

Marketing Private EFL Programs in Damascus

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Abstract

For many educational administrators marketing has tended to focus on advertising, the institute's prospectus and open days. This research investigates marketing activities of private English as a Foreign Language Colleges in Damascus, Syria. A quantitative survey of students in four different EFL colleges in Damascus were interviewed, the results of which are reported on in this paper. The increasingly competitive English as a Foreign Language market in Damascus, Syria shows that the promotions element of marketing armoury is considered the least important amongst students in their selection of an EFL institute at which to study. Of much greater importance to students enrolled at private EFL institute in Damascus is the marketing mix elements of programme (the course itself), place (institute location and times of classes). The aspects of physical facilities (teaching and learning equipment, institute appearance and décor) and pricing issues (fees and payment terms) were also more highly rated than the people and promotions element of the marketing mix.

Key words. Marketing, English language colleges, Damascus.

Introduction

For many years only eight English as a Foreign Language (EFL) institutes operated in Syria; in 2000 fifty three new EFL institutes were authorised and allowed to open in Damascus alone. This growth provided prospective students with a wider variety of EFL course providers from which to choose, and resulted in EFL institutes needing to compete more fiercely for the relatively small number of EFL students in the city.

The proliferation of EFL institutes in Syria is increasingly fragmenting this highly competitive market. As the registration of profit driven private institutes offering programmes in English as a foreign language grows, prospective students have a wider choice of institutes from which to choose; the need for these institutes to differentiate themselves from their competitors is self evident, resulting in the role of marketing in student recruitment increasing in importance (Ivy & Naude, 2005; Taylor & Darling, 1991; Canterbury, 1999; Nicholls et al, 1995; Coates, 1998).

The reliance on an institution's historical reputation and image to draw applications each year from prospective students may no longer have the same 'pulling power' it had in the past, particularly as choices in the Damascene market grow. The image the institute conveys plays a critical role in the

development of prospective student attitudes towards that institute (Ivy, 2001; Yava & Shemwell, 1996; Landrum, Turrisi, & Harless, 1998). Paramewaran and Glowacka (1995) in their study on universities found that higher educational institutions needed to maintain or develop a distinct image to create a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive market. It is after all this image that will impact on a student's willingness to apply to that institute for enrolment.

Marketing in Education: Background to the Study

It is not an uncommon misconception that marketing is little more than advertising and selling. Press advertising, the prospectus and education fairs remain the focus of many educational institutions' marketing activities. This however, is but one small part of marketing and its role in an educational context.

To compound the challenges of marketing in education, there has tended to be a deep sense of suspicion and skepticism amongst educationalists' regarding marketing and its role in educational institutions. The commercialism and business principles commonly associated with marketing are felt by some as being inappropriate for a 'social good' such as education – even for those educational institutes that are in operation to make a profit. However, it is in the for-profit educational sector that a greater variety of marketing tools is being used as competition for students grows.

Marketing is a multi-faceted concept, that goes way beyond just selling and advertising, it is about satisfying needs: not just the needs of the learners in the institution, but also the numerous other stakeholders who have an interest in that institution. Parents, employers, the state, the business community and others are but a few of the stakeholders who are likely not only to have an interest in the institution, but also have needs that the institutions could potentially satisfy.

Davies and Ellison (1997a:2) maintain that it is important for educational institutions to realise that they do not exist on an educational 'desert island', that there is more to their role than merely determining 'what to do and how to do it', but that they are also accountable to their stakeholders. In a similar vein, Bagley, Woods and Glatter (1996) claim that the market has the force to improve education, since one of the intended benefits of increased competition and choice is to motivate schools to develop a closer relationship with 'customers' (students, parents, alumni, the government and the perspective student-employers). Davies and Ellison (1997a, p. 4) go on to argue that marketing is about 'identifying the nature of what is required by the clients and then ensuring that the school gives ultimate priority to supply that product and maintain its quality'. For Bagley, Woods and Glatter (1996), the nature of the process of marketing invites educational institutions to raise standards and to become more responsive to customers' needs.

Kotler and Fox (1995, p. 6) define marketing in an educational context as follows:

Marketing is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programmes designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of value with target markets to achieve institutional objectives.

Marketing involves designing the institution's offerings to meet the target market's needs and desires, using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate and service the markets.

Marketing therefore, requires advanced planning on the part of the institution, rather than *ad hoc* promotional activities for short term gain. This planning involves research and analysis of the environment external to the institution, in particular an understanding of what customers require and careful design of programmes to satisfy those requirements or needs. When a marketing plan, based on customer needs has been developed, it is implemented, managed and controlled to ensure that needs are satisfied by what customers receive from the institution for the tuition fee that they have paid.

A common feature of all marketing definitions is the investigation of customers' needs - requirements and desires - and the satisfying of those needs. The satisfying of customer needs is done through the marketing mix. The marketing mix represents the basic template for strategic marketing plans that must reflect customer needs, it also constitutes a number of controllable variables that an institution may use to produce the response it wants from its various target markets.

The marketing mix is a blend of tools that educational institutions can employ in order to satisfy customer needs and thereby influence demand for the services that it offers. Kotler and Fox (1995) suggest seven elements within an educational institution's marketing: programme, place, promotion, price, process, physical facilities and people.

1. The programme component is all the courses and services that the institution makes available. Kotler and Fox (1995) claim that programme is the most basic decision an educational institution makes as it (a) establishes the institution's identity, (b) positions the institution vis-à-vis other educational institutions in the minds of customers, and (c) determines how customers will respond.
2. The place element of the marketing mix refers to 'the system of programme delivery' (Kotler and Fox, 1995:335); that is, the making of education available and accessible in terms of time and physical-geographical distribution of the teaching/learning. The simple example of this component is providing students with choices such as full-time, part-time and distance learning tuition.
3. The promotional component of the marketing mix is all the methods that institutions use to 'speak' to their target markets so that they convey the intent, the educational activities and the benefits of their programmes. These methods include advertising, sales promotion, public relations, publicity and personal selling.
4. Price is a key factor in the private sector of education where students pay tuition fees that may vary not only amongst the programmes offered but also between competing institutions. An additional and important aspect of price, is that not only does pricing have a direct impact on revenues,

but it also affects perceptions of value and quality conveyed by the institution in the minds of prospective students.

5. By process Kotler and Fox (1995) mean the management of the procedures within the institution; these would include enrolment, recording of marks, examining and assessment, and of teaching and learning.
6. The physical facilities component is where the institution is physically located and what the institution looks like, for example the building's appearance, décor, and furnishings, the teaching and learning equipment provided, and other student/staff facilities (libraries, car parking, cafeterias, lunch and social areas.
7. Finally, the people element of the educational marketing mix are the staff (administration and teachers) of the institution through which the customer's association with the institution is managed, and the programme is delivered (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Davies and Ellison (1997b) and Kotler and Fox (1995) promote the importance of people and argue that quality and motivation of the staff are the most crucial factors for successful marketing. The importance of people ensue from the fact that the staff of an educational institution - to a great degree - determines the institution performance capacity (Drucker, 1990) and consequently builds the 'institutional cultural capital', the ability to attract applications through reputation (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2001:10). Another 'people' element, which can be added here, is the other students in the institution. The importance of this factor is clear in the fact that the presence of students of (dis)similar ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds in the institution may affect the choice of prospective students.

Kotler and Fox (1995) conclude their 7Ps discussion by proposing that each P of the marketing mix plays a crucial role on its own in students' selection of institution; however, the importance of each P and the importance of different subcomponents within those Ps are varied between different educational settings.

This research measures the importance of each P of the educational marketing mix and the importance of different items that make up the mix to student recruitment in the Demascene EFL market.

Research objective

This study seeks an understanding of the private fee-paying EFL market in Damascus, through exploring the degree of importance of different tools of the marketing mix as seen by a sample of current EFL students in Damascus. The study will reveal the underlying framework that students used in the choice of EFL institutes at which they are now enrolled.

Research Methodology

A survey of EFL students in Damascus was undertaken utilizing a self-completion questionnaire (which had been drafted in Arabic). The questionnaire was non-purposively distributed to four private fee-paying EFL institutes located in four different areas of the city, Baramka, Shrebishat, Mazraa and Mazza. The questionnaire was distributed by the English teacher in the four different EFL institutes to adult EFL students in the classes in which they were learning. Adult students were specifically selected due to the fact that younger students are less likely to have chosen the institutes for themselves; parents may well have taken some responsibility for this decision.

In total 151 completed questionnaires were returned from the four institutes surveyed. As the questionnaire was distributed during one of the classes and all students completed the questionnaire and returned it prior to the end of the class, a 100% response rate was achieved. Almost three quarters (73%) of the respondents were enrolled on general English courses, 23% on intensive courses and 4% on what were described as 'slow courses'.

Table 1

The Number of Responses in the Four Institutes and the Response Percentage to total

Institute	Number of responses	Response percentage to total
A	75	49.6
B	41	27.2
C	21	13.9
D	14	9.3
Total	151	%

Note. Figures are rounded to one decimal.

The final questionnaire consisted of two pages. The first ten items were designed to determine motivation for registration on an English language course, the type of course, and past family interaction with the institute. The balance of the questionnaire measured the importance of some 29 marketing tools available in the 7P marketing mix. The items were shuffled so as to eliminate consistent response sets.

Reliability of the 5-point Likert scales was assessed using the Cronbach alpha test to determine the extent to which they produce consistent results, the overall score of 0.80 indicated satisfactory reliability.

Ethical Issues

A copy of the questionnaire and a cover letter explaining aims and providing details about the research was sent to the administrations of the four institutes. The questionnaires were distributed only after having received the administrations' commitment to the study. The questionnaire was anonymous and respondents were assured that no attempt to associate any specific student with any specific answer given in the questionnaire. The institutes themselves are also not specifically identified in the study, with responses from all four institutes being aggregated to determine over all attitude towards marketing activities.

Results and Discussions

Motivation for registration at an EFL institute

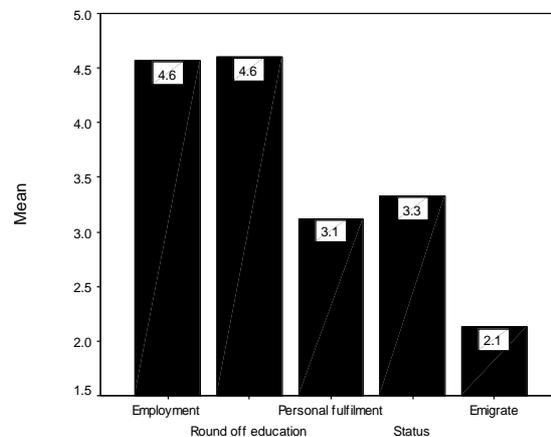
Students enrolled in English language courses in Damascus were strongly motivated by the impact that being able to speak English would have on their employment prospects. On a 5 point Likert scale (where 1 was Strongly disagree and 5 was Strongly agree) this item had a mean score of 4.6 (SD = 0.63). Similarly, Damascene students felt that the knowledge gained from an English course would round off their education (mean = 4.6, SD = 0.52). Motivation means scores are shown in Figure I.

Personal fulfillment has been seen in some educational contexts to be an important motivator for further study. In the case of EFL students in Damascus their attitudes were similar across all 5 response categories on the Likert scale, resulting in a final mean score of 3.1 (SD = 1.44). Similarly, attitudes towards the status that may be linked to being able to speak English were as varied, with a mean score of 3.3 (SD = 1.44).

It would appear that emigration is not an important motivator for EFL students in Damascus; students generally disagreed with the statement 'On completion of my course emigration is a distinct possibility' (mean = 2.1, SD = 1.38). Less than one in five (17%) of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement.

Figure 1

Students Attitudes and Goals of Learning English



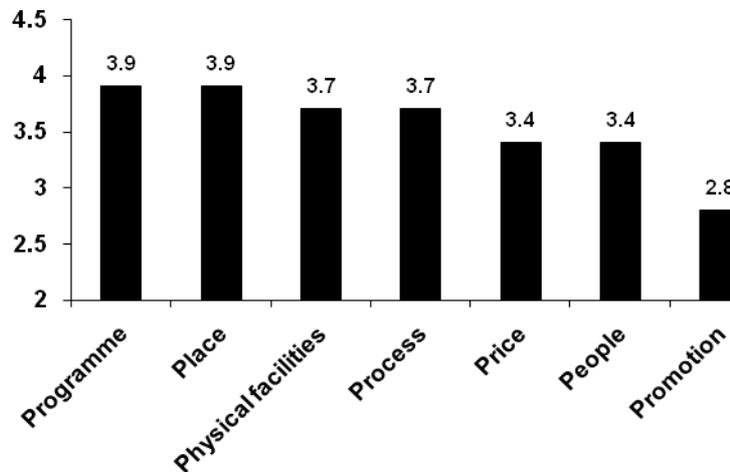
Note. The importance of marketing tools in EFL student recruitment

Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the 29 marketing tools measured in this study. Each of the items was again rated by respondents using a five point Likert scale, where 1 was 'strongly disagree' through to 5 which was 'strongly agree'.

Table 2
The Importance of the different 7Ps variables (Based on a 5-point Likert scale)

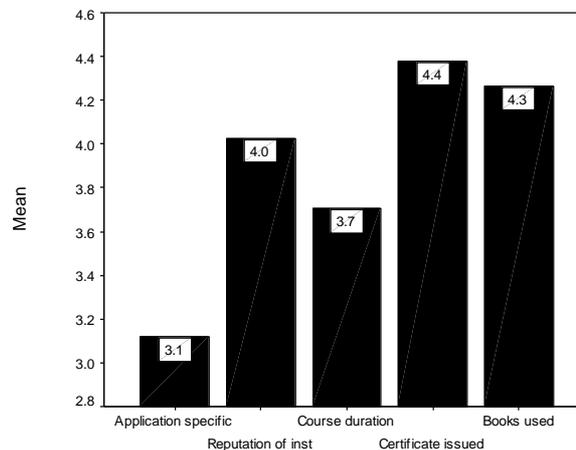
Mix element	Marketing tool	Importance	
		Mean score	SD
Programme	Specific course for my specific purposes	3.1	1.3
	The institute reputation for teaches conversational English	4.0	1.1
	The duration of the course	3.7	1.2
	The certificate I get issued at the end of the course	4.4	1.0
	The books taught in the institute (ie Headway)	4.3	1.0
Overall programme variables mean		3.9	
Place	Easy access to the institute via public transport	3.8	1.3
	Where the institute is geographically located	3.7	1.2
	The course is offered at times convenient to me	4.2	1.1
	The course is on suitable days of the week	3.9	1.1
Overall place variables mean		3.9	
Promotion	The institute's prospectus/brochure	3.1	1.2
	Outdoor advertising in city streets	2.9	1.2
	Advertising of the institute in the local press	3.4	1.3
	Radio or TV advertising I have seen or heard	2.2	1.3
	Institute staff have visited my school/place of work	2.7	1.4
	Free gifts for example; course books, bags, pens, diaries etc	2.8	1.5
Overall promotion variables mean		2.8	
Price	The tuition fees	3.5	1.2
	The flexibility of payment arrangements of tuition fees	3.6	1.2
	The discounts offered by the institute	3.3	1.4
Overall price variables mean		3.4	
Process	Social events the institute organises (exhibitions, plays etc)	3.3	1.3
	The method of teaching English at the institute	4.2	1.1
Overall process variables mean		3.7	
Physical facilities	Teaching and learning equipment at the institute.	3.8	1.3
	Student facilities (library, computer room, lunch room)	3.6	1.3
	The institute's physical appearance (Décor and furnishing)	3.7	1.3
Overall physical facilities mean		3.7	
People	Personal contact with other students enrolled at the institute	3.6	1.2
	Native English language teaching staff	3.2	1.6
	My friends are going to this institute	2.8	1.4
	Warmth, helpfulness and efficiency of administration staff	3.9	1.3
	The individual instructor's reputation for teaching English	4.5	1.0
	Other students' socio-economic backgrounds	2.9	1.3
Overall people variables mean		3.4	

Figure 2
Importance ratings of Marketing Mix elements



The programme element of the marketing mix was made up of five items and was overall the most important element of the marketing mix. All items had mean scores greater than three (the midpoint of a five point scale) indicating that these items were all important in the student's institute selection process. (See Figure 3 for the importance ratings of programme items measured).

Figure 3
Programme Importance

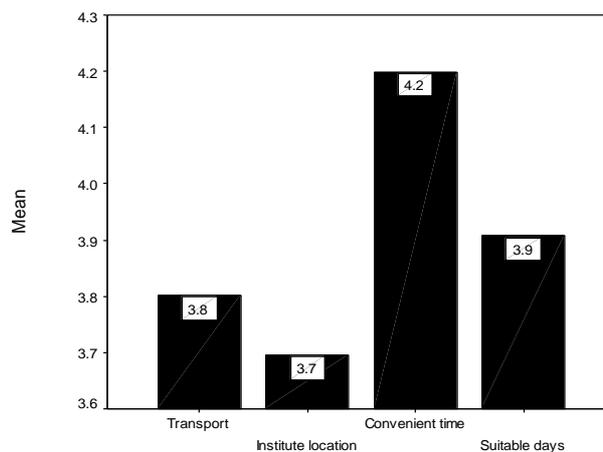


The most important programme item to Syrian EFL students was 'the certificate issued at the end of the course' (mean = 4.4, SD = 1.0). The second most important item in programme was 'the materials (or books) used in the institute'. It is possible that this was rated high due to the following: firstly, students enrol in EFL private institutes expect to study with more modern and effective books than those in the 'free' public sector; secondly, some EFL institutes in Damascus base their promotional activities on the materials they adopt. For example, a picture of the New Headway cover is on most of the

brochures and press advertisements of the largest institute represented in this sample. Seemingly, materials-related promotional activities have raised the Syrian EFL learner's awareness of the importance of 'good' books for learning English. A related and also highly rated item was 'the institute teaches conversational English' (mean = 4.0; SD = 1.1). Of some importance (mean = 3.7; SD = 1.2) was course duration. Somewhat surprising was the low level of importance for a 'course for specific area of study/work' (mean = 3.1; SD = 1.3).

Turning the discussion to the place element of the marketing mix, four variables were measured, all of which were rated very highly. (See figure 4)

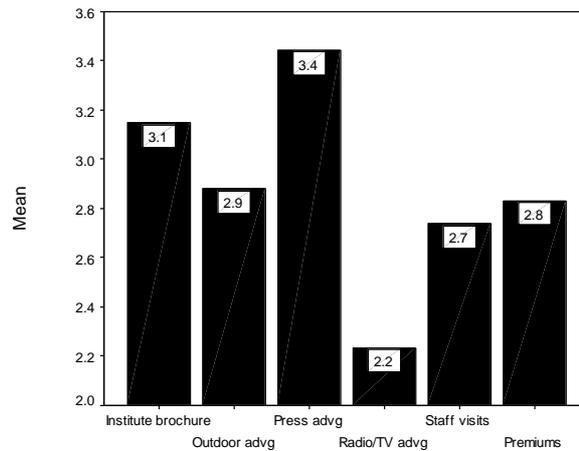
Figure 4
Place Importance



The most important item was 'providing courses at convenient times of the day' (mean = 4.2; SD = 1.1) followed by 'providing courses on suitable days of the week' (mean = 3.9; SD = 1.1). The other two variables that questioned the importance of 'the institute's accessibility via public transport' (mean = 3.9; SD = 1.3) and 'the institute location in the city' (mean = 3.7; SD = 1.2), equally highly rated.

The promotion element of the marketing mix appeared to be the least important factor in influencing student selection, when compared to other items on the education marketing mix. Only two items had a mean score greater than three. (See Figure V). The most important promotional tool was 'press advertising' (mean = 3.4; SD = 1.3). It is likely that the recent establishment of two free and to-door-delivered ad-newspapers in Syria, Al-Daleel and Al-Waseet, has attracted the interest of EFL advertisers in Damascus and may be used by prospective students in their selection processes. The institute prospectus/brochure appears to be of some value to some students (mean = 3.1, SD = 1.3). Other elements of the promotions mix (outdoor, radio or TV, and personal selling) are not considered important in EFL student decision making.

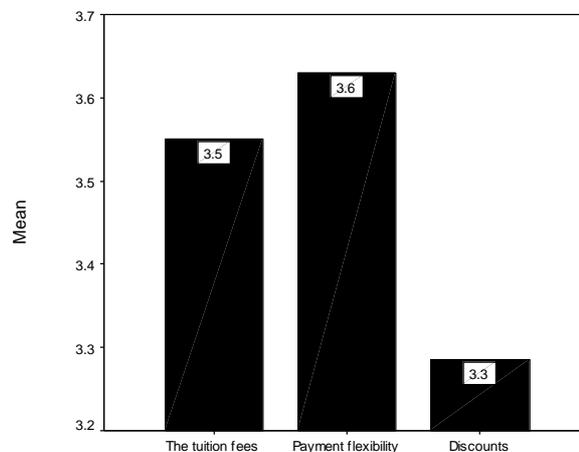
Figure 5
Promotion Importance



‘Flexible tuition payment (paying by installments)’ was the most important *price* element followed by ‘the amount of tuition fee’ and finally ‘the discount offered in the institute’ (See figure 6).

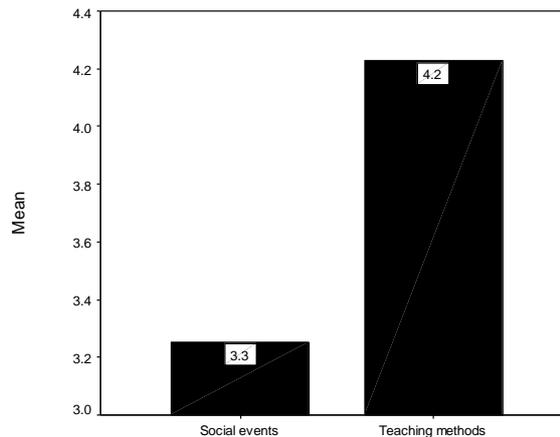
The fact that discounts were the least important might be caused by the lack of use of this tool in Damascus for marketing products in general and marketing EFL institutes in particular.

Figure 6
Price Importance



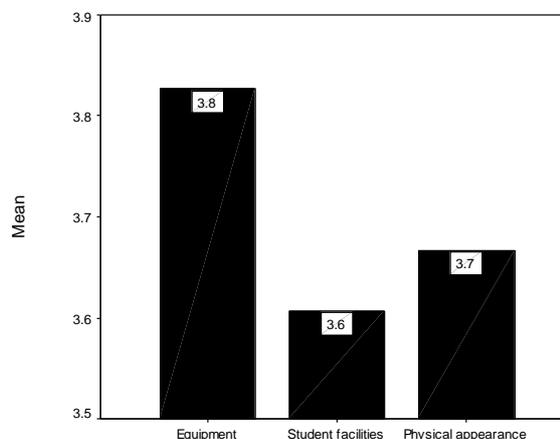
Turning the discussion to *process*, two items were evaluated, ‘social events’ (mean = 3.3, SD = 1.3) and ‘the teaching methods adopted in the institute’ (mean = 4.2, SD = 1.1). Both items had mean scores greater than three indicating that these items were important in the student’s institute selection process (See Figure 7).

Figure 7
Process Importance



As far as *physical facilities* are concerned, three elements were measured all having similar importance ratings of more than three. The most important element here was ‘the teaching and learning equipment provided in the institute’ (mean = 3.8, SD = 1.3). (See figure VIII). Of similar importance to Damascene EFL students were the issues of ‘the institute’s physical appearance’ (mean = 3.7, SD = 1.3) and ‘student facilities, such as a library, computer lab and lunch room’ (mean = 3.6, SD = 1.3).

Figure 8
Physical facilities Importance

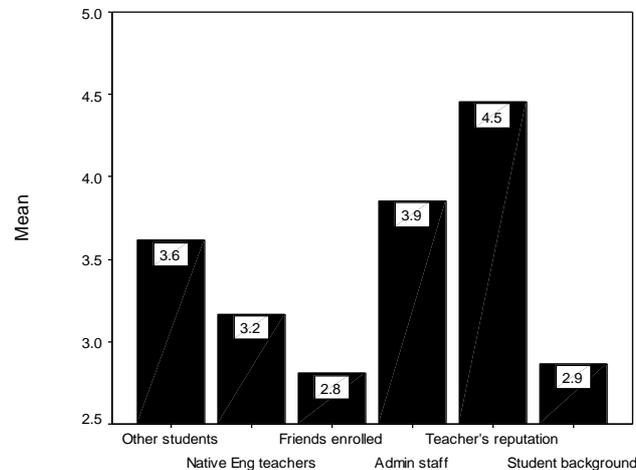


The item that had the highest rating of all 29 marketing tools measured was a people item - ‘The individual instructor’s reputation for teaching English’ (Mean = 4.5, SD = 1.0). An interesting point was the lower importance of ‘native English teaching staff’ (mean = 3.2, SD = 1.6).

Although the presence of ‘friends’ (mean = 2.8, SD = 1.4) and student of ‘similar socio-economic background’ (mean = 2.9, SD = 1.3) in the institute were rated ‘unimportant’, it was important that the institute offered the chance to establish contact with ‘the other students’ in the institute (mean = 3.6, SD = 1.2). (See figure 9). Of equally high importance to Damascene EFL students was the ‘warmth, helpfulness and efficiency of administrative staff’ (mean = 3.9,

SD = 1.0).

Figure 9
People Importance



Concluding Remarks

It is not surprising that the elements of the 7Ps marketing mix vary in importance. Students use those mix elements to make their decision making process easier and better match the EFL institute with their own needs, given what can be both an expensive and life changing educational decision.

The findings of the study show what aspects of the educational marketing mix are important to students when selecting an EFL institute. Clearly, it is these elements that institutes need to ensure are effectively employed in the development of marketing plans for private fee-paying EFL institutes in Damascus.

The programme and place elements of the marketing mix are considered very important by EFL students in Damascus, with overall mean scores of 3.9. The product element does lend itself to change and modification based on needs of students. In the case of the place element, the two most highly rated elements can also be changed based on student demand, days and times that EFL classes are given. Clearly, the physical location of the institute itself and public transport access would require a longer-term strategy for any institute wishing to make changes in this regard.

Physical facilities was also highly rated. As with many services, the aspects that are easiest to assess and measure like the teaching and learning equipment, décor and facilities such as a library, can form a surrogate for a measure of the intangibles, such as the actual teaching. Like physical facilities, the educational process and specifically teaching methods were seen as very important by Damascene EFL students.

Of lesser importance were the issues of price and people. In the case of people however, instructor reputations had the highest importance of any of the marketing tools evaluated.

Perhaps the issue that needs to most taken note of, is the fact that the marketing mix element that educational administrators most link to student recruitment, that of promotion, is considered by Damascus EFL students as the

least important aspect in the selection of an English institute.

One qualification on the findings presented here is that the ratings are based on students' perception of marketing elements they feel are useful in making informed decisions regarding EFL institute selection: what the study did not ask was what students would think should a particular element of the marketing mix not be used. Given that students suggest that promotion is unimportant, how would students find out about the institute's offerings if promotion were not done at all?

Educational institutes in Damascus need to find the appropriate mix of marketing tools for their particular market segments. This paper highlights aspects that are deemed important by the students, those people consuming and paying for the services offered by the institute. Once enrolled, marketing activities still continue, the ongoing need to ensure that students are happy with the institute's offerings and that their needs are indeed being satisfied is critical in ensuring that positive word of mouth promotion takes place – and for business buyers of EFL programmes, that they send other members of their staff on the courses offered.

The market-based information in this study does provide a basis for strategy development. It enables marketers of EFL institutes in Damascus to better understand their customer needs and evaluate their own marketing strengths and weaknesses – resulting in strategies that will counteract the market expansion in an increasingly competitive environment.

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