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MARKETING HIGHER EDUCATION DURING TIMES OF WAR: THE SYRIAN CASE

Abstract:

Based on the marketing mix model, the study aims at exploring current strategies used in private higher education in Syria. This an exploratory study employing sixteen interviews with key participants from two private universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Findings show high sensitivity to market changes. Reflecting on the marketing mix model for higher education, major modifications were found Two main aspects were evident in shaping these modifications; these were survival strategies and security matters. The findings provide useful information for people in charge of marketing related issues at private higher education in Syria and possibly other countries suffering similar conditions.

Keywords:

Syria, marketing higher education, marketing mix, war, conflict, crisis, private university

JEL Classification: M19

Introduction

Syria has been suffering war and conflicts since early 2011 and this has brought huge impact on life in all aspects. The state of instability and insecurity has pushed away most investment. Added to this the imposition of sanctions from some countries has helped in sabotaging the national economy. For example, the currency exchange rate for the Syrian Pound against other currencies has been dropping dramatically. Among the sectors mostly affected by this crisis is private higher education.

Private higher education is a newly born sector as the first private university only started to function in the year 2003. Since then private higher education witnessed consistent growth and prosperity. For example, between 2003 and 2014 twenty universities were established (MoHE, 2015). Private universities are not entitled to any state funding or support; thus they depend fully on revenues generated from student fees. This income covers their expenses and leaves a margin of profit for the investors or shareholders. The role of the MoHE emerges as the higher authority controlling and ensuring that quality education is being delivered. The dramatic increase in the number of private universities in Syria presented challenges for some universities particularly in recruiting students and academics. Since then, the emergence for marketing and its techniques and strategies started to invade this sector. Al-Fattal (2011) highlights private universities in Syria to show well-developed understanding for marketing and its practices exceeding the “traditional understanding of marketing as a process of selling or informing the public about the services” highlighted by Maringe (2005) in the developing world.

Since the war in Syria started in 2011 there has been a huge impact on private higher education. Most of these universities had to suspend teaching for few months or relocate to temporary locations. Besides, there has been a severe decline in the number of the student population for some of the providers. While the student population at private universities was expected to grow, the number remained at about 30,000 students (MoHE, 2018). Recruiting students is now harder than ever as learning at a private university might be a luxury not so much needed in such hard times. Students now might not be able to afford this relatively expensive form of education as their parents might have lost their businesses or savings. Most of the private universities have lost at least two thirds of their student population. Another problem facing private universities is recruiting academics. With such conditions of conflict and insecurity, Syria is suffering severe brain drain where many academics have left the country. Added to this, not many expatriates are interested in working in the country with such conditions. The state of instability has also influenced administrative systems for universities. For example, a member of staff could be absent for work for many days. Students also could miss classes and even exams which would have to be repeated. Probably, the largest problem for private higher education is losing their buildings and campuses. It is quite relevant to highlight that Article No. 36 (which governs the work of private higher education) implies

private universities to be in rural areas in an attempt to develop these areas (MoHE, 2001). Rural areas are the places being most affected by the war being unsafe and areas of military conflicts. Most private universities had to relocate and now they function in large cities which are supposed to be safer. They are renting buildings to perform their classes. The premises could include hotels, schools, or residential buildings. Compared to the ones they had earlier, space and facilities are now limited. This has had a significant impact on the teaching and learning processes especially for programmes requiring laboratories, e.g. medicine and engineering.

Other papers on the impact of war on education in general include Kecmanovic (2013) about Croatia, Cunningham (2014) about Northern Uganda, and Totten (2014) about South Sudan. One paper that deals with the Syrian war and education is Abdel-Jabbar and Zaza (2014) yet it focuses on the impact of war on young children education. It was noticed there was paucity of literature on the issue of marketing higher education in war times or crises in general and in Syrian higher education in particular. Conducting interviews with sixteen participants from two private universities, this study is underpinned by one major research question being “how do the conflicts in Syria impact on marketing strategies for private higher education?”

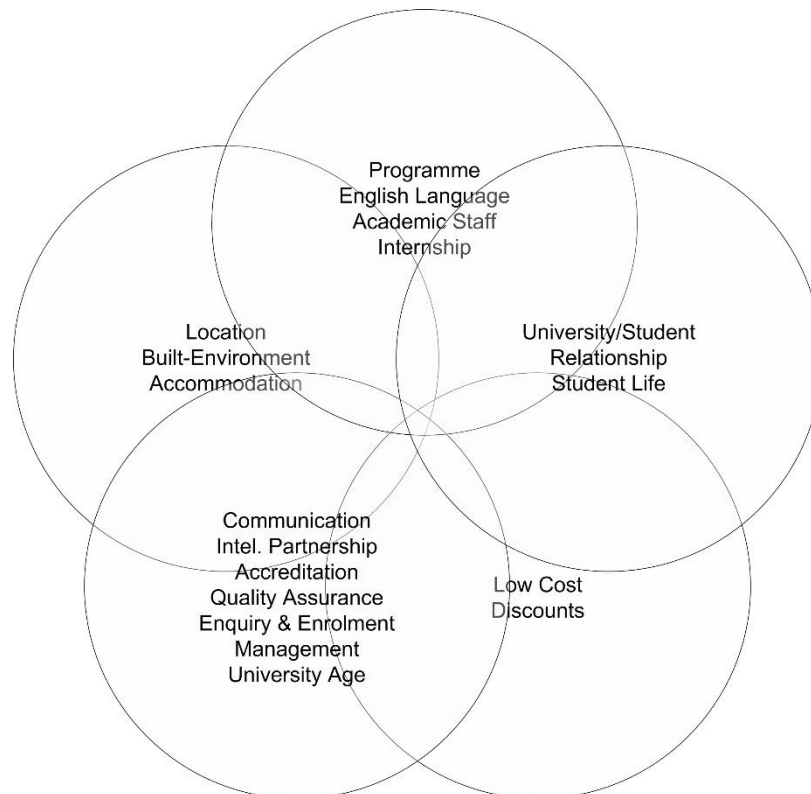
Marketing mix strategy

Marketing mix is a term used to describe a marketing strategy model with a set of controllable elements available for an institution to shape the nature of its offer to customers (Brassington, 2006). It is to put the educational service offered into a number of component parts and to arrange them into manageable subject areas in order to make strategic decisions (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015). The marketing mix model, originated in general business sectors, suggests that a marketing strategy consists of tools and techniques (elements) that can be identified for ease of understanding, usually under the headings of: product, price, place, and promotion. They are also known collectively as the 4 Ps (Wright, 1999). Several critiques have been posed against this model and its suitability for education (Ivy & Naude, 2004, Al-Fattal, 2011, Palmer, 2014).

Kotler and Fox (1995) have developed a version of the marketing mix which is designed especially for educational institutions and which seems to address the limitations and critiques. This model is, perhaps, the most cited mix model in the literature and it depicts the marketing mix in educational context to be consisting of seven marketing tools, 7Ps: programme, price, place, promotion, processes, physical facilities, and people. There are some other suggestions on other elements or developments for the marketing mix such as Ivy and Naude (2004) 7Ps and Ivy (2008) 7Ps 'programme, prospectus, price, prominence, people, promotion, premiums. Ho and Hung's (2008) mix consists of 'living, learning, reputation, economy, and strategy'. Others models are Gray (1991) 5Ps, and

Coleman (1994) 5Ps. What is noticed about all these models is that all have almost the same core component elements; nonetheless, they are named, clustered and grouped differently due to some contextual issues. One marketing mix model that is exactly based on the private higher education in Syria is Al-Fattal (2011) and it consists of five elements or *thematic groups*. These are teaching and learning, customer-centred focus, finance, branding, and environment (see Figure 1). The figure also shows each of the thematic groups encompassing several aspects. This model is used as a framework for this study due to its relevance.

Figure 1. Al-Fattal (2011) five elements



Source: Al-Fattal (2011)

Design and method

A total of sixteen participants from two private universities (eight from each) in the south of Syria took part in this research through in-depth semi-structured interviews. Using the interview as a research tool has offered the researcher an opportunity to obtain qualitative data and probe further into details. The interviews were primarily aimed at identifying issues regarding the five thematic groups of the marketing mix. Participants from each university were: university vice-president for administrative affairs, public relations and marketing director, two staff members from the public relations and

marketing department, student admission and recruiting director and three member of the student admission department. The choice of interviewing these particular members was influenced by information rich sampling strategies (Patton, 2014) due to their direct experience and responsibility for marketing and the issue under investigation.

The interviews took place during the summer of 2015 in the participants' offices and were audio recorded for later analysis. The interview questions (which were drafted in Arabic) covered the research question and followed Al-Fattal's (2011) theoretical framework, having five main questions. Data were analysed using the Miles and Huberman (1994) method of data reduction, data display and drawing conclusions. The theoretical framework and the interview questions also provided useful tool in the analysis process (Burgess, 1984, and Oppenheim, 1992). The selection of which universities to conduct the research in was limited and controlled by the severe and hazardous conditions at that time making it very difficult for the research to be conducted in other parts of the country. Having in mind the size and nature of the sample, the study has limited generalizability. The study does not claim to be representative to all private universities in Syria, yet it provides insights about marketing private higher education in the current conditions of war and conflicts.

Findings from the interviews

Theme one: teaching and learning

As mentioned in the earlier section the findings follow the theoretical framework structure having five themes. This first theme, deals with marketing strategy issues regarding teaching and learning which encompasses four aspects: programme, English language, academic staff and internship.

The choice of what programmes to offer has been identified by the universities to be one of the most important aspects to attract prospective students. In selecting a programme, the universities have shown understanding of the social reflections on students' decisions, although they have not shown any evidence of systematic customer needs analysis. The 'programme hierarchy' has been identified to be the most influential factor to pressure prospective students towards particular programmes. The hierarchy has deep manifestation on social esteem and respect towards students studying particular areas. There is also a link between the 'programme hierarchy' and future career, as some careers are better looked at in the Syrian community. It is noticed how the two universities choose to provide programmes that provide such social respect and esteem and lead to a 'respectful' and rewarding career. The current crises, however, has presented several constraints on initiating new programmes. Participant 11 comments on this saying:

the University and the board of shareholders, for sure, had had plans to expand and provide new programmes. For example, early in 2011 we were authorised by the Ministry (of Higher Education) to start two new programmes, Journalism and Media Studies and International Relations and Law. However, with the current conditions at hand we had to suspend that as it is generally too risky to invest. (Interview: Participant 11)

The other university expressed similar attitude and related the programmes offered to the current conditions in the labour market. Participant 1 said:

we had ambitions of expanding and becoming a university that provides a larger range of specialities and programmes, but now it is almost impossible... look at the programme of Tourism, for example. We were planning to start this programme but now it is unwise to provide such a programme as the tourism sector is struggling with no tourists in the country... I am sure if we offered such a programme not a single student would enrol. (Interview: Participant 1)

English language is another aspect within this theme where private universities in Syria tend to use this language as the official language of instruction. Universities employ this strategy from a belief in the urgent importance of English in the labour market, whether local or global. This has been the case even before the war started; nonetheless, Participant 8 highlighted the point that,

more students want to travel and leave the country now on graduation... it is the hard conditions here that push them to leave... Some could not find a job here and would want to search abroad...Others would want to pursue higher education and for all of these they need to be competent in English language". (Interview: Participant 8)

All of the participants agreed on the increasing importance and demand for English language; however, when asked about introducing new strategies to empower this aspect, none was reported.

The third aspect is academic staff where the universities highlight the importance of having high calibre academics. They believe in the importance of this aspect as they understood the significant role for teachers and the way they are perceived by students and parents. Before the war the universities used to aim at recruiting distinguished and well-reputed academics as their distinction and established reputation would reflect and benefit the university itself (Al-Fattal, 2011). With the current conditions at hand, this does not apply. P1 said:

several academics have left already. All our foreign teachers; they were the first to leave, actually. And then the local ones; every term more and more leave. Some even leave without any notice... It is very hard for us now to find good and qualified academic members of staff... sometimes we just accept any academic member to do the job... yet

s/he should be qualified or we would have problems with the Ministry. (Interview: Participant 1)

Both universities reported recruiting part-time teachers who already did full-time jobs at public higher educational institutions. They also mentioned that before the crises they used to conduct course evaluation surveys where students evaluate various aspects of the courses and most importantly the teachers. However, these are not conducted now. Participant 10 explains on this saying:

we do not do that now... we believe this is a luxury issue... we are more concerned and busy with the basics. (Interview: Participant 10)

The last aspect within this theme is internship where private universities provided opportunities of short term supervised practical work experience. Both universities understand the importance of supporting their students with practical experiences and its relevance to future employability. They are also keen on developing relationships with employers who are considered as “key stakeholders” (Participant 1). The current changes and conditions, however, have presented big challenges to the internship programmes. Participant 9 mentioned:

with the internship culture being not so popular in Syria it is hard to convince companies to agree to train our students. Now it is extremely hard to find such opportunities. You know many companies have closed down... even those that still function are not in their best conditions. For example, some of them are functioning just like us in a hotel or a school of a flat... Many companies lost their premises... All of these cancelled the agreements to train interns. (Interview: Participant 9)

Another participant added:

the University Council expressed their serious concern about sending students on internship duties... some companies might be in unsafe areas and the Council did not want to put students at any risk... as a result it is not compulsory for students to follow such programme. (Interview: Participant 14)

Theme two: customer centred focus

The second theme consists of three aspects: university/student relationship, direct enquiry and enrolment management, and student life. The model highlights dynamic interrelation between these aspects as they reflect on the relationship and interaction a university establishes with its customers and the public.

Both universities stress the importance of building positive relationships with students. They believe this is a marketing strategy that has direct impact on attracting prospective students. This could illustrate that these universities follow the relationship marketing strategy model. Comparison between the way students are treated at private universities and public universities was highlighted at both universities. Public universities are described to be excessively bureaucratic and unconcerned about maintaining positive relationships with students. Private universities, on the contrary, tend to build positive relationships and experiences. For example, they are more responsive to students' views about teachers, exams, and attendance schedules. The positive relationship with customers for private universities extends to parents. For example, one of the universities keeps in touch with parents through a website, and, by means of a username, they can review their children's study performance. The other university holds regular meetings for parents.

The second aspect within this theme is enquiry and enrolment management. This aspect relates to this theme as, through direct enquiry and enrolment, the universities aim at establishing a positive impression, relationship, and rapport with prospective students and their parents right from the first contact. The attention provided to these people makes them appreciate such treatment, and it makes them feel the value of a university in its individual attention to students. The universities understand the importance of this issue and they design various strategies. One of the universities makes use of the student-workers, a technique that is appreciated by prospective students and parents. At the other university most of the administrative staff members get to help the admission team on the enrolment and enquiry days to ensure they run efficiently. Earlier to the war both universities used the open-day strategy where they had more power and control over information passed to the public showing more of a selling practice. Participant 7 mentioned:

earlier, enrolment days were really busy days. We used to have hundreds of prospective students enquiring and getting ready to enrol... Now it is not like that at all... we never have more than ten per day... enrolment has been heavily affected by what is going on in the country, and many times I worry that if we did not enrol enough students, the University or some programmes would have to close down. (Interview: Participant 7)

The last aspect for this theme is student life which reflects on the student way of living and experience at university. Both universities reported attempts to create active and positive university experiences through various kinds of activities ranging from science to sports and culture. Having an active student life helps in building a university's informal reputation in the sense that it is not only current students and their parents who are invited to join in the activities held, but any person interested is welcomed. This aspect of student life has been heavily affected by the war. Participant 5 mentioned about this issue "I feel really devastated for our students now. We used to have a lot of activities held at

our university. We used to organise trips, hold concerts, exhibitions and participate in sports tournaments... now nothing of that happens... We lost our campus and facilities. Where would we hold such events now? It is also the general feeling. You can feel people do not want to be involved in such events". The other university also reported similar issues yet Participant 1 added:

a couple of weeks ago some students proposed a football tournament between private universities to be held at the national football stadium in Damascus. This issue was discussed at the University Council and we rejected it instantly... We could not take the risk of keeping our students somewhere at our responsibility... If something bad happened, God forbid, like the random mortar bombs, the University would be in a very bad situation. (Interview: Participant 1)

Theme three: finance

Two aspects are grouped in this theme: 'cost' and 'scholarships and discounts'. The dynamic interrelation between these two aspects is suggested as they relate to the monetary issues. The importance of the first aspect, cost, and its influence of marketing strategies emerges from the customers' sensitivity to monetary issues. It is important to mention that the private fee-paying form of higher education is relatively new to the Syrian culture where public higher education is provided normally free. This, perhaps, has made private higher education a "second option" (Participant 4). Regarding pricing strategies, at the first university there is a strategy that aims at providing education with the lowest cost possible; this has been supported by their "cost efficiency strategies" (Participant 1). The other university sets itself in a "balanced position between other private universities" as they believe there is some "relationship between price and quality" (Participant 10). This aspect has been influenced heavily in the war having in mind the drop in value of the national currency. Another factor is the dramatic decrease in the student population numbers particularly as private universities depend basically on revenues made from tuition fees. Participant 16 mentioned about this issue:

many people lost a lot of money in this war. Some lost their properties, businesses and companies... not many families can afford private education now. And even if they had the money they would not spend it on education as they might need it later somewhere else; no one knows what is going to happen in the future... nothing is certain and stable in such conditions. (Interview: Participant 16)

With such challenges both universities reported introducing cost efficiency. They mention some practices to reduce spending, e.g. suspending a few services (library and transportation) and cutting down the number of members of staff.

The other aspect within this theme is scholarships and discounts. Both universities offer scholarships and discounts as strategies to attract prospective students. Scholarships and discounts offered at the two universities vary depending on academic achievement and other merits or qualities. The choice to follow such strategy is not entirely up to a university as the MoHE obliges all private universities to offer a set number of scholarships and discounts for particular applicants in an attempt to empower equity of access to such institutions (MoHE, 2006). It is important to mention that participants (Participant 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, and 14) from both institutions highlighted the point that their universities exceed the number of scholarships set by the MoHE. Participant 1, for example, mentioned that their university has provided a new scholarship programme for the children of martyrs in response to the current conditions of war. Participant 15 from the other university provided a related point; he said:

with all the financial troubles now we have had many cases where students could not complete paying instalments of their tuition fees. We gave instructions to the financial department to be patient with such cases... we do understand bad things can happen... we can wait for their instalments till the end of the academic year. There were some cases where students could not pay even at the end... We provided handsome discounts for many students but we could not be tolerant with everyone... Sadly, some students had to suspend or even drop out of their studies at our university because of that. (Interview: Participant 15)

Theme four: branding

The fourth theme comprises five aspects: communication, international partnerships, accreditation, quality, and university age. These aspects are interrelated in their reflections on a university's brand and image and the way it is perceived by the public (Al-Fattal, 2011). Aspects within this theme are related to brand marketing strategies (Harries, 2009) and image and reputation building strategies (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001).

The first aspect within this theme is communication, which represents the method a university uses to connect to its public. It is the channel used to deliver a perceived image about a university. Earlier to the war, private Syrian universities reported concentrating on particular channels of communication and promotion. These were the university's own website, print literature, street billboards and educational exhibitions (Al-Fattal, 2011). With the war conditions, communication strategies changed. Participant (2) said on the change:

some of the old promotional strategies and techniques cannot be used now. For example, we do not advertise through billboards at all... it is too costly and because of limited resources we need to spend wisely... Another example is we stopped participating in any

of the educational exhibitions... the last one we participated in was a failure, not many people showed up... again this was a waste of resources. (Interview: Participant 2)

Compared to these methods, participants focused on the importance of online communication and advertising methods. Participant (12) said:

we came to understand the importance and impact of social network on the younger generation as these social networks contributed in a direct or indirect way to the crisis. (Interview: Participant 12)

Both universities reported communicating with their current and prospective students via groups on social networks. Participant 3 mentioned:

we pay more attention now to update and communicate through our groups and pages on Facebook than we do through our official website. People get updates faster and more efficiently. (Interview: Participant 3)

The second aspect was international partnership. For participants, this was the aspect affected most by the war. Participant 1 highlighted the point that, with the beginning of the war, many countries started to pose political sanctions against Syria. These reflected on their ability to establish and maintain relationships with international institutions. He said:

international potential partners are now not interested in building relationships with Syrian universities". (Interview: Participant 1)

Participant 9 added:

earlier we used to do a lot of activities with international dimension... we used to host visiting academics, offer student exchange opportunities, and hold international conferences... now no one is interested in coming to Syria as it is too risky. I remember we even were working on establishing a joint programme with an international partner... now that is all gone. (Interview: Participant 9)

The third aspect is accreditation, through which a university portrays itself as able to offer well-recognised qualifications, whether locally or internationally (Al-Fattal, 2011). This aspect relates to the earlier one as private Syrian universities reported aiming at establishing international agreement of mutual recognition. With the war conditions, however, such efforts were reported to have been suspended. Participant 9 mentioned on this:

we have now a different priority, which is local accreditation. Some Syrian private universities were not able to meet the local accreditation requirements set by the Ministry... they were forced by the Ministry to suspend their work... The Ministry has been a bit lenient with the accreditation requirements, yet there are basic issues that cannot be ignored such as providing suitable classrooms. (Interview: Participant 9)

Quality was another aspect within this theme. This aspect is grouped within this theme as it is particularly important in presenting, promoting, and branding a university to provide 'high quality' service (Al-Fattal, 2011). Both universities reported that the quality of their services has been heavily affected by the war. Participant 4 said:

I believe quality is not a priority now. There are other core issues to take care of. For example, we had to teach for one year without computers and laboratories. What quality do you expect without these? (Interview: Participant 4)

Participant 13 expressed a similar attitude saying:

of course we would love to offer education at the highest level of quality. But being realistic with the severe conditions we are suffering, talking about quality is a luxury; it cannot be maintained. (Interview: Participant 13)

The final aspect within this theme was university age and heritage. When asking about the relevance of this aspect to a university marketing strategy Participant 7 said:

of course, the university age matters. For example, some universities were established only a few months before the war. I believe these are the ones suffering the most, especially in recruiting. (Interview: Participant 7)

Another participant highlighted a significant issue related to university age. He said:

I believe what matters now is not how old a university is, rather it is how long it is going to survive in such severe conditions. Will the investors be able to carry on running their university with such major financial losses? (Interview: Participant 3)

Theme five: environment

University Environment is the final theme and it consists of three aspects: location, built environment and accommodation. As mentioned earlier, the MoHE imposes that private universities be located in rural areas with the aim of widening access to higher education. Since the war started, most of the private universities have not been able to function on their campuses, and the MoHE made an exception for them to function in safe major cities. This relates the aspect of location to the other aspects within this theme: built environment and accommodation. On these, a participant said:

we had to look for new places to function... of course Damascus was the best option as it is the most secure and is relatively close to our campus... most of our students also come from this city... We had several options to choose, like a hotel or a school. However, it was impossible to accommodate all faculties at the same location. So we

placed different faculties in different locations... This in fact is making it harder for us to manage the University but we had to do this. (Interview: Participant 1)

All participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the buildings they were functioning in as they were not purpose built. Participant 12 said for example,

we are really sad at losing our campuses and facilities... but what can we do... nothing of course. We had to function somewhere or we had to close down the University. (Interview: Participant 12)

Reference was made by one participant to one private university that was very slow in finding alternative buildings. The participant mentioned that this university's accreditation was cancelled by the MoHE and they had to close down because of that.

In relation to accommodation, both universities lost their accommodation premises and they substituted by either renting a hotel or residential flats in the city. A significant issue that was highlighted from the second case study university was that the university preferred students to find accommodation on their own. I investigated this issue further and the participant said:

we are overloaded with duties and troubles, and students and their accommodation bring more troubles and headaches... I truly wish we could cancel this service entirely. (Interview: Participant 14)

Another participant added another relevant point saying:

added to the headaches we get from students on their accommodation is the issue of responsibility... You know when you have students on your premises be it classroom or accommodation it means he/she is your responsibility. You never know; a student might get shot or kidnapped... and if such things happen they are our responsibility. We really need fewer responsibilities during these hard days. (Interview: Participant 5)

Discussion

The findings above show that private universities in Syria have made major modifications to their marketing strategies in order to cope with the current conditions. The model provided by Al-Fattal (2011) and its five thematic areas have offered a general framework to study marketing strategies in this particular context, yet attention should be paid to some changes. Major changes have happened in the market with the war and this has brought major reflections on marketing strategies. The dynamic interactions between a market and institutional policies and strategies have already been highlighted in the literature. And an institution has to be sensitive and reflective to market changes to succeed (Kotler and Fox, 1995). The findings show that the war has brought reflections

on all five marketing thematic areas. These reflections could be summarised in two aspects: survival strategy and security matters.

Institutional survival was the most important concern for universities and the one reflected most in marketing strategies. Any private university might have to cease to operate at any time and several possible causes could lead to this. Both case studies suspended their plans to offer new programmes, showing no interest in growth. These days were described as survival days where maintaining current programmes might be considered a success. This might answer the curiosity about not presenting new strategies to further empower English language learning or even offering courses to teach other foreign languages, though both universities understand clearly the critical importance for such issues in the current market. Both case studies reported losing members of their academic staff. Devising the part-time faculty staffing strategy also showed a high level of sensitivity to the market trend and reflective staffing strategic management. Similar results on academics' migration and brain drain were reported in Yemen which is also suffering war conditions (Muthanna, 2015). Another survival strategy relates to cost efficiency where both universities reported cutting down expenses in particular areas such as transportation and learning resources.

In relation to security matters, the war reflected on several issues. Responsibility was a significant issue as the universities did not want to hold responsibility for students during these hard times. Several marketing-related activities and practices were cancelled as a result to this. Universities did not want to hold events as the crowds might be put in danger. Security matters also reflected on a university's international dimension. Due to hazardous conditions in Syria the international academic community has lost interest in participating with Syria universities.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the issue of marketing private higher education in Syria during the war time. The findings provide information about the current market in Syria and marketing strategies at two private universities in Syria. The study provides relevant insights to marketers and policy makers at the private higher education sector in Syria and possibly in other countries suffering similar conflicts. Although the study offers useful insights, it is noted that the sample included is limited to two case study institutions, and it is impossible to reach statistical generalization with this small sample. Another limitation regards sampling technique where the two case studies chosen on convenience due to security reasons. Further research in this particular area is encouraged. Such research could include a larger sample reaching other private universities in Syrian in locations that were not possible to reach at the time of conducting this study. Another possible research could investigate the issue of private higher education in other countries suffering war,

e.g. Yemen or Libya. Such research could test the findings provided and possibly develop a marketing mix specially designed for higher education in war and conflict times.

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