

## **2] Changing Strategies in Student Recruitment among Selected TVET Institutions in Machakos County, Kenya**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the changing strategies in student recruitment among public middle-level institutions in Kenya, specifically the case of TVET institutions in Machakos County. The study was guided by the following objectives, to: (a) Establish the strategies adopted by the TVET institutions in marketing and recruiting students; (b) Determine the capacity of the TVET institutions in marketing and student recruitment (c) Find out the extent of the area TVET institutions recruit students from, and (d) Investigate other creative strategies used by the TVET in marketing and student recruitment. World over, a more knowledge-based economy is the norm; in that regard, there is a huge demand for the youth to join college for the acquisition of the desired skills. Therefore the colleges are scrambling for student recruitment in a very limited market. A standardized questionnaire was used to collect data from 15 respondents. The study made the following findings: TVET institutions in rural areas must aggressively adopt more effective and professional strategies for student recruitment. For example, hiring professional marketers, usage of websites for general information to the public, taking advantage of the social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, and Twitter to advertise their courses and colleges; branding themselves as a marketing strategy; adopting ICT to reach the youth for faster and wider coverage, and taking advantage of the vernacular FM radios for contextualized messages in the local communities. Finally, the study established that marketers have to be more creative, flexible, and innovative in their strategies, for example, using all existing avenues as marketing opportunities: sports day, festivals, and face to face contact with potential students. The study concluded that successful student recruitment requires aggressiveness, customer-focused and centrality, adoption of effective marketing strategies, and increased visibility in the society.

*Keywords:* Marketing, student recruitment, strategies, higher education

### **Introduction**

The emergence of a knowledge-based economy has caused a ripple effect due to the unilateral push for the youth to join college for the acquisition of the desired skills. Therefore, the scramble for students' recruitment and admissions has triggered fierce competition among the postsecondary institutions (Davis & Floyd, 2005). The situation has been worsened by the liberalized access to higher education globally that has led to the multiplication of postsecondary institutions with limited number of students available for admissions. Therefore, the competition for students is becoming acute because the

institutions are recruiting students from the same limited market. An empirical study by *Rust and Kim* (2012) and *Sheambri and Latimer* (2016) both agree that a college with diverse programmes, modern technology, rich curriculum and well-staffed, mentorship programmes, customer centricism, and good services are very competitive in successful recruitment and retention of students. According to *Pringle and Fritz* (2018), the students are very particular when choosing a school; for instance, they consider whether the school has an engaging curriculum, low student-faculty ratio, internship opportunities, access to modern ICT technology, good service delivery, and the entire college experience that goes beyond career preparation. Interestingly, *Pringle and Fritz* (2018) arrive at the same conclusion; the student is no longer attracted to the school's big names or mega sizes anymore. They would rather be admitted to smaller schools where they can have greater interaction with their trainers, and participate in learning activities; experience personal development, have the opportunity to be part of the extra curriculum (*Rust & Kim*, 2012). In summary, students consider schools with a history of reputable and varied academic programs, holistic education for the whole person, dynamic curriculum, and access to modern technology (*Palmer*, 2013; *University of Toronto*, 2017).

Undoubtedly, student recruiters need to focus more on understanding the characteristics and goals of potential students (*Queen's University*, 2017). Marketing in the institutions of higher education is no longer concentrated on the university programs any longer; it is about the aspirations, dreams, and needs of the students.

In that regard, *Mehran and Fathollahzadeh* (2018) argue that institutions need to improve their marketing strategies to remain afloat:

To maintain their profitability, in the beginning, companies reduced their costs, reviewed their engineering processes, and reduced the number of human Forces. However, companies that are successful in reducing their costs, it is unlikely to increase their revenues without any marketing insight and knowledge.

Thus, consideration for improved marketing strategies is inescapable in the economic turbulent times we live in to cut even. Essentially, the recent economic pressures and upheavals have led the institutions of higher education to respond considerably by mounting strong, dependable and relevant market strategies and workable brand promises (*Pringle & Fritz*, 2018; *Peruta & Shields*, 2017; *Hoehn, Solomon & Efron*, 2017).

### **Succeeding in Today's Evolving Marketing**

Burgeoning literature points out that conventional marketing strategy is inadequate, there is a paradigm shift, and to be relevant institutions' response to the changes is better than denial or rigidity to old ways which may no longer work for anybody (*Rezvani, and Colabi*, 2012; *Reijonen*, 2010; *University of Toronto*, 2017). Perhaps *Mehran, and Fathollahzadeh* (2018) put it better by stating that:

Conventional marketing does not have a great performance in the turbulent and competitive environment and they are especially good for industries experiencing less environmental changes.”

Each institution needs to be more innovative and creative in marketing their school; that is important because each school is unique in terms of context, dynamics, and needs.

Flexibility when considering marketing strategy is important because the market is continuously changing with unprecedented speed in recent history. The changes are made complex by factors like the untamable spirit of globalization, technological advancement, and innovations. For instance, through the internet and ICT distance has been conquered and mocked; with a touch of a button, information is shared across the world at a lightning speed (Hoehn, *Solomon & Efron*, 2017; PwC, 2018; Reijonen, 2010). In today's world marketing focus has shifted from emphasis on products to concentration on customer's interests and needs, hence the doctrine of customer centrism (Mehran & Fathollahzadeh, 2018). The message is clear that postsecondary institutions must focus on customer needs while choosing their marketing strategy.

### **Diverse Strategies of Marketing Adopted in Higher Education**

The world has experienced fast-paced technological advancement; the phenomenon has caused irreversible changes in how businesses and organizations do their business (University of Toronto, 2017). Fundamentally, the technological shift has caused far-reaching consequences in all sectors, for instance, marketing strategies in postsecondary institutions are mostly now digital. According to PwC (2018), there is no turning back to the old way of doing things. For example, they state:

..digital is here and it's here to stay. For example, always-connected mobile devices ...social media is the primary communication channel for many; new cloud computing capabilities allow the creation of new tools and products at a rate not previously seen; geolocation sensors create new tracking and targeting opportunities; digital is now the first choice for media consumption – the list goes on. This disruption is impacting and changing Higher Education and academia and the change is set to continue. Students have become customers who bring their digital world expectations to university. These customers are savvier, better connected, and more vocal than ever.

Social changes like the introduction of new technology therefore become the point of departure because the bulk of the customers targeted by the TVET institutions are the youth and are all connected to form the huge digital world. With their phones messages sent via email, Facebook and ordinary texts can be easily retrieved. However, digitalization does not guarantee automatic results; in that regard, the IT experts must come on board to ensure sustainable benefits (Palmer, 2013; Queen's University, 2017; Peruta and Shields, 2017). The need for being ICT compliant has been underscored by PwC (2018) by stating that,

Universities that are not equipping themselves to adapt to this new digital era will be left behind. Whether you want to be a digital leader or simply stay relevant in the digital age, the time to act is now.

TVET institutions have little choices in employing ICT in all their fundamental service delivery because their potential customers are living in the digital age permanently. ICT has a unique way of connecting customers with their service providers. For example, the institutions can connect with Pringle & Fritz (2018) who posit that ‘digital blueprint considers how being digital in everything you do will connect a university directly to its customers and staff.’

Therefore, eventual investment in IT is the way to go for all the TVET for purposes of efficiency; universality, and relevance.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Most governments globally have adopted TVET as one of their strategies in combating youth unemployment and enhancing self-employment; furthermore, TVET plays an important role in the implementation and promotion of sustainable development. In both developed and developing countries, the job market relies on TVET institutions to maintain the supply of hands-on skilled workforce. There is adequate government support in promoting TVET institutions; for example, posting qualified teachers and assisting TVET students to access financial support through the Higher Education loans board (HELB). However, with all these efforts, the enrolment in these TVET institutions especially in the rural areas remains very low (Wachiye & Nasongo, 2009). This study, therefore, attempted to investigate the strategies adopted by the TVET institutions to boost student recruitment.

### **Research questions**

- 1) What methods do the TVET colleges use in student recruitment?
- 2) What are the rural TVET colleges doing to tap digital potentiality in student recruitment?
- 3) How wide do the TVET colleges recruit their students in Machakos County?

### **Research Methodology**

The study employed a descriptive survey design. The design is considered an appropriate option when the research seeks to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends, and categories (Silva, 2017). The study population of the study included all lecturers compiled from 3 different TVET institutions in Machakos County. Data was collected using a structured questionnaire from 15 lecturers from the institutions in Machakos. Finally, data was analyzed, presented using tables giving the frequency and percentage; and discussed.

## Findings

### Methods used by TVET Institutions in Student Recruitment?

Table 1 below summarizes the findings

Table 1

*The Strategies Used by the Middle-Level Colleges in Student Recruitment*

The Strategy Adopted to Recruit Students by the TVET Colleges	Frequency	Percentage
Hired marketing professionals	0	0
Branding the institutions	0	0
Use of local vernacular FM radios	0	0
Word of mouth	6	40
Announcements through the churches	4	27
Recruitment through local schools	5	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>

The study established that student recruitment was not professionally done. For example, the colleges did not have a marketing professional, neither did they invest in branding of the institutions. One of the most effective marketing channels not utilized was the local vernacular FM radios. The institutions rather relied on free marketing channels: word of mouth 40%; Churches 27%, and local schools at 37%. The channels used are free, however, they can easily lead to misinformation and be unprofessional, and since they are only volunteering to give the services they may not bear any responsibility. Overreliance on volunteer services means the institutions had very little control of the information out there to accurately inform the potential students of the available courses and services. The only method that was relied upon was the announcements through the churches around the schools. One of the Deans of students had this to say about using volunteer services to popularize their college:

Although the church may try their best to popularize our school, sometimes the request to do so is forgotten, or just announced by the way. We cannot do anything about it because they are just giving us a favour. I believe it would be a different story if we had our marketing professionals, used professional channels like the local FM radios, or invest in branding our institution like some of the National schools does. They brand their buses, uniforms, exercise books sometimes pens; cups, and so on. So, as of now we have limited visibility in society and sometimes distorted by the volunteers who try to popularize us.

With proper financial facilitation, and consideration professional marketing could give better results in the dissemination of quality information, and student recruitment.

### What TVET Colleges Doing to Tap Digital Potentiality in Student Recruitment

Table 2

*Adopting Digital Methods in Student Recruitment*

The Method adopted in Student Recruitment	Frequency	Percentage
Website-based recruitment	0	0
Social Media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp)	0	0
Not aware of the effectiveness of social media in recruitment	12	80
Local vernacular FM Radio	3	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>

Unlike the national institutions of higher learning which have reaped big in adopting social and online marketing channels; the rural TVET institutions have not adopted the social and online marketing strategies, for example, 80% of the respondents were not aware of the effectiveness of the online and social media in the recruitment of students (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp); only 20% of the respondents saw the local vernacular FM radio as an effective strategy of student recruitment. The study concluded that the lack of awareness of the effectiveness of online and social media in student recruitment was to blame for the lack of aggressiveness in adopting them as a marketing strategy since their employment is free.

### How Wide the Rural TVET Colleges Recruit their Students

Table 3

*Geographical Areas the Dents were Recruited from in the Rural Middle-Level Colleges*

Geographical Areas from Where Students were Recruited	Frequency	Percentage
Recruited from the home County	13	87
Recruited from the neighbouring Counties	2	3
Other Countries in East Africa	0	0
Collaboration with other colleges	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100</b>

The study established that the rural TVET colleges recruited their students within their local county and communities. By limiting themselves in their county and communities meant a limited number of students recruited; opening up to other Counties or communities would possibly mean more numbers, and possibilities of intercultural enrichment and strengthening of social moral fiber through quality interactions (Pringle & Fritz (2018). This was also echoed by one of the students' Deans who said,

I agree opening up to other Counties and Countries would benefit our students very much because it is a way of learning new cultural experiences, values, and enrichment; further, through diversity, it results in stronger and cohesive societies.

Small student numbers are one of the complaints by the rural colleges; however, by targeting students beyond their communities and counties, they may in the end get the desired big numbers.

### **Other Creative Methods Employed in Student Recruitment by the Rural TVET Institutions?**

The study established that the respondents had some creative ideas which they were willing to consider. For example, 65% of the respondents wanted to adopt online education more to create more awareness among the potential; visit secondary schools and popularize the economic importance of TVET education, entrepreneurial possibilities the TVET graduates have, and the relevance of the services given by such institutions. In that regard, one of the instructors commented,

By visiting the secondary schools which remain our main catchment area, allows our schools to popularize TVET education, job opportunities, or self-employment possibilities.

Visiting schools would help the students to access adequate information about TVET, and enable them to make informed decision to join the colleges. The study also established that 25% of the respondents thought event-based marketing would be effective in student recruitment; for example, they talked of pitching tents during events like secondary school sports days or music festivals as an opportunity to meet students face to face.

### **Conclusion**

To boost their student recruitment, rural TVET institutions need to be more aggressive and employ good marketing strategies to penetrate the untapped market. For example, they may consider hiring or consulting professional marketers, brand themselves; use the ICTs which may enable them to attract students beyond the local county. To encourage the potential students to make more informed decisions, the TVET institutions need to have more face to face contact with students during events and festivals. The local vernacular FM radio comes in handy in educating the students, parents, and guardians in disseminating correct and relevant information about TVET colleges. New ways of

marketing are critical in getting better results; therefore more aggressiveness, innovation, flexibility, and creativity in choosing the relevant marketing strategy remains the secret to improve student recruitment among the rural TVET institutions.

### Recommendations

1. Professional marketers need to be put on board to explore critical strategies in marketing like institutional branding, putting local adverts in the local vernacular FM radios, and engaging the community through CSR.
2. ICT-based strategies need to be applied in marketing to tap the increasing use of smartphones in the country; social media like Facebook need to be explored too.
3. Student recruitment needs to be broadened beyond the local communities and counties
4. The teachers especially the younger graduates need to be allowed to use their creativity in marketing and student recruitment to complement the old marketing methods

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