



The Impact Of Non-Academic Services On Word-Of-Mouth Referral And The Image Of Higher Education Institutions (Heis) In Pakistan: Student Satisfaction As A Mediator

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: The main objective of this study is to explore how nonacademic services impact word of mouth referrals and the overall image of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), in Pakistan. Specifically how student satisfaction plays a role in mediating these effects was examined. Given the competition within Pakistan's education sector it is crucial to understand the importance of nonacademic services, in shaping perceptions of HEIs and attracting potential students.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The research adopts quantitative surveys approach. A diverse sample of students from selected HEIs of Pakistan participated in the study. Quantitative data were collected through structured surveys, allowing for statistical analysis to test hypotheses.

Findings: The study reveals that there is a connection, between the quality of non academic services and how higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan are perceived. HEIs that provide a range of quality non academic services, such as well maintained campus facilities and robust student support services tend to have a more positive reputation among students. Student satisfaction also plays a role in mediating this relationship. HEIs that prioritize academic services not only improve their reputation but also significantly contribute to student satisfaction. Moreover specific non academic services like career counseling and recreational facilities were found to have a impact, on both the image of HEIs and student satisfaction.

Originality: This research contributes to the existing literature by shedding light on the underexplored relationship between non-academic services, student satisfaction, word-of-mouth referral, and HEI image in the context of Pakistani higher education. The identification of specific non-academic services that have a substantial impact on HEIs' overall perception adds original insights that can inform strategies for improving the higher education sector in Pakistan.

Keywords: Non-academic services, Higher education Institutions(HEIs), student satisfaction , Word of mouth referral

Introduction

The educational system in Pakistan is currently experiencing a transformative phase in the field of education. This period is characterized by changes that are reshaping the nature of HEIs. (Sabir & Sharif 2021). In this period the influence of services on shaping the reputation and perception of these institutions become evident (Mumtaz et al., 2022). This research delves into the dynamics that underlie the relationship between services, word of mouth referrals and their combined impact of perception of HEIs. Student satisfaction plays a role in the exploration serving as a mediator within the interplay of these elements. (My et al., 2022; Wissing et al.,

2022). HEIs now plays a role in shaping both paths and societal outcomes making them extremely important (Osman & Saputra 2019; Razinkina et al., 2018).

There has been a shift, towards recognizing the value of academic services offered by these institutions (Khoo et al., 2017; Kalim et al., 2022). These services go beyond the offerings and cover various aspects such, as counseling, career guidance, extracurricular activities and comprehensive student support services (Kuswanto & Anderson 2021; Khoo et al., 2017; Kalim et al., 2022).

By examining the existing literature this review analyzes how non academic services impact word of mouth referrals within Pakistans education system (Camilleri, 2021). The influence of services goes beyond academia and affects every aspect of students educational journeys (Osman & Saputra 2019; Khoo et al., 2017; Razinkina et al., 2018). Higher education institutions create an environment that fosters not academic growth but also personal development and well being (Kalim et al., 2022; Khoo et al., 2017). This research explores the relationship between academic services and the organic spread of word of mouth referrals, within the educational context (Osman & Saputra 2019; Kuswanto & Anderson 2021; Razinkina et al. 2018). The interactions, between individuals play a role, in shaping how people perceive institutions. These perceptions are influenced by the experiences, opinions and recommendations shared within networks (Kalim et al., 2022; Khoo et al., 2017). This study explores the connections involved. Examines how student satisfaction impacts the narratives that influence the decisions of potential students, parents and stakeholders (Camilleri, 2021; Razinkina et al., 2018).

At the heart of Pakistans Higher Education Institutions lies a connection, with the influence of academic services (Murad et al., 2021; Camilleri, 2021). This impact goes beyond the institutions themselves leaving a lasting impression through shared stories (Kuswanto & Anderson 2021; Razinkina et al., 2018). The present study uncovers the interdependencies between services, student satisfaction, word of mouth recommendations and the overall perception of HEIs within Pakistans educational landscape (Mumtaz et al., 2022; Kalim et al., 2022; Murad et al., 2021). Within the symphony of research efforts exploring services assumes a more significant role (Fraser & Ryan 2020; Mumtaz et al., 2022). These services go beyond classroom instruction. Encompass a diverse range of activities that ignite passions provide career guidance offer mental health support and create an enriched learning environment (Fraser & Ryan 2020). Undoubtedly non academic services play a role in shaping education in Pakistan (Mumtaz et al., 2022; Kalim et al., 2022) transitioning from additions to essential contributors, to students overall development and well being.

Their impact can be felt in every aspect of education creating an atmosphere that seamlessly combines growth with the educational journey. In such a setting students thrive, delving into depths and elevating their experiences to extraordinary levels (Murad et al., 2021; Fraser & Ryan 2020). At the heart of this narrative is the understanding that higher education institutions (HEIs) possess the ability to shape environments by offering a range of academic services (Fraser & Ryan 2020; Kalim et al., 2022). These services create an ecosystem that nurtures both personal development. Within this nurturing environment, student satisfaction flourishes, encouraging engagement and academic progress (Razinkina et al., 2018). As satisfaction takes hold and grows positive word of mouth referrals find fertile ground to thrive upon generating a cycle that improves student retention rates and enhances reputation (Casidy & Wymer 2016; Kuswanto & Anderson 2021).

In todays era where connectivity plays a role, in communication the influence of word of mouth referrals has reached unprecedented heights (Stribbell & Duangekanong 2022; Oppong et al., 2022). Students testimonials reverberate, across media platforms as powerful tools shaping reputation and image (Thanh & Binh 2020; In this changing landscape the importance of word of mouth referrals becomes more evident as higher education institutions (HEIs) aim to differentiate themselves. Word of mouth referrals, also known as WOM are marketing tools based on endorsements. Within the context of HEIs WOM serves as a compass, for students and parents. It not enhances the reputation of these institutions. Also attracts a wide range of potential students. In todays paced information era we cannot underestimate the influence of WOM; it has the ability to shape the growth and success of HEIs.

This research narrative focuses on student satisfaction. Explores the connections between non academic services, satisfaction levels and the subsequent impact of word of mouth referrals. Through an analysis of survey data, from HEIs this study uncovers the pathways that link these factors together. The consistent findings validate one truth; student satisfaction acts as a bridge that connects quality academic services with positive word of mouth propagation. Happy students not tend to speak of their schools but they also provide a genuine perspective that adds to the overall reputation of the institution. The findings of this study have implications, for the education sector. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should acknowledge the importance of services, in shaping their reputation.

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Impact of Non-Academic Services on Student Satisfaction

The impact of academic services, on student satisfaction is crucial for higher education institutions (HEIs) as they shape the overall educational experience. These services, which include career guidance, extracurricular activities and counseling play a role in influencing how students perceive their well being and overall satisfaction (Khoo et al., 2017; Kalim et al., 2022). Research suggests that students contentment goes beyond achievements and reflects the quality of academic services provided by HEIs (Razinkina et al., 2018; Khoo et al., 2017). These services create an environment that fosters engagement personal growth and enhances

student satisfaction (Kalim et al., 2022). The availability and effectiveness of academic services directly impact students overall contentment levels (Khoo et al., 2017; Su et al., 2016). By offering support systems such as health assistance and diverse extracurricular activities institutions demonstrate their commitment to ensuring the well being of students (Fraser & Ryan 2020). Addressing challenges through these support services shows responsiveness to students needs leading to increased satisfaction levels (Razinkina et al., 2018). Ultimately non academic services significantly influence student satisfaction, by contributing to their development and overall sense of contentment. Universities should give priority to these services in order to promote the development of rounded and engaged students, which in turn enhances their reputation and success (Khoo et al., 2017; Fraser & Ryan 2020).

H1: Non Academic services has a significant impact on Student Satisfaction

Impact of Student Satisfaction on Student word of Mouth

The extensive research, on the relationship between student satisfaction and word of mouth referrals has been conducted in the fields of marketing and higher education leading to studies that have explored this connection and proposed hypotheses. In the context of consumer products, Homburg & Giering (2000) conducted a study to understand how customer satisfaction and loyalty interact revealing that individual characteristics such as age, income and preference for variety can influence the connection between satisfaction and loyalty. This suggests that student satisfaction may also be influenced by attributes, which in turn affect their likelihood to recommend through word of mouth. Similarly Keiningham et al. (2007) examined metrics for customer satisfaction and loyalty uncovering their associations with customer retention, recommendations and share of wallet. Notably their findings indicate that relying solely on the intention to recommend might not accurately predict loyalty behaviors. Instead using a range of indicators proves effective, in predicting both customer recommendations and retention. This emphasizes how student satisfaction can directly impact their inclination to engage in word of mouth referrals. In the context of the insurance industry a study conducted in 2014 examined how service quality affects satisfaction and word of mouth. The results showed connections, between all aspects of service quality, customer satisfaction and word of mouth. This suggests that when students are more satisfied they are more likely to recommend the institution to others. In the education context Nawarini & Adi (2022) conducted a research on student satisfaction. Found that it has a positive influence, on word of mouth communication. This finding supports the idea that when students are more satisfied they tend to share experiences with others.

H2: student satisfaction has a significant impact on word of mouth referral

Impact of Student Satisfaction on HEI Image:

In the field of education research Bakrie et al. (2019) conducted a study to explore the relationship, between service quality, institutional reputation, student satisfaction and student loyalty. The study revealed insights; it found that institutional reputation directly influences student loyalty in a way and at the same time service quality also has a constructive impact on the institutions reputation. These findings suggest that high levels of student satisfaction can contribute to a perception of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Expanding on these findings Bakrie et al. (2019) also discovered effects of service quality on student loyalty through reputation. This highlights the role played by an institutions reputation in mediating the connection between service quality and student loyalty thereby influencing how HEI is perceived. Adding to the discussion, Hanssen & Solvoll (2015) focused on the role of university facilities in shaping student happiness. Their research revealed a correlation; students perceptions of university facilities were strongly associated with their satisfaction. This suggests that the quality of facilities plays a role in determining student satisfaction and can potentially have an impact, on how HEI's viewed.

The combination of these investigations and discoveries leads to the development of theories, about the connection between student satisfaction and the perception of higher education institutions. Based on these findings it becomes possible to generate hypotheses that explore the relationship, between student happiness. How it aligns with the reputation of the institution.

H3 student satisfaction has a significant impact on HEI image

Mediating Effect of student satisfaction on Non-Academic Services , HEI image and Word of Moth Referral

The study of how academic services, in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can influence word of mouth referrals through student satisfaction is an important area of research (Yu et al., 2021). Non academic services go beyond academics. Have the potential to generate positive recommendations. Khan and Ahmed (2017) found that students who are satisfied with academic services such as career guidance and extracurricular activities are more likely to recommend their institutions serving as channels for positive word of mouth (Li et al., 2015). This connection between student satisfaction and word of mouth referrals is closely linked. Khans study (2019) on HEIs emphasizes the role of student satisfaction as a mediator (Gusta et al. 2021). When students experience enhanced satisfaction due to quality academic services it strengthens the positive recommendations bridging the impact of these services on institutional perception. Moreover Malik and Raza (2018) highlight the mediation role of satisfaction in relation to activities. Active participation in activities not brings personal fulfillment but also contributes to overall satisfaction, which becomes a dynamic catalyst for

expressing support, for the institution through word of mouth. Satisfaction enhances the influence of academic services resulting in amplified positive word of mouth referrals (Gusta et al., 2021).

To sum up the satisfaction of students plays a role, in connecting academic services with word of mouth recommendations, in higher education institutions (Ong, 2017; Hanssen & Solvoll 2015; Rashid & Mustafa 2021). It acts as a pathway, through which the impact of services is transformed into word of mouth. When students are satisfied and benefit from a range of offerings they tend to share their positive experiences thereby strengthening the institutions image and reputation.

H4: Student Satisfaction has a mediating effect on non Academic services and WoM Referral

The dynamic interplay, between academic services and the reputation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) influenced by student satisfaction as a mediator offers an intriguing avenue for exploration (Ong, 2017; Hanssen & Solvoll 2015; Rashid & Mustafa 2021). Beyond the offerings these services have the potential to shape the overall standing of HEIs. Khan and Ahmed (2017) delve into student satisfaction as a connecting factor. When students are contented and benefit from academic services such as career guidance and extracurricular engagements they are more likely to speak highly of their institutions thus generating positive word of mouth. Khan (2019) supports this idea by showing that increased satisfaction resulting from quality academic services enhances students influence on the institutional image through word of mouth referrals. Building on this effect Malik and Raza (2018) focus on activities where satisfaction thrives and strengthens support.

Within this network the role of satisfaction as a mediator emerges as crucial. It channels the impact of academic services, on the broader image of HEIs (Gusta et al., 2021). Satisfaction plays a role, in promoting word of mouth referrals and connecting academic services to the perception of institutions (Li et al., 2015). This means that when students are happy with these services it increases their likelihood of speaking about the institution and shaping its image (Rashid & Mustafa 2021). So satisfaction not impacts experiences but also has a lasting effect, on how the institution is seen overall.

H5: Student Satisfaction has a mediating effect on non-academic services and HEI image

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Figure 1 we can see the framework that is based on the information presented in the literature review section. This research investigates how non-academic services are related to two variables; HEI image and word of mouth referral. Furthermore student satisfaction plays a role, as a mediator, in this context.

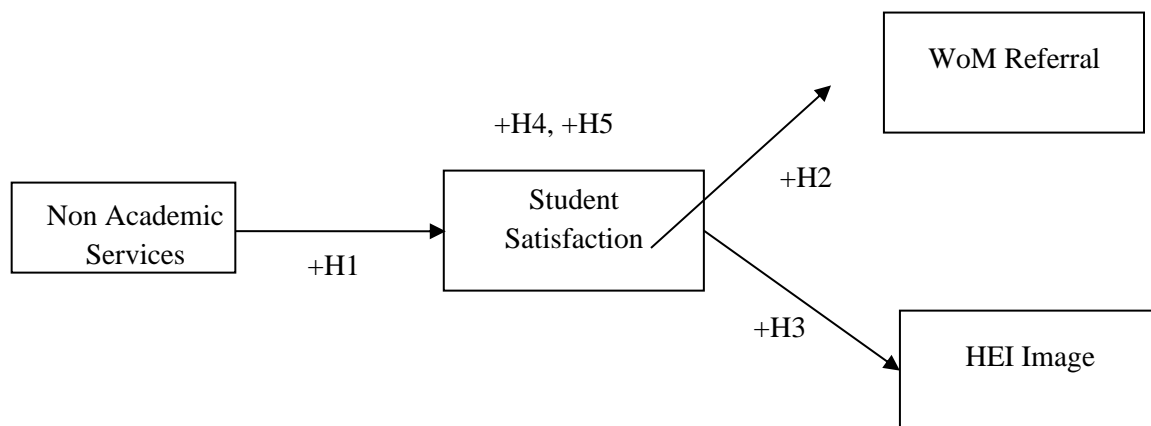


Figure 1 *Theoretical framework*

METHODOLOGY

For this study we chose a research design that uses numbers and measurements to understand how different factors relate to each other. We're looking at how various things influence each other focusing on individuals, as the subjects of our analysis. To gather information we created a questionnaire that people could fill out by themselves. We made sure it was well designed and used it to collect data from 436 individuals who represent a group.

MEASURES AND ANALYSES

The purpose of this research is to study how non-academic services impact people's perception of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and influence word of mouth recommendations. Student satisfaction plays a role in this process. To collect data, for the study a flexible approach was. A modified questionnaire was used as the research instrument. This comprehensive tool included scales to measure academic services the image of HEIs and word of mouth referrals. Additionally the survey used a 5 point Likert scale (ranging from "disagree" to "strongly agree") to assess student satisfaction. To achieve our research objective we conducted mediation analysis using Model 4, from Hayess process (2013).

SAMPLING AND DATA COLLECTION

The sampling methodology used in this study involves selecting a subset of the population that accurately represents the relationships being examined (Sekaran & Bougie 2016). In this investigation we focused on university students as our target population. To collect data we opted for the sampling technique. We distributed questionnaires, to students from selected universities in Pakistans higher education landscape. These questionnaires were specifically tailored for this research. Data were completed by 436 participants. The collected dataset was analyzed using SMART PLS 3 software. The data underwent processing and interpretation, within the Smart PLS 3 software suite, which was specifically designed for analysis purposes. Our analytical approach included equation modeling well as rigorous testing of hypotheses related to our research inquiry.

Results

The research focused on exploring the influence of non-academic services in enhancing the organizational image, word-of-mouth referrals, and student satisfaction. It was found that improvements in non-academic services positively affect the organization's image, word-of-mouth referrals, and the satisfaction levels of students. While much of the existing research, such as the studies by Brown and Mazzarol (2008) and Stukalina (2011), is based in Western cultural contexts, the educational environment in Pakistan, as a developing nation, presents unique characteristics. The selection of non-academic services (NAS) as the primary factor still plays a pivotal role in determining student satisfaction. The work of Ukhopadhyay (2020) highlighted the importance of faculty engagement, especially in light of significant advancements in faculty development noted by Ginns & Ellis (2009).

For validating the measurement model, an assessment incorporating various factors such as Average Variance Extracted (AVE), Composite Reliability (CR), Cronbach's Alpha, and model fitness was conducted. These criteria were benchmarked against established standards set by Fornell & Larcker (1981), Hair et al. (2012), and Hair et al. (2017). Table 1 thoroughly investigates the measures of reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, offering a comprehensive view of the scale's strength and resilience. The obtained results for reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity are in line with the consistency norms established by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The calculated Alpha, AVE, and CR values surpassed the recommended minimums of 0.70, 0.50, and 0.70, respectively, as advised by Hair et al. (2013). Notably, AVE values above 0.40 were deemed acceptable when CR values exceeded 0.60, a viewpoint supported by scholars like Mittal et al. (2016) and Ramayah et al. (2018).

Table 1: Descriptive Analysis

Factor	Mean	Outer loads	No of Items	CR	AVE	Alpha
Non Academic Services	3.67	(.67-.73)	4	0.8	0.5	0.798
HEI Image	3.07	(.72-.84)	4	0.85	0.58	0.843
Word of Mouth Referral	3.6	(.55-.72)	4	0.75	0.52	0.767
Student Satisfaction	3.1	(.57-.82)	4	0.81	0.52	0.803

NAS: Non Academic Services, SS: Student Satisfaction, HEII: Higher Education Institution Image, WMR: WoM Referral

Discriminant validity is utilized to evaluate the degree of distinction between unrelated variables, essentially measuring the uniqueness of latent variables within a study. To assess this, the Fornell-Larcker criterion was employed. This method involves comparing the square root of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of all variables in the study against the correlation values among these latent variables. The findings, as presented in Table 2, demonstrate that the square root of the AVE for each latent variable exceeds their corresponding correlation values. Additionally, Tables 2 and 3 display the outcomes of the AVE and correlation analysis conducted for the constructs. The AVE is compared with shared variance between the variables. the results for AVE Non Academic Services is 0.50, AVE HEI image is 0.58, similarly the results for AVE against the construct of Word of mouth Referral is 0.75 , AVE for Student satisfaction is 0.58. Therefore, the discriminant validity was established between these construct. The results of table-3 shows that the correlation between the constructs are 0.75 to 0.80, the results of the constructs are found correct and significant, and the approach since AVE for all variables found to be greater than shared variance (squared correlation). Hence the results presents that the Discriminant validity is achieved.

Table 2: Fornell-Larcker Discriminant Validity and Correlation Analysis

Constructs	1	2	3	4
1. Non Academic Services	0.75			
2. HEI Image	0.52**	0.77		
3. Word of Mouth Referral	0.56**	0.42**	0.76	
4. Student Satisfaction	0.59**	0.60**	0.59**	0.84

** = The values are significant at the level of 0.01

Results of the hypothesis:

Table -3: Results of Hypotheses

	Relationships	Beta Value	SE	T Value	P Values	BCIL L	BCIUL L	f ₂	Results
H ₁	NAS -> SST	0.149	0.045	3.273	0.001	0.075	0.224	0.028	Supported
H ₂	SST -> WMR	0.73	0.026	28.532	0	0.686	0.77	1.144	Supported
H ₃	SST -> HEI	0.557	0.051	10.822	0	0.461	0.633	0.317	Supported
H ₄	NAS -> SST -> HEI	0.083	0.025	3.264	0.001	0.041	0.126		Supported
H ₅	NAS -> SST -> WMR	0.109	0.033	3.248	0.001	0.052	0.164		Supported

$R^2 = 0.738$; NAS= Non Academic Services, SS=Student Satisfaction, HEI=Higher Education Institution Image, WMR= WoM Referral

Table 3 in the document provides a comprehensive overview of the results pertaining to the evaluation of model fitness and hypothesis testing. The data indicates that the independent variables in the study explain 78% of the variation ($R^2 = 0.738$) in student satisfaction. The t-test results strongly support the first hypothesis ($t = 3.273$, $p < .05$), which means that the hypothesis is accepted. Furthermore, the second hypothesis has been supported and endorsed, as indicated by its t-test outcome ($t = 28.532$, $p < .05$). The following hypotheses - the third, fourth, and fifth - are likewise supported ($t = 10.822$, $p < .05$; $t = 3.264$, $p < .05$; $t = 3.248$, $p < .05$, respectively) and hence confirmed. The findings of these hypotheses are succinctly shown in Table 3. A p-value below 0.05 is considered statistically significant, indicating strong evidence against the null hypothesis and reflecting a probability of less than 5% that the null hypothesis is true. The study sets the criterion for hypothesis support between $p < 0.1$ and $p < 0.05$. The path coefficient test, in conjunction with the t-value and p-value tests, validate the importance of the given hypotheses. Furthermore, these findings demonstrate significant differences in the values of the examined variables with regard to levels of student satisfaction. In addition, the hypotheses (H₁, H₂, H₃, H₄, and H₅) that were tested are shown to be extremely significant, with p-values of 0.000, which is significantly below the threshold of 0.05.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study is to investigate how non-academic services impact the image of institutions (HEIs) word of mouth referrals and student satisfaction, in Pakistan. The findings of this study align with research conducted by Bolton & Drew (1991) Helgesen and Nettet (2007) and Purgailis & Zaksas (2012). The results support the notion that the presence of academic services in educational settings leads to greater student satisfaction. Existing literature also supports the conclusions drawn from this study. Various researchers, such as Ehigie et al. (2006) Bayraktar et al. (2008) and Brown and Mazzarol (2008) emphasize the significance of academic services alongside teaching quality in overall student satisfaction. The discourse surrounding the impact of academic services on HEI image and their influence on word of mouth referral offers valuable insights into this dynamic relationship. Non-academic services encompass a range of aspects, including activities, student support systems and campus facilities and these play a pivotal role, in shaping students overall perception of an HEI. Going beyond offerings these services create an environment that promotes overall student development and engagement.

A key finding highlights the connection, between academic services and the perception of an educational institution. Institutions that invest resources in state of the art facilities, comprehensive student support systems and a wide range of opportunities often receive positive evaluations from students and stakeholders alike. These positive sentiments directly contribute to enhancing the institutions reputation demonstrating the institutions commitment to providing a fulfilling and comprehensive experience. Furthermore non-academic services also play a role in word of mouth referrals within the student community. Students who have benefited from these services naturally become advocates eagerly sharing their experiences with their peers, family members and friends. This organic spread of feedback serves as a marketing tool attracting prospective students who value a well-rounded educational environment. Interestingly this study also reveals that non-academic services can act as a buffer against word of mouth. The timely and effective resolution of student concerns, through these services can effectively protect the institutions reputation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion the impact of academic services, on both the reputation of educational institutions and the subsequent phenomenon of word of mouth recommendation is complex and significant. These services greatly contribute to the appeal and competitiveness of an institution by providing support and diverse opportunities

beyond academics. The positive impressions created by these services have an effect leading to increased word of mouth recommendations that influence student's decisions. Educational institutions that recognize the importance of academic services position themselves advantageously to build a commendable institutional reputation giving them a competitive edge in the broader education landscape. Looking ahead it is crucial for institutions to continuously invest in and improve their academic services. This strategic approach ensures not meeting but surpassing student expectations resulting in a cycle where an exceptional institutional image, combined with enthusiastic word of mouth endorsements contributes seamlessly to sustained growth and prosperity. Based on the insights gained from this research several recommendations emerge to enhance reputation and harness the power of word of mouth recommendations; Strategic Allocation of Resources to Non Academic Services. Institutions should prioritize resource allocation, for developing and enhancing nonacademic services.

This involves establishing facilities expanding offerings and strengthening support systems, for students in order to create an environment that encourages the all-round development of students. Educational institutions should foster a culture of student engagement by encouraging participation in activities, clubs and events. Active involvement of students not enhances their experience but also contributes to positive word of mouth promotion. Effectively and quickly addressing student concerns through academic services can reduce negative word of mouth and enhance the reputation of the institution. Higher educational institutions should implement mechanisms to address student issues in an efficient manner. Collaborating with students to share their experiences through testimonials and student led initiatives can have a genuine impact on prospective students leading to increased enrollment.

6.1 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDY

The research conducted in this study has some limitations. Firstly it focuses on evaluating the outcomes within institutions. The participants, in this study are limited to 436 individuals from three universities in Islamabad. This limitation might affect the validity of the findings especially when compared to a range of university contexts. To increase the reliability of the results it would be beneficial to choose a sample size based on a population. In order to make the research more applicable future studies could include a range of universities including provinces like Sindh, beyond just Islamabad.

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