owned by the CEO of Delta Institute and Delta's primary and high schools are also operated on the same premises. In addition to that, Delta Institute also has branches in four other locations in Colombo and its suburbs for its primary and high schools.

Delta Institute has a library with a vast collection of books, study area and a computer lab. The classrooms are all air conditioned, but are fairly primitive otherwise. The furniture in the classrooms are very basic and do not justify the high tuition fees paid by the students.

Delta Institute has only one intake for a year, in September, with the programmes being delivered on a full-time, face-to-face basis on campus. As such, students of Delta Institute are not able to work while studying because they are required to be present for lectures which are held atleast four days a week. Attendance is mandatory and the minimum acceptable rate of attendance should be 80% in order to be eligible to sit for exams, which take place once a year in May.

10.7.   PROMOTION

In this section, the researcher will be thoroughly analysing the marketing approach followed by Delta Institute to attract new students. Accordingly, the target markets and key marketing timelines are set out, and strategies carried out to attract these target markets are also discussed in detail. The promotional mix will also be discussed in depth.

10.7.1.   Target market

Delta Institute's key target markets are once again the O/L and A/L students of the local and London curricula. It should be noted, however, that the students coming in after O/Ls are required to complete a one-year internal diploma course prior to joining the degree pathway, and hence, the institute has been seen to encourage students to commence their degree after A/Ls instead of O/Ls. Delta Institute has a significant advantage over its competitors because it has a self-managed school (primary and high school), with five branches in Colombo and its suburbs. This means it can, for the most part, rely on its own students to flow into their undergraduate programmes. This practice is evident when analysing its marketing and communication strategies, where the institute is seen to be putting a lesser degree of effort to attract new students in comparison to its competitors. Lastly, the parents of these students are another key target market.

10.7.2.   Key marketing timelines

Despite the fact that post-A/L students from both local and London curricula are targeted, Delta Institute only has one main intake for the year, which is in September. While both sets of students would have completed their exams by September, it also means that London A/L students would have to wait from June until the intake commences in September. This could potentially result in a loss of students for Delta Institute as they may decide to start a professional qualification instead of idling for

three months. The reason why Gamma Institute is unable to have an earlier intake is because the summer vacation in the UK is observed since it is affiliated to a UK university.

10.7.3.   *Advertising*

Delta Institute runs a few press ads occasionally to establish brand presence. However, the frequency of these ads is not even comparable to the other HEIs discussed above as Delta appears to be mostly relying on its internal feeder of Delta's school students.

The staff member interviewed by the researcher stated:
"We mainly rely on our school students coming back to us for our higher education programmes, so we don't need to advertise that much." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Delta Institute)

Most likely for the same reason, Delta Institute also only advertises in the English newspapers and does not extend its presence to Sinhala or Tamil newspapers. As such, Delta Institute's annual spend on press ads is only around LKR 2-3 million, according to media sources. However, the researcher feels that the effectiveness of Delta's press advertisements are not that high as there is a lot of content, and they do not seem to look visually appealing.

Delta Institute also advertises on billboards in a few strategic locations in Colombo. These billboards replicate the press advertisements, and hence, are not very successful in the researcher's opinion because there is too much content for a billboard. A motorist would typically glance at a billboard only for a few seconds, and should be able to absorb the important bits of information during that time, which would only be possible if there was a small amount of text on the billboard.

Delta Institute appears to have little interest in radio advertisements, and according to the marketing personnel interviewed, it is because the management feels that their spend is not justified since the listener audience cannot be accurately tracked.

"We don't really go with many radio campaigns because it's quite expensive to get good airtime at peak hours, and you can't track the listener audience. It's not like we are able to get a database of listeners with their contact details or anything. And it's unlikely that listeners will immediately call our hotlines to enrol when they hear an ad on the radio. Maybe some do, but very few probably. So our management feels that it doesn't really justify the spend." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Delta Institute)

Furthermore, Delta Institute does have a presence on social media, mainly Facebook, and it has been seen to be moderately active on it. They do not seem to be using the feature of sponsored advertisements on Facebook though.

10.7.4.   PR and sponsorships

Delta Institute does not usually sponsor the activities and events of schools because it has its own school. However, it does sponsor one major CSR event in Colombo, which is a 5 km charity run, where all proceeds are in aid of the Sri Lanka Cancer Hospital and this project has been taking place on an annual basis for the past 7-8 years. Thousands of students from all over Colombo participate at this event, and prominent personalities are also invited to grace the occasion.

10.7.5.   Direct marketing

Delta Institute's primary method of direct marketing is its school, since students are made aware of Delta's higher education programmes from a very young age at no extra cost to the institute. This is a very cost-effective way of marketing and a very successful means too. The students are also given substantial discounts for enrolling

for any of these programmes after their A/Ls, which gives them further incentive to remain at Delta.

10.7.6. Personal selling

Delta Institute is a regular participant at all of Sri Lanka's major educational exhibitions, such as Edex Main Expo in Colombo and Kandy, Edex Mid-Year Expo in Colombo, Future Minds Expos in Colombo and Galle, and the Study UK exhibition organised by the British Council. These expos are spread out through the year and usually target major examinations, such as Local O/Ls in December, London O/Ls and A/Ls in May and June, and Local A/Ls in August. Delta Institute has allocated significant budgets for these events as they are very crucial to achieving its recruitment targets, and are more often than not, a main sponsor at each of these events. Benefits of being a sponsor at these iconic events means Delta Institute are allocated a big stall at a very prominent location right at the entrance to the exhibition hall and are also featured in the media campaigns conducted by the organisers of these exhibitions.

The staff member of Delta Institute explained the rationale of participating at educational exhibitions:
"We participate at these educational expos because we need to have a brand presence, and ofcourse there are a lot of students who are not Delta school students who also enrol for our degree programmes." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Delta Institute)

Similar to the approach followed by Gamma Institute, the staff of Delta Institute are also required to capture the details of every student who walks into its stall to get information, maintain a database and regularly contact them to remind them to enrol. While this approach is very proactive and often generates positive results, it also has the potential to annoy students and give an air of desperation.

Participant 15, who had rejected Delta Institute due to this very reason said,

"*I made the mistake of visiting Delta Institute's stall because I wanted some information regarding their Business degrees. Boy was that a mistake. They kept calling me every week until I blocked that number!*" (Interview: Participant 15).

10.7.7. *Sales promotions*

In terms of sales promotions, Delta Institute only offers scholarships for high performance at O/Ls and A/Ls and incentives for referrals in the form of vouchers from various clothing stores. However, as mentioned in section 10.5, Delta Institute seems to be using this mechanism only as a promotional tool as opposed to using it to boost the actual quality of students recruited.

10.7.8. *Internal communications*

Delta Institute uses different methods to communicate with its current students. For matters such as class cancellations and re-scheduling, Delta uses text messages, as that is the fastest means of communication. Matters such as exam results are communicated via the online student portal and other matters like upcoming student events are communicated through e-mail.

10.8. PROCESSES

At Delta Institute, there are a number of key processes, which were examined by the researcher as it was of special relevance to this study. Accordingly, the processes of enrolment, refunds, lecturing and class cancellations are discussed here.

10.8.1. *Enrolment*

When students are enrolling at Delta Institute, they are required to fill in a form giving their details, submit the required documents such as their O/L and A/L certificates, a copy of their birth certificates and a passport-sized photo, and make the payment. The staff at the reception who handle the enrolment process are instructed to attend to each student without undue delays and process their applications in an efficient manner. If the students and their parents have only come to get some information, then the staff is required to attend to that with the same efficiency and courteousness.

The marketing personnel who was interviewed said:

"We are the first point of contact that students and their parents have with the institute, and it is our responsibility to make sure that they have a good first experience because it reflects on Delta Institute as a whole. It is when they arrive here that the most important part happens – They make the decision as to whether or not they are going to sign up for our programme. And this enrolment process is indeed very critical." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Delta Institute)

In the exploratory phase of the study, the students of Delta Institute gave mixed reviews regarding the enrolment process and the efficiency of the staff. The findings were as follows:

"The enrolment process was pretty standard – Fill the form, give a passport sized photo, a copy of my O/L results sheet, passport copy. They told me to submit my A/L results sheet once it comes, and I am yet to do that. […] The lady who counselled me

was very sweet. She gave me her business card and told me to contact her anytime if I had any issue with anything." (Interview: Participant 16)

Participant 19 seemed to have had a different experience though.
"It was supposed to be relatively simple, but the staff messed it up. I had handed over all my documents as requested and I was waiting patiently for my registration with the university to be processed. When all my friends had gotten theirs, I got worried and went to check up on mine. To see, they had lost my documents and had not even bothered to tell me! I had to submit everything all over again. So because of this stupid error, the 'enrolment process' took close to two months." (Interview: Participant 19)

The next interviewee also had a similar negative experience.
She said, *"The staff were running around and getting different students mixed up. Maybe there were less staff working that day, I don't know. They had trouble finding forms and things, but were very friendly."* (Interview: Participant 20)

Accordingly to the findings of the survey phase, where questionnaires were sent out to the students of Delta Institute, 51% had stated they found the process to be average, with nothing particular to complain about, 44% said it was 'very smooth' and 5% felt it was a waste of their time (See Figure 10.3 below). As such, the researcher was able to come to a reasonable conclusion that while Delta's current process was fairly satisfactory, there is room for improvement since a number of students have had negative experiences.

Enrolment process at Delta Institute
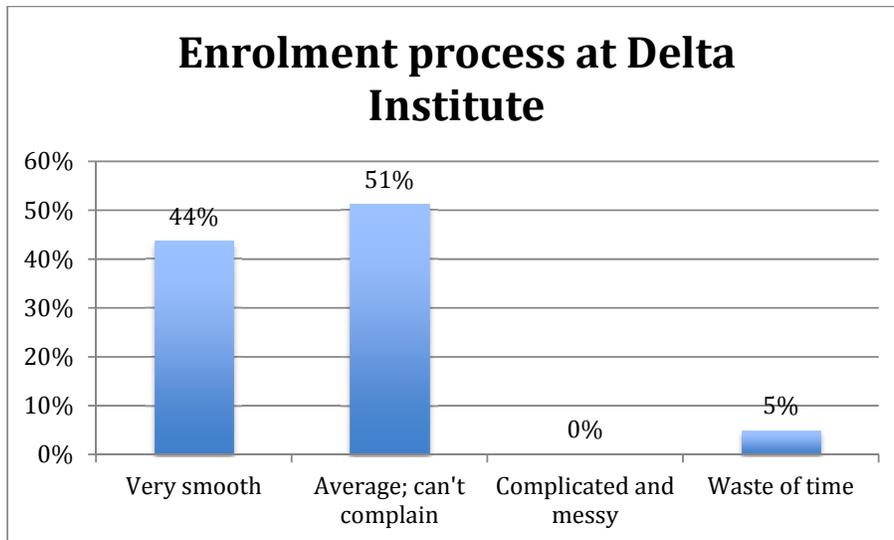
10.8.2.   *Refunds*

Delta Institute permits refunds on certain items, such as exam fees, mainly because that sum is payable in full to the university and the student can also pay it directly online through credit or debit card. However, if the student has chosen to pay it to Delta Institute, then an additional administrative cost is charged, and this amount is not refunded. Refunds are not encouraged, and as such, can sometimes take as long as one month to get processed.

10.8.3.   *Lecturing*

The current lecture panel of Delta Institute has been attached to the institute for over five years. While Delta does occasionally recruit for new lecturers when the need arises, it is not an activity that happens frequently as the turnover is relatively low. The new recruitments are mostly professionally headhunted, and past graduates of Delta Institute are also encouraged to apply for existing vacancies.

"We encourage our graduates, especially the ones who win prizes at national level for various subjects, to lecture for us after they graduate. Most of them feel honoured when we approach them and are very keen to get started, so we train them and get them upto par." (Interview: Marketing personnel of Delta Institute)

10.9.   PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Interestingly, Delta Institute does not seem to have established a very strong brand presence. There is nothing in terms of external building branding aside from the main name board, which is brown with white lettering, which are the corporate colours of Delta Institute. The building is painted a fairly bland shade of beige with a bit of brown, but with no significance to the corporate colours of the university. The interior of the building, including the reception area and its classrooms, also follows the same colour scheme, with minimal internal branding; there are a few posters here and there profiling high performers and past graduates. Delta Institute's classrooms are air-conditioned but not every classroom is equipped with multimedia facilities.

Delta Institute does not have official t-shirts for its staff; however members of the students committee do. As with any other establishment, Delta Institute has company business cards, letterheads and envelopes with corporate branding. Interestingly, Delta Institute does not have any promotional merchandise, which it gives to prospective students, possibly because their main target market are its students itself (the school arm).

10.10.   PEOPLE

According to the staff member interviewed, Delta Institute has a very low turnover of lecturers and its current panel of lecturers has been with them for the past five years. As such, it is clear that Delta Institute is making an effort to ensure that its lecturers are satisfied and empowered, as they are at the heart of the operation.

In order to keep its students happy, Delta Institute encourages a friendly, informal culture where students are allowed to freely approach lecturers to clear their doubts or even have a friendly chat. To further develop student satisfaction, Delta Institute has a student association who organises the Annual Graduation Ball and a number of other small events such as Sports Days, Christmas parties, and religious and cultural celebrations for Vesak, dansals for Poson, Ramazan, Thaipongal and Sinhala and Tamil New Year. There is also a mechanism for student feedback, which takes place at the end of each semester. Through this evaluation, Delta Institute is able to assess if the lecturers are covering the syllabus in time, identify if students require additional support and if they have any other concerns that need to be addressed in a timely manner.

10.11.   SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher has presented a detailed discussion of the marketing and general operational strategies followed by Delta Institute to attract and retain students. The discussion was focused around the 7P's model where the researcher was able to identify the high priority areas from the perspective of Delta Institute, in addition to certain shortcomings on the part of the institute.

CHAPTER 11 : CROSS-CASE ANALYSIS

11.1.   INTRODUCTION

In the chapters 7-10, the researcher has followed an *idiographic* approach whereby each HEI was analysed on a case-by-case basis. While this idiographic approach allowed the researcher to go into an in-depth analysis of each individual HEI, the researcher feels that a cross-case *nomothetic* analysis is also necessary to make generalisations and identify similarities and differences between the four HEIs. Accordingly, this chapter puts forward a combination of findings from the four case study chapters presented under the following interrelated themes – programme, price, promotion, people, place, physical evidence and processes.

Figure 11.1: Categories for the thematic analysis
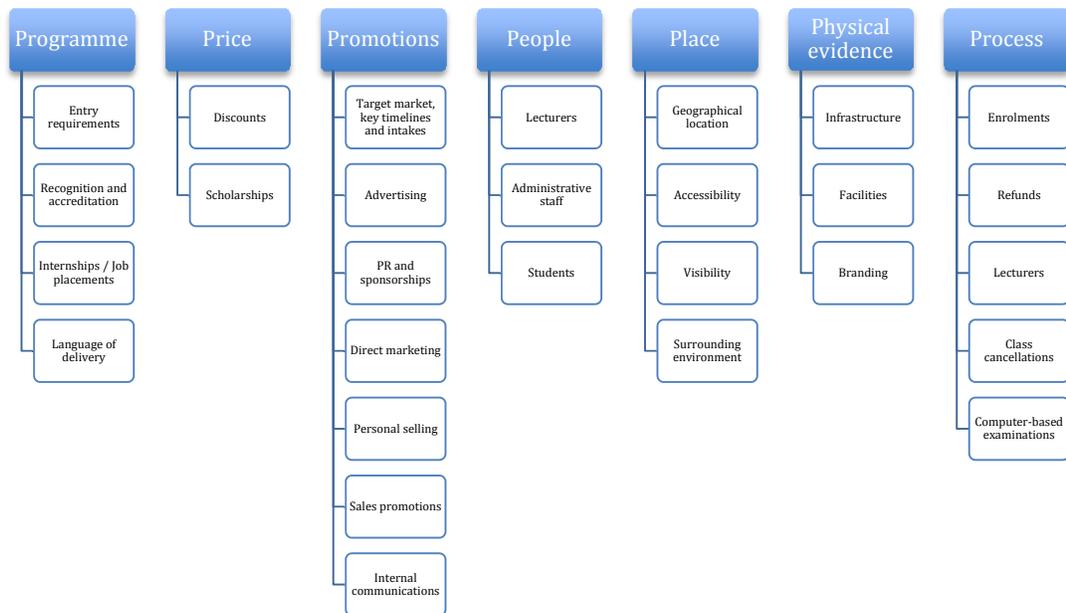
11.2.   PROGRAMME

11.2.1.   *Entry requirements*

With the state university system in Sri Lanka, students are often restricted from pursuing the specific programmes they like. These restrictions come in the form of specific subject combinations required for A/Ls in order to be able to pursue a certain type of degree at university level, but some schools may not offer those exact subject combinations, or, even where students have studied the correct subject combinations, if the Z-score obtained at the A/L exams is not above a certain threshold, they may still be unable to pursue their preferred choice of higher education programme.

With foreign higher education, however, the entry requirements are considerably more relaxed to ensure greater accessibility and allow students to study what they actually like. For instance, students may join a professional programme such as those offered by Alpha and Beta Institutes, immediately after their O/Ls, irrespective of whether or not they are even planning to sit for their A/Ls; the particular subject stream studied for A/Ls is not a barrier either. Moreover, students who do not have A/Ls who wish to join academic programmes could do so by completing a foundation diploma at the relevant institution (although this is not widely encouraged), as is the case at Gamma and Delta Institutes.

11.2.2.   *Recognition and accreditation*

Across all four HEIs covered by this research, the aspects of global recognition of the programmes and accreditation were identified to be the unique selling points when recruiting new students. While each of the HEIs have taken into consideration the various social and other influences on the students' purchase decision, it is apparent that no systematic research has been done to obtain a deeper, more accurate understanding of the student-consumer's thought process when making a purchase decision.

Through this study, the researcher has identified that all these HEIs have taken special care to offer qualifications that are in high demand, and those that provide better employability on a global scale, thereby helping students meet their security, social and self-esteem needs. This relationship between choice of programme and improved future career is not a new discovery by the researcher; there have been a number of other academics who have discussed the same, notably, Townsend (2003) and White (2007). Others like Saiti and Prokopiadou (2008) have put forward the notion that when there are good career opportunities available that are accepted by society, students' will be motivated to pursue higher education in order to avail themselves of those career opportunities. With foreign (private) higher education, students are able to assess the requirements of the job market and choose between a variety of academic or professional programmes, which are globally recognised and accredited by esteemed global bodies.

Accordingly, in the domain of professional qualifications, Alpha Institute has successfully positioned itself as Sri Lanka's highest accredited tuition provider for the particular professional accountancy qualification and Beta Institute as the highest accredited tuition provider for the other professional accountancy qualification. With regard to academic programmes, Gamma Institute distinguishes itself from its competitors by focusing on a niche market with high quality in all aspects – from infrastructure and facilities to programme delivery, and Delta Institute has positioned itself as the only institute offering degrees from the most highly ranked UK University present in Sri Lanka.

11.2.3.   *Internships and job placements*

Providing internships and job placements is a very important marketing tool used almost exclusively by Alpha Institute. It is a unique selling point for Alpha as it offers tuition for a professional qualification, which requires thirty-six months of work experience in accounting/finance in order to gain professional membership, and it shows that Alpha is being mindful of other student needs like employability too. Through its in-house job bank, Alpha's students are placed in top conglomerates in a

variety of sectors in Sri Lanka and this practical exposure helps students in understanding real-life scenarios which in turn helps them to perform better at exams. Moreover, establishing relationships with employers is good for Alpha Institute's reputation because employers fall under the category of customers too (Harris, 2009); they sometimes send batches of employees to Alpha Institute to gain this particular professional qualification.

11.2.4. *Language*

All the programmes discussed in this thesis are delivered solely in English, but here, Gamma Institute has a competitive advantage over the other HEIs because it provides additional English classes free of charge for the students who require it. This reflects awareness on the part of Gamma Institute that students may not entirely be up to par with British English, which may have a negative impact on the students' studies, and as such, it offers a solution to counter the problem. The level of English of students' becomes especially important, as the aim of private HEIs is to make its students world-class professionals due to the labour market becoming increasingly globalised (Farooqui, 2007). This concern is not only limited to Sri Lanka; even universities in Norway and Sweden have acknowledged the same issue and have taken measures to support their students (Brock-Utne, 2007).

11.3. PRICE

As private universities fall outside the scope of the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, they are not regulated in any way by the state, in terms of delivery or price. Thus, private HEIs are at complete liberty to set their prices according to the market demand conditions. The Sri Lankan higher education market is also quite cost-conscious, but it is not alone in this department; according to the findings of Gregory (2001) and Al-Fattal (2010), the higher education markets in Oman and Syria have also been found to be quite price sensitive.

Alpha and Beta Institutes have adopted a low-cost strategy in order to make professional education more accessible to all. Gamma Institute on the other hand, targets the upper end of economic society, and follows a premium pricing structure, but offers premium facilities to ensure value-for-money. Delta Institute also follows a premium pricing strategy given the very high ranking of its affiliated university, but the quality of facilities provided is significantly lower than that of Gamma Institute. However, Delta Institute's rationale for charging high fees is justified because previous research has shown that when the university is highly ranked and has a good reputation, the fees charged would also tend to be high (Tang *et al,* 2004).

11.4. PROMOTION

11.4.1. *Target markets, key timelines and intakes*

The target markets for all these four HEIs are more or less the same – the post-O/L students and post-A/L students following the local and London curricula, both who are awaiting results (the post-O/L students are an indirect target group for Gamma Institute). There are the students between the ages of 16-20 years. In addition to this, the HEIs also target the parents of these students, as Sri Lanka is a parent-funded market.

The marketing timelines of all the institutes too are more or less the same, as the campaigns and intakes are centred around these key exam dates – campaigns are run several months prior to the exams, and intakes are commenced shortly after the exams. Accordingly, the months of January, June/July and September seem to be the popular choices. Institutes offering professional qualifications such as Alpha and Beta Institutes have as many as four intakes a year to cater to the multiple exam sessions of those qualifications, and Gamma Institute too has four intakes a year, but that is in order to be able to cater to the massive demand and maintain size-controlled classes. Despite these timelines of key local examinations, however, Delta Institute remains the only institute to have just one intake a year, which may be a significant disadvantage to them as students may be likely to choose other qualifications instead

of waiting for a few months until the intake commences. Currently, Delta does not seem to be having trouble achieving their student recruitment targets, but the researcher believes that the number of enrolments could indeed be increased if another intake was introduced.

11.4.2.   *Advertising*

In terms of advertising, Gamma Institute is definitely the forerunner in press advertisements, with several full-page advertisements almost every Sunday in the popular English newspapers such as the Sunday Times and Sunday Observer. Alpha Institute follows on a slightly lesser scale, and even advertises in daily English newspapers such as the Daily FT, Daily Mirror and Daily News, Sinhala newspapers like Mawbima, Lakbima and Lankadeepa and Tamil newspapers like Thinakkural and Virakesari. Beta and Delta Institute both do advertise in the local English newspapers, but on a very infrequent basis. In any case, all these press advertisements are directly targeted at the parents and take on a professional look in order to cater to that market.

Keeping in mind that that the purpose of outdoor advertising through billboards is to reinforce the brand and not generate instant recruitment, billboard advertising is mostly done only by Alpha Institute, with a few billboards here and there by Delta Institute. Beta and Gamma Institutes hardly ever advertise through this medium because they feel that multiple billboards in a variety of strategic locations would be required if this channel were to be made truly effective, which would be far too costly.

Radio advertising is also resorted to by the HEIs, despite the very high cost to get airtime during peak hours and the inability to track the listener audience. Gamma Institute is the only institute that gives such a high degree of importance to radio advertising, with Alpha Institute following suit, but to a much lesser extent.

The institutional websites and related imagery also play an important role in providing information to the students to assist their decision-making process.

(Ramasubramaniam *et al*, 2002). Students often assess the institute's level of professionalism through its website. It should be noted that Alpha Institute has the most user-friendly and attractive website, with Delta Institute easily being the least attractive.

Social media is another key means of advertising in today's modern digital age. While a number of social media platforms exist such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram and Pinterest, the most commonly used platform by HEIs in Sri Lanka is Facebook, with moderate use of Instagram. On Facebook, the HEIs have the opportunity to post content by way of posters, photos of student events and short videos to create engagement by its followers. Typically, the content posted on Facebook would contain minimal text, and be more visually appealing with bright colours and images. Through the feature of sponsored ads on Facebook, the HEIs are able to target specific audiences categorised by age, geographical location and interests, which makes it easier to create awareness among the correct target markets.

Alpha Institute is easily the most active HEI on Facebook, with Beta Institute being moderately active. Alpha posts up plenty of engaging content being posted almost on a daily basis, which indicates that Alpha is successfully creating awareness about its programmes with the correct target group. Uploading photos of all student events give the viewers the impression that Alpha Institute has a large student body, which is perceived to be a positive sign in Sri Lanka. However, in the Western world, this may actually be a negative sign, as concerns may arise with regard to lecturer-student ratios, a lower degree of personalised attention and lower exclusivity (Al-Fattal, 2010). This could be the reason as to why Gamma and Delta Institutes do not give much publicity to their student numbers, thereby following an exclusive marketing strategy.

11.4.3.   PR and sponsorships

With regard to PR and sponsorships, most organisations, whether educational or corporate, have realised the importance of giving back to society to boost stakeholder confidence and the fact that this acts as a subtle, yet powerful marketing tool helps the cause. Although Alpha Institute does not have a signature CSR event, it does engage in projects such as providing relief for victims affected by the various natural disasters, and it also supports extra-curricular and educational activities in schools through sponsorships. Beta Institute, through its student body, has a signature annual CSR project to raise funds for the National Cancer Hospital. While this project is not widely known to the general public, Beta Institute's student body very enthusiastically comes together to support this initiative. Moreover, similar to Alpha Institute, Beta Institute too supports extra-curricular and educational activities in schools through sponsorships, for example by sponsoring the team t-shirts of school cricket teams. Gamma Institute also engages in CSR activity. Blood donation campaigns are conducted a few times a year, and during Christmas, the Student Activity Club visits an orphanage, a Home for Special Needs Children or a Home for Elders to spend some time with them and attending to their needs like clothing, dry rations or books. Emergency disaster relief is also provided to victims of floods or droughts. Moreover, sponsorships are a very significant activity at Gamma Institute; for instance there is a high focus on sponsoring major student conferences such as Colombo Model United Nations Conference and Sri Lanka Model United Nations Conference, where approximately 3000 students participate. It can be seen that all of these three HEIs put in efforts to engage in CSR activity, however, it is Delta Institute that is the clear winner in this category. With a level of awareness and support spanning the entire island of Sri Lanka and on an international level as well, Delta Institute's annual charity run, organised in collaboration with the Rotaract Club of Colombo Uptown, to raise funds for the National Cancer Hospital has been and continues to be a resounding success and a massive boost to Delta's corporate image.

11.4.4. *Direct marketing*

Most of these institutions engage in direct marketing as well. For instance, Alpha Institute has partnered with several popular O/L and A/L Commerce stream tuition masters in Colombo, who promote Alpha's programmes during his classes, for an incentive, either to him or to the students or both. Alpha Institute also conducts O/L and A/L revision seminars and career guidance workshops in schools, where the institute's promotional leaflets are distributed amongst those present for the workshops. While Beta Institute does not seem to have any such partnerships with O/L and A/L tuition providers, it too conducts revision seminars and career guidance workshops. Gamma Institute also conducts these workshops and also sponsors farewell luncheons organised by schools on the last day of school before the A/L exams, which gives the institute an opportunity to directly address the students and promote its qualifications. The key advantage of conducting such seminars is that the relevant institute would receive the contact details of the participating students, which the institutes would use to carry out e-mail and text message campaigns to remind students about their special offers and intake commencement dates. Distributing leaflets outside O/L and A/L examination centres is another popular way of direct marketing followed by Alpha and Beta Institutes.

Interestingly, the position of Delta Institute is unique, because Delta has its own school (primary and high school) and hence, is able to directly market its higher education programmes at no extra cost, whereas the other institutes all incur significant amounts on direct marketing. Through this mechanism, Delta Institute is virtually guaranteed of its enrolments for tertiary studies.

Open days are a less popular method of direct marketing due to poor participation levels. Many institutes try this occasionally, without great results.

11.4.5.   Personal selling

Personal selling at educational exhibitions is something that all these HEIs engage in, with most of them investing a great deal in the grandeur of their stalls. The main exhibitions are Edex Expo in January in Colombo and Kandy, Future Minds Expo in June in Colombo and Galle, and Edex Mid-Year Expo in September in Colombo and the timing of these exhibitions is such that the key examinations of both the local and London curricula are held during the month prior to the exhibitions. This gives the HEIs the perfect opportunity to promote their programmes, as students would typically be searching for higher education opportunities after their exams.

It is noteworthy to mention that Gamma and Delta Institutes both invest as high level sponsors for these exhibitions in order to obtain premium stalls at superior locations, and hence, have extensive budgets allocated for this purpose. While the stall space alone amounts to a hefty sum, and more so when the HEI is a sponsor, there are a number of other costs involved, including the stall conceptualisation and design, promotional merchandise and brochures to be given away during the exhibition and staff costs for manning the stall on the days of the exhibition. By virtue of being sponsors, Gamma and Delta Institutes get the added benefit of free, extensive media coverage by the event organisers. It is likely that these organisations have higher budgets for such events given the fact that their respective programmes are much higher priced than those of institutes offering professional qualifications. For instance, Alpha Institute does take part at these educational exhibitions, and while its stall size and position is better than that of an average institute, it is not in the same league as those of Gamma and Delta Institutes due to budgetary constraints. Beta Institute is the only institute surveyed by the researcher who does not participate at these educational exhibitions as the management feels it is pointless since the local office of the professional body promotes the qualification on behalf of the relevant tuition providers.

In addition to this, all four of these institutes also engage in personal selling when enquiries come through phone or e-mail. In all these instances, the relevant staff are trained to be friendly and informative, and are also required to capture the contact

details of the prospective students so that the enquiries can be followed up later and converted to enrolments. Customers, i.e. prospective students and their parents, value the specialised care and attention they receive from the HEI and this has a very big impact on their final purchase decision.

11.4.6.   Sales promotions

The higher education environment is so competitive today that all HEIs offer a plethora of sales promotions, mostly during key enrolment periods and also at key events like educational exhibitions and seminars conducted in schools. These promotions predominantly take the form of discounts and waivers on the course fees to induce enrolments.

Alpha and Beta Institutes offer the initial registration fee and first year subscription fee free of charge during key enrolment periods. Both institutes also use the marketing gimmick of "Original UK-printed study material provided free of charge", whereas the cost of these books are actually built into the course fees. However, this acts as a main attraction because the other providers do not provide any form of study material. Beta Institute also provides CDs with practice questions, again on the "free of charge" notion.

Gamma Institute offers scholarships to high performers at A/Ls (both local and London curricula) and also to sports achievements at school or national level. Delta Institute, on the other hand, only provides scholarships for academic performance and not sporting achievements. However, findings of the exploratory phase have shown that Delta Institute offers scholarships merely to increase enrolments and not necessarily to improve on the quality of students recruited, which inevitably results in a greater number of students dropping out halfway unable to complete the programme as they cannot keep up with the rigour of the programme. Both Gamma and Delta have an incentive scheme for referrals by existing students, but while Gamma offers this incentive through cash, Delta only gives it in the form of vouchers from various clothing stores. In addition to this, Gamma Institute also has

sibling discounts and offers significant discounts for full payments and enrolments at educational exhibitions.

Such mechanisms of providing scholarships and discounts have been subject to heavy criticism by many writers. Blumenstyk (2009) for instance has stated that such strategies undermine the quality and value of the programme and the researcher fully agrees with this view, because it is apparent from the findings of this research that the value of Delta's programme has been compromised due to its scholarship strategy.

11.4.7. *Internal communications*

This is indeed a very important part of any institute's strategy – internal communications with its existing student base needs to take place in a timely manner. Different methods are used by different HEIs. For instance, Alpha Institute does the majority of its communications through its Facebook page, such as posting up timetables and details about student events and other activities. It also sends out a copy of the timetable by post before the start of every semester. Beta uses the text messaging system, Facebook to a moderate extent and before each semester ends, every student is given a copy of the timetable for the next semester; this saves on the postage cost. Gamma Institute, on the other, having an online student portal, uses that to communicate with its students regarding all matters. The only disadvantage there is that students do not check the online portal as often as they would check social media or text messages. Delta Institute too uses its student portal, but details regarding class cancellations and re-scheduling is done through text messages, as that information needs to be received promptly by the students.

11.5.   PEOPLE

11.5.1.   Lecturers

All of the HEIs analysed in this study give a high degree of importance to their panel lecturers and strive to recruit academics and professionals of the highest calibre. It is indeed a good sign that these HEIs have understood that the lecturers are integral to their operations because the success of the programme, from pass rates to producing prizewinners to achieving overall student satisfaction, all boils down to how the lecturers are perceived by the students.

According to a study conducted in the UK by The Student Room, 77% of the students surveyed have indicated that the lecturers' qualifications and experience should be made public though prospectuses and websites (Minsky, 2015). The researcher's personal professional experience also points to the same, that the credentials and experience of the lecturers have the power to boost up the institution's reputation. Both Alpha and Beta Institutes seem to have understood this importance, as they have both profiled their lecture panel in a lot of detail on their websites, in their promotional brochures and sometimes through PR articles in the newspapers too. Both these institutes are also very selective about the lecturers they recruit; they have strict eligibility criteria where foreign academic and/or professional qualifications, and extensive corporate experience are required and a rigorous selection process takes place with auditions. Alpha Institute claims to have a world-class lecture panel and Beta Institute claims to have the best team of lecturers, which leads the researcher to believe that these claims are made based on different perspectives.

While Gamma Institute only briefly profiles its lecturers on its website, it is the lecturers who speak to prospective students and their parents at educational exhibitions. Through this, the institute aims to promote its programmes in a more effective way because the lecturers would be better equipped to advise students on the programme content. However, this could also potentially backfire on Gamma because it may seem a bit degrading for the lecturers to be seen convincing the

prospective students to choose this programme.

Delta Institute does not profile any of its lecturers on any medium whatsoever, perhaps because it relies mostly on Delta's school students who would be accustomed to the quality of programmes at the institute, and also may be because Delta encourages its past graduates to lecture, so students would most likely know them as they too would have been past students of Delta's school.

11.5.2. Administrative staff

State universities are usually very bureaucratic and not very customer-oriented, whereas private HEIs are known to be the exact opposite – warm, friendly and willing to go the extra mile to ensure that the student has a good experience. This is another reason as to why students opt for private higher education over state education. Accordingly, the four HEIs under the purview of this study have all understood the importance of relationship marketing, and make special efforts to train their marketing and administrative staff to build and strengthen this relationship as these staff are often the first point of contact with the students and play a key role in influencing the final purchase decision of the students.

For instance, Alpha Institute conducts a few training sessions each year to coach its staff on the correct mindset and attitude they need to have; Beta Institute goes one step further and organises much more extensive training programmes for its administrative staff, which sometime go on for a few days at a stretch; and while Gamma and Delta Institutes do not seem to have such formalised training programmes for its administrative staff, the management has indicated that they do not in any way undermine the importance of the role played by these staff members to improve the quality of the student-university relationship.

11.5.3. Students

At any educational establishment, just as the lecturers are integral to the operation, on the other side of the coin are its students, without whom the establishment would not exist. In order to maintain the highest level of student satisfaction, HEIs strive to maintain a good balance between studies and extra-curricular activities. Stemming from the Western world, creating an active student life culture is a concept that is becoming increasingly popular today. Accordingly, all the HEIs analysed have an entire calendar of student events thoughout the year, cultural events like Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations, religious festivities for Thaipongal, Vesak, Ramadan and Christmas, and other events like sports days, a dinner dance and an annual day-out.

Gamma Institute goes the extra mile to distinguish itself from its competitors and also organises Halloween parties, bake sales, movie nights and also Sri Lanka's largest inter-university talent show, where its students have the opportunity to represent Gamma, whilst competing against contestants from other universities. Gamma also goes beyond the traditional sportsmeet concept, where a few popular sports like cricket, netball, football and a few track events are included, but instead has separate competitions for a wide range of sports including badminton, basketball, netball, tennis, rugby and football. It also has drama and photography competitions for its students.

Alpha Institute has the basic series of student events, with nothing extraordinary. Beta Institute follows the same concept and also sends its students to represent Beta at events organised by the professional body's local office, such as sports days and quiz competitions. Delta Institute has the lowest number of student events, but its annual CSR event, a fundraiser for the National Cancer Hospital which will be discussed in greater detail in section 11.3, is a terrific hit with thousands of participants each year.

On the academic side of things, course evaluations are necessary in order to assess if the programmes are being run properly and to get student feedback regarding a number of matters such as timely and adequate syllabus coverage, areas for revision,

and complaints or suggestions regarding the lecturers, facilities or administrative processes. Here, Alpha Institute is the clear winner, as it conducts course evaluations three times per semester for every subject and addresses any concerns raised in a timely manner. Beta Institute conducts an evaluation once, at the end of each semester and Gamma conducts it at the end of the academic year, which the researcher feels is quite insufficient because then it would be too late to rectify any issues. Delta Institute, on the other hand, conducts a course evaluation at the end of every semester, but findings from the exploratory phase indicated that this student feedback received is rarely considered and acted upon, so the evaluation appears to be a mere tick-box function on the part of Delta Institute.

11.6.   PLACE

When it comes to discussing the place of the institute, there are four main contributors: the geographic location, accessibility, visibility and surrounding environment.

All four HEIs are located in the heart of Colombo, which is advantageous for several reasons: Colombo has the highest population density in Sri Lanka; the vast majority of the targeted student population resides in Colombo; premium facilities are available in Colombo; and these campuses are all very easily accessible by main roads and railways with plenty of public transportation options. Moreover, since they are all located by the side of main roads, they are very visible and easy to find. There are a wide variety of restaurants, bistros, coffee shops, pubs, clubs, hotels, gyms, malls, supermarkets, theatres and cinemas in the immediate vicinity of the campuses of Alpha, Beta and Gamma Institutes, and a 30-minute drive away from Delta Institute. Despite this, none of the institutes appear to be promoting its surrounding environment, possibly because their targeted student groups are all residents of Colombo who are already accustomed to the surroundings. It could also be due to the fact that since all these campuses are located in the heart of Colombo, which is more or less a concrete jungle with very little greenery and none of the HEIs have their

own landscaped gardens, there is nothing out of the ordinary like "lush green hills and valleys" or "unpolluted fresh air" to specifically promote.

Since online learning is not yet popular in Sri Lanka, all these four HEIs only offer face-to-face classroom-based tuition, and while Alpha and Beta Institutes offer both full- and part-time study options, Gamma and Delta Institutes only have the full-time study option. Alpha also offers tuition in two locations in Colombo, to cater to the demand with four intakes a year, and also so that students are able to choose the location more convenient to them. Alpha Institute did experiment with a couple of campuses based out of Colombo, but due to logistical issues of sourcing lecturers, these operations were abandoned.

11.7.   PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

11.7.1.   Infrastructure and facilities

A well-built campus facility is important for any HEI because it is the physical presence that gives confidence to the prospective students and their parents when they arrive at the institutional premises for the first time. At this point, they would be unable to gauge the quality of education and internal processes, so the material evidence in front of them is all they have to help them make the purchase decision.

While all four HEIs have multiple-storied campuses with air-conditioned classrooms, Gamma Institute stands out with its impressive, glass-covered campus structure. Gamma Institute also has two phenomenal libraries. Delta and Beta Institutes both have libraries which are fairly alright, but Alpha Institute significantly lacks this important academic facility. Alpha, Beta and Gamma Institutes also have their own state-of-the-art IT labs, with Gamma leading this dimension too. Delta Institute is the only one who does not have multimedia facilities available in every classroom, and this is indeed a significant disadvantage to them. While Gamma Institute has the best cafeteria, and Alpha Institute does not even have a proper cafeteria and students are required to bring their lunch and snacks and have them in a separate classroom allocated as the lunchroom. Beta Institute also has four large auditoriums.

The buildings of all institutes take on their corporate or product-related colours on the exterior – Red and white/silver for Alpha, blue and white for Beta, grey and blue for Gamma and beige and brown for Delta Institute, with external name panels. Internal building branding is also an important means of building up brand equity. Alpha and Beta Institutes have both displayed several portraits of high-performing students with testimonials and lecturers who produce prizewinners for multiple sessions are also featured in some of these posters. The lifts are also similarly branded. At Gamma and Delta Institutes, internal branding of this nature is fairly minimal. Gamma Institute makes use of several brightly lit LED touch panels in the lobby/reception area to give a classy effect and display promotional messages.

None of the institutes have a corporate uniform for its staff, but with the exception of Delta Institute, the other institutes have provided official t-shirts bearing their respective logos to the staff. All company business cards, letterheads, envelopes and tickets for student events bear the relevant institutional logos. In terms of promotional merchandise, Alpha Institute has a wide array of items including branded pens, notebooks, bookmarks and key tags; Beta Institute has branded pens, notebooks and bags; Gamma Institute has a branded docket; all of which are distributed to prospective students at seminars and career guidance workshops conducted in schools and other events. Similar to the corporate t-shirts scenario, Delta Institute once again proves to be an exception, as it does not have any promotional merchandise, with the main reason said to be because its main target market are the students from Delta's school.

11.8. PROCESSES

11.8.1. Enrolment

The enrolment process is a very important internal process as it involves a strong ability to convince the prospective student or parent to make that purchase decision, and after that decision has been brought about, the manner by which the student is taken through the enrolment process is also important because it creates a positive impression in the minds of the customer, which will lead to positive word-of-mouth.

Alpha Institute has acknowledged that this is the most important process for them, and that they make special efforts to make it a positive experience; Beta Institute provides specialised etiquette training to its staff so that prospective students and parents walking in are warmly greeted and attended to, and also trains its staff on the changes to the qualification so that they are able to provide accurate, updated information to the customers; Gamma and Delta Institutes do not seem to have invested specifically on training their staff in this respect.

11.8.2. Refunds

Having in place a refunds policy is entirely up to the discretion of each individual institute. Alpha and Delta Institutes both have a refunds policy for its examination fees, provided the student concerned submits a letter stating the reason for requesting the refund, with relevant supporting evidence. However, it has been found that despite this policy, the institutes are very reluctant to process these requests and cause unnecessary delays in doing so. Beta Institute permits refunds on both tuition and examination fees, on grounds of the provision of valid supporting evidence, and refunds are processed within seven working days. Gamma Institute does not permit refunds under any circumstances.

11.8.3. *Lecturing*

This process is integral to the functioning of any educational establishment. As such, all the institutes recruit only academically and professionally qualified individuals with sufficient industry experience and prefer to recruit through headhunting rather than by advertising. In fact, Gamma Institute is the only one who advertises vacancies on its website and in the local newspapers. Alpha Institute has adopted a new strategy of recruiting only fresh graduates with no prior experience to keep the costs low, but the effectiveness of this strategy in terms of its impact on pass rates is yet to be seen.

11.8.4. *Class cancellations*

Most institutes strive to achieve a zero cancellation policy, but there are instances when, due to unavoidable circumstances, classes do get cancelled on fairly short notice. In such situations, it is the responsibility of the institute to promptly inform the students so that their valuable time would not be wasted. The usual method of communicating such matters is through text messages.

Alpha Institute has experienced certain issues in this domain, where there have been delays in notifying the students, so much so that some students only receive the message after they have already arrived for that particular lecture, causing extreme inconvenience to them and their parents who may have dropped them off at the institute. Classes get cancelled or re-scheduled very rarely at Beta Institute and at Gamma and Delta Institutes, there is no internal process for this because the lecturers are not permitted to cancel classes. In the event they do due to unavoidable circumstances, there is always a substitute lecturer to take over the lesson so that the students are not inconvenienced.

11.8.5.   Computer-based examinations

Computer-based examinations are only found at Alpha and Beta Institutes due to the professional qualifications being offered. The procedure for booking computer-based exams at both institutes are very similar – The students are required to fill in a form available at the office and make the relevant payment. At Alpha, they can straightaway book the exam based on their preferred date and time, based on the availability of the allotted slots, but at Beta, they are required to give three preferences and the staff will do the allocation and inform the students via text message. On the day of the exam, they are required to arrive half an hour prior to the scheduled time, with their national ID cards and exam payment receipts, without which they would not be permitted to sit for the exam. Alpha Institute charges a fee for re-scheduling exams; however, Beta permits re-scheduling up to twenty-four hours prior to the exam at no extra charge. Separate personnel have been allocated for this computer-based examination function – to verify student details, run the exams, invigilate and troubleshoot.

Alpha Institute also provides free computerised mock exams to be attempted at its lab; Beta Institute provides CDs containing mock exams and other practice questions so the students are able to attempt them from the comfort of their homes.

11.9.   SUMMARY

In this chapter, the researcher has put forward a cross-case nomothetic analysis of the case study research presented in Chapters 7-10. The findings of those four chapters are combined and discussed in the form of a thematic analysis, highlighting similarities and differences existing between the various themes. The analysis is categorised into the following themes - Programme, price, promotion, people, place, physical evidence and processes.

The theme of 'programme' is further broken down into internship or job placement and language of delivery;   'price' discusses the provision of discounts and scholarships to attract students, 'promotion' is discussed according to the sub-themes of target market, key timelines and intakes, advertising, PR and sponsorships, direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotions and internal communications; 'people' is further classified into lecturers, administrative staff and students; 'place' is discussed in terms of geographic location, accessibility, visibility and surrounding environment; 'physical evidence' is discussed in terms of infrastructure, facilities and branding; and 'processes' are further sub-divided as enrolments, refunds, lecturers, class cancellations and computer-based examinations.

The similarities of operations between each of these HEIs are, to a great extent, shaped by external market forces, and a strong customer-focused approach is apparent. The strategies followed in respect of marketing and brand-building are also very important in shaping the customers' perceptions of quality (Cubillo *et al,* 2006). Despite certain similarities, however, it is apparent that each institution follows its own unique marketing strategy with varying levels of focus on different elements of the marketing mix and hence, there is no universally-applicable marketing formula that can be applied uniformly across all institutions (Maringe, 2005; Taylor and Reed, 1995). The next chapter will draw parallels between student choice of qualification and institute, and the marketing strategies of the HEIs.

CHAPTER 12 : STUDENT CHOICE AND HEI MARKETING STRATEGY: AN OVERALL PERSPECTIVE

12.1. INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher has sought to combine the findings of the exploratory and survey phases, and that of the case study analysis phase, in order to establish a relationship between the two. As such, this chapter is structured to reflect the stages of the student-consumer decision process model, i.e. need recognition, information gathering, pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives, purchase and post-consumption evaluation, in the context of the marketing strategies of the respective HEIs, categorised according to the various aspects of the marketing mix, i.e. programme, price, promotion, place, physical evidence, people and processes.

The relationship between student choice and institutional marketing strategies has been discussed by several other writers such as Kotler and Fox (1995), Ivy and Naude (2004), Briggs (2006) and Maringe (2006), and it has been established that in order to understand the market and meet the demand, it is necessary to first understand the thought and decision-making process of the student-consumer through a conceptual model. Once the needs of the student-consumer have been correctly understood, then the HEIs would be able to market themselves accordingly, and if done effectively, they should even be able to manipulate the choices of student-consumers to their advantage. Hence, the researcher's objective here is to effectively synthesise all these findings and present it as one compact model.

The following matrix represents the relationships between the stages of the student-consumer decision process model and the marketing strategies of the HEIs in a thematic fashion (See Table 12.1 below).

Table 12.1: Student Choice Model Vs Marketing Strategy

Thematic Breakdown of Marketing Strategy		Stages of the Student-Consumer Decision Process Model				
		Need Recognition	Information Gathering	Pre-Purchase Evaluation of Alternatives	Purchase	Post-Consumption Evaluation
Programme	Recognition and accreditation	x	x	x	x	x
	Internships and job placements	x	x	x	x	x
	Language	x	x	x		x
Price	Discounts		x	x	x	x
	Scholarships		x	x	x	x
Promotion	Advertising	x	x	x		x
	PR and sponsorships	x	x	x		
	Direct marketing	x	x	x	x	
	Personal selling	x	x	x	x	
	Sales promotions		x	x	x	
	Internal communications					x
Place	Geographical location		x	x	x	x
	Accessibility		x	x		x
	Visibility		x	x		x
	Surrounding environment		x	x	x	x
Physical Evidence	Infrastructure and facilities		x	x	x	x
	Branding		x	x	x	x
People	Lecturers		x	x	x	x
	Administrative staff		x	x	x	x
	Students		x	x	x	x
Processes	Enrolment			x	x	x
	Refunds					x
	Lecturing					x
	Class cancellations					x
	Computer-based exams					x

Certain marketing strategies of the HEIs fit better into some stages of the student-consumer decision process model and the discussion will see the progression of elements of the marketing strategy through the five stages of the student-consumer decision process.

12.2. NEED RECOGNITION

The discussion in this particular section is focused on what leads a student to become aware of his/her need to pursue higher education and the role played by the HEI to act as a catalyst for this need. It is essential that the HEIs first understand the needs of its customers to develop a product (i.e. programme) to cater to this need. Subsequently, the HEI can manipulate the market dynamics and create a demand for its programmes, and later on, gradually shape the market to it accept any of its product offerings.

As presented in the findings of Night and Yorke (2004), Holdsworth and Nind (2005), Saiti and Prokopiadou (2008) and Kennett *et al* (2011), the exploratory and survey phases of this research in Chapters 5 and 6 too indicated that career-related reasons were among the strongest reasons for wanting to pursue higher education. Certain programmes have also been perceived as being better than others - A status that may have been derived from the university ranking, accreditation by the professional body, or the career pathways associated with the qualifications. All the programmes offered by these HEIs give students the opportunity to pursue rewarding careers, leading to secure futures.

For instance, Alpha Institute's job placement mechanism further demonstrates the institution's commitment towards this career-focused objective. Alpha is being sensitive towards students' needs and has cleverly used that as a marketing tool to achieve its own recruitment targets as well. Moreover, Gamma Institute, by giving its students the opportunity to attend summer school or transfer to the UK after the first year, has acknowledged and supported the desire of the students' to obtain foreign exposure and become globally employable.

There were a number of social reasons that were highlighted by the students as important catalysts in their decision to pursue higher education. For instance, most students indicated a high level of parental influence on the decision to pursue higher education, most likely because it is the parents who fund their education. The researcher also discovered that some families merely want their children to obtain a

degree or professional qualification to maintain the family's social status. Moreover, students with parents of lower education levels have shown a stronger desire to become qualified and gain respectable jobs (Blackwell *et al*, 2002). Certain cultural and religious influences also influence the decision of whether or not to pursue higher education. The influence of friends was another reason that was highlighted, especially in situations where students chose particular qualifications or institutes simply because it was what their friends' chose.

There were also personal motives for wanting to pursue higher education. Academic reasons such as the desire to gain knowledge, both for personal growth and also to expand skills pertaining to certain areas, and wanting to feel a sense of achievement was another reason for pursuing higher education.

In addition to these non-marketer-dominated factors stimulating the need to pursue higher education, there were certain marketer-dominated stimuli as well. For instance, by conducting seminars and career guidance workshops in schools and exposing school students to advertisements (for example through social media or radio), the HEIs directly stimulate an interest in and need for higher education and also make the students aware of the higher educations options available to them.

12.3.   INFORMATION GATHERING

This particular section discusses the ways by which the students gather information about their prospective higher education choices and how the HEIs devise their marketing strategies to disseminate such information, and hence, the relationship existing between the two processes. When going through different phases of the decision-making process, students analyse the HEIs in the context of the elements of the marketing mix, and as such, the HEIs have all developed marketing strategies to influence the students' decision-making process to their benefit.

HEIs employ a variety of techniques and channels to disseminate information amongst the student-consumers. Examples of these directly controlled sources of

information include advertising through print media, electronic media including radio, website and social media; hoardings, PR and sponsorships, personal selling at educational exhibitions and the like, and direct marketing through career guidance workshops and seminars. As explained in Chapter 6, all these sources, except the institutional website, social media platforms and direct marketing, scored very low in the student survey. This could be due to the fact that most of these methods create brand awareness, rather than generate instant leads (Berger and Wallingford, 1996). Direct marketing through career guidance workshops and seminars seemed to be particularly effective as acknowledged by the students surveyed and all the institutes are making very good use of this method of communication: Alpha, Beta and Gamma Institutes conduct seminars at schools and Delta Institute mostly focuses on directly promoting its higher education qualifications within its own school.

Word-of-mouth is another powerful source of information available to prospective students. Current students often inadvertently act as ambassadors for the qualification and/or institute by giving their opinions to the public, including their friends who may well be prospective students. In fact, a number of students interviewed indicated that at the time of selecting a qualification and institute, they had relied on information supplied by their friends who were already pursing higher education. The student-university relationship, social life at university, value-for-money assessment, and the overall experience at the institute were seen to be the main factors leading to post-enrolment satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The advantage of the word-of-mouth communication channel is that when information is conveyed on a student-to-student basis, it becomes more understandable and meaningful to the prospective student, and it is also perceived to be much more genuine than any marketing information communicated directly by the institute. However, it should be remembered that while post-enrolment satisfaction could lead to current students positively recommending the qualification and institute to prospective students, post-enrolment dissatisfaction could generate the exact opposite effect.

Another indirectly controlled source of information is the academic staff, or the lecturers, because they tend to provide information and personal opinions about the

institute in an informal manner, mostly during lectures. This notion reflects on the findings of Gronroos (2000), who put forward the view that an organisation should first market its products to its staff so that they truly believe in those products and would positively mirror those communications to others. The researcher agrees with this view and further believes that the organisations should ensure that their staff members are happy and motivated, if they are to generate any positive informal communications. The word of lecturers is a very powerful communication tool as the lecturers are highly trusted by the students and perceived to be experts. As witnessed at Gamma Institute, when some lecturers were commenting negatively about the institute during lectures, they actually succeeded in influencing the students to such a great extent that a number of students started to switch to other institutes.

12.4. PRE-PURCHASE EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVES

This stage is a crucial turning point in the student-consumer's decision-making process as this is when the student evaluates all the options available and arrives at the final decision. It is therefore, important that the HEIs identify which criteria are important to the student and align their marketing strategies to these preferences. Accordingly, the relationship between student choice and the HEIs' marketing strategies presented in this section is classified under six themes as discussed in Chapter 6 - Reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related reasons, convenience factors and financial factors.

12.4.1. Reputational factors

This particular cluster scored the highest aggregate mean amongst the other selection criteria in the survey and the importance of reputational factors were also evident in the case study analysis chapters. It has also been highlighted in the findings of Soutar and Turner (2002), Holdworth and Nind (2005) and Azoury *et al* (2014).

Some of the factors that were highlighted in the survey as being very important to the students were institutional reputation, accreditation status by the professional body,

quality of the lecture panel and ranking of the university. Similarly, the case study analysis showed that the HEIs concerned were indeed paying a lot of attention to these factors; for instance, Alpha Institute is very proud of its high level of accreditation from the professional body and is continuously working towards maintaining it, Beta and Delta Institutes both strive to maintain a senior and experienced panel of lecturers, and Gamma Institute is making great efforts to ensure that its level of facilities and overall programme quality are consistent with the partner university's ranking and prestigious status in the UK.

Although the findings of the student survey indicated that students do not give much importance to factors such as pass rates and the number of prizewinners produced, it became apparent from the case study analysis that institutes offering professional qualifications in particular have dedicated a significant amount of effort and resources towards marketing these factors. Therefore, it can be reasonably concluded that while this activity may be good for building up the institutes' brands, it does not necessarily stimulate the final purchase decision, and hence, the researcher feels that the HEIs concerned would be able to generate better returns if they invested these resources into marketing other aspects that are more valued by the prospective students.

12.4.2. Recommendations

Although this particular cluster was ranked fairly average according to the findings of the student survey, the findings from the exploratory phase indicated a significant influence by the families, friends and teachers of the prospective students when evaluating alternatives and making the final purchase decision. The influence of friends has also been suggested by research put forward by Brooks (2003) and McAllum *et al* (2007). While it is difficult to directly control these influences, some institutions have devised other mechanisms to circumvent this particular obstacle.

For instance, Alpha Institute has successfully managed to control the recommendations from tuition teachers by partnering up with prominent tuition

teachers for the Commerce stream subjects where they promote Alpha's qualifications in class, inform them of special discounts and also give out brochures. These teachers also provide the details of their students to Alpha Institute. As data protection laws are not strictly enforced in Sri Lanka, it is a common phenomenon for institutes to obtain the contact details of students through various means. While some teachers receive a payment for facilitating all these promotional activities, others request it in the form of additional discounts for their students.

Another example would be the sibling discounts and referral incentives offered by Gamma Institute. If a student were to introduce a sibling to the institute, substantial discounts would be offered on the course fees of the new student, which is a significant motivator for any family. Moreover, by introducing a friend to the institute, current students are able to receive cash as an incentive, which is an exciting opportunity in the eyes of any student. Delta Institute also has in a place a referral incentive scheme, but only in the form of vouchers from various clothing stores and not hard cash. These incentive schemes, although beneficial for the institution, can have negative repercussions on the quality of students recruited and has the potential to generate positive word-of-mouth for the wrong reasons.

12.4.3.   *Strength of marketing*

The theme of 'strength of marketing' recorded the lowest cluster mean, and the findings of the survey indicated that elements such as persistent calls/texts from the institute and the attractiveness of the brochures did not in any way act as positive forces in influencing the final purchase decision of students. In fact, students have indicated that constant follow up calls by the institutes annoy them and they make it a point to stay away from such institutes. However, the case study analysis indicated that almost all the institutes spend heavily on printing promotional brochures and on call, e-mail and text message campaigns. As such, the HEIs may need to rethink their marketing strategy in this department since it does not seem to be adding much value when it comes to influencing the final purchase decision.

Facilities, campus infrastructure and technology used in class were the clear winners in this category, with the overall category ranking fourth in the findings of the student survey. Students have indicated that they do very seriously assess these criteria and select institutes that best satisfy them in terms of material aspects such as the appearance of the building and classrooms.

From the case study analysis, it is evident that Gamma Institute stands out as having the most luxurious campus infrastructure and offering the best quality facilities of the four HEIs studied. The facilities offered at Beta Institute are commendable, although they cannot be meaningfully compared with those of Gamma Institute since the contexts are slightly different due to the difference in the calibre of programmes offered, i.e. professional and academic. Moreover, all the HEIs except Delta Institute have demonstrated superior use of technology, with each classrooms being fully equipped with modern teaching aids in the form of state-of-the-art multimedia facilities.

Although most students indicated a preference towards an informal university environment without strict rules, the survey findings showed that the criterion of university rules and regulations was not something that had a drastic influence on the final purchase decision of students. The case study analysis showed that Alpha and Beta Institutes in particular have been successful in creating a friendly, informal ambiance on campus, and although Gamma and Delta Institutes have a slightly more formal environment, students have not expressed particular displeasure over it either.

Extra-curricular activities have not been indicated as a top priority when choosing an institute, mainly because students seem to assess the institute's academic performance like pass rates to a greater extent. That being said, however, the availability of extra-curricular activities is a definite marketing advantage for the HEIs as it demonstrates their ability to provide a balanced life for the students, which

is always appreciated by students and parents alike. Accordingly, all four HEIs have a variety of sports and extra-curricular activities throughout the year, with Gamma Institute having the highest number of events.

12.4.5. Convenience factors

Ranked second highest of all the criteria considered by the students when evaluating options to make the final purchase decision, this contradicts the findings of Ivy (2009) who put forward that students do not consider convenience factors to be that important.

The most popular convenience factor was the availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time options. However, it was noted that only the institutes offering professional qualifications, i.e. Alpha and Beta Institutes, offer classes in both full- and part-time options; both Gamma and Delta Institutes only have full-time classes. This type of flexibility can be easily facilitated with professional qualifications, given the number of examination sessions and cycles during a year, whereas academic qualifications follow a rigid timetable with one exam session each year.

The availability of campuses in different locations has been considered by certain HEIs as something that would be a critical factor in the students' choice on institution. For instance, Alpha Institute has established campuses in multiple locations to increase convenience to the students. However, the findings of the student survey indicated that this is in fact not an aspect that students critically consider when deciding on an institution. Therefore, Alpha Institute would be wiser to consider consolidating its position to one campus facility, possibly a larger and much nicer one, instead of opting for several campuses with mediocre facilities in each. Beta, Gamma and Delta Institutes appear to have correctly identified the students' viewpoint on this criterion and have focused on ameliorating the conditions of their existing campuses.

Moreover, the student survey also indicated that distance from home to the institute was also not considered to be too important, which is also consistent with the findings of Holdsworth and Nind (2005). This lack of importance has been justified as the students have mentioned that they would be willing to travel any distance to study at a particular HEI if it were considered to be a highly reputed one.

Gamma Institute offers students the possibility of transferring overseas after the first year of study, and it is a well thought-out strategy by Gamma. Having correctly identified that the target market is one which wishes to study in Sri Lanka itself but simultaneously become globally employable professionals, by giving them the option of transferring to the UK for a couple of years, Gamma is providing an extra value-addition through this foreign exposure. Unfortunately, this is not something that can be used as a marketing tool by Alpha and Beta Institutes as professional qualifications can anyway be studied from anywhere in the world and even self-studied. Delta Institute also faces a problem in offering the transfer option. This is because there are vast numbers of students from all over the world reading for degree programmes from this university, which makes it impossible for the university to facilitate such transfer programmes on behalf of its partner institutions worldwide.

12.4.6.   Financial factors

This particular category relates to the financial considerations that play a pivotal role in the final purchase decision of students and has been ranked as the third most important category in the student survey. There were a number of elements considered here, such as scholarships, discounts, the affordability of tuition fees and the availability of instalment payment plans and student loan schemes. The findings of the student survey indicated that the affordability of tuition fees especially was a significant game changer in the view of the students, and this stance is further supported by the findings of Ahier (2000) and Pimpa (2005). Although it is a parent-funded market in Sri Lanka, given the level of influence that the family exerts over the final purchase decision, it is not strange to find that the students themselves are

concerned over the fees. In fact, the influence of the family is so strong that it is almost as if the students and their parents were considered as one decision unit.

The pricing strategy has a direct impact on the overall profitability and hence, is of strategic importance to any organisation. In the context of educational establishments, it is necessary to generate sufficient revenue to be able to carry out marketing campaigns, pay the lecturers and manage other overheads and wages (Doti, 2004). Alpha and Beta Universities both follow a very affordable pricing structure because they are targeting the mass market. Gamma Institute, on the other hand, has opted for premium pricing and offers high quality, premium facilities and additional academic support as part of its value proposition. In doing so, it targets a slightly more niche market – the upper class and upper end of middle class Sri Lankan society, and this strategy seems to be working for Gamma, as they do not wish to have vast numbers in its classes. Gamma Institute has thus successfully positioned itself with the notion of 'better quality comes at a higher price', a perception that is not unique to this research alone; a number of other writers such as Tang *et al* (2004) and Holdsworth and Nind (2005) have also put forward the same notion. Delta Institute also charges a premium for its tuition, but does not appear to have facilities or extra services to justify its pricing, and as such, students have expressed a certain level of dissatisfaction over the same.

In conclusion, the pre-purchase evaluation of alternatives phase is definitely the most important one when it comes to analysing the relationship between student choice and HEI marketing strategy. The objective of the HEIs is to align themselves to the students' choice criteria, but it is no doubt a challenge to correctly identify student perceptions and tailor the marketing strategies to suit these specific criteria.

12.5. PURCHASE

The actual 'purchase' action mostly depends on the convincing ability of the institutional staff member who is handling the enrolments and the strength of the overall enrolment process. The ease and efficiency of the enrolment process, and the level of care and attention given to the student during enrolment have a significant impact on the student's decision to enrol because it is a direct reflection of the institution's commitment towards the students (Taylor *et al,* 2008; Sánchez, 2012). The first impression is everything, and this view has been expressed by the students during the exploratory interviews and subsequently confirmed during the interviews with the marketing personnel of the HEIs. Some of the HEIs have also acknowledged that the enrolment process is the most important internal process they have. In the researcher's personal experience, there have been instances where students have decided against a particular institute simply because they felt the enrolment process was not handled efficiently, thereby giving a bad first impression.

In a parent-funded market such as Sri Lanka where the influence of family is also quite strong, there was a doubt as to whether it was the students or their parents who made the final purchase decision. The survey findings confirmed that it was the students' who had made the final call, but the accuracy of these findings cannot be entirely guaranteed as the students may have simply thought that it was they who made the final decision, whereas it may have actually been their parents who had made the final decision. In any case, it is a difficult distinction to make, given the dependency of Sri Lankan students on their parents, and this makes parents important stakeholders from the perspective of the HEIs. The HEIs have all correctly identified this, and hence, direct a fair proportion of their marketing strategies towards parents, such as newspaper advertising.

12.6. POST-CONSUMPTION EVALUATION

This is the final stage in the student-consumer's higher education experience, where they reflect on their decision to pursue a particular qualification at a particular institute, and this particular section evaluates the extent to which the HEIs' marketing strategies were successful in ensuring that the students had a positive experience while studying at their establishments.

It is always an on-going battle to correctly identify the expectations of the students and try and match upto those expectations (Elliott and Healy, 2001). At the same time, it is also important to inform the students of the realities at the time of enrolment so that their expectations are realistic and they do not end up disappointed later (Prugsamatz *et al,* 2007). Unfortunately, most HEIs nowadays tend to portray a significantly glamorous experience, despite the actual situation being different, and in some cases, drastically different (Armstrong and Lumsden, 1999). Akin to the suggestions of Supiano (2009), this researcher too feels that the HEIs should inform the students of the fine print at the time of enrolling. For instance, students should be informed that their tuition and exam fees might increase annually, so that they do not feel deceived when the fee increases actually do take place.

Ensuring that the students' expectations are met is also important because of the word-of-mouth effect that is generated, which has the power to influence the purchase decision of a prospective student and affect the institute's reputation too. Students who have had a positive experience would always portray a positive image of the institute to others, and would genuinely not hesitate to recommend it to family and friends. Likewise, students who were not satisfied would do much worse than simply not recommend; they may speak ill of the institute, which would definitely result in a negative impact on its reputation and future recruitments. Most importantly, the level of student satisfaction is a reflection of the success of the institute's marketing strategy.

Although it was apparent from the case study analysis that all the HEIs conduct formal investigations of student satisfaction through course evaluations, only Alpha

Institute enquires about matters other than academic matters, such as facilities, the friendliness and efficiency of administrative staff and the enrolment process. The irony, however, is that Alpha's facilities are not the greatest, so receiving feedback about those facilities are a bit like stating the obvious. Despite this however, the detailed evaluation is a commendable act by Alpha Institute as it enables the institute to be sensitive to the needs of its students', which results in achieving increased student satisfaction (Petruzzellis *et al,* 2006).

Although the findings of this study are similar in certain aspects to previous studies, they are nevertheless unique because this study has been conducted in the context of a South Asian country, which has very different socio-cultural and economic conditions influencing the decision-making process of students, thereby giving a different spin to the research conducted in the Western world. Moreover, the significance of this study is further enhanced by the fact that no similar study has been conducted in this region.

12.7.   SUMMARY

This particular chapter has presented how the various stages of the student-consumer decision process model interacts with the elements of the marketing strategies of institutes, with best practice and other noteworthy examples highlighted from the case study chapters. Accordingly, it is apparent that the needs of students and society in general play a role in shaping the marketing strategies of HEIs and also that the marketing strategies of HEIs do in fact have an impact on the higher education choices of students. This is a classic 'push-pull' relationship between the two inter-dependent variables, and any change to either of the variables would have a knock-on effect on the other. This means that the HEIs should be responsive to the changes in consumer dynamics, and adjust their marketing strategies accordingly.

CHAPTER 13 : CONCLUSION

13.1.   INTRODUCTION

The final chapter of this thesis evaluates the extent to which the research questions have been answered. Accordingly, the discussion is broken down into three sections for the respective research questions; the first analysing student choice, the second analysing the marketing strategies of the higher educational institutions and the third analysing the relationship between student choice and HEI marketing strategies.

This study is particularly important since there has not been any research conducted in Sri Lanka related to higher education marketing and this study delves into analysing the effectiveness of the marketing strategies of HEIs and its influence on student choice. The researcher also introduced a new student-choice decision process model by building on and improving a number of existing models. With an increasing demand for foreign higher education in Sri Lanka, the researcher believes that the timing of this research was apt and that the findings of this study would prove to be very useful to the higher education industry as a whole.

13.2. ASSESSMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This section discusses and summarises the outcomes of the study and is analysed in the context of each research question.

13.2.1. Research question 1: What is the student-consumers' decision-making process when choosing to pursue higher education?

Substantiated by the exploratory interviews and survey with students of the four HEIs under study, the researcher was able to arrive at the conclusion that the student-consumers in Sri Lanka go through five distinct phases during their higher education decision-making process. The first phase is where the need to pursue higher education is recognised, and non-marketer dominated stimuli such as future career, parental influence, and a thirst for knowledge and personal achievement were the main motivators. The findings of this study revealed that these motivations and expected benefits of higher education vary based on the social, cultural and economic backgrounds of the students. In addition to this, marketer-dominated stimuli such as advertisements, and seminars and career guidance workshops have also been acknowledged as stimulating the need to pursue higher education.

The second phase is where the students gather information, both consciously and sub-consciously, about the higher education options available. This information gathering process often starts as early as when the students are still in school (aided by the HEIs when they visit schools to conduct career guidance workshops), and becomes an active search after the students complete their A/L exams. The main sources of information were identified to be recommendations, direct inquiry, marketing collateral, media and school promotions. The institutional website under the category of 'media', recommendations by parents and relatives under the broad theme of 'recommendations', and seminars and career guidance workshops under the category of 'school promotions' were ranked first, second and third respectively as the most informative sources from the students' viewpoint. The researcher expected the website to be of low importance; however, findings of the student survey proved to be the exact opposite, as students felt it was the most convenient and easy-to-

compare source that was readily available to them at all times. Although referring to the websites was the popular option, the students also indicated that they felt they could not entirely rely on the information presented on the website, and preferred to verify the information by getting a recommendation from family, friends or teachers, and/or contacting the respective institute via call or e-mail.

Once the information has been gathered, the student-consumer enters into the third phase of the decision process, i.e. evaluating the options before purchasing. As such, the students often draw up a list of the potential qualifications and institutes and proceed to eliminate one by one by assessing the availability and strength of by one or more of their six preferred criteria: reputational factors, recommendations, strength of marketing, campus-related reasons, convenience factors and/or financial factors. They sometimes seek additional information and perform crosschecks by contacting the institutes or by speaking to family or friends.

The fourth phase, 'Purchase' takes place once the students have successfully narrowed down their choices, and decided on one specific institute for a particular reason(s) in one of the categories mentioned above. According to the findings of the student survey, reputational factors ranked the highest in influencing the purchase decision, and convenience and financial factors ranked second and third respectively; campus-related reasons, recommendations and strength of marketing followed suit. However, the findings of the exploratory study indicated that recommendations were in fact quite a significant influence on the final purchase decision. The efficiency of the enrolment process was also a main factor in influencing the purchase decision. For instance, students have pointed out that they decided against enrolling at a particular institute simply because the staff handling the enrolments did not give them the attention they felt they deserved as customers.

The final phase is the post-consumption reflection phase, where students reflect on their choice decisions. They would assess the extent to which their expectations of the relevant institutions were met after they enrolled; if the actual experience was as described to them in the information gathering phase. If their expectations were more

or less met, students would be satisfied and would be likely to recommend the institute to others. Similarly, if they had had a negative experience, then the message given to the public would be negative and may harm the reputation of the institute. As such, the post-consumption reflection phase is directly linked to the information-gathering and pre-purchase evaluation phases of a prospective student. However, it is worthwhile to note that in most cases, only extremely positive or extremely negative experiences have the power to seriously impact the institute's reputation, and as with anything, criticism always tends to spread a lot faster than positive feedback.

In conclusion, the first research question has been analysed in detail and a solid basis for the student-consumers' decision-making process when choosing a higher education pathway has been established through the research findings. The model presented by the researcher has built on the work of Vrontis *et al* (2007) and Blackwell *et al* (2012) and has laid out the student-consumers' decision-making process in a manner that is relevant to the Sri Lankan market. The rationale behind developing a new model is because the previous research has been conducted in the context of developed countries in the West, and the researcher felt that the different economic and socio-cultural settings in Sri Lanka would lead to significant differences in the findings. Accordingly, some of the key differences that were highlighted due to the economic and socio-cultural peculiarities of Sri Lanka were the influence of parents on student choice of higher education, an increased level of importance placed on recommendations and informal reputation, and a strong focus on the cost of the programme.

13.2.2. Research question 2: How do HEIs market their suite of qualifications?

The researcher analysed this particular research question through four case studies conducted on the selected HEIs. The analysis was classified according to the various elements of the extended marketing mix put forward by Kotler and Fox (1995) – Programme, price, place, promotion, process, physical evidence and people.

Through the analysis of the element of 'programme', the researcher provided some background context to each qualification, including details regarding the entry requirements, recognition and accreditation, internships/job placements, language of delivery. The case study findings established that the overall objective of all these qualifications is to make the students' globally employable and to help them secure a better future.

The next element of the marketing mix was 'price'. It was found that the Sri Lankan consumers of higher education are quite cost-conscious and as such, the institutes attract students by offering significant discounts on course fees, various other fee waivers and scholarships. Accordingly, the pricing strategy has a significant impact on the marketing strategy of the HEIs as it has a knock-on effect on the organisational revenue and the management of ancillary costs. The case study analysis also established that professional qualifications are less expensive than academic qualifications, and the marketing budgets of those HEIs reflected the lower degree of finances too.

The element of 'place' focused on the aspects of geographic location, accessibility, visibility and surrounding environment. The study showed that it was important to have a strategic placement as face-to-face classroom learning is key in Sri Lanka, and as such, all the HEIs are located in Colombo, which make them easily accessible due to the ample avenues of public transport available, with a wide variety of entertainment and convenience options in the vicinity. It was noted, however, that these aspects are not emphasised in any marketing communications, and it was

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believed to be because the target audience mainly consisted of the residents of Colombo who were already familiar with the surroundings.

The element of 'promotion' was further analysed under the sub-topics of advertising, PR and sponsorships, direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotions and internal communications. From traditional channels such as newspaper advertising, to more modern channels such as social media marketing, a variety of marketing tools are being used by the HEIs concerned to target the students and also their parents since this is a parent-funded market. The institutes are also seen to be engaging in multiple CSR projects in order to boost their image as good corporate citizens, and sales promotions to ease the financial burden are quite popular.

The internal processes of the HEIs, such as enrolment, refunds, lecturing, class cancellations and computer-based examinations, with the last two processes only being applicable to the two institutes offering professional qualifications, are seen to be playing a key role in influencing the students' experiences at the institutes. Accordingly, the HEIs seem to be placing a high degree of emphasis on a relationship marketing strategy, with special measures being taken to improve the student-consumer's first encounter with the institute during enrolment.

The next element, 'physical evidence' was discussed under two sub-topics: infrastructure and facilities, and branding. The study revealed that the infrastructure and facilities are considered to be important by students as they use those criteria to judge the quality of the institute and its financial viability. Branding is also considered to be important because it contributes towards the institution's image and building its brand. The HEIs are seen to be externally projecting their brands through the use of their corporate colours, logos and promotional merchandise.

The marketing mix element of 'people' was further categorised into three sub-divisions: lecturers, administrative staff and students. While lecturers are seen to be the integral core of the operation, the administrative staff members are an important support mechanism. Accordingly, the lecturers undergo a rigorous selection

procedure and every measure is taken to ensure their long-term retention as the institute's brand is developed with the performance of its lecture panel. Students are also very critical to the operation of any educational establishment and a variety of extra-curricular and sporting activities are organised throughout the year to ensure their satisfaction. Students are also asked for feedback on the programme, so that any concerns could be addressed in a timely manner.

As the case study analysis resulted in an in-depth revelation of the marketing strategies of the four HEIs selected, it can be reasonably concluded that the outcomes of the second research question are quite satisfactory. As anticipated, the different institutes are seen to attribute varying levels of importance to the different elements of Kotler and Fox's (1995) extended marketing mix and it is apparent that one marketing strategy cannot be applied uniformly to all institutes.

13.2.3. Research question 3: Is there a relationship between student choice of HE and the marketing strategies of HEIs?

Upon comparison of the findings from the exploratory, survey and case study phases, it is evident that there is indeed a relationship existing between student choice of HE and the marketing strategies of HEIs, with the two variables being dependent on each other. As presented in Chapter 12, it was found that the various elements of the extended marketing mix correspond with certain stages of the student-consumer decision process model, i.e. the HEIs tailor their marketing strategies to satisfy the needs of the students as they progress through the decision-making process. For instance, the students' need to gather information is satisfied through the provision of information by the HEIs across a variety of channels such as newspapers, brochures, the institutional website and social media to name a few. The study further established a 'push-pull' relationship between student choice and HEI marketing strategy, where the needs of the consumers play an important role in shaping the marketing strategies of HEIs, and the marketing strategies of the HEIs also have the power to influence the higher education choices of students.

While the researcher expected the existence of a relationship between the two variables prior to conducting the study, the 'push-pull' relationship was a new discovery and the researcher believes the findings presented form an excellent basis for the HEIs to better understand their consumers and the related market dynamics.

13.3. MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS RESEARCH

This study has contributed in many ways to academia, mainly in the spheres of research methodology, theoretical models and content.

From a methodological perspective, this study has followed a sequential pattern and encompassed a mixed research paradigm, where elements of both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed. Accordingly, the first phase consisted of a series of exploratory interviews with corresponding pilot studies, the second phase consisted of a student survey (and pilot study) to establish patterns based on statistical analysis, and the final phase consisted of a case study analysis on the four selected HEIs, which was supplemented by the researcher's personal observations and interviews with marketing personnel from the institutes. The mixed-method approach has not been used in many previous studies, and the researcher specifically decided to use it because the advantages of the quantitative and qualitative research paradigms would be combined and the disadvantages could be offset. Hence, the researcher was able to effectively corroborate and methodologically triangulate the data, thereby enhancing the validity of the conclusions and level of pragmatism of the overall study.

From a theoretical perspective, although the researcher's initial plan was to apply existing consumer decision models to the local context, due to the significant cultural and socio-economic differences influencing this particular study, the researcher felt that the application of those models to this study would diminish the relevance of the study and hence, proceeded to develop her own student-consumer decision-process model by further building on the work of Vrontis *et al* (2007) and Blackwell *et al* (2012). Accordingly, while there have been certain consistencies with previous research conducted on higher education marketing in a Western context, this particular study has brought out some unique differences that are specific to the Sri Lankan context. This study also puts forward the proposition that in order to maximise returns, HEIs should focus on understanding their customers, and then evaluate their marketing strategies to assess if they are effectively catering to the

needs of the student-consumers. Consequently, the institutes were seen to give varying degrees of importance to different elements of the marketing mix.

With regard to the contribution to content, as higher education marketing in Sri Lanka is a severely under-researched area, by analysing the effectiveness of HE marketing strategies and their influence on student choice, this study contributes to a better understanding of the decision-making process of Sri Lankan students and opens the gateway for further research. It highlights the peculiarities of the Sri Lankan HE market and establishes that models developed in the West cannot be directly applied to developing countries such as Sri Lanka without being slightly adjusted to the local context. This study is the only one of its kind conducted in Sri Lanka and hence, is very relevant to the entire higher education industry in Sri Lanka. It is also of strategic importance to foreign universities, those who are currently operating in Sri Lanka and also those who have future plans of doing so, who wish to capitalise on the abundant HE opportunities in the Sri Lankan market.

13.4. LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

This particular research has a number of limitations. Firstly, this study was limited to HEIs offering foreign undergraduate qualifications (both academic and professional) in Colombo (i.e. private HEIs) and expressly excluded state institutions. Postgraduate qualifications were not considered here because those students would be a mature group who would be less likely to be influenced by marketing strategies of the HEIs.

Secondly, as the students surveyed were those in their first, second or third years of HE study or those who have recently graduated, they were required to recall their choice decisions from the past. However, they may not have been able to remember all the important factors that went into their consideration of choosing the HE qualification and institute at the time of initial enrolment. This may have slightly affected the findings, but the researcher believes that this approach generated better results than if prospective students had been surveyed (such as those in high school), because they would not have completed the decision-making process in full yet and may be confused about the choices available, which may have distorted the findings to a greater extent.

Thirdly, the researcher only surveyed students of four key institutions based on certain self-established criteria (Burgess, 1984). However, this was not an accurate reflection of the private HE market in Sri Lanka as only four of atleast forty to fifty institutes have been taken into consideration. Unfortunately, due to the availability of limited resources, the researcher was unable to extend the sample to include more HEIs.

Lastly, due to time constraints, the researcher was not able to engage in a longitudinal study to identify possible trends in student choice and new developments that may have taken place in the marketing strategies of HEIs over a period of time.

13.5.   SUGGESTIONS FOR AREAS OF FURTHER STUDY

Suggestions for areas for further studies inherently stem from the limitations discussed above.

This study is the only one of its kind focusing on private higher education marketing in Sri Lanka, but it is limited to undergraduate level studies. Given the massive demand for postgraduate taught programmes in Sri Lanka, it is vital that research is conducted on analysing the choice of these mature student-consumers. In the researcher's personal experience, there are two possible scenarios. Firstly, it is likely that postgraduate consumers with prior academic qualifications would assess the information provided by the HEIs in a much more critical manner as they have already gone through a similar process at undergraduate level. The second possibility is that postgraduate consumers with no academic background and only work experience may be likely to undergo a decision-making process similar to that of undergraduate students as they would be first-time consumers of higher education. Therefore, this could definitely prove to be a very interesting area for future research.

Research could also be conducted on prospective students, perhaps even as two separate categories, for instance, students in high school and those who are no longer in school but who are awaiting examination results prior to commencing higher studies, as these groups of students may have differing perspectives on higher education avenues. The data gathered from such students would also be very current as they would be in the first few stages of the decision-process, rather than having to recall past incidents.

Furthermore, a longitudinal study could be conducted to analyse the changes in student choice and marketing strategies over a longer period of time, which may no doubt give way to new important findings. A larger sample of HEIs could also be taken into consideration for the case study analysis, and a quantitative study could be conducted to establish stronger generalisations with a solid statistical basis.

Lastly, the exploratory interview phase highlighted an interesting area for future research - To find out which qualifications were currently in high demand from the perspective of the employers in Sri Lanka.

13.6.   SUMMARY

In conclusion, this chapter succinctly presents the extent to which each research question was answered.   The first section summarised the student-consumers' decision process when choosing to pursue higher education, the second section addressed the marketing strategies of HEIs and the third section summarised the relationship between the first two sections. The researcher has also discussed the main contributions of this study in the context of research methodology, theoretical models and content, and key limitations and areas for future research have also been highlighted.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: PILOT STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Q1. Why did you choose this qualification?

Prompts and probes – Did you choose it because your friends had decided on it? How does this choice help you in your career?

Q2. Why did you decide to study it at this institute?

Prompts and probes – Did you visit the institutes? Were you impressed? How did you compare the different institutes? Was it due to factors like timetables, fees, lecturer quality etc?

Q3. Did you have any other options?

Prompts and probes – How many alternatives did you have? How did you eliminate those alternatives and decide on this? What was the key deciding factor?

Q4. From where did you get information about the qualification and institute?

Prompts and probes – Was it from a press ad, social media like Facebook, educational exhibitions like Edex and Future Minds, through parental / teacher's recommendations, friends/relatives, institutional website?

Q5. What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

Prompts and probes – Did you consult your parents? Did they make the decision? Were your friends studying at the same institute? Did you read graduate testimonials? How was the enrolment process?

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

Prompts and probes – Did the ads reflect the true situation within the institutes? Do you think the institute would be able to retain its students in future years? What makes this institute unique?

APPENDIX 2: STUDENT INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Q1. At which institute did you choose to study?

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

Prompts and probes – What was the purpose? How does it help you in your career?

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

Prompts and probes – Was it from a press ad, social media like Facebook, educational exhibitions like Edex and Future Minds, through parental / teacher's recommendations, friends/relatives, institutional website? What was your preferred source? What specific information were you looking for?

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

Prompts and probes – How did you eliminate those alternatives and decide on this? What was the key deciding factor? Did you visit the institutes? What were the things that attracted you in particular? Did you consult your parents?

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

Prompts and probes – Did the ads reflect the true situation within the institutes? Do you think the institute would be able to retain its students in future years? What makes this institute unique? Were there any issues while you studied at this institute?

APPENDIX 3: PARTIAL TRANSCRIPTS OF STUDENT INTERVIEWS

Exploratory interviews were conducted with twenty students, five from each HEI. Accordingly, Participants 1-5 were from Alpha Institute, Participants 6-10 were from Beta Institute, Participants 11-15 were from Gamma Institute and Participants 16-20 were from Delta Institute. This appendix contains partial transcripts of the student interviews as the researcher felt that the verbatim transcripts were too voluminous.

PARTICIPANT 1:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Alpha."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I did local A/Ls, but I was never interested in studying at the state universities. They are forever on strike and a 3-year degree would take almost 5 years to complete. The quality of education at private universities is so much better. This is why I decided to follow a career in accountancy with the professional qualification".

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"My uncle had done this particular qualification, so he told me. In addition to that, almost every week, I used to see something on Facebook related to Alpha Institute. Either pictures of some student event, or a poster about their prizewinners or lectures, or a poster highlighting discounts. I have also seen a few short videos which were quite interesting. […] I think my mother called a few places too."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"Like I said, state universities were really not an option for me. Which left me wondering what my pathways were. Having done Commerce for A/Ls, it was either a Business degree, Law or some professional qualification. I was good with numbers so then it was a choice between the qualifications offered at Alpha or Delta. [...] I feel that institutes that offer a range of recognised professional qualifications are fairly well-reputed and good at what they do. It also gives me more options if I wish to gain some other qualification. This is why I chose Alpha Institute [....] I am from Negambo and although the institute has a campus close to my home, I prefer to come for the classes which are conducted in Colombo. This is because Colombo has a lot more activity going on and I have a wider choice of lecturers to choose from. [...] My uncle and parents agreed that this qualification was the best career choice for me. So here I am!"

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"It was quite smooth. They told me which documents to bring, and it took me less than 10 minutes to get enrolled."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?
"There was one key incident that made me regret my decision. I requested for a refund because I got dengue haemorrhage fever and was unable to attend classes for more than half the semester. I followed the correct procedure and gave all the supporting documents as well. But it took me about one and a half months to get my refund! And that was also after a million calls by me to remind the staff to do the needful. That was quite disappointing. [...] The ads spoke a lot about prizewinners, but I haven't noticed any exceptional support given in class. Maybe those students were just smart."

PARTICIPANT 2:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"I am currently studying at Alpha Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"Everyone knows that you can't find a job without a degree. And there are times where even one degree is sometimes not enough, but the employer also requires you to be professionally qualified. That's why I chose this qualification, because you get two qualifications together at a fairly affordable cost."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"We had a career day at school and a few institutes participated there. Ofcourse, the whole event was kind of commercialised and we all got the impressions that they were really just interested in promoting their courses rather than in our wellbeing, but it was useful all the same. We got a bunch of brochures, most of which I threw away the same day. I regretted this later when I started seriously hunting for options. [.....] I started calling different places, but that was taking so much time that I decided a Google search instead, and that way, I found some stuff online too. And I visited a couple of places with two of my friends."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I knew there were a lot of options available, wasn't sure what all of them were though. It was just too confusing. Almost every road I passed from school to home had a billboard advertising some college. [....]The qualification offered at Alpha Institute takes 2 and half years to complete, and that includes the degree as well.

When compared with other degrees, which take 3 to 4 years to complete, I would have two qualifications sooner and can start looking for a job while continuing my higher studies. The duration was the winner! But there were so many good options out there. [.....] I feel it's always best to opt for an institute with some form of accreditation. It's more reliable that way. Alpha Institute is highly ranked, so I thought it was the best place to study this qualification. [...] When I came to the institute that day, I was not sure whether I would actually choose to study this qualification. But the sir who spoke to me explained the whole programme very clearly, and then my parents and me decided to register. [...] During enrolment, they told me that there are both full-time and part-time classes, and that I could switch from either mode whenever I wished to – i.e. I could switch at the start of each semester. So if and when I started working, I could switch to part-time."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"The registration process was very easy. All we had to do was submit the required documents (which we had already brought with us), fill in a form and make the initial payment, and then within 2 weeks, I received an email with my registration number."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Generally yes. Everyone is so friendly that it's like home away from home. But if you really think about it, lectures get cancelled quite often, sometimes with prior notice but most of the time, without. I actually like it when lectures get cancelled on short notice. Then I can go have fun with my friends, especially when it is weekday classes that get cancelled, because my parents are a work. My parents really don't like it though. They feel that I am wasting time and money and even went and complained to the institute. The situation didn't really change though. [.....] I wanted to start working when I was in the second stage of the qualification. But it was really difficult to find a job. Then I got to know about Alpha Institute's job bank and I sent my CV to them and I was able to find a job in less than 4 months. I am so grateful!"

PARTICIPANT 3:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Alpha Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I didn't know what to do after my A/Ls so I let my parents guide me."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"Well it was mostly from my parents that I got to know. I never contacted the institute myself. But I assume my parents did, because they had all the information. I didn't have to double check on anything because I know my parents would always give me the best options."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I think my parents checked on this. I'm not too sure. […] My parents recommended this college."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"At the time I was enrolling, the phone kept ringing in the office and my counsellor was compelled to answer it. I found this a bit distracting. I may have decided against this college just for that factor alone, but because it was my parents who had picked this, and I trust their judgement, I went ahead with it."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Everyone thinks getting audit experience is compulsory. It's not. I hated the thought of working at an audit firm and thanks to Alpha Institute's job bank, I had other choices, and am now working at HSBC. They really do help us like that. I think I am quite happy with my choice. […] I switched very easily to the part-time classes once I started working. […] I once gave some feedback on the lectures, requesting for some areas to be covered in revision, and the management actually considered my request. I told all my friends to take the evaluations seriously thereafter. The evaluations are usually conducted thrice every semester, for every single subject."

PARTICIPANT 4:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Alpha Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I chose Accountancy because it was (is) my passion. And it feels really good to know that I'm following my dream of becoming an accountant! My dream is to be a company CFO someday. And without a solid professional qualification like this, that is not possible. […] I want to specialise in this field and this was a true catalyst for my choice."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"There was a big billboard right outside my school. Although I initially looked at it because there was a picture of a pretty girl in it, I got used to looking at the new messages that come on it from time to time. [….] If you want to get realistic information, then the best thing to do is to speak to someone who is currently studying there. My neighbour told me that the qualification I had in mind might be a bit difficult for me since it is not one of my strengths and that I might be better off choosing something else."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"Previously, I used to live in Kandy but I realised that there are much more job opportunities in Colombo. So although there was an institute in Kandy offering this qualification, now I am staying in Colombo at a rented apartment and following classes here… […]When they say highest ranked, you know that the UK body is giving you a guarantee in terms of quality and pass rates; it's not just the institute

who is talking good about themselves. So then you are assured that the institute would not close down anytime soon. […] I spoke to a few friends who were studying at the institute I had shortlisted, and they told me that the lecturers were very amiable and were more than willing to re-explain any concept until every single student had understood. That was the main reasons why I picked this institute. [….] They had full-time classes too, which was great! And two campuses in Colombo, so I was able to pick the location I preferred. […] I wanted as much personalised attention as I could get from the lecturers."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"I think they could have given me more attention, to be honest. I got the impression that once they knew I was going to enrol for sure they took me for granted. They were answering a lot of calls, but to be fair, there wasn't anyone else to answer those calls either. But the immediate customer is supposed to be the priority right?"

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"I don't know. There are plenty of student events like parties and trips; the lecturers are good too and staff are friendly. The facilities are an entirely different story though. No study rooms, no proper cafeteria, no toilet paper in the washrooms. [….] Our textbooks always get delayed and sometimes it's only a week before exams that we get them, which is bad. [….] Fees started increasing suddenly for no good reason."

PARTICIPANT 5:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Alpha."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"This qualification was widely advertised in my school while I was doing my A/Ls. It was highly recommended by my teachers too, saying that it's the best thing for my career."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"I came across Alpha Institute's page while I was doing my A/Ls. I liked the page, and it's a very active because there are lot of updates on it and something used to pop up on my newsfeed everyday. […] My A/L tuition teacher recommended this qualification and institute. He said a lot of his students are studying full-time and part-time there and that he has heard good reviews from all of them. I listened to his great advice and gave the institute a call after my exams were done."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I was not aware of any other colleges providing this particular qualification. […] Alpha Institute was advertised alongside the qualification, so I thought they were the only college that offers it. […] My teacher recommended it first. And my parents endorsed it, so since I liked it too, I thought I would start it."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"When I went there to enrol, I was not impressed by the look of the building, I'll tell you that. But the staff member who handled my enrolment was very friendly and fairly efficient. They answered all my questions in detail, gave me some leaflets like the semester timetable and about the lecturers and it was a positive experience."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"I hate it when classes get cancelled on such short notice. It is very inconvenient as we could not make other plans on that day as we expected the lecture to be held. It's even worse when it gets re-scheduled to another day. I suppose sometimes it is inevitable. However, my lecturer cancels his classes very often and because of this, my lecture schedule is very erratic. [...] Quality of lectures is excellent for some lecturers, but horrendous for some."

PARTICIPANT 6:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"I am at Beta Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"It was a bit stressful because if you wanted to get accepted to local universities, you need ridiculously high Z-scores just because we are from Colombo. So even if you get 3 A's, that may still not be enough. Because of this, my parents kept checking the papers and showing me the other options I could consider. All this was while I was studying for my A/Ls.. But my parents both have this qualification and that was the career path that I wanted to take as well."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"I visited 2 stalls at the last Edex expo, and I literally experienced two ends of the spectrum. The first stall I visited, the staff were so lack-lustre; they couldn't care less about me. It was a big turn off and halfway through, I didn't even feel like asking them the rest of my questions about the programme, so I just left. The other one that I went to – They even offered me a soft drink! I had one staff member who attended to me, provided all the informational leaflets that I needed, explained the financials to my parents and very clearly explained everything that I wanted to know. My friend who was with me felt that they seemed desperate for business, but I felt that I mattered enough for them to give me their undivided attention, which was, in my opinion, a sign of their marketing done right, and this played a huge role in my final decision."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"Qualification-wise – This was my top choice. Institutes – Well there were a few, but I wanted to seriously pursue my studies without getting distracted by too many extracurricular activities so I chose Beta Institute for that reason. […] When I spoke to the staff at the local office, they gave me a list of tuition providers. I picked the highly ranked one because I want to study at a reliable tuition provider and pass my exams. […] (At Edex) I felt that I mattered enough for them to give me their undivided attention, […] and this played a huge role in my final decision."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"Nothing to complain about, I suppose. Gave my documents, filled a form, and that was it. […] I picked weekend classes because I wanted to be free during the weekdays, so the staff were a little extra busy when they handled my enrolment because a lot more students come during the weeks, I suppose. […] The front office staff were friendly."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Above and beyond. They haven't even advertised half the good things. The whole experience has been amazing so far – So many student events, both entertaining and educational, superb lecturers, excellent lab."

PARTICIPANT 7:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Beta Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I feel that if I am to have a successful career, I need to be properly educated. The time is passed where a being mindless ape was acceptable. [.....] My parents are both bankers. They always say there is no point in pursuing any other type of career apart from banking. As such, I was compelled to choose a qualification that would support me in pursuing a career in banking. This is not my first choice though. While I don't necessarily hate banking, I would much rather become a lecturer. But even casually mentioning this at home would be considered as the height of shame."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"Some of the brochures had pretty pictures of events held by the institute. I found the brochures to be very colourful too. And yes, all the details were there. I called and double checked certain things too."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I visited two institutes with my parents before I enrolled here. In some places, the staff was not very friendly, which made me realise that they would not be any friendlier once I get registered. Frankly, this was a big deterrence to my decision. At Beta Institute, everyone was very friendly and I felt instantly comfortable. […] The other two colleges I visited were offering BSc. degrees. The campus infrastructure was excellent, but I felt this particular professional qualification gave me more scope, because a lot of top people in big companies have this qualification, so this

seemed to a qualification with a lot of recognition. […] It was nice to be able to choose between and have the option of switching from full-time to part-time or vice versa, whenever it was convenient to me. Some institutes only offered part-time classes, which was during the weekend. I was not working at that time, so I felt like I would be wasting 5 days at home and also not be able to enjoy the weekend at home with family. […] I want to make as many friends and acquaintances as possible because it's these contacts that will be useful to me someday when I start working, so the more students the college has, the better."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"It was okay. I just had to give some personal documents, that's it."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"It's good so far. Everything is as expected."

PARTICIPANT 8:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Beta Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"If only I could know which qualification out there would give me the highest chance of earning big bucks, I would choose that. I chose this qualification because I thought that seemed like the best choice."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"The usual – Parents, friends. I had friends who were studying there already. […] My mother's friends were discussing about private higher education at a dinner party one day. One lady was saying how a professional qualification is better than an academic degree because it is more practical, and another one was saying that her daughter was studying for a business degree at a private university and how good the administration is. [….] I wanted to pass on the first attempt. So I did try to find out a bit about pass rates of the institutes before I enrolled. I checked the institute's website, checked other independent reviewing sites, called them and also asked some people who were studying there."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I knew there was a place called Alpha Institute which offered a slightly different professional accountancy qualification, but my friends were all studying at Beta Institute, so I did not look into much choices. […] I had heard that Beta Institute known as Sri Lanka's best tuition provider for this particular qualification because

they have the highest number of students enrolling and also succeeding at exams on the first attempt."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"The staff at the front office were (are) really helpful. Clearly they are well-trained in customer etiquette. They're fast and efficient and really makes you feel at ease. […] don't think it took more than 10 minutes max."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Beta Institute is generally helpful when it comes to student matters. […] Due to being accepted to Sri Jayawardenapura University, I was unable to go for classes one semester. So I requested for a refund. However, the staff at Beta Institute suggested that I instead defer that amount to the next semester since I was hoping to follow classes again, so that was fine by me. The whole thing just took about half an hour to get sorted…"

PARTICIPANT 9:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Beta."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"My mother always wanted to be an accountant. However, due to various commitments, she was unable to achieve her dream. I hate accounts, but I am being forced to study it. I feel as if she is trying to achieve her dreams through me. [...] My older cousin brother told us that we could get a degree and a professional qualification with the qualification offered by Beta Institute. We relied on his word and enrolled, but it was only after a semester or two that we realised that this particular qualification actually did not have the option of a degree and that it was the qualification offered at Alpha Institute that did. But by that time, it was too late to change my decision, so I just continued with what I was studying."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"My cousin brother said he would do the research and tell me. But I regret letting him do the background check because clearly he did a bad job of it! He had gotten the two qualifications mixed up, which was not cool. I should have just gone for one of those educational exhibitions or something."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I visited another big institute that offers this same qualification, because they were quite famous for winning various sports competitions and I love sports. [...] I had also heard of another institute offering this qualification, but it was located a bit far

away from my home, so... […] I was disappointed that the institute I originally wanted to go to only had full-time classes. I was employed and wanted part-time classes. But right now, I have all the flexibility I need at Beta Institute. […]The instalment payment plan at Beta was also a key factor."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"My enrolment was completed in less than 10 minutes. The staff member who handled it was very efficient. I was provided with all the information that I needed..."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Well I hated accounts, still do, actually. But the lecturers are quite good and I'm doing ok with the exams and stuff. So I guess the expectations are met, it's just that I'm not too crazy on the subject."

PARTICIPANT 10:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"I'm at Beta."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"My dad has many friends who are CEOs and heads of various banks. All of them have this qualification, so my dad recommended it to me. I checked it out, and it did seem like a good business-oriented qualification. I also didn't want to study abroad, so this was a good option."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"Brochures, websites, calling or visiting the places. Spoke to some friends too. [....] Some people at my dad's office gave some useful advice."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I did check out 2 places offering degrees. One was an American programme, so it didn't interest me that much. The other one was ok, but the institutes offering this qualification were at the top of my radar. […] I did a basic search of institutes offering this qualification by Googling. I spoke to the local office too. They told me about the ranking thing, and explained how the ranking system works. They gave me a few brochures, so I called all those places, about 4 colleges, and got all the information. […] Some places had both part- and full-time classes but some places only had the part-time option; some places had multiple locations like Colombo and Kandy, but obviously I was not going to travel all the way to Kandy every week for a class! […] Since my mother's friend's son had previously worked at an institute in Colombo, we asked him about the institutes we were considering. He told us to stay

away from certain places. And although I had liked one of those places, we decided that the smart thing to do was to listen to his advice since he had a better understanding of the industry than we did. […] I liked the look of the place when I visited and my dad advised me too, I guess."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"Enrolling was easy. I filled out the application, but I hadn't brought the things to submit, like my O/L certificate, so I had to come back again. That was my fault for forgetting. I thought they would get mad, but they were really nice about it. They located my form easily enough the next week when I went with my certificate copy"

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"The information in the brochures was fairly accurate. As in, there were no outright lies, but I think the truth was slightly stretched in some places. […] Classes get cancelled only very very rarely. I have been studying at Beta Institute for one and a half years now, and I think classes have gotten cancelled only about thrice. During all of these times, if I remember correctly, I received an SMS from the institute, stating that the particular was cancelled and the re-scheduled date was also communicated via the same text message..."

PARTICIPANT 11:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Gamma Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"My parents have done so much for me, and I really can't expect them to keep supporting me financially. I want to study and get a good job so that I don't have to depend on them and be a burden. Being financially independent would also mean I have more freedom. [.…] Where I live, in Negambo, everyone boasts about their children. So if I were the only one who has not studied anything, it would be shameful for my parents…"

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"My uncle and parents. [.…] We got some leaflets too, so we called a few places and also e-mailed them to get it in writing."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"We didn't look into it much. Atleast I didn't. But maybe my uncle or cousin did? […] I could not find anything negative about the institute in the brochures. But ofcourse the institute would only ever speak well about themselves! […] As my cousin sister was already reading for her degree at Gamma Institute, my uncle heavily recommended the institute to my parents. As someone in the family already knew about the institute, we did not do much background research, but went and enrolled straightaway…"

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"I had to come back a couple of times because I kept forgetting things. I think processing time was around a month? […] The staff were alright, just your usual friendly, business-like persona. They still smile at me, and even know my name."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Absolutely. I mean the facilities are well worth the money we pay. It's a smooth transition from semester to semester; they even facilitated summer school for us in UK, where we get to actually visit the actual university. I went last year and it was an amazing experience. […] The lecturers know their stuff obviously, but you do have to do a fair amount of reading and studying on your own, right, so I don't think it's fair to blame them if you ever flunk a subject. But people rarely do, unless they're weak in language skills."

PARTICIPANT 12:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Gamma Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"It can be very demotivating when you miss out on state university by like one mark, but thanks to private higher education, I have been able to prove to myself and to everyone else who has ever doubted me that I have indeed got something that I can be proud of. It was my hard work that got me here. I feel like I am on my way to achieving something that matters – a rewarding career in the business world [...] I would most likely have to take over my dad's business one day, so I need to be ready for that too.."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"I don't usually read the newspapers per se, but my parents told me that there are a lot of options higher education-wise in the papers, and because of that, I did go through the education section when I hunting for a course to follow. It helped that my parents had highlighted certain ads! […] I asked my father to call the places I liked to check on the fees. He understands those things better than me."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"When I was looking into which institutes to study at, I heard that the lecturers at a particular institute were not very qualified in their relevant subject areas. I didn't want to pay a thumping amount to hear nonsense, so I did not enrol at that institute. […] Being in an overly congested class did not seem like an attractive option. I

mean, it's not free education; you need a benefit for the price. So I made it a point to look into how many students were put in each class. [...] If I had not gotten a 50% scholarship, I may never have even considered studying at this institute because I know my parents would not have been able to afford it. The scholarship greatly motivated me."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"I don't remember much of it, to be honest. Staff is usually friendly."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Although they promised not to have more than 40 students in a class, for some subjects there are nearly 60, which does make it a bit uncomfortable because some classrooms are a bit small. [...] The lecturers are very knowledgeable and friendly, so we can approach them anytime."

PARTICIPANT 13:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"I'm at Gamma."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"My friend chose to study this degree right after his A/L's. I didn't really know what I wanted, so I figured I might as well choose that too, so that way, I would atleast have a friend, and I would have some sort of a career."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"My friend gave me all the information. […] I contacted some institutes too, but anyone can say anything over the phone, but it's a lot harder to lie to your face. That's why I preferred to visit the institute, and my parents and I visited about 5 institutes before we chose one. Some institutes boasted about their facilities on their website, but when we went there, the reality was totally different. We also got a chance to see what the environment was like, whether it was conducive to studies, or overly formal. […] I tried to find out how many students were enrolled at Gamma, and I was amazed to hear about the numbers – over 3500 was what one of my friends said, so I felt like that had to be an indicator of the institute's success."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"One institute was calling me non-stop. I was getting so many calls that I blocked that number. But then they just call from another number! I will never recommend anyone to even go get information from them, because they will never let you go! That and Gamma's facilities were what helped me decide where I was going to study."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"Everything was very smooth. Staff were efficient."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"The campus looks beautiful and I'm so proud to be a student here. […] We have a really cool summer school programme which is optional, and that gives a good opportunity to make some new friends and experience UK. […] I will never hesitate to recommend Gamma Institute to anyone, not only because they give me an incentive for doing so, but also because I genuinely feel that they live upto their promises."

PARTICIPANT 14:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Gamma University."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I want to be a famous businessman one day, and I need to be qualified to achieve that. Although there are CEOs of our parents generation who only have A/Ls, I don't think that is enough today."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"My father's childhood friend is the CFO of a bank, and he decided to ask him about the best options out there for me. […] We visited some places offering different degrees, spoke to the counsellors, got the brochures etc. I also checked their websites and called one place. I was initially thinking about the qualification offered at Beta Institute, but I felt that might be too hard to me, so I thought a degree would be better."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"If the institute consistently delivers its promises, and there are students who I personally know who can testify to this, then I would say the institute has a good reputation. […] I know that graduate testimonials displayed by various institutes may have been slightly modified to the advantage of the institute, but I believe that there must have been some aspect that made the students want to give some form of testimonial. And that did make a difference in my choice. […] If I am paying a premium, then I need top-notch facilities. And by top-notch facilities, I mean clean

and spacious classrooms with good air conditioning, an extensive on-campus library and access to online resources, a good canteen and study room facilities. I carefully considered Gamma Institute and Delta Institute before I decided on Gamma, and that was on the basis of its facilities."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"It was alright. Nothing to complain about but not particularly fantastic either."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"I got the opportunity to represent Gamma at an Inter-University Debating Contest and we won! The best part was that Gamma gave us a special cash award. […] Facilities are excellent; we saw that the day we came to enrol because they gave us a campus tour. […] The other students are also well-behaved and courteous, and very friendly. I have a lot of friends here."

PARTICIPANT 15:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Gamma."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"That's simple – I want to be a rich and famous career woman. […] I have noticed that those who are educated are more liberal and more likely to accept different, newer things in life, even though those concepts may be foreign to them. That's a definite plus!"

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"I visited Gamma Institute's stall at the Edex Expo with my parents. I got all the information I needed and to my surprise, they offered a 50% discount on the course fees if I registered at the exhibition itself. Since I was definitely going to register for this programme anyway, my dad made the payment then and there. I also noticed that some other institutes were giving away tabs for spot registrations."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"We visited a number of educational providers' stalls at Edex and got all the information. I had my mind made up about Gamma, but the discount we got was a bonus in helping me decide. […] I made the mistake of visiting Delta Institute's stall because I wanted some information regarding their Business degrees. Boy was that a mistake. They kept calling me every week until I blocked that number!"

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"So I got enrolled at Edex itself. All I had to do was make the payment and fill out a form. They told me to bring some other documents on the first day of class. That was it."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"I did not like the buildings of the other institute that I visited. They looked old. But when you look at Gamma Institute, you get a nice, respectable university feeling. What's more, the interior was luxurious! […] The library is really extensive. […] I would say value for money."

PARTICIPANT 16:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Delta."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I love to meet new people, and at university, I knew I would be able to do so. I want to work in abroad one day, so I wanted to learn to thrive in a multi-culturally diverse community..."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information? /
Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"Some of my friends were studying here at the time. I felt like I was getting inside information and there was a certain thrill in that. Thanks to my friend, I got a thorough understanding of what it was like once you started studying here, and I would say it helped me a lot to decide. [....] I visited several stalls at Edex. I was considering the Greenwich programme. However, I just went once to their stall, and they got all my contact details. From that day onwards until almost a year, that institute would call me once a month or message me a few times a week, trying to persuade me to enrol. It just annoyed me to bits. Obviously I would never go back there. So I enrolled here."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"The enrolment process was pretty standard – Fill the form, give a passport sized photo, a copy of my O/L results sheet, passport copy. They told me to submit my A/L results sheet once it comes, and I am yet to do that. […] The lady who counselled me was very sweet. She gave me her business card and told me to contact her anytime if I had any issue with anything."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"One good thing at Delta is that they conduct evaluations every semester. This is like a student feedback form of sorts. We get to comment on facilities, lecturers, content of lectures and stuff like that. The bad thing however, is that our feedback, like the feedback on really serious things, often falls on deaf ears. But atleast they ask for our feedback. […] I think the programme was too hard for some of my friends though. They failed some exams and then dropped out. There are usually a lot of students who drop out for various reasons, but mostly because they are unable to cope up with the programme because it really is a bit rigorous."

PARTICIPANT 17:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Delta Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I want to move out and live on my own someday, and for that, I need to be earning. To be able to get a good job, I obviously need a good qualification. My parents are a bit sick as well, so I need to be able to pay for their medicine and treatment and all, which is not cheap at all. [….] I'm happy that I'm now one step closer to being a graduate of a prestigious UK university."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"My mother found details of the institute in the newspapers. Subsequently, my father called them and got all the information. He also spoke to his brother who was working at a similar institution and sought clarifications on how to assess quality of the institute, what the best options were etc"

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"I particularly liked how the information was clearly presented and the overall quality of the brochure itself. My dad owns a printing press and I know that printing brochures on high quality paper does not come cheap. To me, it meant that the institute was willing to go the extra mile and not cut corners when it came to quality, and I felt that the institute would give the same attention and care to the delivery of tuition."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"I was quite happy with it. It wasn't complicated and Delta's staff guided me through it."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"The greatest thing for me, I would say, is the reminder that comes from the staff with regard to exam payment deadlines, because if not, I would surely forget. […] Well, the ads said it was a highly ranked UK university, and it is. […] I'm quite happy with everything."

PARTICIPANT 18:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Delta Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"I want to be a Research Analyst someday. My plan is to get a degree and then do CFA [Chartered Financial Analyst, USA]. *So that way I can achieve my goal. […] I did get into local university too, incidentally, but I didn't go. The degree at Delta Institute is of much better quality and is globally recognised."*

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"Every Sunday, my parents read the papers after returning from church. The education section of the paper is fairly large and since a lot of institutes advertise their programmes, my parents make it a point to browse through this section. And we made a list of the places we wanted to check out, and called them. Then we narrowed our list further and visited some colleges."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"For me, even if it was the highest ranked university, the cost is the most important factor. I wanted to choose a university of medium ranking, something that was also fairly affordable, but also of good quality. […] I did not know much about computers at the time I had finished school, so I feared qualifications which had computer-based exams. That was why I chose this programme, because it was good for technophobes like me."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"It was an alright experience. They did their job alright too."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"Yeah. I mean they don't have much tech-stuff involved, just as promised. Like no online exams or anything. […] And it turned out this particular university programme was actually ranked really high, so that was a pleasant surprise for me. And that meant it was even more cost-effective than I had initially thought!"

PARTICIPANT 19:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"I chose Delta Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

"To get a job and to progress in my career, I knew I needed a solid education to back me up. I didn't want to be idle after school. [...] Local uni was not my thing, neither did I want to go abroad to study, so private higher education in Sri Lanka was the solution."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"Gamma and Delta institutes both advertise so much in the papers. Each of them have atleast 2 full pages every Sunday in both the Sunday Times and the Sunday Observer!"

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"Gamma Institute was one place that I was definitely considering. […] A university with a higher ranking may mean it's more expensive than the others, but I would always choose one with a high ranking. I felt that this would give me an edge when applying for job, and it actually did. When I applied to this particular company, they told me that they preferred me as a candidate because they felt the quality of my programme was higher because the university I studied at was highly ranked."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"It was supposed to be relatively simple, but the staff messed it up. I had handed over all my documents as requested and I was waiting patiently for my registration with the university to be processed. When all my friends had gotten theirs, I got worried and went to check up on mine. To see, they had lost my documents and had not even bothered to tell me! I had to submit everything all over again. So because of this stupid error, the 'enrolment process' took close to two months."

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"The paper ads spoke a lot about scholarships and 'rewarding high performance', but as far as I know, no high performance was ever rewarded. The quality of lecturers is quite poor, and everyone has to go get tuition externally, and we have to pay twice then. But the thing is, everyone associates programmes from this university with Delta Institute, so students just keep coming."

PARTICIPANT 20:

Q1. Which institute did you choose?

"Delta Institute."

Q2. What made you pursue higher education?

'Everyone in my family has a degree and are working at big companies, so I didn't want to be the only one without one. I needed to feel a sense of belonging."

Q3. From where did you get the relevant information?

"When I visited their stall at Edex, I got the fee structure and informational leaflets, which were quite helpful. All the contact numbers were there too, in case we needed to call them for further clarifications and we did, once, I think. […] I also e-mailed the institute because I thought it would be easier to have the information in black and white, rather than me trying to jot down facts and figures over the phone with the risk of missing out on important things. I did initially call them though. So this way, I was able to double check the details."

Q4. Did you have other options? What/who influenced you to make the final decision regarding the qualification and institute?

"Did I have any other options? There were so many, I could hardly choose! So many degrees and universities and colleges. […] I don't appreciate being constantly plagued by any institute with them forcing programmes down my throat. I enquired about the programme, but after they have given me the information I needed, they really need to learn how to maintain boundaries. [….] I used to do a lot of sports while at school, and I wanted to be active even while studying for my degree. Delta Institute was very famous for all its student events and that was something that I specifically wanted. […] I considered my options and liked this one better."

Q5. How was the enrolment process? How effective was the staff in counselling you?

"It was ok. The staff were running around and getting different students mixed up. Maybe there were less staff working that day, I don't know. They had trouble finding forms and things, but were very friendly. "

Q6. Once you started studying at this institute, did it match up to your expectations? Why?

"I am playing basketball for Delta and we are winning all the tournaments we participate at. Delta spends a lot of good coaches and we are treated well when we go for matches – free food, transport, outfits etc. [....] We get regular payment reminders but classroom facilities weren't as great as promised."

APPENDIX 4: PILOT STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey is conducted as part of a PhD study to help the researcher understand what is important to students when choosing a qualification and institute and how you reach this decision. All your responses will be anonymous and hence, the researcher will not know your identity.

Thank you for your time in participating in this study!

Q1. What is the institute you have chosen?

1 Alpha
2 Beta
3 Gamma
4 Delta

Q2. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "not at all important" and 5 is "very important", rate the extent to which each of the following factors influenced your decision in choosing the particular <u>qualification</u>?

	1 Not at all important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neutral	4 Important	5 Very important
1 Greater employability and career prospects					
2 Increased financial stability					
3 Personal growth and gaining knowledge					
4 Global recognition					
5 Meeting new people					
6 Friends' choice					
7 Parents' decision					
8 Possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications					
9 Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously					
10 Relaxed entry requirements					
11 No other choice					
12 Other reasons, please specify					

Q3. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "not at all important" and 5 is "very important", rate the extent to which each of the following factors influenced your decision in choosing the particular <u>institute</u>?

		1 Not at all important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neutral	4 Important	5 Very important
1	Accreditation status by the professional body					
2	University ranking					
3	Institutional reputation					
4	Quality of lecture panel					
5	Pass rates					
6	Number of prizewinners produced					
7	Recommendation by friends/relatives					
8	Recommendation by teachers					
9	Parents' choice					
10	Graduate testimonials					
11	Graduation ceremony					
12	University rules and regulations					
13	Class size					
14	Total number of students at the institute					
15	Quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions					
16	Persistent calls/e-mails/SMS from institutional marketing personnel					
17	Availability of scholarships					
18	Special offers / Significant discounts on course fees					
19	Affordable tuition fees					
20	Availability of instalment payment plans / student loan scheme					
21	Campus visit					
22	Clear explanations when speaking to the institute staff at the campus					
23	Facilities available					
24	Technology used in class					
25	Institute buildings and classrooms					
26	Extra-curricular activities at the institute					
27	Availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time					
28	Possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme					
29	Portfolio of other qualifications offered at the institute					
30	Distance from home to the institute					
31	Attractiveness of brochures					
32	Innovative/creative marketing (Please specify)					

Q4. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "not at all important" and 5 is "very important", rate the following sources from which you gathered information about the qualification and institute.

		1 Not at all important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neutral	4 Important	5 Very important
1	Friends					
2	Parents / Relatives					
3	School teacher					
4	Tuition teacher					
5	Seminars / Career guidance workshops at school					
6	Educational exhibition					
7	Institutional brochures					
8	Banner at an event					
9	Promotional merchandise such as notebooks, keytags, bookmarks etc					
10	Telephone / e-mail enquiry					
11	Billboard					
12	Press ad					
13	Institutional website					
14	Facebook ad					
15	Radio ad/endorsement					
16	Other digital sources (Please specify)					
17	Inter-school competitions (Please specify)					

Q5. Did you have a list of qualifications and institutes to choose from?

Yes
No

Q6. How many institutes did you or your parents physically visit before arriving at your final decision?

Q7. At which point did you <u>decide on</u> (not start) this qualification and this institute?

1 Before you sat for your O/L exams
2 While you were awaiting O/L results
3 After you got your O/L results
4 Before you sat for your A/L exams
5 While you were awaiting A/L results
6 After you got your A/L results
7 Other (Please specify)

Q8. How old were you when actually started studying for this qualification?

15-17 years
18-20 years
21-23 years
24-26 years
26 years and above

Q9. Who made the final decision with regard to choosing the qualification and the institute?

You

Your parents

Q10. Did the institute provide you with all the information you required before enrolment?

Yes

No

Q11. How was the enrolment process?

1 Very smooth
2 Average; can't complain
3 Complicated and messy
4 Waste of time

Q12. After you enrolled, did the institute meet your expectations?

1 Yes, over and above what was promised.
2 Yes, exactly as they were marketed.
3 Yes, but only to a certain extent.
4 No, it was purely for marketing purposes only.

Q13. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "extremely dissatisfied" and 5 is "extremely satisfied", indicate your levels of satisfaction with the following factors.

	1 Extremely dissatisfied	2 Dissatisfied	3 Neutral	4 Satisfied	5 Extremely satisfied
1 University rules and regulations					
2 Class size					
3 Quality of tuition					
4 Student support					
5 Provision of study material					
6 Tuition fees					
7 Facilities available					
8 Technology used in class					
9 Institute buildings and classrooms					
10 Extra-curricular activities at the institute					
11 Graduation ceremony					

Q14. Would you recommend this institute to anyone else?

Yes

No

Q15. Please explain the reason for your answer to Q14 above (tick all that apply)

1 I had a good experience
2 High quality of tuition
3 Good administration
4 I had a bad experience
5 Poor quality of tuition
6 Poor administration
7 I receive an incentive for introducing new students

Q16. Would you return to this institute to study a postgraduate or any other qualification?

Yes
No
Not sure

Q17. What is your gender?

Male
Female

Q18. What is your ethnic and religious background? (This is to help us analyse any existing cultural trends)

1 Sinhala Buddhist
2 Sinhala Catholic/Christian
3 Tamil Hindu
4 Tamil Catholic/Christian
5 Muslim (Islamist)
6 Burgher (Catholic/Christian)
7 Other (Please specify)

Thank you for participating in this survey!

APPENDIX 5: STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey is conducted as part of a PhD study to help the researcher understand what is important to students when choosing a qualification and institute and how you reach this decision. All your responses will be anonymous and hence, the researcher will not know your identity.

Thank you for your time in participating in this study!

Q1. What is the institute you have chosen?

1	Alpha	
2	Beta	
3	Gamma	
4	Delta	

Q2. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "not at all important" and 5 is "very important", rate the extent to which each of the following factors influenced your decision in choosing the particular <u>qualification</u>?

		1 Not at all important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neutral	4 Important	5 Very important
1	Greater employability and career prospects					
2	Increased financial stability					
3	Global recognition					
4	Meeting new people					
5	Friends' choice					
6	Parents' decision					
7	Personal growth and gaining knowledge					
8	Possibility of claiming exemptions from other qualifications					
9	Availability of dual qualifications simultaneously					
10	Relaxed entry requirements					
11	No other choice					

Q3. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "not at all important" and 5 is "very important", rate the extent to which each of the following factors influenced your decision in choosing the particular <u>institute</u>?

		1 Not at all important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neutral	4 Important	5 Very important
1	Accreditation status by the professional body					
2	University ranking					
3	Institutional reputation					
4	Quality of lecture panel					
5	Pass rates					
6	Number of prizewinners produced					
7	Portfolio of other qualifications offered by the institute					
8	Recommendation by friends/relatives					
9	Recommendation by teachers					
10	Parents' choice					
11	Graduate testimonials					
12	Quality of information provided by institute staff at educational exhibitions					
13	Persistent calls/e-mails/SMS from institutional marketing personnel					
14	Attractiveness of brochures					
15	Campus visit					
16	Clear explanations when speaking to the institute staff at the campus					
17	Facilities available					
18	Technology used in class					
19	Institute buildings and classrooms					
20	Class size					
21	Total number of students at the institute					
22	University rules and regulations					
23	Extra-curricular activities at the institute					
24	Graduation ceremony					
25	Availability of different study modes such as full- and part-time					
26	Availability of campuses in multiple locations					
27	Possibility of transferring overseas halfway through the programme					
28	Distance from home to the institute					
29	Availability of scholarships					
30	Special offers / Significant discounts on course fees					
31	Affordable tuition fees					
32	Availability of instalment payment plans / student loan schemes					

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Q4. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "not at all important" and 5 is "very important", rate the following sources from which you gathered information about the qualification and institute.

		1 Not at all important	2 Somewhat important	3 Neutral	4 Important	5 Very important
1	Friends					
2	Parents / Relatives					
3	School teacher					
4	Tuition teacher					
5	Telephone / e-mail enquiry					
6	Educational exhibition					
7	Brochures					
8	Banner at an event					
9	Promotional merchandise such as notebooks, keytags, bookmarks etc					
10	Billboard					
11	Press ad					
12	Institutional website					
13	Facebook ad					
14	Youtube video					
15	Google ad					
16	Radio ad / endorsement					
17	Seminars / Career guidance workshops at school					
18	Inter-school competitions					

Q5. Did you have a list of qualifications and institutes to choose from?

Yes
No

Q6. How many institutes did you or your parents physically visit before arriving at your final decision?

Q7. At which point did you <u>decide on</u> (not start) this qualification and this institute?

1 Before you sat for your O/L exams
2 While you were awaiting O/L results
3 After you got your O/L results
4 Before you sat for your A/L exams
5 While you were awaiting A/L results
6 After you got your A/L results
7 Other (Please specify)

Q8. How old were you when actually started studying for this qualification?

15-17 years
18-20 years
21-23 years
24-26 years
26 years and above

Q9. Who made the final decision with regard to choosing the qualification and the institute?

You

Your parents

Q10. Did the institute provide you with all the information you required before enrolment?

Yes

No

Q11. How was the enrolment process?

1 Very smooth

2 Average; can't complain

3 Complicated and messy

4 Waste of time

Q12. After you enrolled, did the institute meet your expectations?

1 Yes, over and above what was promised.

2 Yes, exactly as they were marketed.

3 Yes, but only to a certain extent.

4 No, it was purely for marketing purposes only.

Q13. On a scale of 1-5 where 1 is "extremely dissatisfied" and 5 is "extremely satisfied", indicate your levels of satisfaction with the following factors.

	1 Extremely dissatisfied	2 Dissatisfied	3 Neutral	4 Satisfied	5 Extremely satisfied
1 University rules and regulations					
2 Class size					
3 Quality of tuition					
4 Student support					
5 Provision of study material					
6 Tuition fees					
7 Facilities available					
8 Technology used in class					
9 Institute buildings and classrooms					
10 Extra-curricular activities at the institute					
11 Graduation ceremony					
12 Friendliness of lecturers					
13 Friendliness of admin staff					

Q14. Would you recommend this institute to anyone else?

Yes

No

Q15. Please explain the reason for your answer to Q14 above (tick all that apply)

1 I had a good experience
2 High quality of tuition
3 Good administration
4 I had a bad experience
5 Poor quality of tuition
6 Poor administration
7 I receive an incentive for introducing new students

Q16. Would you return to this institute to study a postgraduate or any other qualification?

Yes
No
Not sure

Q17. What is your gender?

Male
Female

Q18. What is your ethnic and religious background? (This is to help us analyse any existing cultural trends)

1 Sinhala Buddhist
2 Sinhala Catholic/Christian
3 Tamil Hindu
4 Tamil Catholic/Christian
5 Muslim (Islamist)
6 Burgher (Catholic/Christian)
7 Other (Please specify)

Thank you for participating in this survey!

Q1. In your opinion, why do students choose foreign higher education qualifications?

Prompts and probes: Do they prefer foreign qualifications over state qualifications? Is it because they do not have a choice because of low Z-scores? Do they feel these are more globally and locally recognised? Do they think it would enable them to find jobs more easily?

Q2. What makes your institute stand out from the rest?

Prompts and probes: Is your institute accredited in some way? What is the ranking of the university or the recognition level of the professional body? Does the age of the institute matter? What are your institute's unique selling points?

Q3. In your opinion, what is the main thing that students consider when selecting your institute?

Prompts and probes: Is the cost of the programme an important factor? What do you think is the most important to them – Is it accreditation or ranking, quality, lecturers, past track record, facilities, proximity to home?

Q4. What are the main avenues of marketing that you engage in?

Prompts and probes: Do you advertise in newspapers? If so, how frequently? Do you advertise on the TV, radio, social media and/or billboards? Is there any specific medium of advertising that you avoid? If so, why? Are there any other ways by which you market yourselves?

Q5. In your opinion, what is the most important internal process that you have?

Prompts and probes: What are your thoughts on the enrolment process? What about managing lecturers?

Q6. How do you recruit your lecturers?

Prompts and probes: Do you advertise or headhunt?

Q7. Are there any major issues that students usually face while studying at your institute?

Prompts and probes: Do they have difficulties with paying the fees halfway through? Do they struggle with the course? Do they have language issues?

Q8. Do you think your students are satisfied with the programmes at your institute?

Prompts and probes: Are there extra-curricular activities? Do they engage in those extra-curricular activities? Do they get any extra support for studies?

APPENDIX 7: EXTRACTS OF INSTITUTIONAL MARKETING PERSONNEL INTERVIEWS

ALPHA INSTITUTE

Q1. In your opinion, why do students choose foreign higher education qualifications?

"Everything is so competitive nowadays. People are no longer happy with one degree, but they go for two, sometimes even three degrees or professional qualifications before they do their masters. Add this to the fact that not everyone can get into local universities; either their Z-scores are not enough, or they have not done the correct combination of subjects, or they get placed in universities in remote, rural parts of the country where it is difficult for someone born and bred in Colombo to survive. [..] In addition to that, not everyone wants to get into local university in the first place. Because of things like ragging, the degree gets dragged on unnecessarily for years on end. That's a well-known fact. So what with one thing and another, students and their parents prefer to opt for foreign higher education. And with this qualification, they can get both a degree and a professional qualification in accountancy in just 2 ½ years, and an MSc in another 6 months."

Q2. What makes your institute stand out from the rest?

"Firstly, we are Sri Lanka's only [...]-status tuition provider for this qualification which makes us the highest ranked institute for it. We have the largest number of students for the qualification and we have produced more prizewinners than all other institutes combined. Moreover, we want to mould our students into becoming forward-thinking finance professionals, and for that, they need to have hands-on experience in a corporate environment. Even if you're qualified, finding a job today

is not at all easy, so with our in-house job bank, we are giving them a competitive edge over others. We use this too as a promotional tool…"

Q3. In your opinion, what is the main thing that students consider when selecting your institute?

"Students, or rather their parents, look at the cost first. They look at what benefits they can get for the price. And the way our programme is priced, it is very competitive. You can get two qualifications at the cost of one, and although the instant thought is that they must be half-baked qualifications, they're not. One is the world's largest global body for professional accountants based in UK and the other is a fully-fledged internal British degree. Then they also look at who the lecture panel is, their qualifications, corporate exposure and how long they have been lecturing. They also look at the accreditation the institute has got – We are the highest ranked, which means they know that UK has endorsed us. Students also ask us what extra-curricular activities we have at Alpha, because they want to have a bit of fun while they're studying as well. But I would say cost is the main thing."

Q4. What are the main avenues of marketing that you engage in?

"Well, we use the basic channels, same as everyone – newspapers, social media, radio, billboards. You may have also seen us at exhibitions like Edex and Future Minds."

* The researcher detected a slight note of reluctance to further explain Alpha's marketing strategies, and hence, did not further pursue the subject.

Q5. In your opinion, what is the most important internal process that you have?

"The enrolment process is one of the most important internal processes that we have. All the hard work that the marketing team puts in would go to waste if we did not do our jobs properly and process their applications properly. […] Ofcourse the enrolment process is linked to some other processes as well, for example the IT lab staff are the ones who register the student online with professional body; we only handle the enrolment with Alpha Institute. But here's the thing, if someone else, like the marketing team for example, messes up, students would not realise that, but if we mess up their registration, that they do notice, and could really affect Alpha's reputation among the students."

Q6. How do you recruit your lecturers?

"We usually headhunt. In addition to that, we get our high-performing students to be under-study tutors, so that they can learn from experienced tutors. […] Everyone has renewable contracts and this renewable contract basis works for Alpha Institute because the lecturers too have the flexibility to decline classes when it conflicts with their other commitments, and it gives us the opportunity to try out new lecturers who sometimes end up producing prizewinners."

Q7. Are there any major issues that students usually face while studying at your institute?

"Nothing particular comes into my mind. I mean, there are students who have some financial troubles down the line and find it a bit hard to pay fees, and then the occasional one who drops out. But there's nothing that I would say has been identified as a common occurrence."

Q8. Do you think your students are satisfied with the programmes at your institute?

"We haven't had any drop in numbers as far as I think, so I think so, yes."

BETA INSTITUTE

Q1. In your opinion, why do students choose foreign higher education qualifications?

"We cater to two categories of students – Those who prefer foreign education but do not wish to go abroad and those who do not want to, or cannot go to local universities. Most parents nowadays have realised that with foreign qualifications, the scope is much higher; students become globally employable. […] This qualification is definitely a passport to success, because it is the world's largest body for management accountants and is recognised all over the world. Even in Sri Lanka, if you look at any of the major companies, a lot of the top boards of management have this particular qualification. So parents know this, and that's one reason why they come to us."

Q2. What makes your institute stand out from the rest?

"Without bragging, we are the biggest and most successful player in the market for this qualification at the moment. There have been other institutes in the past that were bigger than us, but due to various internal issues, their market share has declined significantly over the past few years. We stand out because we deliver what we promise; it's as simple as that. Our job is to make sure students pass their examinations on the first attempt, with flying colours, and we have indeed produced many Sri Lankan prizes and world prizes. Our achievements speak for themselves."

Q3. In your opinion, what is the main thing that students consider when selecting your institute?

"Professional qualifications are always more economical. So when it comes to selecting the institute, they look at the accreditation given by the professional body because that is a very valid endorsement, and then they also look at our past track record, whether we have produced prizewinners, if so how many, for which subject, and who the lecturers concerned are, what is their track record for pass rates, producing prizewinners. Then they also look at our classrooms and our IT lab where they sit for their computer-based examinations. Beta Institute is known as a fairly 'serious' institute where we place greater emphasis on studies. That doesn't mean we don't have any fun activities, we do; we have sports meets and Christmas parties and things like that, but our first priority is to get them through their exams."

Q4. What are the main avenues of marketing that you engage in?

"We have done some market research and found that the majority of the students who follow the UK curriculum for their O/Ls and A/Ls tend to go overseas to pursue higher studies. Because of this very reason, we usually only target the students following the local curriculum; the management feels this investment is adequately justified. […] The local office actually does most of the marketing. We advertise in the newspapers occasionally, mostly before the commencement of a new session We do not use billboards to advertise because we have realised that for a billboard to be truly impactful and memorable, it needs to contain six words or less, and for us to convey what we need to convey in such a few words is close to impossible. But since it is pointless to display so much text on a billboard when the passers-by only glance at it for a few seconds at max, we have decided not to opt for this form of advertising. The other reason is that having one or two billboards is pointless. In order for a campaign to truly make its mark, you need to have atleast ten billboards, which come at a great cost. We also feel that we do not need to engage in much brand building for the professional qualification itself since the local office is actively doing this for our market… Same with radio advertising – The local office does it on our behalf.

We don't usually run our own campaigns because it's difficult to measure the returns, and frankly, I don't think radio advertising is that productive. We also do not participate at educational expos. The issue with educational expos is that competition is very high and any prospective students are engulfed in a sea of qualification options, which confuses them. We do not want to add to their confusion. It's as simple as that. And the benefit of this does not justify the cost of participating and constructing the stall. The professional body has its own stall, and once a student chooses this qualification, we are sure that they will choose Beta Institute because we would have already reinforced this choice while they were still schooling…"

Q5. In your opinion, what is the most important internal process that you have?

"The first impression is always a lasting one, and at Beta Institute, we want to have that effect. Even if the student does not enrol for our programme in the end, if we give them the attention they require and deserve, and if we ensure that they have a good experience even for that short period of time, then our time and effort would not be wasted because that student will most definitely pass the word to his/her friends and family. And this will give us benefits in the long-term. So I feel the enrolment process is very important because it is the turning point in the students' decision-making process. This is why all our staff at the reception desk have to go through a mandatory etiquette training to ensure that the customers are greeted in the right way. There are a number of other trainings too, like on changes to the qualification, for example."

Q6. How do you recruit your lecturers?

"Our lecture panel is a very senior group of individuals and definitely industry veterans. They are our pride and pillar of success. We receive plenty of CVs without even advertising, so we save all of these, and when we have a requirement, we review the candidates to assess their skills, qualifications and experience, and we also audition them."

Q7. Are there any major issues that students usually face while studying at your institute?

"Recently, this qualification underwent a major structure change, with all exams being shifted to a computer-based platform, case study exams being introduced for three levels and to top this off, the professional body also increased the pass mark from 50 to 70, which really scared the students. Sri Lankan students are by default not hardwired to deal with case study exams because they have never experienced it before; neither do they have prior experience with writing for exams online. So what happened as a result was that fail rates increased, and then dropout rates increased, and word was getting out that this qualification is now impossible to pass, and we had to literally stand on our heads to rectify the situation. We had to invest in developing and enhancing our computer labs, introducing online mock exams instead of our usual paper mocks, and basically change their mindset about the whole thing. This was the biggest issue we faced, and I wouldn't say that we have recovered from it 100%, but we are getting there. I fervently hope that this is the last time so many drastic changes are introduced at once."

Q8. Do you think your students are satisfied with the programmes at your institute?

"Well I most certainly hope so! We actually have very few complaints, and even when it comes to student events and things like that, the level of participation is very high. So that means the students are happy. Pass rates are very good, so even the parents are happy. Come to think of it, we should probably publish some student satisfaction ratings or something. It might be good marketing!"

GAMMA INSTITUTE

Q1. In your opinion, why do students choose foreign higher education qualifications?

"I'm not running down the local programmes, but foreign qualifications are definitely more valid and valuable in the global market. It doesn't come cheap, that's true, but I mean look at the value you get! You can migrate anywhere and easily find a job because any employer would know that you've gone through a rigorous, quality-controlled programme when you show your UK degree certificate. And also for students who miss out on local university by a few marks, this ends up being the only option. We have a lot of students from the A/L biology stream who weren't able to enter the Colombo University medical faculty, so then they sign up for our Business or Law degree because studying medicine abroad tends to be very expensive."

Q2. What makes your institute stand out from the rest?

"Gamma Institute is known for quality. Quality of the campus facilities, quality of the programme delivery, quality in the experience we give to our students. We have made it compulsory for our students to attend lectures in professional work attire, unlike most other institutes who do not have a formal dress code. The reason for this is because we want our students to be ready to go for a job interview if we schedule it for them on short notice, and simply to look good. It reflects well on the institute when everyone is well dressed and this is definitely something that makes us stand out! We also give our students the opportunity to attend summer school in the UK and hardly any other institute facilitates this."

Q3. In your opinion, what is the main thing that students consider when selecting your institute?

"The majority of the students who choose Gamma Institute do not have significant financial problems, so this is not a major concern. Those who enrol with us have made a conscious choice after taking into account similar programmes. They pick us because of our superior facilities because it is value for money, even though it is priced at a premium."

Q4. What are the main avenues of marketing that you engage in?

"The newspapers are what we find the most effective to build our brand. I don't know if you have seen some of our ads, but we make sure to advertise almost every Sunday in the major English papers like Sunday Times and Observer. That, and exhibitions like these work well for us. Especially with the Edex Mid-Year Expo, there is a lot of students who come to get information and the conversion rate of inquiries to enrolment is very high for this particular exhibition."

Q5. In your opinion, what is the most important internal process that you have?

"I would say recruiting and managing lecturers. It's actually a very complicated process. We have to make sure that we hire the correct people, with the right experience and knowledge and very importantly, friendly personalities. Then after we hire them, we have to make sure they are happy – We have to pay them competitive rates, provide the required resources and training and facilitate continuous professional development. […] The lecturers are the core of our business. Students look up to them, and if the lecturers are happy, then they will go out of their way to make sure that the right message about the institute is conveyed to the students. We have had a bad experience once. The lecturer was not happy about something or other, which I don't think was communicated properly to the management, but instead he started saying negative things about the institute during lectures, so much so that students started moving out to other institutes. It was very

detrimental. We could have handled that issue much better from our end, I feel, like we should have looked into that particular lecturer's needs better."

Q6. How do you recruit your lecturers?

"We usually advertise all vacancies on our website and on TopJobs.lk. Thereafter, the HR team does their job. I'm not too sure what happens after that because I don't get involved with that process."

Q7. Are there any major issues that students usually face while studying at your institute?

"Language is sometimes an issue. Being a British degree, a very high standard of English is expected. However, a small percentage of students who enrol have a very poor level of English. All our lectures are conducted in English and we do not explain any concepts in Sinhala or Tamil, and the textbooks are all written by British or Western authors so it's a very high standard of English there too. We don't encourage students to talk in other languages apart from English while on campus for the same reason. We do provide additional English language classes for those who require it and these classes are conducted free of charge too. Sadly, a lot of students who really need it are reluctant to go for it because they feel ashamed. So they basically drop out when they get stuck due to language issues! In addition to that, some students are unable to cope with the assignments and deadlines, and sometimes fail due to bad time management."

Q8. Do you think your students are satisfied with the programmes at your institute?

"Yeah. We haven't had many complaints about lecturers or the programme itself. We also have plenty of events for our students, because we believe in a balance between the academic side and the fun side. We do invest a lot in these kinds of things

actually. The downside is that students sometimes have so much fun and they get involved in every single activity there is, that they sometimes neglect their studies, which is bad. But I'm sure the satisfaction factor is there! Some of the students who drop out or who are unable to pass exams on the first go due to weak English language proficiency tend to grumble that we do not facilitate teaching in Sinhala or Tamil, but this is an internal British degree; we have standards to adhere to, and unfortunately, we as an organisation, are not willing to compromise on the quality of our programme on any grounds."

DELTA INSTITUTE

Q1. In your opinion, why do students choose foreign higher education qualifications?

"Better quality, global recognition, employment prospects, you can complete the programmes faster and you can get the best of abroad while being in Sri Lanka itself. You also get to be part of the university's international student community, so the opportunities for networking are simply abundant. The options are just immense. So anyone who can reasonably afford it would always opt for foreign higher education."

Q2. What makes your institute stand out from the rest?

"We are the largest and the only affiliated centre for this particular UK university in Sri Lanka. So whenever people think of this university, they immediately think of Delta. We have been operating for a very long time and we are definitely growing, not too fast, but at a steady rate."

Q3. In your opinion, what is the main thing that students consider when selecting your institute?

"I think they choose the degree because of the university's very high ranking in the UK. It's in the top 5. And since we are the only Affiliated Centre in Sri Lanka, that carries a lot of weight too."

Q4. What are the main avenues of marketing that you engage in?

"Newspapers and billboards – to a moderate extent. We mainly rely on our school students coming back to us for our higher education programmes, so we don't need to advertise that much. We participate at these educational expos because we need to have a brand presence, and ofcourse there are a lot of students who are not Delta

school students who also enrol for our degree programmes. We don't really go with many radio campaigns because it's quite expensive to get good airtime at peak hours, and you can't track the listener audience. It's not like we are able to get a database of listeners with their contact details or anything. And it's unlikely that listeners will immediately call our hotlines to enrol when they hear an ad on the radio. Maybe some do, but very few probably. So our management feels that it doesn't really justify the spend."

Q5. In your opinion, what is the most important internal process that you have?

"We are the first point of contact that students and their parents have with the institute, and it is our responsibility to make sure that they have a good first experience because it reflects on Delta Institute as a whole. It is when they arrive here that the most important part happens – They make the decision as to whether or not they are going to sign up for our programme. And this enrolment process is indeed very critical."

Q6. How do you recruit your lecturers?

"Our current lecture panel has been with us for the past five years. We encourage our graduates, especially the ones who win prizes at national level for various subjects, to lecture for us after they graduate. Most of them feel honoured when we approach them and are very keen to get started, so we train them and get them upto par. We also do advertise vacancies as and when they arise and headhunt too."

Q7. Are there any major issues that students usually face while studying at your institute?

"This programme is not easy, and there is a lot of work to be done by the students on their own, so unless the students are capable of independent study, it is difficult to achieve pass grades. And students are so easily distracted! They would much rather

spend time with their friends chatting rather than productively engaging in group studying. I think the programme is made harder by the fact that it's assessed by a 100% written exam held once a year, so you need to study the entire syllabus at once, which is a lot to retain. So anyway, what happens is, some students find it hard to get through exams for these reasons and some re-attempt the exams once or twice, but if they fail again, then they quit and join some other programme elsewhere. If they're lucky, they would be able to claim exemptions from the other place if they have completed atleast half of our programme."

Q8. Do you think your students are satisfied with the programmes at your institute?

"I think my opinion here may be rather biased because I would always say yes!