



## The Role of Barriers, Perceptions, and Strategic Gaps in Attracting International Students

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### Abstract:

This paper examined the administrative outlooks of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq regarding the issue of recruiting international students, based on the perceived obstacles, institutional approaches, and the desired support of the government. The study is based on institutional theory and strategic management in higher education, which offers a strong theoretical framework for investigating how universities can ensure their internal capabilities are aligned with external policy structures. Quantitative research design was incorporated, and a structured survey was introduced to the presidents, deans, vice presidents, and directors of international relations and admissions of various universities. The collected data were analyzed using inferential statistical methods and model testing to examine the relationships among the core variables influencing international student attraction. The research problem is on the ways in which the perception of administrators can assist reveal the gaps between strategic objectives and practice in the context of the Kurdistan private institutions of higher education. The paper includes practical and social implications that could be presented in the form of evidence-based policy recommendations to policymakers and university leaders who want to increase the global academic competitiveness of the region. It highlights the urgent necessity of coordinated institutional policies, as well as enabling societal policies. The novelty and usefulness of the study lie in its focus on a relatively under-researched regional setting, which contributes to the general discussion of globalization in developing higher education markets.

**Keywords:** International students, Higher education marketing, Strategic barriers, Kurdistan universities, Government support

**1. Introduction:**

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are also under increasing pressure to expand their international interactions in light of the increasing global academic competition and the dynamic trends in international student mobility. As a strategic goal, internationalization has become not only a crucial element of institutional sustainability but also a crucial element of strengthening the academic reputation of the institution in the case of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, regarding private universities. Nevertheless, in spite of diverse capacity-building activities and outbound scholarship schemes, the attraction of international students is rather small, disjointed, and far under-achieves its potential. The proposed research fills a critical research gap in the literature by examining the perceptions of university administrators regarding the obstacles and opportunities associated with international students' recruitment in the Kurdish private higher education sector. It also examines the influence of these perceptions on administrators in terms of their institutional roles and experience, as well as to what degree governmental support (or the lack thereof) facilitates or limits internationalization strategies. These views are important to understand, as administrators are at the center of policy drafting and implementation of recruitment policies. The study determines: (1) the main obstacles to the attraction of international students; (2) the perceived success of institutional strategies in international recruitment; (3) how the government and ministry-level support can be utilized; (4) how the gap between institutional efforts and support mechanisms contribute to a successful recruitment; and (5) provides specific recommendations that would fill the existing strategic gaps and enhance performance.

This paper has the following structure: Section 2 contains the relevant literature review and hypotheses of the study. Section 3 describes the research methodology, data collection, and measures the variables. The empirical findings are presented in Section 4. These findings are discussed in Section 5 in view of the related literature. Finally, Section 6 concludes with key recommendations, limitations, and directions for future research.

**2. Literature review and Hypothesis Development:****2.1 Theoretical Framework:**

The theory has been used to inform the current study relies on two paradigms that can be complementary to each other: Institutional Theory and Strategic Management in Higher Education. The theories offer a solid perspective to explain how the private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq overcome the structural, strategic, and regulatory problems in their endeavors to attract international students.

**Institutional Theory:**

The institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 2010) is used to explain how organizations adhere to external legitimacy and resource conformity norms. This, in the higher education sector, implies the embracement of international standards such as accreditation and teaching in English. Government, accreditor, or uncertainty pressure makes HEIs tend to copy dominant models (Tavares et al., 2025), particularly in developing areas that juggle both local and global needs.

**Strategic Management in Higher Education:**

The strategic management theory puts emphasis on the application of internal resources in achieving the challenges and exploiting opportunities by the universities. The development of global competitiveness prompts institutions to employ the use of digital marketing, collaborations, and focused scholarships (Wang et al., 2025). This is necessary in weak systems where flexibility is the most important (Bogbula et al., 2025). The match of capacity to the goals has a powerful impact on the outcomes of recruits (Gülel, 2025).

**2.2 Internationalization of Higher Education:**

Contemporary higher education has become a major characteristic of internationalization, which has shaped the recruitment, courses, and collaborations. Increased mobility of international students has been brought about by globalization, digitalization, and policy reforms.

**Global Trends in International Student Mobility:**

Over the last ten years, the trend of international education has changed with the traditional destinations of international education, namely, the US, UK, and Australia maintaining top positions, whereas the newcomers to the market as the destination of international education, such as Malaysia, Turkey, and the UAE, attract students with policy incentives and branding (Tsiligiris & Ilieva, 2022). The competition in the world talent market has increased further due to the post-pandemic recovery.

**Push and Pull Factors Influencing Student Choice:**

The push and pull factors influence the decisions made by students (e.g., instability, limited programs & quality education, and career prospects). Affordable tuition, safety, reputation of the faculty, and work rights after the studies are nowadays considered to be the most important priorities, and digital access and pre-arrival support is becoming a priority, particularly among the students of lower-income countries (Exploring Dropping Out Trends and Career Outcomes of Bangladeshi IT Students in Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences: Challenges and Insights, n.d.).

**The Importance of Brand Reputation, English-Medium Instruction, and Quality Assurance**

The brand of the institution is also paramount in the attraction of international students, where the global rankings, international faculty, and successful alumni have a great influence on preferences (Fakhrudin et al., 2024). English-minded programs increase access, particularly in non-Anglophone nations (Quotah, 2023), whereas international accreditation enhances credibility. In the case of such regions as Kurdistan, it is crucial to be in line with these international standards to be competitive.

**2.3 Barriers to Attracting International Students:**

Bringing international students on board is a universal objective, and universities in developing or post-conflict countries are competing with structural, institutional and contextual challenges that reduce their competitiveness.

**A. Structural Barriers:** Systemic constraints are limits that cannot be changed by individual institutions like visa problems, complicated admissions, and international accreditation. Non-transparent legal courses of action and visa regulations discourage outsiders, particularly in politically dark areas (Jafar & Knight, 2020). In a similar manner, the absence of international quality assurance will hurt trust and legitimacy (Tarawneh, 2025).

**B. Institutional Barriers:** Universities in the emerging systems have internal weaknesses such as low English programs, low capacity to recruit new students, and inefficiency in serving students. It is hard to maintain international enrolment without trained professionals or international offices (Kim et al., 2023). Poor housing and maintenance are also some of the factors that lead to low retention and early dropout.

**C. Contextual Barriers in Developing Regions:** The developing regions have socio-political challenges such as instability, safety, and inefficient infrastructure. Safety and governance often outweigh academic quality in student decisions, especially in the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa (Moshtari & Safarpour, 2024). Poor electricity, internet and transport also contribute to the poor experiences of international students, and reforms and stability are therefore a necessity in achieving successful internationalization.

**2.4 Strategic Initiatives and Institutional Responses:**

In order to compete favorably on the global higher education market, institutions have to embrace strategic initiatives that not only help them deal with the current challenges but also make them highly attractive to international students. These programs include establishing international alliances and involvement in educational fairs, to using the newest digital technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) to recruit students.

**Best Practices in International Student Recruitment:** Global partnerships, education fair, AI tools, and digital marketing have become a way of enhancing visibility used by universities. Strategic alliances strengthen credibility and can draw in a range of students (Zhou & Alam, 2024), whereas social media campaigns are more efficient to reach niche markets (Cordero-Gutiérrez & Lahuerta-Otero, 2020a). The AI facilitates individualized outreach and enrollment prediction, particularly in North America and Southeast Asia (Cordero-Gutiérrez & Lahuerta-Otero, 2020a).

**Proactive vs. Reactive Strategies:** There are proactive or reactive internationalization strategies that are adopted by institutions. Strategies that are proactive include branding, scholarships, and alignment of policies, and reactive ones are in response to a decrease in enrollments. (Calonge et al., 2021) discovered that policy-linked proactive plans increased resilience following the COVID-19 pandemic compared to the reactive models that resulted in poorer recruitment and diversity.

#### **Role of Branding Campaigns and National Initiatives:**

Branding efforts like the brand name Study in Kurdistan and Study in Malaysia use emerging hubs as a global study destination, as is the case with other initiatives like Study in Canada and Erasmus+. The unified branding through visas, scholarships, and work rights is the most successful (de Wit et al., 2021). In the case of the Kurdistan private universities, the involvement of such coordinated branding with the institutional preparedness and building partnerships can drive success tremendously in terms of global attractiveness and enrollment.

#### **2.5 Government and Ministry Support Mechanisms:**

Higher education internationalization is highly influenced by government policies, funding, visas, and promotion. In the absence of coordination between the government and universities, the effort may be haphazard or not fruitful.

#### **Impact of National-Level Policies on Internationalization:**

International student recruitment is determined by government policy. The 2021 strategy of the UK established clear goals, simplified visas, and employment opportunities (Joshi, 2022). Canada, the Netherlands, and Malaysia have made similar policies that have led to rapid enrolment due to goal conformity and good infrastructure.

#### **Funding, Visa Support, and Global Promotion:**

International students have an enhanced access and competitiveness through merit scholarships and grants. Visa support—like fast processing and clear pathways—is a top student priority (Jafar & Knight, 2020). The state-based campaigns, such as Study in Canada, promote education sectors in nations through embassies, fairs, and electronic media.

#### **Strategic Alignment Between Universities and Government Bodies:**

Internationalization requires that the goals of the university be aligned with government policy. In integrated systems such as Singapore and Germany, the institutionalization of support to branding and standards is unified (Viet Nguyen et al., 2024). Disorganized systems, such as those in post-conflict areas experience incoherent communications and a poor legal framework. Having a central system in such areas as Kurdistan would enhance coordination and recruitment of students.

#### **2.6 Strategic Gaps and Misalignment:**

- Gap between stated goals and actual practices in Kurdistan Region universities.
- Consequences of lack of coordination between departments and between institutions, and between regulators.
- Strategic misalignment's impact on academic, marketing, and service outcomes.

#### **2.7. Research Gaps**

Lack of region-specific empirical research focusing on administrative perspectives.  
Limited literature addresses the interaction between barriers, institutional strategies, and government support.

**2.8. The hypothetical research model:**

**Hypothesis 1:** There is a statistically significant relationship between perceived barriers, perceived effectiveness of strategies, and desired ministry/government support, and the ability of private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq to attract international students.

**Hypothesis 2:** There are statistically significant differences in perceptions regarding barriers, effectiveness of strategies, and desired government support between different categories of university administrators (e.g., presidents, deans, and directors).

**Hypothesis 3:** Strategic gaps exist between the stated goals of private universities and their actual practices, and these gaps negatively affect the academic, marketing, and service dimensions of attracting international students.

**3. Research Methodology:**

The research was anchored on the descriptive and analytical research design in which data was collected through a questionnaire completed by targeting a sample of the private universities of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Data was analyzed using the descriptive and analytical statistical packages in an attempt to extract the findings:

**A. Methods Used:** qualitative data analysis using the SPSS program to analyze questionnaires and test hypotheses.

**B. Research Community Sample:** 109 Participants in 17 Private Universities of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

**C. Research Design:** Quantitative and cross-sectional.

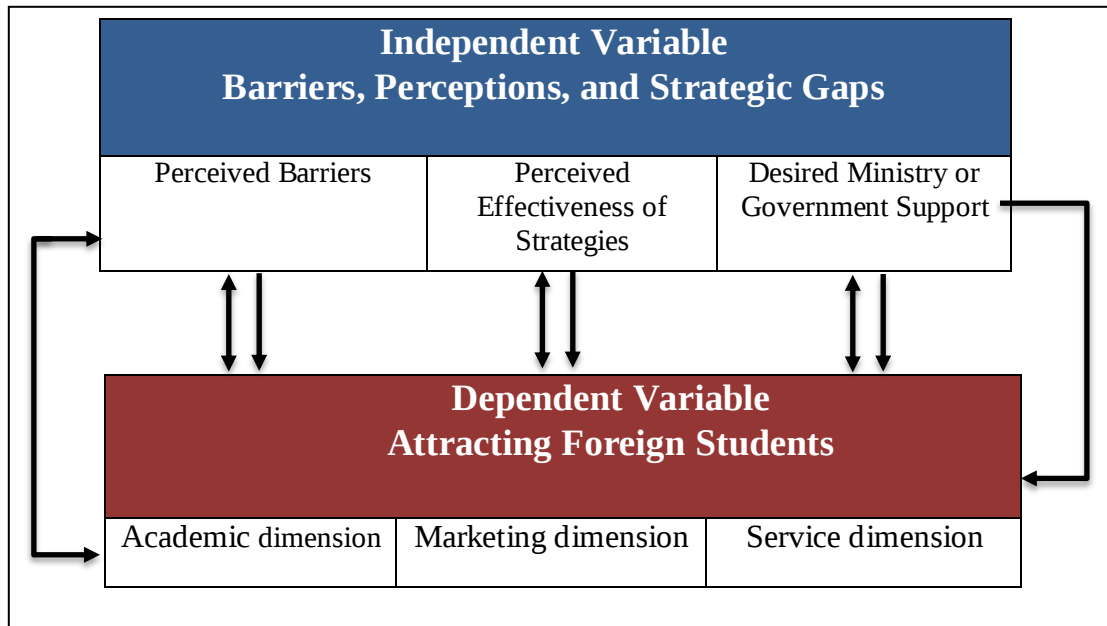
**D. Data Collection:** The primary data source for this study was a structured survey questionnaire distributed to academic leaders (presidents, deans, VPs, and directors of international relations) at 17 private universities in the Kurdistan Region. Responses were collected via Google Forms and analyzed using SPSS, survey of academic leadership from private universities in Kurdistan (demographic info: age, Current Position, and years of experience) and questionnaires, Google Forms, and literature reviews.

**E. Measurement of Variables:** The independent variable includes Barriers, Perceptions, and Strategic Gaps with three dimensions, whereas the dependent variable is Attracting International Students with three dimensions using Likert scale.

**F. Analytical Approach:** Descriptive statistics, correlation, regression, and hypothesis testing.

**G. Alternative Methods Considered:** Qualitative interviews, mixed methods (not applied but justified). Although informal exploratory conversations were held during instrument design, no qualitative interviews were conducted or included in the analysis. The study's findings are based solely on quantitative data derived from structured survey responses.

**H. The Research Model:** By using the Barriers, Perceptions, and Strategic Gaps as an independent variable and Attracting International Students as a dependent variable, a hypothetical model has been derived to show the potential to create an environment conducive to the establishment of private universities in Kurdistan Region, Iraq, and how far these variables relate to the work environment under study, the correlation between the two variables to the work environment under study has been indicated as indicated in Figure 1 also shows the correlation of the two variables with the work environment under study.



**Figure1:** The hypothetical diagram of the research

**Source:** Prepared by researcher

#### 4.Results:

Table 1 indicates that most of the participants were aged between 51-60 (41.3) and 60 years (39.4), with the minor percentage being between 41-50 years (15.6) and 31-40 years (2.8), and 30 years (0.9). At the present position, more than half of the Deans (50.5%), then Vice Presidents (15.6%), then director of international relationships (12.8%), then university president (11.9%). Finally, there was only one, a Head of the Board of Trustees. In terms of years of experience in the field of higher education, the majority of the respondents had over 15 years of experience (63.3%), 11-15 years (25.7%), comparatively less 5-10 years (5.5%), and less than 5 years (5.5%).

**Table 1:** Demographic profile of respondents

| Variable                                           | Category                                | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Age                                                | Under 30 years                          | 1         | 0.9     |
|                                                    | 31–40 years                             | 3         | 2.8     |
|                                                    | 41–50 years                             | 17        | 15.6    |
|                                                    | 51–60 years                             | 45        | 41.3    |
|                                                    | Over 60 years                           | 43        | 39.4    |
| Current Position                                   | Head of the Board of Trustees           | 1         | 0.9     |
|                                                    | University President                    | 13        | 11.9    |
|                                                    | Vice President                          | 17        | 15.6    |
|                                                    | Dean                                    | 55        | 50.5    |
|                                                    | Director of International Relations     | 14        | 12.8    |
|                                                    | Director of Admissions and Registration | 9         | 8.3     |
| Years of Experience in Higher Education Leadership | Less than 5 years                       | 6         | 5.5     |
|                                                    | 5–10 years                              | 6         | 5.5     |
|                                                    | 11–15 years                             | 28        | 25.7    |
|                                                    | More than 15 years                      | 69        | 63.3    |
| Total                                              |                                         | 109       | 100     |

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

**Table 2:** Perceived Barriers to Attracting International Students

| Items                                                   | Mean | SD   | T      | P-Value | Cohen's d | Interp.                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------|------|------|--------|---------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| Not availability of internationally accredited programs | 2.93 | 1.14 | -0.674 | 0.501   | -0.07     | Not significant                |
| Limited English-taught programs                         | 3.11 | 0.95 | 1.215  | 0.227   | 0.12      | Not significant                |
| Limited effectiveness of international marketing        | 4.41 | 0.81 | 18.26  | 0.000   | 1.75      | Strong barrier                 |
| Visa application process complexity                     | 2.48 | 1.14 | -4.775 | 0.000   | -0.46     | Significant barrier (low mean) |
| Perception of political instability/safety risks        | 4.73 | 0.65 | 27.95  | 0.000   | 2.68      | Very strong barrier            |
| Lack of affordable student housing                      | 1.65 | 0.89 | -15.89 | 0.000   | -1.52     | Strong negative barrier        |
| Limited scholarships                                    | 4.23 | 0.91 | 14.11  | 0.000   | 1.35      | Strong barrier                 |
| Lack of trained recruitment staff                       | 3.21 | 1.65 | 1.335  | 0.185   | 0.13      | Not significant                |

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

Table 2 indicates how respondents perceive hindrances to the attraction of international students. The greatest barrier identified was the perception of political instability and safety risk ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ , and  $p < 0.001$ ), which was considered a very strong barrier, and the limited efficiency of international marketing ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ , and  $p < 0.001$ ), limited scholarships ( $M = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ , and  $p < 0.001$ ), the complexity of visa application ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1$ , and  $p < 0.001$ ). On the other hand, the lack of availability for internationally recognized programs, limited English-turned programs, and absence of trained recruitment employees were not statistically significant barriers.

**Table 3:** Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies for Attracting International Students

| Strategy                                                                  | Mean  | SD    | T      | P-Value | Cohen's d | Interp.             |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|--------|---------|-----------|---------------------|
| Offering targeted scholarships for international students                 | 3.963 | 0.576 | 17.455 | 0.000   | 1.672     | Very important      |
| Establishing strategic partnerships with international universities       | 4.193 | 0.518 | 24.048 | 0.000   | 2.303     | Highly important    |
| Expanding English-language degree programs                                | 4.018 | 0.68  | 15.631 | 0.000   | 1.497     | Very important      |
| Enhancing digital marketing (social media and SEO)                        | 4.78  | 0.416 | 44.637 | 0.000   | 4.275     | Extremely important |
| Improving student visa assistance and documentation                       | 4.046 | 0.712 | 15.333 | 0.000   | 1.469     | Very important      |
| Participating in international education fairs/expos                      | 4.349 | 0.498 | 28.29  | 0.000   | 2.71      | Highly important    |
| Creating a 'Study in Kurdistan' branding campaign                         | 4.697 | 0.462 | 38.39  | 0.000   | 3.677     | Extremely important |
| Using AI-driven recruitment platforms or global online education networks | 4.725 | 0.488 | 36.883 | 0.000   | 3.533     | Extremely important |

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

Table 3 indicates that some of the strategies were considered to be very effective by the respondents in attracting international students. The most rated strategy was improving digital marketing ( $M = 4.78$ ), closely followed by developing the Study in Kurdistan branding campaign ( $M = 4.697$ ) and application of AI-based recruitment systems ( $M = 4.725$ ), which were interpreted as extremely important. Building partnership with international universities and attending international education fairs were rated as very important, and providing scholarships, increasing English-language programs, and enhancing visa assistance as very important.

**Table 4:** Desired Government/Ministry Support for Attracting International Students

| Items                                           | Mean | SD   | T      | P-Value | Cohen's d | Interp.              |
|-------------------------------------------------|------|------|--------|---------|-----------|----------------------|
| Using AI-driven recruitment platforms           | 3.21 | 1.65 | 1.335  | 0.185   | 0.13      | Not significant      |
| Simplified and clear visa process               | 4.11 | 0.39 | 29.492 | 0.000   | 2.83      | Strongly needed      |
| Facilitation of admission process               | 4.94 | 0.25 | 82.063 | 0.000   | 7.86      | Most needed          |
| Official "Study in Kurdistan" campaign          | 4.88 | 0.33 | 60.306 | 0.000   | 5.78      | Very strongly needed |
| Support in establishing partnerships            | 4.44 | 0.55 | 27.261 | 0.000   | 2.61      | Strongly needed      |
| Accreditation/quality assurance frameworks      | 4.21 | 0.49 | 25.696 | 0.000   | 2.46      | Strongly needed      |
| Incentives for enrolling international students | 4.85 | 0.36 | 54.42  | 0.000   | 5.21      | Very strongly needed |
| Assistance with participation in fairs/expos    | 4.43 | 0.55 | 27.141 | 0.000   | 2.6       | Strongly needed      |
| Subsidies for accreditation fees                | 4.05 | 0.69 | 15.926 | 0.000   | 1.53      | Needed               |

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

Table 4 provides the opinions of the sample on the desired government or ministry support for attracting international students. Facilitation of the admission process ( $M = 4.94$ ), an official campaign of the Kurdistan Study, ( $M = 4.88$ ), and incentives to join international students ( $M = 4.85$ ) were all rated as very strongly needed. Streamlined visa processes, facilities in the formation of partnerships, accreditation models, and facilitation in the attendance of fairs were also identified as a priority need, but subsidies on accreditation charges were identified as a need. In comparison, AI-powered recruitment tools did not seem to be an important sphere of governmental assistance.

**Table 5.** Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Attracting International Students from Barriers, Strategies, and Government Support

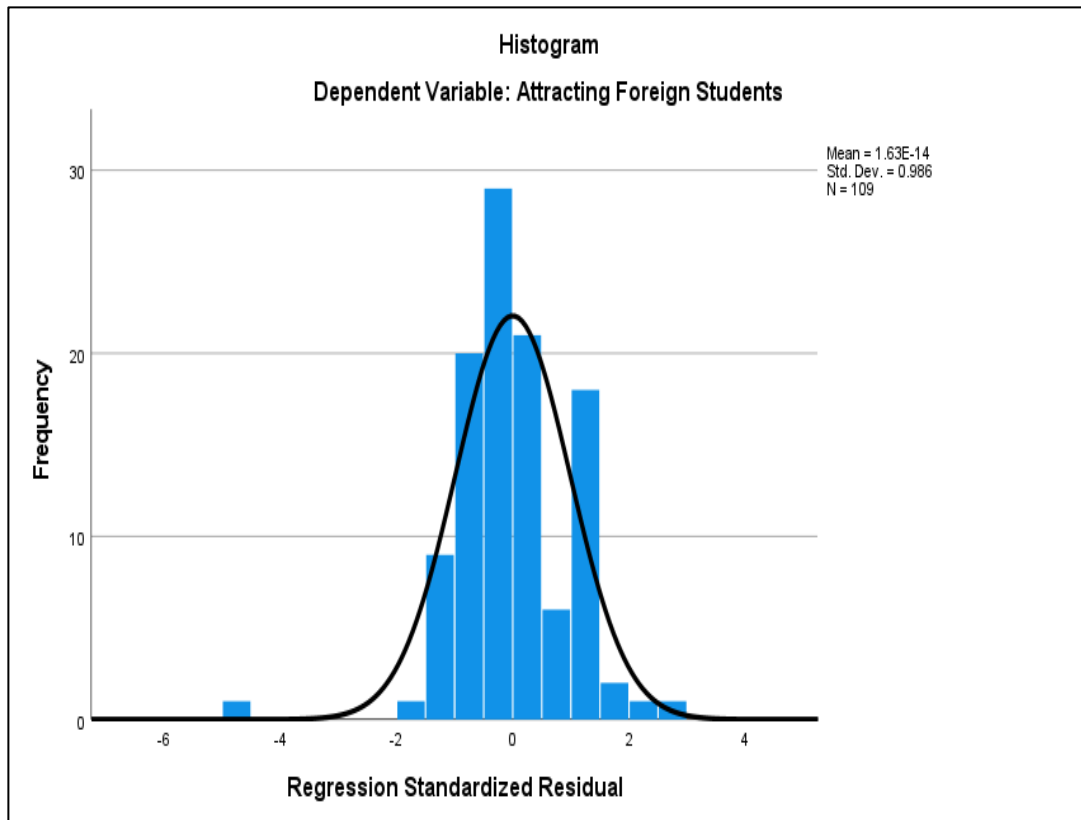
| Predictor          | B      | Std. Error | $\beta$ | t      | p     | VIF   |
|--------------------|--------|------------|---------|--------|-------|-------|
| Constant           | 2.252  | 0.441      | —       | 5.105  | 0     | —     |
| Barriers           | 0.08   | 0.048      | 0.141   | 1.67   | 0.098 | 1.16  |
| Strategies         | 0.474  | 0.074      | 0.545   | 6.393  | 0     | 1.189 |
| Government Support | -0.067 | 0.088      | -0.061  | -0.759 | 0.45  | 1.057 |

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

Table 5 presents the findings of multiple linear regressions, which predict obstacles, strategies, and government support by predicting the attraction of international students. The result of the analysis reveals that the impact of strategies was significant and positive ( $B = 0.474$ ,  $0.545$ , and  $p < 0.001$ ), and it was the most influential predictor in the model. The effect of barriers was positive but not significant ( $B = 0.080$ ,  $0.141$ , and  $p = 0.098$ ), whereas negative and not significant in government support ( $B = -0.067$ ,  $-0.061$ , and  $p = 0.450$ ). It also did not show any problems of

multicollinearity in the predictions since the values of VIF were less than two. This result accepted the first hypothesis (H1).

Figure 2. Histogram of Standardized Residuals for Regression Model Predicting the Attraction of International Students. The histogram of standardized residues indicates that residuals are normally distributed, and group around zero with a mean of 0 (1.63E-14) and a standard deviation close to 1 (0.986). The bell-shaped curve aligns well with bars, suggesting that the perception of normality in regression analysis is reasonably complete. Although some outliers appear on top, they do not distort the total distribution to a large extent and support the suitability of the regression model used in this study.



**Figure 2:** The hypothetical diagram of the research

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

**Table 6:** Multivariate and Between-Subjects Effects of Current Position on Perceived Barriers, Perceived Effectiveness of Strategies, and Desired Ministry/Government Support

| Variable           | Position                            | Parameter Estimates (B) | F     | Sig.  | Partial Eta Squared | T      | Sig.  |
|--------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------|-------|---------------------|--------|-------|
| Barriers           | Head of the Board of Trustees       | 0.625                   | 1.168 | 0.33  | 0.054               | 1.436  | 0.154 |
|                    | University President                | 0.231                   |       |       |                     | 1.288  | 0.200 |
|                    | Vice President                      | 0.147                   |       |       |                     | 0.864  | 0.390 |
|                    | Dean                                | 0.091                   |       |       |                     | 0.612  | 0.542 |
|                    | Director of International Relations | -0.063                  |       |       |                     | -0.354 | 0.724 |
| Strategies         | Head of the Board of Trustees       | 0.111                   | 0.548 | 0.74  | 0.026               | 0.386  | 0.700 |
|                    | University President                | 0.063                   |       |       |                     | 0.532  | 0.596 |
|                    | Vice President                      | 0.045                   |       |       |                     | 0.399  | 0.691 |
|                    | Dean                                | 0.122                   |       |       |                     | 1.247  | 0.215 |
|                    | Director of International Relations | 0.040                   |       |       |                     | 0.34   | 0.735 |
| Government Support | Head of the Board of Trustees       | -0.014                  | 3.655 | 0.004 | 0.151               | -0.065 | 0.948 |
|                    | University President                | -0.091                  |       |       |                     | -1.03  | 0.306 |
|                    | Vice President                      | 0.111                   |       |       |                     | 1.325  | 0.188 |
|                    | Dean                                | 0.157                   |       |       |                     | 2.141  | 0.035 |
|                    | Director of International Relations | 0.111                   |       |       |                     | 1.279  | 0.204 |

**Source:** Prepared by the researcher

Table 6 shows the effects of the current position (multivariate and between-subjects) on perceived barriers, strategies, and desired government support. The findings depict that no statistically significant effect was found on the alleged obstacles to the current position ( $F = 1.168$ ,  $p = 0.330$ , and  $\eta^2 = 0.054$ ) or the alleged efficiency of strategies ( $F = 0.548$ ,  $p = 0.740$ , and  $\eta^2 = 0.026$ ). Nevertheless, the desired support by the government has a significant effect ( $F = 3.655$ ,  $p = 0.004$ , and  $\eta^2 = 0.151$ ), meaning that the stills of the respondents impressed the way they see the necessity of supporting the government or the ministry, whereas dean shows a significant positive influence ( $t = 2.141$  and  $p = 0.035$ ). This result in some way supported the second hypothesis (H2).

**Table 7:** One-Sample T-Test for Strategic Gap (Gap Strategy) Among Private Universities in Kurdistan

| Variable     | Mean  | SD      | Std. Error Mean | t       | df  | Sig. (2-tailed) | Cohen's d | Hedges' g |
|--------------|-------|---------|-----------------|---------|-----|-----------------|-----------|-----------|
| Gap Strategy | 0.065 | 0.23313 | 0.02233         | -131.44 | 108 | 0               | -12.59    | -12.502   |

**The source:** Prepared by the researcher

Table 7 shows that there is a statistically significant strategic gap between the perceived effectiveness of strategies and the actual implementation in the case of private universities ( $M = 0.065$ ,  $SD = 0.233$ ,  $T(108) = -131.442$ , and  $p < 0.001$ ). The negative mean difference on average indicates that the level of strategy implementation is less than the actual perceived efficiency or expectations, and validates the presence of a gap. The magnitude of the effect is extremely high (Cohen  $d = -12.590$  and Hedges  $g = 12.502$ ). It shows that this difference is practically significant and considerable. This finding reinforces the argument that there are strategic gaps, and these gaps may ensure that the university never achieves the full potential of the planned strategies. This result was in favor of the third hypothesis (H3).

### 5. Discussion of Results:

The findings of the research have some useful information to understand the Kurdistan Region of Iraq private universities' perception and response to the challenges of attracting international students. The first hypothesis (H1), which proposed a significant relationship among barriers, strategies, and government support in how international students are recruited was largely supported. Regression analysis also showed that institutional strategies gave the highest predictability of attraction outcomes ( $0.545$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). The necessity to enhance digital marketing, develop a branding campaign called Study in Kurdistan, and recruit new employees with the help of AI were considered by the respondents as one of the most important strategies. The result corresponds with the previous studies underlining the importance of proactive institutional efforts to determine international competitiveness (Cordero-Gutiérrez & Lahuerta-Otero, 2020b). It indicates that, even though universities in the Kurdistan Region are limited in resources, they have a lot more to do to enhance their global popularity and their recruiting capabilities, because strategic investments in digital and the partnership-based activity are the mean through which they can achieve their goals. Simultaneously, the results also point out that systemic barriers are one of the significant impediments to effective internationalization. The biggest obstacle cited was the perception of political insecurity and security risk ( $M = 4.73$  and  $p < 0.001$ ), then weak international marketing ( $M = 4.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), shortage of scholarships, and visa issues. The outcome of the study corroborates previous research that safety perceptions and bureaucratic visa procedures can be considered one of the most influential deterrents toward international students in emerging and post-conflict countries (Ghundol & Muthanna, 2022; Jafar & Knight, 2020). Though the intervention of limited programs in English-mediated or untrained personnel was not proven to be statistically significant in this situation, the prevalence of safety-related and structural issues highlights the necessity to tackle the perceptions of the outside world and the rules rather than focus on the inside plans.

Only partly supported was the second hypothesis (H2), concluding that differences exist among the administrators concerning the perceived barriers, strategies, and government support. Significant differences were not found that have to deal of barriers or strategies, but there was variation in perception of government support, and deans rated interventions made by the ministry as more important than interventions by other administrators. This deviation encompasses the variation in the positions that administrators assume in institutional frameworks. Because of the institutional theory, the closer the position is to academic and student-facing functions, the more the governmental alignment might be seen as the key to achieving the success of operations and ensuring its legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 2010; Viet Nguyen et al., 2024). This observation suggests that policymakers need to take into account a wide spectrum of administrative outlooks in the development of policy on higher education, whereby both the policy leadership at the strategic level and the operational players must be well facilitated. The third hypothesis postulated the presence of strategic differences between the stated objectives and real practices. However, this hypothesis was strongly supported. The statistically significant strategic difference (Cohen  $d = -12.59$ ) obtained with the one-sample t-test proved that the way universities apply a strategy of internationalization is way behind their perceived success.

It is not the first result to reflect the findings in other developing situations when institutional ambitions are frequently undermined because of the lack of capacity, resources, and the inability to coordinate efforts with the governmental departments (Gülel, 2025; Viet Nguyen et al., 2024). In the case of Kurdistan, and in relation to its private universities, there is a break between strategic planning and actionable and well-resourced implementation structures. The policy implications of these results are institutional and policy-oriented. At the institutional level, universities should proceed with a focus on investment in branding, digital marketing, and international collaborations as these strategies have been proven to be the most efficient. At the policy-level, the most urgently required government interventions, as stated by respondents, were facilitation of admissions procedure, simplified visa procedures, and creation of an official campaign named Study in Kurdistan. They go together with best practices seen in other countries including the United Kingdom, Malaysia, and Canada where coherent national branding campaign and simplified visa policies have directly led to increases in international enrollment (Joshi, 2022; Tsiligiris & Ilieva, 2022). Institutional strategies will have no chance of becoming disjointed in the global higher education scene without such systemic support.

To conclude, the discussion supports that international student recruitment in the Kurdistan Region can only be successful in the case of a two-pronged strategy: institutional flexibility enabled by creative tactics, and structural integration facilitated by enabling government structures. The work contributes to the larger discussion of internationalization of developing higher education markets by providing empirical evidence about how the interplay between barriers, strategies, and government support is formed. It strengthens the applicability of institutional theory and strategic management school of thoughts in explaining such dynamics and gives evidence-based suggestions to both policymakers and higher education leadership who aim to improve the global competitiveness of the region.

#### **6. Conclusion:**

This paper has explored issues and solutions of international student recruitment in the private universities of Kurdistan. It has been discovered that there is a discrepancy between the internationalization aspiration and practice constrained by political instability, poor marketing, insufficient scholarships, and visa restrictions. Although digital tools and international collaborations can be promising, they are not used consistently.

To overcome the challenges identified in this study, coordinated governmental, ministerial, and institutional action is recommended. The government should simplify visa procedures, eliminate residential fees for international students, increase scholarship funds, and launch a single, branded campaign named 'Study in Kurdistan' along with international mobility agreements. It is recommended that the Ministry of Higher Education change its admission policies to be flexible, eliminate enrollment limits relating to international students, facilitate quality assurance, facilitate international accreditation, and build institutional capacity by training and centralized systems. On the university level, the private institutions are expected to increase the English-language programs, improve the services and infrastructure of the institutions, hire international staff, and adopt modern and technology-oriented approaches to findings, such as postgraduate scholarships to keep the best talents. The study has limitations because it is regional and only uses quantitative data. It does not involve views of international students or compare with the public universities. The research needs to take a mixed-method perspective, which would incorporate the qualitative data of the students and international affairs personnel, and also apply it to the public institutions. Further longitudinal research is also possible to help understand how political events and policy shifts affect the trend in enrolling international students.

**Researcher Reflection:**

As a practitioner and academic affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, my motivation for conducting this study stems from direct exposure to the institutional challenges and policy gaps surrounding internationalization efforts in the private higher education sector of the region. The observed incompatibility between strategic goals and implementation practices, especially in student recruitment and global engagement, prompted this investigation. My positionality provided both access and contextual understanding of administrative behaviors, which informed the design of survey tools and the interpretation of the findings. While the study maintains academic objectivity, it also reflects a genuine commitment to contributing actionable insights that can guide reform and enhance the region's global academic competitiveness.

**Declarations:****Conflicts of Interest**

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Authors' Declaration**

We hereby confirm that all the figures and tables in the manuscript are our own. Besides, the figures and images that are not ours have been permitted for republication and are attached to the manuscript.

**Ethical Clearance**

The research was approved by the Local Ethical Committee at the University.

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