

Strategic Educational Partnerships: An research Study on Program Development and Recruitment in Zhonghe's Collaboration with UTM Malaysia

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Abstract

This action research examines the strategic collaboration between Zhonghe, a China-based educational firm, and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), focusing on the development and implementation of a tailored Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program. The study aims to assess the effectiveness of strategic partnerships and targeted recruitment strategies in catering to the educational needs of Chinese working adults. Methodologically, the research utilized a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews with Zhonghe's founder and key stakeholders, along with an analysis of secondary recruitment data. The first intervention explored the formation of the partnership, emphasizing the customization of the DBA program to meet linguistic and scheduling needs, while ensuring recognition by Chinese authorities. The second intervention examined the shift from solely relying on outsourced recruitment agencies to employing a mixed strategy that includes establishing an in-house marketing and recruitment team, leveraging social media and direct engagement. Findings indicate double digit growth in student enrollment in the second intake, demonstrating the program's success and significant positive financial impacts for Zhonghe. This research highlights the potential of strategic educational collaborations and innovative recruitment strategies in the international education market.

Keywords: Education, China, Malaysia, Overseas Study.

Introduction

In an era marked by globalization and technological advancements, education systems around the world are increasingly interlinked, creating opportunities for international collaborations that enrich educational offerings and expand cultural horizons. These collaborations are especially pivotal in higher education, where the demand for globally

relevant yet locally tailored educational programs is rapidly rising. China, with its burgeoning middle class and increasing emphasis on international competitiveness, has emerged as a significant player in the global education market. This context sets the stage for innovative companies like Zhonghe to create impactful educational partnerships that cater to the nuanced needs of Chinese students seeking international qualifications.

Zhonghe, a visionary educational firm based in Nanjing, China, has strategically positioned itself to leverage these global trends by focusing on collaborations with overseas universities. Founded by Mr. Kent Gong, the company specializes in developing customized educational programs that integrate the stringent academic standards of Western education with the unique cultural and linguistic requirements of the Chinese market. These programs are not merely academic ventures but are designed as bridges that connect Chinese students with global educational resources, thereby enhancing their professional capabilities and global outlook.

According to Statista Research Department (2022), students from China account for 39.01% of the international students studying in higher education institutes in Malaysia. This substantial presence underscores the strategic importance of Malaysia as a study destination and highlights the significant potential for tailored educational programs designed for this demographic. The significance of such educational initiatives extends beyond individual academic achievement; they represent a crucial element in China's broader educational strategy. As the Chinese economy continues to integrate more deeply into the global market, the demand for professionals who are not only proficient in their fields but also adept at navigating international contexts has surged. Zhonghe's tailored programs are designed to meet this demand by providing students with an education that is both globally competitive and culturally relevant.

Problem Diagnosis

Zhonghe's strategic initiative to develop tailored educational programs for Chinese working adults faces multiple challenges, underpinning its core business strategy. The need for such programs arises from the unique requirements of this demographic, which seeks educational solutions that offer flexibility, cultural relevance, and global recognition. Accurately identifying these needs demands a robust mechanism for ongoing market research and feedback analysis, ensuring that the programs are not only attractive but also genuinely beneficial to students. A critical challenge lies in forming strategic partnerships with international universities that can deliver high-quality education and are open to customizing their courses to align with the Chinese market. These partnerships must be carefully managed to sustain relevance and ensure mutual benefits over time.

Additionally, navigating the complex regulatory environments of both China and partner countries is essential to guarantee that the programs receive proper accreditation and recognition, thereby securing their legitimacy and value in the educational market. Another significant hurdle is developing effective marketing and recruitment strategies. Moving beyond traditional methods, Zhonghe must leverage modern digital marketing tools and platforms to effectively communicate the value of their programs and engage potential students. This comprehensive approach to problem diagnosis sets the stage for exploring

how Zhonghe navigates these challenges through its partnership with UTM Malaysia in the tailored DBA program.

Literature Review

International student mobility is often framed within the theoretical context of push and pull factors, which provides a robust framework for understanding the motivations behind students' decisions to study abroad. Push factors include internal motivators from the students' home countries, such as the unavailability of certain educational programs or socio-economic pressures, which compel students to look overseas for higher education opportunities (Mazzarol, 1998; Zhai et al., 2019). Pull factors, on the other hand, consist of attractive attributes of the destination countries, including the quality of education, lifestyle, and potential migration opportunities, which draw students to these locales (Gatfield & Larmar, 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015).

Evolution of Recruitment Strategies in Higher Education

The initial approaches to international student recruitment focused largely on leveraging education agents and maximizing the reach of digital platforms. Many universities in western region utilized agents to mitigate the perceived risks associated with studying abroad, thus enhancing their attractiveness to prospective students through reduced uncertainty (Mazzarol et al., 2001; Ziguras & Law, 2006). Recent literature reflects a diversification in recruitment strategies, especially in response to the globalized nature of education. Prestigious universities often maintain a passive recruitment stance due to their established reputations, relying on their historical prestige to attract students. In contrast, less renowned or newer institutions tend to adopt more aggressive marketing strategies, focusing on market research and personalized communication to appeal to potential students (Asaad et al., 2015; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). This proactive approach is evident in the strategic use of global branding, extensive agent networks, and bespoke recruitment tactics tailored to specific regional markets (Klafter, 2018; Onk & Joseph, 2017).

The development of these strategies highlights a shift towards a more nuanced understanding of the international student market, recognizing the need for tailored approaches that address the specific expectations and needs of students from diverse backgrounds. The ongoing evolution of these strategies is crucial for institutions aiming to enhance their international student enrolment in an increasingly competitive educational landscape.

Proposed Intervention

The first critical intervention in the collaboration between Zhonghe and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) was the formation of a strategic partnership and the subsequent customization of the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program. UTM was selected for its international acclaim and its alignment with the rigorous academic standards Zhonghe sought to uphold. The partnership focused on developing a curriculum that was not only academically rigorous but also tailored to the specific needs of Chinese working professionals. This involved integrating relevant business management theories and practical case studies applicable to both global and Chinese markets. Additionally, the

program was designed to offer courses in both Mandarin and English, accommodating language preferences and ensuring cultural inclusiveness. The scheduling was made flexible, with weekend and online classes to suit the busy lives of working adults. Ensuring compliance with both Chinese and international educational standards was also a priority, necessitating regular coordination with Chinese education authorities to secure recognition for the DBA degree in China.

Following the successful establishment of the program, the second intervention addressed the optimization of marketing and recruitment strategies. Initially, Zhonghe utilized outsourced recruitment agencies to attract students. However, to enhance effectiveness and control, the strategy was expanded to include a robust in-house recruitment team. This team was tasked with implementing advanced digital marketing strategies, including social media campaigns and content marketing, aimed at directly reaching and engaging potential students. Furthermore, the in-house team organized informational seminars and webinars, which not only served as marketing tools but also provided platforms for direct interaction with prospective students, offering them detailed insights into the program and addressing any queries. Importantly, feedback from these engagements was systematically gathered and analyzed, creating a feedback loop that continuously informed and refined the recruitment strategies. This dynamic approach allowed Zhonghe to adapt its marketing efforts according to real-time feedback and evolving market conditions, thereby increasing the effectiveness of its student recruitment efforts.

Through these interventions, Zhonghe and UTM not only succeeded in launching a bespoke educational program but also established a model for future collaborations that could adapt to meet changing educational needs and market dynamics. The effectiveness of these strategies was continually evaluated through metrics such as enrollment numbers, student satisfaction, and stakeholder feedback, ensuring that the program remained relevant and responsive to the needs of its participants.

Methodology

This action research utilized a mixed-methods approach to evaluate the effectiveness of the tailored Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program developed through the collaboration between Zhonghe and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). The research design was bifurcated into two primary phases corresponding to the key interventions: partnership and program customization, and the enhancement of marketing and recruitment strategies. To capture both quantitative and qualitative insights, the methodology integrated several data collection methods. Qualitative data were primarily gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Interviews were conducted with a diverse set of stakeholders, including Zhonghe's founder, as well as recruitment agents. These interviews aimed to delve into the stakeholders' perceptions of the program's effectiveness and the decision-making processes involved.

On the quantitative side, data on enrollment numbers and retention rates were collected to directly measure the impact of the interventions on student recruitment and satisfaction. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis for the qualitative data to identify patterns and common themes across the interviews and focus group discussions. This approach helped in understanding the nuanced perspectives of different stakeholders.

For the quantitative data, trend analysis were employed to assess the effectiveness of the marketing and recruitment strategies by examining growth in enrollment numbers and levels of student satisfaction.

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed throughout the research process. Ethical approval was secured from the appropriate bodies before the commencement of the study. Participants were informed about the research's aims, their rights to confidentiality, and their freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. Consent forms were duly signed, ensuring that all data collection and analysis procedures adhered to high ethical standards. This comprehensive mixed-methods approach was designed to provide a holistic evaluation of the strategic interventions implemented by Zhonghe and UTM, revealing both the statistical impacts and the subjective experiences of the program's stakeholders. This method ensures a balanced exploration of the efficacy and reception of the DBA program, highlighting areas of success and potential improvement.

Results and Discussion

The results from the action research on Zhonghe's collaboration with Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in launching a tailored DBA program reveal significant positive outcomes both in terms of stakeholder feedback and student recruitment metrics. Qualitatively, the feedback from key stakeholders including the founder of Zhonghe and recruitment agencies has been overwhelmingly positive, pointing towards a promising future for the program.

Qualitative

The founder of Zhonghe expressed strong optimism regarding the future growth of the program, citing the tailored approach and strategic partnerships as key drivers of success. Recruitment agencies noted a consistent increase in inquiries about the program, attributing this trend to the positive word-of-mouth and successful outcomes from the first two batches of students. This feedback underscores the perceived value and effectiveness of the DBA program, highlighting its relevance and appeal to potential students.

Quantitative

The statistical data further supports this positive outlook. The number of students recruited for the second intake exhibited a substantial double-digit growth compared to the initial cohort. Such an increase is indicative of the program's growing reputation and the effectiveness of the revised marketing and recruitment strategies implemented after the first intake. Furthermore, the introduction of an in-house recruitment team has had a marked impact on the current recruitment efforts for the third intake. The volume of inquiries for this upcoming batch has already tripled compared to the same period during the first intake, demonstrating exceptionally promising signs. This surge is largely attributed to the strategic shift towards an in-house recruitment approach, allowing for more targeted, responsive, and effective engagement with prospective students.

Discussion

The results discussed provide strong evidence that the interventions, particularly the strategic partnership with UTM and the enhancement of recruitment strategies, have been highly effective. The qualitative feedback aligns well with the quantitative data, both

pointing to a successful implementation of the tailored DBA program. This synergy between stakeholder perceptions and empirical recruitment data highlights the program's ability to meet the needs and expectations of Chinese working adults seeking international business education.

The significant increase in student inquiries and enrollments can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the positive experiences of the initial student cohorts have likely contributed to an organic growth in program interest through word-of-mouth. Secondly, the strategic shift to a mixed recruitment approach, incorporating both outsourced agencies and an in-house team, has allowed Zhonghe to more effectively target and engage potential students. This approach has not only improved reach but also allowed for better communication of the program's unique value proposition, aligning marketing strategies more closely with prospective students' expectations and needs.

Overall, these findings suggest that the DBA program is well-positioned for continued growth and success, affirming the strategic decisions made by Zhonghe and UTM. Looking forward, it will be crucial for both institutions to continue adapting their strategies in response to feedback and market changes to sustain and possibly accelerate this growth trajectory.

Conclusion

This action research has thoroughly examined the strategic collaboration between Zhonghe and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) in the development and implementation of a tailored Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) program. The study aimed to assess the effectiveness of the partnership and targeted recruitment strategies in meeting the educational needs of Chinese working adults. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative analyses provide substantial evidence that the interventions have been successful. The partnership between Zhonghe and UTM has proven to be a strategic success, evidenced by the positive feedback from stakeholders and the significant growth in student recruitment. The customization of the DBA program to meet specific linguistic, cultural, and professional needs has enhanced its appeal and relevance to the target audience, thereby contributing to the program's increasing popularity. Furthermore, the transition to an in-house recruitment strategy has allowed for more nuanced and effective engagement with prospective students, as demonstrated by the tripled volume of inquiries for the third intake compared to the first.

The results underscore the potential of tailored educational programs to not only fulfill market demand but also to drive significant growth for educational institutions. This success story highlights the importance of strategic partnership management, cultural adaptation in curriculum design, and innovative recruitment strategies in the international education sector. The insights gained from this research suggest that similar approaches could be effectively applied in other contexts where educational institutions aim to cater to specific demographic segments. Looking ahead, it is recommended that Zhonghe and UTM continue to refine and expand their strategic initiatives. This could involve enhancing their market research to keep the program aligned with emerging trends and needs in the business world. Additionally, continuously innovating recruitment strategies will be crucial to maintaining the program's growth momentum. It is also suggested that future research

could explore the long-term impacts of such educational collaborations on students' career outcomes and on the broader educational landscape.

In conclusion, the collaboration between Zhonghe and UTM in developing the tailored DBA program serves as a robust model for successful international educational partnerships. The program not only meets the specific needs of Chinese working adults but also contributes positively to the global educational ecosystem, demonstrating the significant benefits of thoughtful and strategic educational innovations.

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