

Enrolment Performance in Higher Education: A Focused Literature Review

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Abstract

The intensification of competition in higher education has heightened the strategic importance of brand communication in shaping enrolment performance, particularly in digitally mediated and adult-learning contexts. This focused literature review synthesizes prior research on enrolment performance in higher education regional institutions. The review of this study examines how enrollment as performance outcomes of higher education institution. The analysis reveals a clear evolution of enrolment performance from a narrow quantitative indicator to a multidimensional construct encompassing conversion effectiveness, cost efficiency, learner–institution fit, and sustainability. However, significant gaps persist in operationalizing enrolment performance, linking brand communication to intermediate digital metrics such as conversion rates, and incorporating adult learner perspectives in less-developed regions. By consolidating fragmented findings across disciplines, this review clarifies the conceptual and practical perspective of enrolment performance and identifies directions for future empirical research. The study contributes to higher education marketing scholarship by advancing a more integrated understanding that can support sustainable enrolment outcomes in competitive and resource-constrained environments.

Keywords: Enrolment Performance, Higher Education Marketing, Adult Learners, Literature Review

Introduction

Higher Education (HE) is widely recognized as a foundation for social development, economic competitiveness and knowledge innovation at the global level. Reports by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2025 and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2024 indicated that global higher education enrollment has continued to expand, with particular emphasis on digital skills, sustainability literacy, and innovation competencies. However, the higher education system faces a series of challenges, including misalignment between curricula and labor market needs, pressure on institutional resources, and intensified competition among institutions. For example, the Chinese Ministry of Education (2024) has emphasized the importance of

improving institutional brand strength and ensuring the quality of enrollment to enhance the overall competitiveness of Chinese higher education. At the same time, higher education institutions increasingly operate in a marketized environment where learners behave as informed consumers who actively compare program value, learning flexibility and future career outcomes before making enrollment decisions (Woodall et al., 2012). This shift has strengthened the strategic role of brand communication in shaping institutional positioning, signaling academic quality, and influencing enrollment choices within broader social, economic and policy dynamics.

The academic literature has examined higher education primarily from two perspectives. First, research has considered the drivers of industry evolution, including the growing demand for lifelong learning and the widening skills gap in labor markets (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Second, scholars have emphasized the unique characteristics of adult learners, who often display strong career orientations, require flexible and convenient learning formats, and prioritize tangible educational returns (Chapleo, 2015). More recent studies extend these insights, arguing that enrollment performance is increasingly linked to how institutions align program design and communication strategies with learner expectations (Zhang & Li, 2025b). These discussions highlight an important theoretical shift from viewing enrollment as a purely administrative outcome to conceptualizing it as a behavioral response shaped by perceived relevance, institutional trust, and brand meaning within the learner decision-making process (Buvaneswari et al., 2025; Li et al., 2025).

Within this body of work, brand communication has been identified as a powerful tool for improving institutional visibility, credibility, and loyalty. Foundational studies highlighted the importance of consistent messages for building brand equity (Keller, 2013) and the role of both informational and emotional appeals in strengthening relationships (Duncan, 2002). Contemporary research, however, emphasizes the need to integrate consumer behavior theory with digital communication technologies to enhance engagement with adult learners (Huang & Xu, 2023b; Liu & Chen, 2025a). For this group, course quality, career prospects, and flexible scheduling remain decisive factors influencing enrollment decisions (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2014). Therefore, effective brand communication requires translating these priorities into targeted and relevant messages that resonate with learners (Saunders & Townsend, 2023).

The digitalization of communication has profoundly reshaped branding practices across industries. Tools such as social media, search engine optimization, big data, and artificial intelligence enable highly personalized communication strategies (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2019). Yet, despite the ubiquity of these tools, their application in higher education remains uneven. The literature provides limited guidance on how digital communication strategies should be adapted to the decision-making profiles of adult learners, leading to a persistent gap between theory and practice (OECD, 2024). Most existing models were developed for traditional universities or vocational training contexts and often fail to accommodate the complex needs of adult learners (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015; Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). Furthermore, current approaches tend to emphasize institutional priorities over learner perspectives, undervaluing factors such as career planning and time management. Recent studies also call attention to the lack of robust evaluation frameworks for assessing

the effectiveness of digital tools in higher education brand communication (Huang & Xu, 2023a; Liu & Chen, 2025b). This limitation is particularly salient in adult education environments, where learners are more selective, risk-aware, and outcomes-driven, making the alignment between digital brand communication strategies and enrollment performance both theoretically and practically significant.

In summary, while the literature acknowledges the growing importance of brand communication for higher education institutions, especially in the digital era, theoretical and practical gaps remain. Existing models often fail to capture the distinctive needs of adult learners, lack mechanisms for linking brand communication with enrollment performance, and provide insufficient guidance on evaluating digital strategies. These limitations highlight the need for new conceptual and empirical approaches tailored to the higher education sector in regional contexts. By synthesizing current evidence and critically examining how brand communication interacts with adult learner expectations and institutional enrollment outcomes, this study seeks to contribute clearer theoretical grounding and stronger practical insights to the ongoing discourse. This study aims to critically synthesize existing literature on enrolment performance in higher education.

Enrolment Performance in Higher Education

In higher education research, enrollment performance is commonly defined as the extent to which institutions succeed in attracting, converting, and retaining prospective learners into formal academic programs (Fahrudin et al., 2023). It represents the effectiveness of marketing and communication strategies that lead to actual enrolment in the education institution (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). In higher education, enrollment performance is often measured by the number of students successfully admitted or registered within a given recruitment cycle.

Earlier studies describe it as a multidimensional construct that goes beyond numerical admission targets, encompassing both the efficiency of the recruitment funnel and the sustainability of enrollment outcomes over time (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2015). Within the context of adult learners, enrollment performance becomes even more complex due to external constraints such as time limitations, financial pressures, and family responsibilities that often influence learners' decision-making and persistence (Kasworm, 2003). Recent studies argue that enrollment should not only be assessed as a quantitative outcome but also as a qualitative process that reflects an institution's credibility, reputation, and responsiveness to evolving market conditions (Zhang & Li, 2025a).

The dimensionality of enrollment performance has been treated differently across past studies. Early research often applied a unidimensional perspective, focusing primarily on the number of enrollments achieved within a given academic cycle. However, more recent approaches emphasize its multidimensional nature, integrating indicators such as conversion ratios, student-institution fit, cost efficiency, and retention sustainability. In this sense, enrollment performance reflects both the completion rate of enrollment targets and the cost efficiency of student acquisition while also capturing the extent to which admitted students align with the institute's program offerings. This approach enables the evaluation of enrollment not merely as a matter of volume but as a strategic construct connected to institutional competitiveness and sustainability in a regional and private higher education

market characterized by brand constraints and increasing competition (Wei & Tuntinakhongul, 2024b).

Table 1 shows the past studies in performance. Table 1: Systematic Literature Review for Performance

No.	Author (Year)	Title of Paper	Underpinning Theory / Model	Research Type	Methodology (Sample Size Included)	Key Findings / Outcomes
1	Jung & Shegai (2023)	The Impact of Digital Marketing Innovation on Firm Performance: Mediation by Marketing Capability and Moderation by Firm Size	Resource-Based View (RBV)	Quantitative	Data from top 100 firms on KOSPI & KOSDAQ; linear moderated mediation model	Digital marketing innovation improves firm performance via marketing capability
2	Mante & Martey (2023)	Brand Awareness and Firm Performance: The Mediating Role of Brand Love	Sternberg's Triangle Theory of Love	Quantitative	Survey of 540 commercial bank customers in Ghana; PLS-SEM	Brand awareness significantly improves firm performance
3	Sonza & Silva (2023)	Brand Equity and Company Performance: Evidence from a Quasi-Experiment in an Emerging Market	Signaling Theory	Quantitative	29-year panel (1990–2018) of 689 firms (7,970 observations) in Brazil; Difference-in-Differences (DID)	Strong link between brand equity and firm performance in emerging markets.
4	Van Klaveren et al. (2018)	The Higher Education Enrollment Decision: Feedback on Expected Study Success and Updating Behavior	-	Experimental / Quantitative	Randomized field experiment among 313 prospective law and social science students, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	Providing students with personalized feedback on study success increased enrolment by 25% but did not reduce first-year dropout. Enrolment was driven more by fear of failure than optimism bias.
5	Ramchander & Naudé (2018)	The Relationship Between Increasing Enrolment and Student Academic Achievement in Higher Education	-	Quantitative	4 cohorts (2012–2015) in undergraduate Supply Chain Management program, University of KwaZulu-Natal, n ≈ 1,651	No significant inverse correlation between class size (229–490 students) and academic achievement. Larger enrolment did not degrade pass rates; efficiency maintained through structured teaching.
6	Batool & Liu (2021)	Exploring the Relationships Between Socio-Economic Indicators and Student	-	Quantitative	15-year dataset (2001–2016) from UNESCO & Pakistan MOF; correlation,	Socio-economic indicators (GDP per capita, government expenditure, unemployment rate) strongly predict

		Enrollment in Higher Education Institutions of Pakistan			PCA, clustering, stepwise regression	enrolment. Public spending and per capita income positively affect enrolment.
7	Abdelhadi et al. (2022)	A Regression Model to Predict Key Performance Indicators in Higher Education Enrollments	-	Quantitative	MoHE Palestine dataset (n = 2,500 HEIs records); Linear, Lasso, Elastic Net, SVR regression	40% training/60% testing ratio produced the best accuracy. Regression models successfully predicted enrolment KPIs
8	Quílez-Robres et al. (2023)	Emotional Intelligence and Academic Performance: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis	-	Systematic Review & Meta-Analysis	PRISMA-based review of 27 studies (n = 13,909 participants, aged 9–25)	Emotional intelligence has a moderate high positive correlation with academic performance.
9	Yan et al. (2024)	A Systematic Literature Review of University Student Enrolment from 2020 to 2023	Theory of Reasoned Action	Systematic Review	17 articles (2020–2023) analysed via PRISMA qualitative synthesis	COVID-19 accelerated online learning transitions and widened socio-economic gaps; institutional branding, digital pedagogy, and inclusiveness are key to sustaining enrolment.
10	Magasi & Bwemelo (2024)	Unlocking Students' Enrolment: A Mixed Methods Study on How Brand Reputation and Perceived Benefits Shape Higher Education Choices in Tanzania	Expectancy-Value Theory	Mixed Methods	7 Focus Groups + Survey (n = 119 students, Tanzania); Multiple regression + thematic analysis	Brand reputation, alumni success, and faculty expertise significantly predict enrolment intention.
11	Yamin (2024)	Impact of University Branding on Student Enrollment: Market Trends and Strategic Approaches in Private Higher Education	Expectancy-Value Theory; Push-Pull Model	Conceptual / Literature-Based	Secondary data synthesis of market and institutional trends in Bangladeshi private universities	University branding enhances student attraction, satisfaction, and institutional reputation. Strategic branding (digital, faculty, infrastructure) is key to sustainable enrolment growth.

The scholarly understanding of enrollment performance has evolved chronologically alongside broader developments in higher education marketing. Early studies applied the marketing mix framework to explain how product design, promotion, and pricing influence student choice. Subsequent research expanded this discussion to consider the growing importance of digital visibility, responsiveness to inquiries, and transparent communication as determinants of conversion effectiveness in both online and blended learning environments (Huang & Xu, 2023a). In the context of adult learners, factors such as

institutional reputation, perceived career relevance, program flexibility, and expected return on investment have been identified as primary determinants of enrollment decisions (Saunders & Townsend, 2023).

In addition, the empirical findings in the Chinese context indicate that the availability of nationally recognized credentials, alignment with labor market demands, and the strength of digital strategies play decisive roles in shaping enrollment outcomes, while weak online presence and insufficient brand salience hinder institutional competitiveness (Zhang & Liu, 2025; Liu & Chen, 2025b). More recent contributions suggest that robust enrollment performance contributes not only to institutional growth but also to long-term brand equity by strengthening student loyalty, enhancing reputation, and generating positive word-of-mouth effects (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009; OECD, 2024).

The distinction between enrollment performance and enrollment efficiency also warrants clarification. While enrollment efficiency generally refers to the ratio of outcomes to resources used, including the cost per applicant or time taken to convert leads, enrollment performance encompasses a broader evaluative framework. It includes not only efficiency but also effectiveness, sustainability, and strategic alignment between institutional goals and student characteristics. Efficiency is therefore considered one of the dimensions of performance rather than an equivalent construct.

A synthesis of these studies demonstrates that the concept of enrollment performance has transitioned from a narrow administrative metric to a strategic and relational construct grounded in marketing and communication theory. However, three critical research gaps remain evident. First, there is limited operationalization of enrollment performance as a multidimensional construct that connects process efficiency with qualitative measures of institutional sustainability. Second, existing research offers little insight into how digital presence and brand recognition mechanisms contribute to intermediate outcomes such as Click-through Rate (CTR) and Conversion Rate (CVR), which are now essential indicators of enrollment success in digital environments. Third, the perspectives of adult learners in less-developed provinces remain underrepresented, despite their growing significance within the expanding higher education sector. These gaps underscore the need for further empirical research that integrates marketing communication theory, digital analytics, and brand management into the study of enrollment performance.

In summary, enrollment performance serves as a critical outcome variable in this research because it integrates theoretical insights from marketing communication, brand equity, and persuasion theory. The study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of higher education marketing and offers practical implications for improving competitiveness and sustainability among higher education institutions.

Conclusion and Implications

Research on brand communication in education has expanded, yet limitations remain when enrollment performance is the focal outcome. Many studies examine national level or traditional university settings and provide little evidence for institutions operating in regional markets. Measures that link communication to conversion, completion, and yield are often missing or underdeveloped. Existing theories describe education branding in generic terms

and rarely model how brand awareness and consideration translate into application, enrollment, and retention in higher education.

Past studies tend to infer reputation effects without specifying the mechanisms that connect message exposure, perceived value, and funnel conversion for heterogeneous learners (Hill et al., 2023a; Liu & Chen, 2025b). Research on brand equity often cites quality, career outcomes, and price, yet the role of brand salience and trust in driving inquiry to application is not formalized for general regional markets. As a result, frameworks offer weak guidance for improving completion of targets and conversion efficiency. By incorporating these perspectives, the research expands the scope of consumer behavior theory in education and demonstrates that brand strategies must reflect heterogeneous learner motivations. By highlighting unresolved gaps in theory integration and measurement, the study underscores the need for future research that systematically links effective mechanisms to enrolment outcomes in diverse and regionally specific higher education contexts.

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