A Determination of the Extent to which Marketing Communication Tools Influence Parents and Prospective Students’ Choice of Private Higher Educational Colleges in the Lao PDR

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Malina Khammavong
28 September 2016
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Summary

This thesis extends research on marketing communication and promotional mix strategies. Extant literature reveals that there is a dearth of academic research and literature on marketing communication, promotional mix, and IMC in Lao PDR HEIs. Promotional mix is defined as a form of marketing communication consisting of advertising, publicity, sales promotion, direct marketing, personal selling, events, and sponsorships. Promotional mix tools have been employed as a significant component of marketing communication strategies. In today’s complex and highly competitive marketplace, promotional mix can play a major role in the process of increasing student recruitment and building image and reputation of higher education institutions (HEIs).

This thesis applied a mixed methods approach, consisting of two separate but interrelated studies. Study 1 (Chapter 4) involves semi-structured interviews with directors (n=5), marketing managers (n=5), and academics (n=5). This study aims to determine the ways in which PHE providers employ promotional mix tools as a part of their marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of college. Study 2 (Chapter 5) comprises two phases: Phase 1 is a survey of private college students (n=250). Phase 2 involves semi-structured interviews with parents (n=3) of prospective students.

Findings from Study 1 indicate that traditional media advertising, electronic media, discount offers, provision of sponsorships and college activities, college information, orientation and open days, brochures, school visits and internships, face-to-face, and word-of-mouth communication are considered to be effective PM tools. The analysis also confirms that directors, marketing managers, and academics adopt multi-roles and functions in their institutions despite having limited experience and knowledge in educational marketing communication, promotional mix and the integrated marketing communication field. Lack of systematic marketing planning and strategy, and funding are commonly found among private higher education institutions (PHEIs).
Findings of Study 2, reveal that advertising, direct communication; special information, scholarships, college guide books, social media, financial incentives, and discount offers have an impact on students and parents’ choice of college. Importantly, students and parents report that social media, including Facebook, college websites, and YouTube played a significant role in influencing their college choice. Findings from Studies 1 and 2 have a significant practical, research and government policy implications. Key recommendations are provided for improving marketing communication, promotional mix and IMC practices in PHEIs.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Overview

Chapter 1 provides a summary of the present thesis, which examines how private higher education institutions (PHEIs) utilize promotional mix tools as a way of influencing students and parents’ choice of tertiary educational private college in the Lao PDR (Study 1), and investigates the ways, if any, different promotional mix tools influence students and parents’ choice of college (Study 2). Findings are grounded in the private higher education (PHE) system in the Lao PDR context and the intensification and massification of tertiary education. The chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of this thesis.

The purpose of this thesis is (i) to examine how PHEI providers employ promotional mix tools as a part of their marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of tertiary educational private college in the Lao PDR, and (ii) to investigate in what ways, if any, various promotional mix tools influence students and parents’ choice of college. In pursuit of these objectives, this thesis adopts a mixed methods approach, consisting of two separate but related studies. Study 1 (Chapter 4) involved semi-structured interviews with directors, marketing managers, and academics. This study aimed to determine the ways in which PHEI providers utilized marketing communication strategies and different promotional mix tools to influence students and parents’ choice of college. Study 2 (Chapter 5) comprised two phases: Phase 1 is a survey of private college students (n=250). Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews with parents of prospective students.

The Context of the Lao PDR

The current constitution of the Lao PDR guarantees all citizens the right to education, outlines the importance of education, and permits private sector participation in the
provision of education (Lao National Assembly, 2015). The constitution places a priority on human resources development while recognising the importance of economic development aligned with cultural, social, and sustainable environmental development. In this regard, it is clear that education plays a central role in the development of human capital. The Education Law (Amended version), issued in 2015, stipulates that all Lao citizens have the right to education without discrimination regardless of their ethnicity, origin, religion, gender, or social status. The Decree on Higher Education article 4 p. 3 states that:

*The government, with reference to lifelong learning policy, supports all Lao citizens in gaining access to higher education based on an individual’s competencies and conditions through the provision of scholarships to outstanding students, the poor, females, ethnic minorities, and the disadvantaged* (Lao Government Office, 2015).

During the previous three decades, most countries have successfully increased their higher education (HE) systems, transforming from elite HE system to a mass or even a universal system in both developed and developing countries (Mok, 2003). These massification programs seek to serve students and professional groups who may not have the educational opportunities to commence initial or further study, and professional development at higher levels (Lee & Healy, 2006). In this regard, the rapid growth and expansion of HE has given rise to a new landscape of HE. Vann (2012) explained that in the new economy, HE plays an important role in contributing to country’s growth and development, value of knowledge, productivity, and competitiveness. In addition, the importance of creating an entrepreneurial culture to encourage innovation and creativity with the call for life-long learning have heightened demands on the HE sector to reform their curricula, mission, and vision, and so that they reflect intensively the role of HE in the 21st century (Mok, 2003). With the move to a knowledge economy, universities have to serve as engines of innovation and entrepreneurship (Quah, 1999).

In the Lao PDR, the government set a target by 2020 to recruit 200,000 HE students of which 45,000 would attend 5 public universities with the remainder being allocated to private higher education institutions (PHEIs) (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2015).
This allocation would foster an intense competition for students in the private education sector. In response to the growth of student enrolment in degree courses, the Higher Education Department flagged an intention to also take into account disadvantaged outstanding students, females, tribal groups, and the poor through the provision of scholarships and establishment of a system of loan schemes (Ministry of Education & Sports, 2015). Similarly, local governments in other regions provide financial aid in the form of loans and scholarships. For example, the Vietnamese government has increased access to PHEIs through the provision of official loans to students from poor regional areas. The Thai government provides loans to poor students enrolled in private or public universities (Asian-Development-Bank 2012). India has the largest number of students studying at private colleges. These students also receive financial support from the government (Altbach, 1999). In the US, students in private institutions are eligible for government loans and grants (Altbach, 1999). Chinese students enrolled in private institutions are also eligible for government loans (Levy, 2010). Government funded research grants are also available to HEIs. For example, the respective governments of Thailand and the US provide competitive grants for both public and private HEIs (Asian Development Bank, 2012; Altbach, 1999).

Governments in a number of developing Asian countries provide tax incentives to encourage the private higher education (PHE) sector to establish HEIs. For example, PHEIs in Malaysia are provided with attractive tax incentives such as investment tax allowance of 100% for 5-10 years, tax exemption on income, industrial building allowances, accelerated capital allowances, exemptions from import duties, and sales tax and excise duties on educational and multimedia equipment (Asian Development Bank, 2012). In the Lao PDR, international PHE sector investment is supported and encouraged by the Ministry of Education (Xaysomphou, 2006). In contrast, the Singaporean government provides financial support, buildings, and land to private ethnic organizations as a way of encouraging investment and the establishment of PHEIs (Tan, 2006).
In the Lao PDR the Ministry of Education and Sports formulated the following vision.

*By 2030 all Lao population will equally and equitably have access to quality education in order to become good citizens, disciplined, healthy, knowledgeable, high-skilled, and professional to develop the country in a sustainable manner, and to become interconnected and competitive with in the region and the world (translated by the researcher from the Ministry of Education and Sports, 2015, p. 9).*

This vision suggests that one of the roles of HE is to develop quality human resources so that Laos can meet regional and international standards and build a strong workforce capable of contributing to the socio-economic development of the nation. In this context, PHEIs have a central role to play in the development of graduates who are well-resourced, knowledgeable, and skilled to sufficiently contribute effectively to the development of the society. In this manner, graduates are expected to energize the country’s economic development. Thus, PHEIs need to be adaptable to changing labour and economic conditions, and student needs, and those of the nation.

Within this context, the Lao PDR Government has recently raised the issue of quality of education that culminates in students who are capable of playing a key role in the country’s future economic development. Thus, there is an urgent need for PHEIs to increase their quality standards as PHEIs expand and student numbers grow. HE is a fundamental foundation for building a quality workforce. The quality of HE is a critical component of the education system, training, and the effective employment of human resources. The market forces generated by an intensified competition between public and private HEIs has also stimulated or provided a focus on quality education experiences as a way of attracting students who are the ultimate source of revenue (Vann, 2012). To compete effectively in the challenging circumstances that confront tertiary educational institutions, quality of higher education, quality assurance and accreditation play a critical role in HEIs.
Reasons For Carrying out This Thesis

A review of the pertinent literature identifies five significant reasons for undertaking this research:

(i) Quality of higher education
(ii) Intensification of competition in relation to the recruitment of university and college students;
(iii) Definitional ambiguity concerning marketing communication, promotional mix tools, and integrated marketing communication;
(iv) There is paucity of academic research and literature on marketing communication, promotional mix and integrated marketing communication in HEIs in the South-East Asia contexts, particularly in the Lao PDR;
(v) The relevance to marketing communication, promotional mix, and integrated marketing communication strategies in Lao PDR HEIs

Quality of Higher Education

Quality assurance (QA) in HEIs has been important for both developed and developing countries as a result of the increased emphasis on accountability, from their government (Vann, 2012). QA is used for different purposes. For example, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Malaysia have established QA mechanism to monitor their HEIs (Lee & Healy, 2006). In Thailand, the implementation of QA in public universities is derived from the Good Governance Act of 2003 in response to the call for more public accountability and value-for-money spent on HE (Phusavat et al., 2012). In Singapore, HE QA processes are aimed at enhancing the global competitiveness of the city-state in regional and global market contexts (Mok, 2003). The rapid growth of PHEIs in Taiwan has seen QA programs becoming an integral component of government strategy (Mok, 2003).
Lim (2001) noted that the QA policy, procedures, and initiatives adopted by developing nations tend to be ineffective. In developed countries, the administrative responsibility for the management of QA at both national and institutional levels lies with external agencies or special units who specialise in this academic field and function independently from government (Vann, 2012). For example, on the one hand, in the UK, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) is independent of government and its staff members are experienced, well-trained, and qualified for academic program assessment (Lim, 2001). On the other hand, QA is still emerging in the South-East Asian countries including Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam (Vann, 2012). One of the main challenges for Cambodia is to foster experienced human resources for QA (Vann, 2012). PHEIs in Vietnam are considered to be on the margins of the HE system (Asian Development Bank, 2012).

In the Lao PDR, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) has recently established a formal accreditation and QA process to respond to the rapid expansion in HE (Lao Government Office, 2015). According to the Decree on HE, *all types and forms of HEIs must have a quality assurance unit and network in their institutions to ensure the quality of education in their institutions* (Article 27, p. 23 Lao Government Office, 2015). This decree indicates that QA is mandated for all HEIs. All institutions are required to establish an internal QA system, and perform inspections and evaluations using standards set by the MoES. It is apparent that implementing QA will be a challenge for PHEIs in the Lao PDR. As indicated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, PHEIs face problems associated with limited qualified academics. Adoption and implementation of QA mechanisms is still in its infancy. Institutions are in need of support of well-trained academics with expertise in QA. Currently, it seems that PHEIs do not have internal QA units and staff is not familiar with the processes associated with the development of QA systems. To help PHEIs meet these challenges, the Lao PDR government has provided institutions with QA guidelines and support that enhance competitiveness and quality of HE service provision.
Intensification of Competition in Relation to the Recruitment of University and College Students

The changing macro-economic environment has turned the US, UK, France, Holland, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand into a global export industry in HE sector (Stevenson et al., 2011). These countries have become major foreign exchange earners in HE sector. In addition, previous major source countries of international students such as Singapore, China, and India have now become destinations for HE (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). Mazzarol and Soutar (2012) highlighted a number of factors for competition among established nations to have intensified. One of the key push factors that influenced the flow of international students were a perception that overseas qualification was better than a local or national qualification (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Other factors were the difficulties in gaining entry to domestic educational institutions, a desire to learn about other countries and to migrate. As competition for students intensifies, HEIs have been very creative in the use of marketing communication approaches and techniques in order to recruit and attract students (Kim & Periyayya, 2013).

In addition, Kim and Periyayya (2013) outlined key factors associated with the emergence of PHEIs. Information and communication technology (ICT) is one of the strong drivers of growth. Hong and Songan (2011) investigated how ICT has been and can be used to enhance the design, delivery, and management of HE programs in South-East Asia. However, a number of countries in this region remain unprepared to ICT in education. Countries in this region can be categorized into three stages of ICT development. For instance, findings reveal that Singapore has integrated the use of ICT in HE system. In contrast, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand are commencing to employ and test such technology. Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam however, have just begun and are more concerned with ICT infrastructure and connectivity installation in their HE sector. It would appear that the use of ICT in HE is compelling for educators and administrators in the Lao PDR (Hong & Songan, 2011). Thus, HE in this regions need to find approaches to
creatively incorporate ICT in HE and to ensure that ICT for HE enhances the quality of learning (Hong & Songan, 2011).

Hanover Research (2014) highlights that changing trends in educational technology such as online learning is a driving force behind many tertiary educational strategies. These strategies involving new delivery approaches, increased access to courses and course material such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOs), and different ways of employing technology in teaching. For instance, ‘flipped classroom’ teaching, and ‘gamified’ courses (Hanover Research, 2014). In addition, Armstrong (2000) stated that the arrival of Internet-mediated distance learning greatly increased competition between profit and non-profit institutions and traditional institutions. This Online learning mode has also eliminated competition on size and geographic location (Armstrong, 2000).

Other factors that contribute to the rapid expansion of PHEIs are the rising costs of education abroad and changes in government policies (Kim & Periyayya, 2013). For instance, the case in the Lao PDR, the economic growth rate has increased over the previous 20 years, since the Lao government’s reform policy of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) is pervasive, across all sectors including hydropower, mining, trade, agriculture, and the tourism industry (UNESCO, 2012). At present, the agriculture sector is critical important to the Lao economy as a source of revenue (UNESCO, 2012). However, in recent times, educational services have become one of the faster growing sectors (Ogawa, 2009). Since the promulgation of policy on promoting private education, there has been a significant increase in the number of both public and private colleges and universities (Takita, 2010; Xaysomphou, 2006). Consistent with other regions in the East and South-East Asia, government promotion of HE and PHE providers of the HE sector and growth has been substantial compared with other regions of the world (Alan & Cheung et al., 2011; Levy, 2010). In the Lao PDR, the PHE sector plays a significant role and has become a crucial part of the national economy contributing to economic growth and development (Takita, 2010). Further, development of the HE is considered to be a key factor for the sustainable socio-economic future of the country (Ogawa, 2009).
As competitiveness and attractiveness in international student markets trend recruitment and enrolment of students is becoming critical for institutions. Shifts involving demographics and increased mobility of students as well as the increasing cost of higher education across all regions of the world are becoming important considerations (Hanover Research, 2014). Many private higher educational colleges in the Lao PDR find themselves in a highly competitive environment when it comes to recruiting and attracting more students. As competition for new student enrolments in HE increases in other regions of the world, PHEIs are compelled to become assertive and creative in their use of various marketing communication strategies, marketing and promotional strategies, and promotion activities to recruit and attract local and international students (Evelyn, 2016; Moogan, 2011; Al-Hawary, 2010). These institutions compete hard to attract students to meet targets and secure revenue (Marginson, 2011; 2004).

Marketing Strategy

Mazzarol and Soutar (1999) stated that the basis of devising a competitive advantage aligns with the development of marketing strategies at a number of levels that generate or enhance distinctive competencies. Similarly, Bradmore (2007) emphasized that to sustain a competitive advantage institutions needed to implement strategic management and marketing principles.

In order to respond to competition in global HE, Bradmore and Smyrnios (2009) recommended three principal implications for all Australian universities. First, the universities need to re-examine their strategic planning processes. This means that adequate attention is being paid to rapid intensification of competition. Second, the universities need to review their current strategies in response to increasing competition if they are appropriate. Finally, the universities should develop better models to guide competitive behaviour in a university sector with unique characteristics. In line with the work of Bradmore and Smyrnios (2009), the HE sector needs to apply market theories and concepts in the field of HE marketing (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). The value, effectiveness and potential benefits of using marketing theories and concepts will assist HEIs to gain a competitive edge and
a larger share of the international market (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In this context, it will be a great challenge for the Lao HEIs to compete in the international marketplace and increase market share. Wann Yih Wu et al. (2004) evaluated the national competitive of Laos from four categories, namely, economic performance, technology development, human resource and management capability. This study indicated that the actual achievement levels and perceived achievement levels for almost all measurement items are lower than those of Thailand (Wann Yin Wu et al., 2004).

As competition for HE student intensifies across regions of the world, Schiiller and Rasticova (2011) recommended that HEIs need to consider employing integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategies, including various forms of communication methods and techniques with prospective students. Marketing communication is critical in HEIs. Institutions need to explore and determine what are their target market and student needs and expectations. In order to compete and gain a sustainable market share Lao PDR. PHEIs need to develop contextual marketing communication approaches that employ promotional mix tools, information communication and technology (ICT), online learning, and electronic media approaches. Electronic media might include social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other website application (Smedescu et al., 2016; Schiiller & Rasticova, 2011; Alkhas, 2011). These techniques and processes can assist these institutions to meet the demands of the economy and increase their market share nationally and in the region, particularly the case in the context of ASEAN integration (Smedescu et al., 2016). PHE providers might need to collaborate with foreign universities so that colleges can become and remain competitively sustainable (Siharath, 2014; Xaysomphou, 2006; Lee & Healy, 2006). If PHEIs in the Lao PDR intend to recruit and attract more students from other countries or even neighbouring countries such Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Thailand, the understanding and effective application of IMC becomes essential.
**Knowledge and capacity**

Bradmore (2007) indicated that the competitive advantage referred to knowledge and ability of universities to overcome challenges that increasing competition poses and to maintain and/or improve their market positions. Hoffman (2000) discussed a source of sustainable competitive advantage derived from a customer orientation where firms can gain knowledge and customer insights in intangible resources such as organizational and resources of information.

**Image and reputation**

Mazzarol and Soutar (1999) highlighted that building image is critical for sustainable advantage in both domestic and international markets. Alksha (2011) suggested that a college or university need to build image in order to attract and retain students. Hua (2011) examined sustainable competitive advantage the leading PHEIs have in order to achieve market leadership in the Malaysian education industry. Additionally, Hua (2011) concluded that branding, image, location, facilities, and mode of delivery were key determinants of a sustainable competitive advantage. Stevenson et al. (2011) stressed that reputation, quality, and recognition of the institutions are the most important criteria variables for PHEIs to sustain their business in the education market. PHEIs also need to review their branding strategies in order to become more competitive (Kim & Periyayya, 2013). Owing to create a sound branding strategy it is important for PHEIs to understand the expectations of students. Moreover, understanding the expectations of students to fulfill their need for HE is critical for the continuous growth and capability of PHEIs. In addition, Khan and Matlay (2009) suggested that implementing service excellence is becoming increasingly important in a variety of competitive environment for HE. The service excellence creates a direct link between a workforce and successful competitive strategies.

**Partnerships**

To remain competitive in the future, HEIs need to establish strong networks (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012; Hoffman, 2000). Alliances will be important for research cooperation and partnerships with industry that will also secure funding for research
and teaching (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012; Hoffman, 2000). Mazzarol and Soutar, (2012) stated that through industry alliances universities can have access to industry expertise and opportunities to provide career pathways for students. However, business seeks partnerships with universities to secure early access to the intellectual property evolving from research programs; and to reduce their own research and development costs. This highlights the importance of industry alliances which requires HEIs to obtain additional funding for research, teaching programs and infrastructure. International cooperation and collaboration are key activities supporting and facilitating the development of higher education in terms of quantity and quality (Xaysomphou, 2006). To gain sustainable competitive advantage Lao PHEIs need to have partnerships with industry. This issue had been reiterated by Alksha (2011) who noted the importance of maintaining a strong partnership with the community. It is essential for institutions to create a powerful and consistent identity that sets it apart from its competitors.

**Definitional Ambiguity Concerning Marketing Communication, Promotional Mix and Integrated Marketing Communication**

Marketing communication (MC), promotional mix (PM), and integrated marketing communication (IMC) are interpreted differently by various parties. Marketing communication is regarded as a collective term for communication tasks employed for marketing products and sources (Kitchen, 2005). As well, marketing communication plays a central role in fostering relationships in relation to brand and channel equity (Reid et al., 2005).

In contrast, promotional mix is a form of marketing communication consisting of advertising, publicity, sales promotion, direct marketing, personal selling, events and sponsorships (Todorova, 2015; Ivy, 2008; Wong, 2006). Todorova (2015) highlighted that many firms acknowledge the need for incorporating diverse efforts associated with the marketing communication mix including media advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, and public relations to achieve more effective marketing communications. Coordination of promotional mix elements help to produce unified
messages in integrated marketing communication. Thus, in this thesis, the terms promotional mix and marketing communication had been used interchangeably.

Recent research (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Smedescu et al., 2016) in the HE sector have referred to the eight elements of the marketing communication mix. Marketing communication mix can be regarded as comprising eight major components: advertising, sales promotion, event and experiences, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, interactive marketing, and word-of-mouth marketing (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Within the context of the tertiary education sector, to be effective, marketing communication needs to be collaborative, no matter the channel (Smedescu et al., 2016). Furthermore, Smedescu et al. (2016) concluded that further research might consider how to form synergies as a result of the simultaneous use of different communication channels, which could be pertinent in HEIs.

**Paucity of Academic Research on Marketing Communication in Lao PDR HEIs**

There is a dearth of empirical research findings relating to marketing communication, promotional mix, and integrated marketing communication of HE in the South-East Asia context (Wong, 2006). This is particularly; the case in the Lao context. It seems that Lao PHEIs providers have a limited understanding of these approaches. These marketing communication approaches are relatively recent practices in the Lao PDR, contributing to a lack of scholarly studies.

A paucity of academic research in Lao universities can be attributed to high academics teaching loads. A shortage of appropriate infrastructure and capacity to conduct research along with limited funding opportunities are other contributing factors (MoES & ADB, 2009; Lee & Healy, 2006). Compounding the problem is the fact that Lao tertiary educational private colleges do not undertake research because of lack of support, incentives to seek external funds, no opportunities for institutional exchanges of information, and limited capacity to carry out rigorous research. Funds to support university-based research activities are virtually non-existent (Xaysomphou, 2006).
In general, empirical research findings relating to marketing communication, promotional mix, IMC, and the use of social media tools in the HE sector is not new (Mohamad et al., 2017; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Alkhas, 2011; Al-Fattal, 2010). Moreover, discussion has been intense across various regions of the world. Research relating to the use of marketing communication, promotional mix, and social media approaches for marketing purpose is still in its infancy in the Lao PDR (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). One possible reason might relate to the relatively small number of academics who have had research training, another is low prevalence of academics with PhDs or higher degrees. A further reason concerns the small amount of government and institutional funds available for research.

The Relevance to Marketing Communication, Promotional Mix, and Integrated Marketing Communication Strategies in Lao PDR HEIs

Development of marketing communication strategies are not commonly utilized in HEIs, particularly in the Lao PDR. None of key stakeholders (i.e., director, marketing manager, academic) are trained in educational marketing communication and promotional field. In addition, there is no prior research done on the areas of marketing communication, promotional mix, and IMC in any Lao tertiary educational private colleges. This research shows feasibility of adopting marketing communication and IMC strategy of higher education relevant to the Lao context.

It can be argued that marketing communication strategies are critical for Lao PHEIs. Tertiary educational providers are competing for students locally and regionally. Marketing communication and IMC strategies can help PHEIs to stay competitive, become market-oriented, coordinate their marketing communication efforts, and achieve marketing goals.

Building knowledge requires building college staff capabilities. Academic and marketing management teams need to be trained and developed professionally in marketing communication strategies; and how to best communicate with customers using promotional mix tools, IMC, and electronic media. Building brand image and
how to foster a positive relationship between brand and customers are other important considerations.

Finally, electronic media communications are essential part of HE marketing. Because this form of marketing is critical, PHEIs need to train personnel and/or hire IT professionals to ensure that these technologies and websites are used cost effectively. It would appear that governments might have an important role to play in providing the necessary infrastructure and financial support.

**Conclusion**

This introductory chapter has set the background and context of the study. The contextual background has provided information about the Lao PDR and South East Asia HE development. Shaped by this particular context and most particularly as PHE is an emerging market, this thesis explored how PHEIs employ various promotional mix tools as part of their marketing communication strategies through the application of IMC procedures to attract and recruit student enrolment.

Many developing countries in Southeast Asia including the Lao PDR have succeeded in reaching the goals of increasing access to HE. In addition, PHEIs have played a significant role in absorbing demand for HE and in contributing human resource development. The rapid expansion of PHEIs within the Lao PDR has created consequences on quality. The majority of PHEIs are not funded by government. PHE providers are struggling between providing good instructional quality and ensuring return on investment to their owners and stakeholders. PHEIs are also facing intense competition in the marketplace; however, they are not well-equipped with marketing communication knowledge and skill in HE. Systematic marketing research and marketing communication strategies are not commonly practiced among PHEIs. With limited budget on marketing communication and promotional activities, PHE providers have made their best efforts to satisfy their customers and to sustain in the competition.
PM, MC, and IMC seem to be new academic practice among PHEIs. This consequence has triggered the government’s concern about the quality and efficiency of PHEIs in the country. The chapter then ends with presenting the importance for the research.

**Thesis Structure**

Chapter 2: This chapter provides an overview of PHE development in East and South-East Asia, and then discusses the intensification of competition in relation to the recruitment of university and college students. The chapter also addresses the development of higher education (HE) in the Lao PDR, discusses government and HE institutions strategies and problems associated with private higher education providers (PHEPs) in terms of their marketing plans.

Chapter 3: This chapter discusses the previous studies (Literature Review). It examines promotional mix tools and electronic media amongst other factors, in relation to the ways in which higher education institutions utilize marketing communication including promotional mix tools, brand image, reputation, and electronic media.

Chapter 4, (Study 1): This chapter reports the results and findings on the ways in which private higher education providers in the Lao PDR utilize various promotional mix tools as a part of their marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of colleges.

Chapter 5, (Study 2): The chapter presents the findings of students and parents’ view on the influence of different marketing communication (i.e., promotional mix) on their choice of tertiary educational institutions in the Lao PDR.

Chapter 6: This chapter concludes this research. It further reiterates the objectives and the main findings of this thesis. Additionally, the chapter conflates the findings of Studies 1 and 2, with a discussion on the interpretation of these findings in relation to key stakeholders, marketing communication strategies of PHEIs, target market, institutional profile, and government policy and support.
Chapter 2
Private Higher Education in the Lao PDR, and East and South-East Asia Regions

Overview
Chapter 2 reports on the general and socio-economic background of the Lao PDR private higher education (PHE) sector. This information places the present thesis within this context. To begin with, this chapter provides an overview of PHE development in East and South-East Asia, and then discusses the intensification of competition in relation to the recruitment of university and college students. This section highlights the importance of the marketization of, massification of, and diversification in PHE. The chapter also addresses the development of higher education (HE) in the Lao PDR, discusses government and HE institutions strategies and problems associated with private higher education providers (PHEPs) in terms of their marketing plans, relatively low qualification levels of academic staff, limited research capacity and international partners, and lack of a regulation framework for private higher education institutions (PHEIs). The final section of this chapter discusses the current status of PHEIs.

General and Socio-Economic Background of the Lao PDR

The Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) is the official name of the country, also known as Laos. The Lao PDR is a landlocked country in South-East Asia, bordered by Myanmar and China to the Northwest, Vietnam to the East, Cambodia to the South, and Thailand to the West (see Figure 2.1).

The total land-locked area of Lao PDR is 236,800 km$^2$ (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). Similar to Vietnam, the Lao PDR is one of the remaining socialist countries. The Lao PDR is a strongly Buddhist country which retains many traditional values and cultural practices. Laos has an ethnically diverse population with 49 different recognised ethnic groups, estimated to be 6.5 million at the time of the 2015 National Census (Lao Statistics Bureau, 2015). These ethnic groups belong to the Lao-tai, the Mon-
Khmer, the Tibeto-Burman, and the Hmong-Mien language families (UNESCO, 2012). Approximately 68% of the population live in rural and remote areas with very limited access to basic infrastructure and services (UNESCO, 2012).

Under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)’s Human Development Index (2013), the Lao PDR is ranked 138th out of 187 countries and 141 out of 188 countries in 2014 (UNDP, 2015). Thus, this indicates a slight downward trend in the four tiers of human development. It also remains one of the least-developed countries in the Asia and Pacific region, and is classified as a least-developed country (LDC),
one of four in South-East Asia (Takita, 2010). Despite its relatively low GDP per capita, the economy of the Lao PDR has increased over the previous two decades. Arguably, this increase is attributed to the government’s initiative of a comprehensive program of economic policy reform called the New Economic Mechanism (NEM), in 1986. The NEM was geared to shift the country from central planning and its emphasis on public ownership towards a market-oriented economy led by a vigorous private sector (World Bank, 1994).

The economic growth rate remained strong throughout the 1990s, despite the Asian financial crisis. However, the financing of socio-economic development has been heavily dependent on foreign investment savings through loans, grants, and private investment. At the present time, the Lao PDR is attracting significant foreign trade and investment with foreign direct investment in five major sectors such as hydropower, mining, trade, agriculture, and the tourism industry. Hospitality (hotels and restaurants) and local handicrafts are other investment areas for the Lao PDR (UNESCO, 2012). However, the dominant sector of the Lao economy is still agriculture. The agriculture sector is overwhelmingly important to the Lao economy as a source of income. Given limited attraction to foreign trade, the purpose of this study, however, focuses on the current state of the higher education in the Lao PDR, especially, tertiary private colleges, also known as private higher education institutions (PHEIs). This sector is changing and expanding in a competitive education institution marketplace and is critical for economic development.

The Lao PDR became a member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997 (Kittiphanh, 2011). The overall aim of ASEAN is “to accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of Southeast Asian Nation” (www.asean.org/asean/about-asean/overview, retrieved 20 March 2016). It was granted World Trade Organization (WTO) membership on 2 February 2013 (source: laoconnection.blogspot.com, retrieved date 4 January 2016). Currently, the Lao PDR is preparing for entry into the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and ASEAN Integration. This transition has not only created challenges for the country but has also
set clear responsibilities on the education sector to produce skilled and knowledgeable human resources. The transition has imposed demands on the labor market to facilitate labor mobility in the region, as the country has become more open to international trade and cooperation, a way of increasing national economic growth among the ASEAN countries. In this regard, the continuing focus on the development of a more knowledge-based economy and corresponding training of a skilled workforce are critical for the Lao PDR in order to strengthen the country’s development, particularly in relation to ASEAN integration.

The following section provides a wide-angle view of private higher education (PHE) development in the East and South-East Asian regions, with a particular focus on the Lao PDR. The overall landscape of the rapid increase in PHE in this region can be misleading, given wide disparities across countries. This point is also applicable to the Lao PDR as it is located in South-East Asia. In this region, there are variations on how and when countries reach their targets and on where they are heading in terms of PHE. Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to the range of PHE development levels across the East and South-East Asian countries. This information provides a broad understanding of the research context as well as trends and challenges faced by PHEIs in the region and in the Lao PDR.

**Overview of Private Higher Education Development in East and South-East Asia**

East and South-East Asia is a region of massive development diversity, from highly developed knowledge economies such as Japan, South Korea, and Singapore to pre-modern undeveloped countries, including: Myanmar, the Lao PDR, and Cambodia (Marginson, 2011). Differences in this region are noteworthy, but also misleading. Countries range in geographical size, economic wealth, political ideologies, and education conditions (Lee & Healy, 2006). This diversity shows both international and national variations in PHE development and its role in fostering changing market conditions, student interest, and the needs of an economy. In this region, PHE starts from various historical backgrounds and has undergone different stages of development (Altbach, 1999; Lee & Healy, 2006).
PHE has long dominated higher education systems in Japan, the Republic of Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines (Altbach & Knight, 2006). However, in some countries, the creation of PHEIs is considered to be a new initiative (Varghese et al., 2014). For example, in Cambodia private universities emerged in 1997; the Lao PDR legalized PHE in 1995, Malaysia in 1996, China in 2002, Thailand in 2003, and Vietnam in 2005 (Varghese, 2014). It is evident that the establishment of PHE is widely accepted in the region as it has become a significant component of the national education system, which can deliver highly qualified graduates who can contribute to sustainable economic development. The expansion of PHE has also increased competitiveness throughout the region, making it important to examine the status and specific problems associated with this sector.

The following sections, discuss the issues of intensification of competition in relation to recruitment of university and college students in this region. These sections concentrate on the massification, diversification, and marketization and privatization of PHE.

**Massification of Private Higher Education**

The increase in PHEIs has become a globally remarkable phenomenon over the previous 20 years (Asian Development Bank, 2012). As noted in the Private Higher Education Across Asia Report, the PHE sector covers approximately 31% of total global higher education enrolments and 56% of the total number of higher education institutions (HEIs) (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Levy (2010) noted that government promotion of private higher education providers (PHEPs) in the higher education sector and the growth of PHE are much more significant in Asia than in other regions of the world. Across Asia more than 35% of higher education students are enrolled in the private sector, and almost 60% of the region’s HEIs are private (Asian Development Bank, 2012). In East Asia (EA), PHE share of total enrolment totals 38.6%; this places EA behind only Latin America among the various world regions, ahead of South-East Asia, and the US, and far ahead of Europe and Africa (Levy, 2010).
In Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Indonesia, PHEIs dominate the higher education system in terms of numbers, with upwards of 80% of students participating in private institutions. In Malaysia PHE is considered to be the fastest growing segment while in China and Vietnam PHE is on the rise (Altbach, 1999). The fast expansion of PHE in the region has lead to a number of consequences and attention has been on the impact of system expansion on public financing of higher education as well as the role of PHE in absorbing the growing demand for access, and implications of increased access on equity.

PHE plays an important role in helping to bear the cost of higher education and take-up enrolment demand, as well as supplying and meeting workforce demands for both domestic and international labor markets (Asian Development Bank, 2012). There are many factors contributing to the rapid growth of PHE in this region. Three significant reasons concern the high birth rate, increasing school participation rates, and the perceived importance of advanced education for subsequent life opportunities (Varghese et al., 2014). Another key factor driving the growth of PHE is the governments’ success in increasing the number of high school graduates, leading to an increased demand for higher education (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Consequently, more students graduate from secondary schools and seek to continue their further education, to take advantage of the market opportunities. PHEP have been encouraged to establish PHEIs. In this regard, PHEIs are not only required to accommodate a large number of students, but also to improve their administrative efficiency and accountability in response to the demands of various stakeholders including government, business, industry, labour organizations, students, and parents (Mok, 2003). Notwithstanding, the promotion of PHE has triggered concerns about the quality and efficiency of PHEIs as well as the demand for HE.

**Diversification of Private Higher Education**

The massive expansion of PHE has led to a distinction of type and variety of PHEIs. Diversification involves a distinction between public and private HEIs depending on how they are managed, financed, and operated. According to the Asian Development Bank (2012), public HEIs conventionally are owned, operated, and funded by the
government but PHEIs are generally-owned and run by non-state personnel such as individuals, families, companies, religious organizations, or foundations. Normally, PHEIs receive little or no state funding, and rely heavily on tuition fees. Public HEIs are established to serve the economic, social, and political needs of countries and for the public good, while private HEIs are founded to offer difference to those who seek alternatives to public higher education (Asian Development Bank, 2012, p2).

In developing countries, PHE helps to bear a government’s financial burden for expanding access to higher education and absorb demand for higher education, especially when admission to public universities is limited (Altbach, 1999). For example, across the Asian region, many governments allow and encourage the expansion of PHE in an effort to shift students away from the heavily-subsidized public sector as PHEIs can charge tuition, thereby providing greater post-secondary access without increasing the demand for public funds (Varghese, 2014). This freedom has generated a wide diversity among PHEIs, along with significant challenges for governments and higher education stakeholders when formulating policy and regulatory frameworks for this sector, with the aim of ensuring institutional efficiency and quality (Asian Development Bank, 2012).

**Marketization and Privatization of Private Higher Education**

The re-structuring of higher education in many countries has involved the privatization of higher education, corporatization of public universities, implementation of student fees, and constitution of strategic partnerships between public and private sectors (Lee & Healy, 2006). This consequence has culminated in an increase in PHEIs which has absorbed a growing demand from society. The increasing number of PHEIs also indicates the burgeoning gap between government capacity and the heightened demand for higher education (Asian Development Bank, 2012). Table 2.1 shows the number of public and private HEIs, and foreign universities located in a number of East and South-East Asian countries.
Table 2.1 Number of public, private and HEIs or foreign university campuses across a number of SE Asian nations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Public</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Foreign University Campuses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China (2011)</td>
<td>1887</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>2818</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea, Rep</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao PDR</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>1636</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam (2011)</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UNESCO Institutes for Statistics (2014)

Table 2.1 shows the number of PHEIs in Cambodia, Indonesia, South Korea, the Lao PDR, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore, all of which outnumber public HEIs. In Thailand, PHEIs have absorbed the high demand for higher education. In the Philippines, PHEIs is yet another example of a demand-absorber, as well as an academic and labour-market leader in this sector (Levy, 2010).

Foreign universities establish campuses in selected Asian countries in order to not only accommodate demand that cannot be met by local HEIs, but also as a way of attracting international staff and students (Varghese., 2014). Singapore has the largest number of international branch campuses, followed by China and Malaysia. Baharun et al. (2009) observed that international and globalisation concepts in higher education force both public and private HEIs to take more ownership and responsibilities for the overall product and services that they offer customers. In some countries, PHEIs not only meet excess demand, but also raise standards and aim to target the so-called elite who can afford it. Examples of such institutions include De La Salle University in the Philippines, Monash University in Malaysia, the University of New South Wales in Singapore, and RMIT University in Vietnam (Lee & Healy 2006). These countries appear to have an objective to become educational hubs in the South-East Asian region, particularly in Malaysia and Singapore, and to export transnational education, by providing educational services to students from neighbouring countries and establishing institutions across borders (Lee & Healy, 2006).
Malaysia aims to attract more foreign students to advance their education alongside reported goals of expansion and diversification (Levy, 2010). Wong (2006) had earlier noted that by the year 2020, Malaysia aims to be a regional center for higher education. This vision of the Malaysian government shows how the competition in the marketplace of PHEIs is intensifying. In Singapore, PHEIs capture the demand for the attainment of higher education qualifications as there is strong link between education achievement and work income (Tan, 2006). The high demand for higher education encourages many HEIs to develop various types of business models and strategies, particularly when formulating their marketing and strategic plans, and operational strategies (Baharun et al., 1990).

The Development of Higher Education in the Lao PDR

Since Laos was proclaimed the Lao People’s Democratic Republic on 2 December 1975, the development of HE and the associated growth of tertiary private colleges and students have improved significantly, particularly since economic reforms in 1986. Consistent with this view, Nouansavanh (2009) observed that the number of students, lecturers and higher education institutions increased rapidly in both public and private sectors. Economic reform policies in the Lao PDR have encouraged the expansion of HE markets, which were relatively small. HEIs were dependent on state subsidies. The development of HE is considered to be a key factor for sustainable socio-economic development of the country (Ogawa, 2009). Since 1975, the government has played a significant role in policy reform encouraging the educational system to develop human resource goals in accordance with the Lao revolution party’s policy and the government’s educational development plans. The government also administers and monitors the implementation of law by specifying detailed roles and duties to be carried out in education, especially those pertaining to organizational structures, movements, management of private schools, and centers and institutes (Revised Education Law No 61/NA, dated 2007).

As noted earlier, the Lao government’s reform policy of the New Economic Mechanism (NEM) also known in Lao as the kon kai sethakitmai is pervasive. Reasons underlying the NEM are to promote internal and external investors in Laos in
order to boost and develop the national economy. For education, the government promotes investment from local and foreign individuals, groups, and organizations for establishing schools, educational centers, and institutions of different levels, running programs in accordance with the national education systems, and the curricula approved by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to serve the demand of the public and to gain reasonable compensation from learners (Revised Education Law No 60/NA, dated 2007). Additionally, the government promotes and encourages private individuals and organizations locally and internationally to invest in the development of national education by supporting them with credits, tax exemptions, or tax reductions (Revised Education Law No 04/NA, dated 2007). For these reasons, the NEM has increasingly played an important role in the provision of private educational services.

*Government Strategy and Higher Education Institutions*

In the Lao PDR, the formal education system starts from early childhood. The proceeding levels are general education, technical and vocation education, to higher education (Revised Education Law No 62/NA, dated 16/7/2015). Public and private HEIs provide teaching and learning of academic curricula starting with Associate Degrees (Decree on Higher Education No 177/GO, dated 5/6/2015). PHE is provided in parallel with the public formal education system. PHE plays an increasingly essential role in the education system (Tatika, 2010). PHEPs actively participate in human resource development alongside public education institutions (Ministry of Education, 2011).

The higher education system in the Lao PDR consists of five universities, ten teacher education institutions, and 34 public and 73 PHEIs (Ministry of Education and Sports Statistics Centre, 2014). The National University of Laos (NUOL), located in the Vientiane Capital, is the leading institution and was established in 1996. Over the previous two decades, three regional universities were founded: Souphanouvong University (2001); Champasack University (2002); and Savannakhet University (2009). The University of Health and Science, which is located in Vientiane, was established in 2007 and it is dedicated to educating health professionals.
In recent years, higher education has become one of the faster growing sectors in the education system in the Lao PDR (Ogawa, 2009). In the academic year 2012-2013, the total number of student enrolments in public and private HEIs was 78,454, moving up to 111,964 in the academic year 2013-2014 (Education Statistics Information and Technology Center 2012). Owing to this growth, HE in the Lao PDR has developed extensively. PHEIs have been established to meet demand (Ogawa, 2009), and the number of PHE is increasing, concentrated primarily in urban areas (Tatika, 2010). These institutions are fully independent financially and do not receive any government subsidies. However, they are registered under the Ministry of Education (UNESCO, 2008). Higher education branding and marketing has contributed to their growth (Almadhoum et al., 2011).

**Lack of Marketing Strategic Planning:** As noted earlier, HE has been one of the fastest growing components of the Lao PDR education system. However, marketing and strategic planning appear to be shortcomings. This issue has not been addressed by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) Policy, Plans, and Strategies (see the Education Strategic Vision Up to 2020) (MoE, 2000); The Education for all National Plan of Action 2003-2015 (MoE, 2003); The National Education System Reform Strategy 2006-2015 (MoE, 2008); and The Education Sector Development Plan 2011-2015 Review and Update Final Report (MoES, 2013). Emphasis on major recent policies and strategies are placed on achieving universal primary education and improving the quality of education, as well as increasing enrolments in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sub-sector, and balancing the number of graduates across professionals in order to meet the national development agenda (MoES, 2013). This emphasis reflects the government’s new strategic vision on HE which is built upon three pillars: equitable access, quality improvement, and planning and management (Xaysomphou, 2006).

As a way of improving planning and management, key strategies including developing legislation, rules, norms, and standard guidelines; formulating a strategic plan for HE and HEIs, and upgrading the capacity of personnel management levels have been adopted (Xaysomphou, 2006). However, none of these strategic plans and
management pillars addresses marketing strategic planning for HE. Clearly, marketing strategic planning for HE in the Lao PDR remains underdeveloped or largely of low priority. Moreover, this apparent absence of a focus on marketing highlights the lack of understanding of the importance of this process for growing a market.

**Low Qualification of Academic Staff:** Another significant limitation facing HEIs is the relatively low levels of qualifications of academics. This problem is particularly true for three regional universities. For example, Souphanouvong University, comprising 3,700 undergraduates, located in the Northern Province, consists of six Faculties, 19 departments, and 320 staff members. Only three academics from this particular university hold PhD qualifications, 60 hold Master degrees, and the rest have undergraduate degrees (Knight, 2013). Champasack University placed in the Southern Province, has 192 staff of which, four hold PhDs and 31 have Master degrees. The National University of Laos (NUOL) located in the Vientiane Capital, employs 1,520 academics and 350 administrative staff. 258 of these academics are studying abroad, and 932 teach academics. 55 hold PhD level qualifications and 436 hold Master degrees, and the remainders hold Bachelor degrees. In 2009 (MoE & ADB, 2009) the target of NOUL was to ensure that 10% staff hold PhDs, 60% Master qualifications, and 30% undergraduate degrees. It is apparent that a very small proportion of academic staff hold relevant postgraduate qualifications at HEIs. Obviously, this problem is also the case in PHEIs.

In order to reach national goals, there is an overwhelming need to upgrade academic qualifications to meet targets, to enhance teaching skills of existing staff, and to recruit additional staff to accommodate anticipated increases in student enrolments (MoE & ADB, 2009). The need for professional development skills and training, especially those pertaining to degree upgrading is one of the MoES top priorities (Knight, 2013). The MoES has set-up ambitious targets for Faculty development requiring that 10% of university academic staff hold PhDs, 60% of Master level credentials’ and 30% undergraduate degree (Knight, 2013). It is obvious that the upgrading of qualifications of academic staff is a real challenge. In the Lao PDR only
NUOL offers a comprehensive selection of undergraduate and graduate degree programs (Takita, 2010).

In addition, most HEIs do not meet the same quality standards as those of other countries in the region (UNESCO, 2012). Developing academic intellectual foundation in Laos is a priority. Upgrading of qualifications for the majority of Lao academics relies on scholarships from foreign universities, international cooperation with universities, who can provide the training, and foreign governments who are prepared to provide support both educationally and financially (Knight, 2013). In order to achieve these goals, large scale interventions are required for further upgrading of academic staff qualifications to meet the intensifying demands.

**Limited Research Capacity and International Partners:** Owing to relatively low levels of academic ability, HEIs have limited research capacity and international partners. Conducting scientific and technological research is essential for the optimal functionary of HEIs given that these institutions are centres of scholarship and repositories of knowledge (Government Office, 2015). HEIs are obliged to conduct scientific and technological research.

Research capacity is also associated with levels of academic qualifications and foreign language skills. As stated earlier in this chapter, the majority of Lao PDR academics have limited graduate degree levels qualifications, and associated deficits skill and confidence to conduct quality and publishable research. Moreover, limited foreign language skills obstruct access to and utilization of scientific publication as most available published research is written in English (Xaysomphou, 2006). These concerns extend across disciplines. Siharath (2010) claimed that only NUOL has reasonable proportion of suitably-qualified academic staff, with postgraduate degrees that can enable them to carry out limited research activities. Needless to say, regional universities and PHEIs would have proportionally fewer teaching staff, research facilities, and limited research capacity.
Limited research capacity is not a unique problem in the Lao PDR HE sector. As observed by Lee and Healy (2006), many countries in the South-East Asia region do not have very encouraging environments for conducting research, owing to heavy teaching loads, lack of research funding and lack of qualified scholars. In sum, the overall research capacity status in Laos can be said to be in its formative stage of development and building research capacity still remains a major challenge. Notwithstanding, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand buck the trend.

Cooperating with foreign countries and international organizations is supported by higher education decree, stating that HEIs have the right to undertake academic collaboration with foreign institutions and organizations based on the relevant laws and regulations, and upon the approval from the government or relevant organization (Government Office, 2015). Despite this decree, international partnerships have been largely symbolic rather than practical, and not being sufficiently resourced (Siharath, 2014).

Xaysomphou (2006) stated that only NUOL has developed an internationalization strategic direction through its cooperation with foreign HEIs and international student intake. From 2000 to 2005, the number of international students increased from 26 to 249 as a result of signed Memorandums of Understanding (Xaysomphou, 2006). A number of countries in the region, such Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam have provided international development aid including student fellowship and academic staff development programs as part of a wider strategic initiative to develop the capacity of the HE system rather than for commercial purposes (Lee & Healy, 2006). On the whole, PHEIs need to collaborate with foreign institutions in order to foster capacity building and sustainability, as well as a means for attracting international students.

*Lack of a Regulation Framework for PHEIs:* As competition for students intensifies, PHEIs in Laos have become assertive and creative in their use of promotional mix tools and marketing communication strategy to recruit and attract students. Such strategies have been developed in the force of a largely un-regulated environment. The decree on higher education sets the principles and regulations regarding the
implementation and management of HE in the Lao PDR to ensure that teaching and learning, scientific research, and academic services of public and private HEIs are of high quality, effective, and responsive to the needs of developing new academics, specialists, researchers, scholars, and scientists who are knowledgeable, skilful, ethical, and contribute to the national socio-economic development, facilitating regional and international integration (Government Office, 2015).

The decree indicates that PHE is part of the national education system, providing a governance framework for both public and private institutions. However, there is no specific up-to-date regulatory framework for PHEIs. The decree on HE only establishes an overarching regulatory framework for PHEIs. As observed by Siharath (2010), a series of Prime Ministerial Decrees have provided legislative support for HE which include the Prime Ministerial Decree on Establishing of NUOL (1995), the Decree on Private Education (1995), and the Decree on Higher Education Curriculum (2001). To further strengthen PHEIs and help these organizations to meet regional and international standards, development of a coherent regulatory framework is urgently required to ensure that they attain high quality standards; relevant to labor market demand and contribute to the nation’s socio-economic development.

**Current Status of Private Higher Education Institutions**

The Lao PDR has experienced rapid growth and challenges in HE since education for the public and private sectors were introduced in 1995 (Tatika, 2010). In line with other countries in the East and South-East Asia, the growth of the Lao private sector plays an important role. PHE has become an essential part of the overall national systems as it contributes to economic growth and development. Furthermore, PHEIs have helped absorb the demand for HE and contributed to broadening their access. However, it is difficult to coordinate PHE as their resources do not come from public funding. Their survival depends on being able to attract students, and by offering services and products that are appealing and appropriate (Altbach, 1999).

Notwithstanding, the government has acknowledged the importance of the contribution of private education to human resource development alongside the public
sector that responds to labour demand essential for socio-economic development (Ministry of Lao Education 2011). As an integral part of the national education system, PHE contributes to the socio-economic development plan. Besides, the PHE sector helps to promote skills that individuals can use to raise their income, living standards, and to develop their careers (Altbach, 1999). Indeed, HE contributes to both public and private benefits as well as to improvement in human resources needed for socio-economic growth and operation of a modern economy.

Many tertiary private colleges in the Vientiane find themselves in a highly competitive environment. They are interested in attracting more students. Some colleges demonstrate inadequacy when it comes to promoting and recruiting students to their institutions through the application of various promotional mix tools. As competition for new student enrolments in HE increases, these strategies have needed to be developed in the context of marketing communication approaches that employ promotional mix tools and digital approaches, amongst other factors. Traditional media advertising such as television, radio, and newspapers employed to promote their institutions are being replaced by social media, technology media, and the internet. Some colleges offer the internet services, discounts on tuition fee, scholarships, and prizes. As the private education market has expanded, competition among tertiary private colleges is obviously evident in the local media such as the Vientiane Times, Vientiane Mai, and Pasasonh newspaper, and Lao National television.

This market economy context has culminated in greater competition in the service for tertiary private college management, in order to attract and satisfy students, as customers. The rivalry across institutions has been intense in terms of resources for teachers/lecturers, buildings, other facilities for teaching and learning processes, and student activities in order to provide quality education services and to gain student satisfaction (Thant & Vokes, 1997).
Expansion of Private Higher Education Institutions

PHEIs have developed rapidly since the Prime Minister’s Decree on Private Education in 1995 and the 2001 Decree on Higher Education Curriculum (Xaysomphou, 2006; Ogawa, 2009; & Takita, 2010). Nouansavanh (2009) reported that the government’s authorization to open PHEIs was in response to the heightened increase in demand for HE and the preparation for regional integration. Thus, the government’s promotion of the PHE sector draws business attention towards investing in this area. Since the establishment of government policy on promoting private education, there has been a substantial increase in the number of tertiary private colleges in the Lao PDR.

From 1996-1997 to 2012-2013 academic years, tertiary private colleges continued to expand increasing from two colleges in 2006 to 54 colleges in 2012. As a consequence, the number of students rapidly increased (Education Statistics Information and Technology Center 2012). In 1996-1997 academic years, there were 2,502 student enrolments in tertiary private colleges. The student population continued to rise to 23,469 in the 2012-2013 academic year (Education Statistics Information and Technology Center 2012). Figures 2.2 and 2.3, shows the rise in numbers of tertiary private colleges and students, respectively, in the 1995-1996 to 2012-2013 academic years.
Figure 2-2 The rise in number of tertiary private colleges in the 1995-1996 to 2012-2013 period
Source: Educational Statistic and Information Technology Centre, Ministry of Education and Sports (2012)

Figure 2-3 The growth in number of students in the 1995-1996 to 2012-2013 period
Source: Educational Statistic and Information Technology Centre, Ministry of Education and Sports (2012)
During the 1995 and 1997 academic years, tertiary private colleges were allowed to offer only diploma and certificate courses. After the 2002-2003 academic year, the Ministry of Education permitted tertiary private colleges to provide Bachelor degree programs. The main reasons underpinning this decision were to meet the booming demand for tertiary private college education and educational industry services to the public, labour market requirements, short-term programs for executive higher level qualification (higher diploma), and taking up the excess students unable to enrol in public universities and HEIs. In response to labour market needs and demands for HE services, tertiary private colleges requested permission from the MoE to allow them to offer higher diploma programs as a trial in 1993. In 1997 these programs were approved by the MoE. For example, Comcenter College was the first college to offer a Bachelor program followed by a number of other private colleges. The number of institutions has increased dramatically, providing higher diploma and Bachelor programs, as well as contributing significantly to the development of the human resource capital of the nation.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation UNESCO, (2008), a major increase of students enrolment in PHEIs can be attributed to two reasons: First, there is excess demand for HE which cannot be met solely by public HEIs. Consequently, PHEIs were established to meet the excess demand. Second, PHEIs provide a different type of education service such as educational programs taught in English (e.g., Business Administration, Business English, Accounting and Banking, Finance). These courses are not available in public universities or diploma and certificate programs, which are in high demand among upper secondary school leavers, especially those who can afford some form of post-secondary education to improve their employability in the labour market.

Conclusion

PHEI providers in the Lao PDR have to deal with significant internal challenges and constraints to effectively contribute to the nation’s competitiveness and helps meet government targets for economic development by 2020. To help PHEIs meet with these challenges, the government has encouraged and implemented policies to enable
PHEIs to be more innovative and creative to enhance their competitiveness and quality of service provision.

To compete effectively in the challenging circumstances that confront the region, PHEIs need to have a clear sense of purpose; well-defined polices and strategic plans; and a sound understanding of the marketing communication and promotional mix strategies. These processes and structures will help these institutions to meet the demands of the economy and increase their market share nationally and in the region. This is particularly the case in the context of ASEAN integration. Globalization within a world economic system has contributed to a rapid shift towards knowledge-based economies, with a reliance on higher education, which has become an important component of a nation’s survival (Lee & Healy, 2006).

Accordingly, PHEIs in the Lao PDR need to develop their marketing communication strategies and promotional mix tools, knowledge capital, information technology, communication, and social media tools to ensure that their relevance are current. Information and communication technology is playing an increasingly critical role within the education system. Particularly, there is heightened interest in how education can both benefit from and contribute to ordinal society in which we live (UNESCO, 2014).

The application and use of internet and social networks is growing in the capital and main towns in the Lao PDR (UNESCO, 2012). From 2000 to 2011, the number of internet users in the Lao PDR has increased rapidly from 6,000 to 527,400. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are blooming among young generation and parents with approximately 129,660.29 users (UNESCO, 2012). In this context, PHEIs need to integrate and diversify in their adoption of using social media, the internet, and electronic media in their marketing and marketing communication strategies so that students, parents, and sponsors as well as college staff and lecturers are able to access up-to-date information about their institutions.

PHEIs should consider creating or designing websites that carter to a wide range of diverse Lao socio-economic ethnic groups so that people who come from different
backgrounds can be informed. Providing information in both Lao and English languages on their website will facilitate communication with local and international students.

Furthermore, Lao PHEI providers need to collaborate with foreign universities in order for their institutions to be competitively sustainable. However, they need to develop their strategic plans and policies for international partnerships as these collaborations will bring mutual and multiple benefits for all partners (Knight, 2013). PHEIs not only have to be well-recognized in the country, but they have to be widely seen to be good by the international community if they intend to recruit and attract students from other countries or even neighboring countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and China. Gaining international recognition and prestige for HEIs will bring national economic benefits as it is part of the process of preparing the country for the regional and international economic integration.

Research is one of the essential roles for HEIs in the Lao PDR and should be given more support. There is a need to increase funds for marketing research activities in and across disciplines, and link research in programs in an effort to motivate and promote lecturers (Xaysomphou, 2006). As Marginson (2011) indicated, the shift in the global balance of power is signified by the impressive growth of research in the Confucian zone. In 2007, investment in research and development (R&D), in the Asia-Pacific has been significant, including 3.5% of GDP in Korea, and 2.6% in Taiwan and Singapore. This level of investment compares favorably with that in the Western Europe and the USA which has accounted about 2.7% of GDP. If the Lao government ambition is to strengthen higher education and upgrade academic qualifications, when compared with its Asia-Pacific and South-East Asian neighbors, then a sufficient budget needs to be allocated for R&D.

The following chapter (Chapter 3), Literature Review, examines marketing communication approaches that employ promotional mix tools and electronic media in relation to the ways in which HEIs utilize promotional mix tools, brand image, reputation, and electronic media. The chapter includes a discussion on the importance of developing effective marketing communication strategies in higher education.
Chapter 3
Literature Review

Overview

In recent times, there has been an intensification and massification of global competition in the higher education sector. Increasingly, higher education institutions (HEIs) have been called upon to be innovative and creative in their promotional strategies to attract new and retain existing students. These strategies have needed to be developed in the context of marketing communication (MC) approaches that employ promotional mix (PM) tools and digital disruptions, amongst other factors. The present literature review, examines these factors in relation to the ways in which HEIs utilize MC including promotional mix tools, brand image, reputation, and electronic media.

The chapter proceeds with a discussion on the importance of developing effective marketing communication strategies in higher education (HE). Moreover, integrated marketing communication (IMC) can play an important role of incorporating the coordination of promotional mix tools in HE strategy development. The next section of this chapter argues that whilst there is a relationship between MC and IMC, and between IMC and PM within the context of a HE target market, these relationships had not been considered concurrently by the literature. In this section, the importance of considering these three approaches simultaneously is highlighted. A conclusion ends this chapter.

Marketing in Higher Education

Marketing in the higher education sector is not new (Ivy, 2008). Colleges and universities engage in marketing communication service to increase student enrolment numbers (Messah, 2011; Rudd & Mills, 2008; Ivy, 2008). Tertiary institutions are pushed to turn to marketing owing to the intense competition between HEIs (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012; Bradmore & Smyrnios, 2009; Rudd et al., 2008; Wong, 2006). The heightened competition and associated spend in marketing and advertising has made it
difficult for students to decide on the best selection of the courses, career options, and a university to suit their needs. Institutions tend to use similar marketing techniques to attract and enhance a student’s experience. By turning to marketing, HEIs seek to influence students’ decision choices (Rudd & Mills, 2008).

Thus, the role of marketing in student recruitment has become increasingly important (Ivy, 2008). One outcome of this trend is for tertiary institutions to adopt promotional mix principles and methods used in the product-based sector as part of their HE marketing strategies (Ivy, 2008). Notwithstanding, college administrators need to understand the labor market needs and demands of their students. They also need to have the capacity to develop a mix of effective integrated marketing strategies (Kitchen, 2005; Michael, 1990).

An in-depth review of the relevant literature has failed to provide a sound definition of promotional mix. Notwithstanding, a number of authors have discussed promotional mix in terms of promotion (Wong, 2006), and as a component of the 7Ps (Kotler & Fox, 1995), 7Ps (Ivy, 2008), and the 9Ps (Rudd & Mills, 2008). Despite equating promotional mix with promotion, the key elements of promotional mix include advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, personal selling, events and sponsorships, brand image and reputation, and electronic media (digital, social media, websites, online platforms).

As shown in Figure 3.1, on the one hand, promotional mix can be reviewed as an outgrowth of the marketing mix framework comprising of the 7Ps (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Ivy, 2008) and the 9Ps (Rudd & Mills, 2008). On the other hand, PM is associated with marketing communication (MC) and integrated marketing communication (IMC).

Marketing communication can be defined as a collective term for the aggregate of communication tasks utilized for marketing products and sources, the purpose of which is to add customer value (Kitchen, 2005). The separate elements of the marketing communication mix are: advertising (Clow & Baack, 2002), public relations (Kitchen & Schultz, 2001), sales promotion (Yeshin, 1998; Ogden, 1998),
direct marketing (Evans, 1999), personal selling (Shimp, 2000), exhibitions (de Pelsmacker et al., 2001), sponsorship (Shimp, 2000), inter alia. Yeshin (1998) noted that each aspect has a specific function to achieve. Messages are heightened when marketing communications are reinforced by other tools in the mix.

As the five elements of the promotional mix have their strength across a number of different characteristics, Fill (1995) concluded that these tools share three main qualities, namely their ability to communicate, costs involved, and control retained by each individual tool. Fill (1995) added that each element has a different capacity to communicate and aimed to achieve different objectives, differentially affecting an overall marketing campaign.

Over the previous decades, MC has been used as an umbrella term to refer to the diverse communication tasks that are integrated strategically into functional areas. This integration has led to the development of IMC tools, principles, and approaches, helping to reach new consumers and other stakeholders (Kitchen, 2005).

According to Glynn Mangold and Faulds, (2009) IMC is the guiding principle organizations follow to communicate with their target market. Integrated marketing communication attempts to coordinate and control various elements of the promotional mix: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, public relations/publicity, direct marketing, and events and sponsorships to produce a unified customer-focused message and therefore, achieve various organizational objectives (p.357).

Schultz and Schultz (2004) defined IMC as a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences. Similarly, Kliatchko, (2005) viewed IMC as the concept and process of strategically managing audience-focused, channel-centred and results-driven brand communication programs over time.
The definition provided by Schultz and Schultz (2004) seems to be suitable for the current thesis. These authors suggested that IMC is a business process, providing value for customers and internal stakeholders. This definition complements other IMC definitions through its employment of the terms *business process, evaluation,* and *measurability* (Kliatchko, 2005). In contrast, Kliatchko (2005) neither emphasizes explicitly individual stakeholder groups, nor explains how the results-driven characteristic of IMC helps to achieve organizational objectives, or point out the relevance of the long-term brand value and short-term financial returns. It appears that researchers (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010) note that it may not be possible to agree upon a universal definition of IMC, given the various interpretations of IMC and its different values in the academic and industrial areas. There is a multitude of definitions and concept of what IMC is about and what it entails, right through to its implementation.

Integrated marketing communication can be defined or approached in a variety of ways. One such view is that it is comprised of five key significant features of IMC (Shimp, 2000): goals; processes; uses all forms of communication, coordination to achieve a strong brand image, and building a relationship between a brand and a customer. Each of these features is discussed below.

First, a goal of IMC is to influence behavior through directed communication. Second, the IMC process should start with the customer or prospect, and then work backwards to the brand communicator. Third, IMC should use all forms of communication and all sources of brand or company contacts as prospective message delivery channels. Fourth, synergy and coordination help to achieve a strong brand image. Finally, IMC requires successful marketing communications that needs to build a relationship between the brand and the customer. These attributes indicate that IMC include many marketing activities and it seems that IMC is defined by those who are implementing it (Kitchen, 2005, p.75).

Pickton and Hartley (1998) listed another important feature of IMC including clearly identified marketing communications objectives that are consistent with other organizational objectives. Integrated marketing communication also incorporates a
planned approach which covers the full extent of marketing communications activities in a coherent and synergistic way. Pickton and Hartley (1998) also included several ranges of IMC such as range of target audiences, promotional mix, messages, brands, and media.

It is apparent that any outcomes associated with various features of IMC identified above are unable to be achieved by an advertising agency alone. Thus, any management implications would most likely affect an entire client organization. When viewed from this perspective, it is likely that IMC goes beyond a mere focus on promotional mix, and require an integration of the various aspects of IMC. An outcome of integration is a coherence of all elements of marketing communications, leading to high levels of efficiency and effectiveness (Pickton & Hartley, 1998).

Figure 3.1 provides a structure for the write up of this chapter which begin with a definition of PM; an examination of PM as an outgrowth of marketing communication such promotion and the traditional 4Ps, 7Ps, 9Ps; a review of research on PM tools in HE with a specific focus on promotion and advertising, sales promotion, public relations, events and sponsorships, direct marketing, personal selling, brand image and reputation, and electronic media (i.e., digital, social media, information and communication technology or online platforms). The following section discusses the importance of developing effective marketing communication strategies in higher education. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the relationships between MC and IMC, and between IMC and PM within the context of a HE target market including parents and students.

**Towards a Definition of Promotional Mix in Higher Education**

Promotional mix can be viewed as a subset of marketing communication which is made up of four major components: advertising, sales promotion, personal selling, and marketing public relations (Kitchen, 1996). Wong (2006) highlighted that promotional mix consists of advertising, publicity, sales promotion, direct marketing, personal selling, events and sponsorships that are coordinated to produce a unified message in integrated marketing communication (Figure 3.1). Similarly, Rudd and Mills, (2008)
and Rowley (1998) stated that promotional mix for HE comprises of advertising, direct marketing, sales promotion, public relations and publicity, personal selling, and sponsorship.

Promotional mix is the combination of different promotional channels that are used to communicate a promotional message. This mix comprises of a suitable selection from the wide range of tools that are available for use. An appropriate promotional mix needs to be developed in order to meet the promotional objectives of any given promotional strategy (Rowley, 1998). Ivy (2008) indicated that all universities utilize promotional mix elements including advertising, publicity, public relations, and sales promotional efforts to provide a market with information on what it has to offer.
Thus, institutions need to communicate their services to a target marketplace via promotional strategies.

As mentioned earlier, it is apparent that all these contexts have failed to provide a sound definition of PM. Promotional mix is not a single tool but rather a mix of several tools that HEIs utilize as part of their marketing objectives to communicate with customers. Despite increasing support for the adoption and implementation of a PM framework for HEIs (Ivy, 2008; Wong, 2006; Rowley, 1998) a clear definition is absent. There is a need for PHE providers to coordinate promotional mix tools carefully into consistent and coordinate communication programs. This process can lead to an integrated approach to marketing communication. One promotional tool can be used to complement other communication tool such as advertising. Several tools can be employed to deliver a consistent message.

**Promotional Mix as an Outgrowth of Marketing Communication**

*R Promotion*

Promotion is also known as marketing communication (Wong, 2006). As noted by Wong (2006), most practitioners and educators prefer to use marketing communication in terms of ‘promotion’. Similarly, Alan et al. (2010) stated that promotion represents several aspects of marketing communication and has perhaps become the most important element among the 4Ps. Promotion is pervasive and high profile which can certainly break a marketing mix in the 7Ps (Al-Fattal, 2010).

Rudd and Mills (2008) highlighted that promotion in the 9Ps can very well have the central role in marketing for the HE sector. Promotion can enhance recognition and provide exposure for a college or university. In addition, promotion assists an institution to reach a target market more than any other of the P’s (Rudd & Mills, 2008). Thus, promotion can play important function in the marketing of a university (Hayes, 2002). Promotion also can play a key role for market success in HE (Almadhoun et al., 2011). More importantly, an appropriate mix of promotional activities and channels can enhance student recruitment (Messah, 2011; Al-Fattal, 2010, Wiese, 2008; Kittle, 2000).
The traditional 4Ps, 7Ps, and 9Ps

As alluded to earlier, promotion is one of the key elements of 4Ps, 7Ps, and 9Ps in the marketing mix (Kotler, 1995, Ivy, 2008; Rudd & Mills, 2008). Originally, the theory base for marketing in HE and practice was derived from the 4P’s marketing mix: product, price, place, and promotion (Rudd & Mills, 2008; Ivy, 2008; Wong, 2006; Kotler, 2002). Owing to the uniqueness of marketing for HE, the 4Ps marketing model was inadequate in the service or education industry (Rudd & Mill, 2008). The nature of the educational service requires additional components beyond the marketing mix (Al-Fattal, 2010).

To address the limitations associated with the 4Ps employed in the educational service sector, Kotler and Fox (1995) developed a 7Ps version of a marketing mix for educational institutions. The marketing model consists of program, promotion, price, place, people, physical evidence/facilities, and processes (Kotler & Fox, 1995). The additional 3Ps of program, physical evidence/facilities, and processes were added in order to satisfy the needs of the service-provider customers (Figure 3.1).

Ivy (2008) proposed another form of the 7Ps for marketing mix. In this framework, four components are consistent with Kotler and Fox’s model such as program, promotion, price, and people. Ivy (2008) explained that the people component of the marketing mix involves all HEIs staff including academic, administrative, and support staff that communicate with prospective students and current students. Physical evidence/facilities comprises of a variety of tangible aspects that are assessed by a university’s target markets, covering teaching materials to the appearance of the buildings and lecture facilities at university. Processes are all the administrative and bureaucratic functions of the university such as how HEIs deal with enquiries and registration, course evaluation and examination, and result-dissemination to graduates and so on. Ivy (2008) identified three unique components consisting of prospectus, prominence, and premiums. Ivy explained that a prospectus can be thought of as a direct mail-related promotion and direct mail from a university. Prominence refers to the use of the university’s image or brand for student recruitment purpose. This factor is comprised of the reputation of academic staff, a university’s position on league
tables (e.g., Times Higher Education World University Rankings), MBA reviews in the popular press, and on-line information. Premiums are those elements that act as an incentive or add value to offerings including accommodation, international exchange programs, flexible tuition approaches, digital facilities, and class sizes (Figure 3.1).

Rudd and Mills (2008) developed the 9Ps marketing mix model, expanding marketing principles for the sale of higher education. Six elements are consistent with the traditional marketing mix. Rudd and Mills suggested three other unique components such as partnerships, positioning, and packaging (Figure 3.1). Rudd and Mills (2008) explained that partnerships comprise of two or more businesses that offer complementary services and combine their resources and marketing efforts. Positioning is the market-niche a college or university retains. Packaging is similar to partnership where all of the service can be charged for one single price. Rudd and Mills (2008) indicated that the use of the 9Ps in marketing mix allowed HEI administrators to understand the differences between product-oriented marketing and service-oriented marketing.

This thesis adopts the notion of promotion as elaborated in the 4Ps, 7Ps, and 9Ps frameworks. These three perspectives are integrated into the marketing communication mix as highlighted in the literature. HEIs can use these functions as a framework for developing effective promotional mix tools that are associated with the strategies necessary for the successful MC developed for a university or college. The following section reviews promotional mix practices in HE.

**Research on Promotional Mix Tools in Higher Education**

The present review on promotional mix in HE focuses on a number of key elements including promotion and advertising, sales promotion, public relations, events and sponsorships, direct marketing, personal selling, brand image and reputation, and electronic media. Each of these promotional mix tools is discussed, below.
**Promotion and advertising**

In relation to use of promotional mix in HE, advertising can be regarded as any paid form of non-personal presentation, promotion of ideas, products; or services communicated via television, radio, newspapers, magazine, billboards (Messah, 2011). Advertising is considered an important form of promotion as it can be a very cost-effective method for communication across large audiences (Belch & Belch, 2003). Advertising can play a significant role in increasing student enrolment (Messah, 2011; Kittle, 2000).

Messah (2011) investigated the effects of selected marketing communication tools on student enrolment in private Kenyan universities. This research found that print and electronic media advertising is a key tool for universities and has the potential to attract customers across a wide reach. Traditional marketing communication tools such as billboards, poster, radio, university newsletters, and alumni magazines were observed to be less effective tools for reaching and providing information to prospective students (Messah, 2011).

Contrary to the findings of Messah, Kittle (2000) investigated relatively recent advertising practices utilized by 102 US colleges and universities. Findings revealed that universities employed integrated marketing communication, an approach where television, newspaper, and radio comprised three main vehicles for commercial media communication purposes. Advertising is a major element in the strategies utilized by US-based HE institutions. Television combines sight, sound, and motion capturing, high levels of attention. Radio has high geographic and demographic selectivity and is low cost relatively. Newspapers have flexibility and timeliness with high levels of believability (Kotler, 2000). These three commercial media vehicles appear to be appropriate advertising tools for the Lao educational market.

Kittle (2000) highlighted that television is one of the most effective advertising tools for promoting HEIs. Jugenheimer (1995) however, argued that using television to promote institutions can be expensive. Similarly, Kotler (2002) noted that particular types of advertising such as that on television typically is more expensive than other
forms including newspapers. Kitchen (1996) stated that advertising comes with media costs, audience fragmentation, media clutter, competitive trends, and the availability of complementary tools. Jugenheimer (1995) also claimed that advertising is not only costly but produces too few measurable results. It is apparent that certain forms of advertising typically require relatively large budgets, while other forms come at a small cost. Kotler (2002) highlighted that advertising on television involves high cost, high clutter, and fleeting exposure with less audience selectivity. In this context, using television to advertise educational programs is likely to be more expensive than using radio and newspapers. When choosing media, it is more important to consider the most cost-effective communication channels, and know the capacity of the media type to deliver reach and frequency, and the impact of its associated costs (Kotler, 2002).

Jugenheimer (1995) asserted that a shortage of funds remained a problem for advertising by universities. In this regard, Jugeheimer suggested that advertising should be viewed as an investment. Moreover, it needed to be planned and funded for the long-term, with specific goals targeted for the immediate future. But more complex objectives need to be set for the longer duration. To this end, institutions need to develop an achievable marketing plan and select proper advertising methods that require minimum resources, especially when marketing budgets are limited.

Sales promotion

As a part of the promotional mix, sales promotion (SP) is a form of indirect advertisement, designed to stimulate sales (Sanday & Bayode, 2011). Kotler (2002) noted that SP consists of a diverse collection of incentive tools, mostly short-term, designed to stimulate quick or high volume purchases of particular products or services by consumers or traders. Similarly, Rowley (1998) stated that SP is a short-term incentive to persuade trial or purchase of a product or service. Generally, sales promotion tools comprise the use of incentives, free samples, twin-pack bargains, temporary price reductions, and special discount bonuses (Sanday & Bayode, 2011). Other sales promotion tools used by organizations consist of coupons, cash refund offers, reductions on prices, premiums, prizes, trade show countries, conventions, contests for sales reps, and specialty advertising (Kotler, 2002).
While advertising offers a reason to buy, SP offers an incentive to buy (Kotler, 2002). The advantages of sales promotion are to produce an immediate consumer response and attract attention (Sanday & Bayode, 2011). On the one hand, sales promotion creates product awareness and allows easy measurement of results. On the other hand, sales promotion is non-personal in nature and difficult to differentiate from other marketing efforts (Sanday & Bayode, 2011). Kitchen (1996) highlighted that there are two schools of thought in relation to SP, one of which views sales promotion in a positive light while the other considers sales promotion negatively because SP activities increase emphasis and expenditure. Whether sales promotion activities will continue to be viewed in a favorable light is doubtful, given the emergence of some negative aspects.

In promoting HE, sales promotion activities seem to be short-term and temporary, and can involve price reductions or some other incentives aimed at boosting student enrolment and retention. With regard to various types of sales promotion practiced in HE, this literature review focused on discount offers; the provision of scholarships for outstanding students; and financial incentives. The use of different sales promotion strategies is discussed below.

Higher education institutions utilize discount offers and scholarships strategies as a form of sales promotion activities mainly to attract students. In understanding a student choice of university and marketing strategies in Syrian private HE, Al-Fattal (2010) found that universities implement different discount strategies. It was not uncommon for these strategies to provide up to 10% discount for students from local areas, 7.5% reductions on tuition fees to siblings, 35% tuitions fee for the highest achieving students in an academic year, 100% fee waivers for students who receive high academic scores greater than 90% in any module, and full fee waivers scholarships for the best achievers in the National Secondary School Exams and other equivalent exams. Overall, the aim of these strategies is to attract quality students.

A Malaysian study investigated the expectations of Malaysian Chinese students on selected factors which were regarded as influential on their university choice (Kim and Periyayya, 2013). The overall findings indicate that one of the significant factors
that influence the choice of HEIs is education fees. Additionally, Quraeshi and Luqmani (2009) revealed that the most common strategy used by a number of private colleges is the provision of cost comparisons of various options where institutions compare tuition fees, books, materials, and living expenses. Ivy (2008) noted that pricing element in the service marketing mix is important as it not only affects the revenue of a HEI but also provides perceptions of quality. The pricing tools used in HE marketing involves payment arrangements, tuition fees, flexibility of payment of tuition fees and program duration. This element is important in students’ decisions to return to full-time study (Ivy, 2008).

Low cost would seem to be another influential consideration for students. Wiese (2008) investigated relevant important-choice factors that first-year South African university students consider when they decide to enroll at HEIs. Findings from this study reveal that price/fees and financial assistance are regarded as moderately important, especially for Indian and Coloured students. HEIs need to choose a competitive price and communicate this to prospective students, particularly to their parents. Providing discounts for tuition fees can attract students (Wiese, 2008). In short, price is always an important factor for prospective students to consider when pursuing education. In line with this argument, price differentiation is yet a further consideration (Cheung et al., 2011).

**Public relations**

Public relations (PR) are planned and sustained management functions that evaluate public attitudes and identify the policies and procedures of an institution with the public of interest. Public relations help to implement a program of action to gain public understanding and acceptance (Malan et al., 1991). Public relations can also be used as a cost effective component of marketing communication that is linked to advertising, image, awareness factors, and recognition, as well as being supportive and complementary to other forms of promotional mix (Kitchen, 1996).

As the power of advertising recedes owing to media expense and audience fragmentation, PR can play an important role in terms of emphasis and expenditure
both at marketing and corporate communication levels (Kitchen, 1996). Kotler (2002) noted that PR are often used to support, corporate product, promotion, and image-building (Kotler, 2002).

This view suggest that the appropriate blending of or mix of promotion is what leads to the achievement of marketing objectives. Therefore, HEI providers need to choose proper promotional mix elements in order to persuade potential students and stakeholders. Owing to the intangibility of education, it is desirable for HEIs to find ways of increasing a prospective students’ awareness of what institutions offer. Effective PR tools include publications, events, news, speeches, public-service activities, and identity media (Kotler, 2002). Other public relations tools utilized in the HE sector comprise of university tours, career fairs, exhibitions, open days, information services, personal contact, and so on (Messah, 2011).

In terms of different forms of PR employed in HE, this literature focuses on orientation and open days; providing special information; roadshows, exhibitions; provision of scholarships; college activities and special events. The uses of a wide range of PR techniques are discussed below.

Orientation and open days. In promoting HEIs, providing orientation and open days are used as promotional strategy tools to enhance student enrolment (Messah, 2011). Wiese (2008) highlighted that campus visits and open days are very useful sources of information in the South African education market. Wiese also explained that open days provide an opportunity for HEIs to create awareness of courses and programs, and offered instructional environments and support services. University open days have also been used as opportunities for institutions to change the perceptions of and to build relationships with prospective students and their parents (Wiese, 2008). It is important for HEIs to include parents in their target market for open days and campus visits.

Pampaloni (2010) stated that one way students narrow their college choice is by visiting schools, personally. Pampaloni also emphasizes that the students’ perceptions after physically visiting a school weighted heavily in the decision-making process.
Interestingly, open houses or tours were found to be the third most influential factor after programs and location. The goals of campus visits are to provide students with a substantial understanding of a wide range of aspects of what the school is about both culturally and socially (Rudd & Mills, 2008). It is evident that visiting campuses allows students to see the school with their own eyes. Campus visits can help students by answering their inquiries and providing information prior to making any choice concerning a college. However, attending open days and campus visits might be difficult chronologically and financially for students and parents who live far away (Pampaloni, 2010).

As a way of encouraging out-of-state enrolments, Pampaloni suggested that the use of advanced technology as it can provide detailed graphic representations of the physical attributes of a school. HEIs still incorporate orientation and open days and campus visits because personal experiences of a campus, involving physical, academic, and social aspects can influence many aspects of student decision-making.

Providing special information, roadshows, exhibitions. The provision of special information, roadshows, and exhibitions are commonly used in promoting activities to facilitate students’ college decision-making processes (Cheung et al., 2011). Messah (2011) and Amiso (2000) revealed that providing information can have a significant role in attracting students from different backgrounds. Messah (2011) further highlighted that providing special information to prospective students, and organizing event speeches and exhibitions are effective tools for attracting and maintaining students in private Kenyan universities. Universities can employ these promotional tools to inform, remind, and persuade prospective students to select their institutions (Ivy, 2008).

With regard to lessons from the UK, Australia and Singapore, establishing overseas offices to facilitate their export of education services is found to be an effective promotional strategy in Asian markets (Cheung et al., 2011). The overseas offices can provide on the spot personal services and help to answer concerns of international students, and aid in solving their questions so that they can make informed decisions.
(Cheung et al., 2011). In this connection, this strategy might be applicable to the Lao educational market. PHEIs can employ this tactic to promote their institution by establishing promotional centres or offices in selected target markets in different provinces to provide and disseminate important educational information to prospective students and their parents.

In Malaysia, private HEIs use annual travelling roadshows including education fairs and exhibitions conducted in the big cities. According to some commentators, these roadshows have become more extensive and elaborate each year (Quraeshi & Luqmani, 2009). At these roadshows private groups, colleges, and universities from foreign countries including UK, USA, Australia, Japan, and foreign consulates attend. HEIs can review potential students’ credentials, interview them, and make on-the-spot decision concerning admission of candidature (Quraeshi & Luqmani, 2009). Roadshows and exhibitions help to promote the export of HE services and to reach the market.

**Provision of scholarships.** Scholarships and financial aid are important factors for influencing students choice of college (Cheung et al., 2011, Wiese, 2008). Providing scholarships and loan schemes are also important for attracting quality students (Asian Development, 2012; Wiese, 2008). Cheung et al. (2010; 2011) highlighted that scholarships and financial assistance form a significant aspect a students’ decision-making process to study overseas. Similarly, students and parents interviewed in countries such as Mumbai, New Delhi, Jakarta, and Kuala Lumpur expressed that the provision of financial aid had a substantial influence in their choice of destination for overseas study (Cheung et al., 2010).

Many governments in Asian developing countries also provide student loan schemes and financial aid to ensure extended access to HE. These loans come in the form of subsidies to students (Asian Development Bank, 2012). In most cases, financial assistance in the form of scholarships and student loans are given to students from low-income families in order to assist them to afford their tuition and fees (Asian Development Bank, 2012). In India, loan companies and banks offer low-interest
loans that target students at exhibition or trade fairs (Cheung et al., 2010). As scholarships, bursaries, and loan schemes are considered to be potential influences; this financial aspect of HE is widely publicized to prospective students and parents (Wiese, 2008). To this end, it is noteworthy that providing grants, scholarships, and low interest loans in order to reduce the financial burden of students and family is important. These types of promotional activities should be included in HE marketing strategies.

**College activities and special events.** College activities and special events are described as one of the most effective channels in promoting HE. Amiso (2000) expressed that US-based HEIs utilize various form of college activities and special events to improve their institutional image and to attract students. These activities include organizing special events to attract attention and raise funds for scholarships. Other activities involve working at a community level such as arranging presentations about the university to various organisations (Amiso, 2000).

**Direct marketing**

Direct marketing (DM) is one of the fast-growing forms of promotion in terms of dollar expenditure (Cowels & Kiecker, 1998). For many marketers, it is rapidly becoming the strategy of choice for reaching consumers. Generally, DM comprises of various activities, such as database management, direct selling, telemarketing and direct response ads via direct mail, internet, different broadcast, and print media (Belch & Belch, 2003; Kotler, 2002). Other forms of DM include mail shots and leaflets inserted in professional magazines that are used to promote information products (Rowley, 1998). Similar to other function of promotional mix elements, direct marketing can also be used to influence student enrolment in HE.

In relation to the practice of promotional mix in HE, direct marketing is fundamental to stimulating the interest of potential consumers of existing programs and services (Messah, 2011). Unlike other forms of promotional mix, direct marketing is viewed as the way in which organizations communicate directly with target customers (Belch & Belch, 2003). Personal communication is regarded as highly efficient because it
generates immediate feedback informing a communicator if he/she has been successful in conveying the intended message (Messah, 2011). One of the advantages of DM is an opportunity to receive an immediate response from customers (Sunday & Bayode, 2011). Sunday and Bayode (2011) concluded that DM also covers a wide audience with targeted advertising and allows complete, customized, personal message as well as producing measurable results.

Direct marketing tools utilized by HEIs include distribution of brochures, flyers, and leaflets, as well as organizing study/school visits/career days (Messah, 2011; Kittle, 2000; Amiso, 2000). The use of institutional print media such as brochures and flyers can play an important role in advertising private colleges, particularly in developing countries (Kittle, 2000). As a case in point, distributing brochures are rated as the most effective marketing communication tool in Kenya as they provide information to potential students (Messah, 2011). Amiso (2000) suggested that HEIs should use a combination of ads in local prints media and recruitment visits in order to increase student numbers. This evidence indicates that traditional media (i.e., brochures, flyers) is considered to be a useful source of information for HE marketing purposes.

**Personal selling**

In relation to personal selling (PS), oral communication with potential consumers involves personal contact. Personal selling is the most expensive form of promotional mix and relies almost exclusively on the ability of a sales person (Sunday & Bayode, 2011), and involves high-cost per contact (Kitchen, 1996). Messah (2011) however, highlighted that the interactive nature of personal selling helps to build relationships with potential HE customers. It is also a useful communication tool at certain stages of a buying process, especially when the intention is to develop a buyer’s first choice; enhance certainty, and subsequent proceedings (Messah, 2011).

Higher education marketing officers utilize various personal selling tools via face-to-face meetings, telephone conversations, and digital technologies (i.e., video conference, text messaging) (Messah, 2011). Utilization of face-to-face meeting and word-of-mouth communication can play a significant role in disseminating messages
about programs (Kim & Periyayya, 2013; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Messah, 2011; Wiese, 2008).

Face-to-face and word-of-mouth communications are considered to be useful sources of information in HEIs. Kim and Periyayya (2013) noted that face-to-face communication via senior students at open days, recruitment fairs, and awards ceremonies play a role in branding institutions, because these tools can influence decisions made by parents and students. Kim and Periyayya (2013) also highlighted that television and radio is less popular among students than face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication. Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) stated that social networks are excellent platforms for word-of-mouth. Studies indicate that recommendations from family, friends, and acquaintances continue to play a key role in students’ choice of university. Therefore, the impact of word-of-mouth through the use of social media is expected to be highly effective (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011).

In a South African study, female and male students confirmed that word-of-mouth via parents, high school teachers, and alumni are useful sources of information when it comes to HEIs selection (Wiese, 2008). Wiese recommended that word-of-mouth should be associated with other communication channels including open days, campus visits, radio advertisements, and school visits in order to be a powerful source of information. For word-of-mouth to be effective, institutions need to ensure that current students, alumni, secondary school teachers, and other well-connected people that have influence in their communications, are part of the target groups to be informed about the strengths, accomplishments, and successes of the institution (Wiese, 2008). Thus, face-to-face and word-of-mouth communications are regarded as significant personal selling tools in educational marketing.

Oplatka (2004) noted that, in Israel, word-of-mouth communication can be employed as an effective technique for determining the market needs and demands for an educational institution. This observation also suggests that these communication tools can influence the perceptions of potential students regarding higher education institutions (Duke, 2002).
Brand image and reputation

Kotler and Fox (1995) defined image as the sum of belief, ideas, and impressions that a person has of an objective. Aaker (1991) described a brand as a logo, name, or even a package that differentiates between products or services of different providers. Marconi (1993) emphasized that a brand is not just a name because the name is created to identity a product. A brand is designed to add value to a product and instill personality. Brands are powerful assets representing the essence of a company, outlasting a company’s specific products/services. Thus, they are developed carefully and managed (Pinar et al., 2010). Brand has been increasingly recognized as a key determinant of consumer choice (Mourad et al., 2011).

Branding is an integral part of marketing strategy and involves the creation of a corporate’s identity and reputation (Pinar et al., 2011). Morris and Brent (2001) noted that image and branding can be associated with the promotional aspects of integrated marketing. In this context, HEIs need to understand the need to develop brand strategies to help gain a sustainable competition advantage in the marketplace. The brand image of HEIs can play a crucial role in attitudes held towards an institution (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Morris & Brent, 2001; Ivy, 2001). Paramewaran and Glowacka (1995) indicated that HEIs need to maintain and/or develop a distinct image to create a sustainable competitive advantage in an increasing competitive global market. A distinct image impacts on a student’s willingness to apply to enroll. Thus, creating these images in the mind of the stakeholders is relatively vital (Ivy, 2001).

In a review of the literature, Morris & Brent, (2001) and Curtis et al., (2009) reveals that building a strong image is essential for higher education institutions. The intangibility and inseparability of HE services makes branding even more critical because branding is one of the most important assets of any institutions. The development and management of a distinctive brand helps HEIs to create and maintain a competitive advantage (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). Universities with strong historical and cultural legacies have a clear basis for their commercial brand and top ranking universities can also enhance their image (Curtis et al., 2009). Branding encourages students and parents to identify the quality of services on offer and help to
persuade customers to pay for such services (Curtis et al., 2009). To compete in the marketplace, HEIs need to have an established business brand for the best students, qualified faculty, and general service staff. Amiso (2000) asserted that HEIs can enhance their image via organizing special events, working at a community level, and recommending ways to deal with community concerns inter alia. Mourad et al. (2011) stated that developing brand image is more important than creating awareness; thus HEIs should invest in creating and maintaining the determinants of a brand image dimension rather than in simply expending their promotional campaigns.

The branding of PHEIs appears to be moving towards student-oriented expectations. Kim and Periyayya (2013) investigated the expectations of Malaysian Chinese students who dominate enrolment in PHEIs. Findings reveal that planning branding strategies influence student expectations in highly competitive private education sector (Kim & Periyayya, 2013). In this regard, understanding students’ expectation is crucial for PHEIs. Moreover, PHEI administrators need to comprehend how various student segments might differ in terms of their decision-making behaviors. Kim and Periyayya highlighted that the internet and traditional print media communication are important tools for conveying branding messages. As popular sources of information, integrating websites and links to institutions in printed advertisements and related materials such as brochures and leaflets can be effective in motivating students to visit institutions’ websites for further information. Substantial consideration needs to be given to selecting the most appropriate communication approaches for prospective students when formulating effective media strategies that might help to build brand image.

Electronic media

In recent times, Almadhoun et al. (2011) highlighted the importance of social media as a potential tool in HEIs. Similarly, Constandtinides and Zinck Stagno (2011) noted that the potential of social media as an effective tool in HE marketing. Social media can be regarded as a new hybrid element of the promotional mix (Glynn Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The following section focuses specifically on digital channels: social
media, websites, and information and communication technology (ICT) or online platforms. The use of these media tools is discussed below.

**Digital channels.** The rapid development of digital technologies (i.e., smartphones, email) and associated number of social media adopters and users highlights the potential power and implications for using social media as part of an educational marketing strategy (Deanne et al., 2015; Almadhoun et al., 2011; Constantinides et al., 2011; Alkhas, 2011; Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Research suggests that PHEIs have embraced digital technologies including social media, realizing its implications as an integral element of a marketing mix strategy. These digital tools have the potential to attract students, parents, and sponsors while also providing access to up-to-date information about institutions (Alkhas, 2011).

**Social media.** Marketing has shifted significantly from traditional media to new phenomena known as social media (Almadhoun et al., 2011). There is a wide range of different social media and publishing tools (e.g., Blogs, BlogSpot, Twitter), social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, Myspace), media sharing facilities (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Flickr), and websites (e.g., Wikipedia) that can be utilized (Almadhoun et al., 2011; Deanne et al., 2015). These digital tools, platforms, and technologies can be regarded as essential for strategic and marketing planning. Creating attractive social media applications and connecting with potential and current students is therefore a major challenge for educational marketers. Internet social media marketing tools enable HEIs to reach millions of people, globally (Alkhas, 2011). It appears that many promotional tools (i.e., print media, broadcast media) face major challenges in most, if not all countries around the world, as social media tools can be used to communicate directly with target audiences.

The use of social media and online communication is an excellent platform for social interaction and information sharing and seeking (Almadhoun et al., 2011). For example, in Malaysia, the Education Marketing Division in the Ministry of Higher Education has used social media in promoting Malaysian HE locally and overseas (Almadhoun et al., 2011).
An internet search of private colleges suggests that in the Lao PDR, private colleges are heading towards the adoption and application of the internet, college-websites, Facebook, and YouTube for advertising and communication purposes. Digital media is fast and suitable for young students who live in urban and rural areas. That is, students are able to access college information quickly and widely. Moreover, digital media is cost effective for both institutions and students. The rise of the knowledge economy means that information technology plays an increasingly significant role in communication systems (Mok, 2003). With the emerging phenomenon of digital technology media, PHEIs have to integrate this marketing tool into their strategic planning. Research highlights the importance of word-of-mouth, via sound media, as a powerful source of information. This form of social networking combined with the behavior of future students in social media environments is clearly relevant to the Lao educational market.

Websites. Messah (2011) noted that websites are viewed as one of the most effective promotional tools in HE. Clear and well-organized websites are an essential component of an overall marketing communication recruitment strategy (Messah, 2011). Websites allow prospective students to visit institutional webpages repeatedly and interact with representative from colleges and universities (Messah, 2011). Websites create outstanding opportunities for HEIs to quickly and effectively make information available to prospective students. Information can be updated and communicated regularly and freely (Wiese, 2008). Mazzarol and Soutar (2012) explained that an important characteristic of virtual universities is their ability to make effective use of the internet. As the market penetration of the internet grows globally, it is vital that HEIs have robust online marketing capabilities. Prospective students make considerable use of the internet to access information on courses and institutions prior to making a final decision (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012).

In this regard, integrating technology media, especially social media into a marketing strategy at any institution can be effective as students become digital savvy. This type of advertising can be viewed as a positive investment for the long-term as it is cost-effective and a primary source of information for increasing numbers of college-age
people (Alkhas, 2011). Therefore, one possible solution to help governments establish effective information sources for HEIs, parents, and students is to encourage investment in digital technology, social media, and online platforms. Seeking new methods or sources of information will not just ensure effective communication, but will also provide a possible way of differentiating and assist institutions to compete with each other (Wiese, 2008).

Information and Communication Technology. Online course delivery can help build rapport with students (Rada, 2003), and increase opportunities for significant strengthening of brand image in the educational sector and across national boundaries (Lenn, 2000). Mazzrol and Soutar (2012) suggest that virtual and corporate HEIs have become the new type of HE providers. Owing to the fast development of information and communication technology (ICT), particularly the global expansion of high speed broadband internet services, Web 2.0 social media, and the adoption of mobile computing solution such as the light weight low cost, notebook, computers, and tablets, there are many opportunities for the delivery of higher education services through online technologies (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012).

The growth of ICT online and mobile systems has also created a shift towards online access to academic journals, books, magazines, and newspapers with more libraries becoming virtual in nature (Rada, 2003). ICT has facilitated online learning systems that can generate growth in distance education provision, such as the African Virtual University that operates in more than 20 countries (Altbach et al., 2009). In Malaysia co-branding with foreign universities through distance degree programs via electronic media is another effective strategy for PHEIs to raise their status (Wong, 2006). In the US, growth in virtual universities has reached approximately 20% annually over the previous decade (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). This credible success of virtual universities has helped capture market share.

Armstrong (2000) identified distance learning (DL) as a powerful educational technique when combined with the communication power of the internet. Access to Distance learning courses is not limited to location, classes, or to time. This mode of learning is global and asynchronous, providing flexibility and opportunities for
students (Armstrong, 2001). In addition, distant online learning traverse geographic
distance at all times and can be tailored to suit individual needs (Razavi et al., 2011).

The scalability of online learning also increases the potential for generating significant
revenue (Armstrong, 2001). For example, it is reported that the University of Phoenix
online courses have shown an annual increase in enrolment of almost 45% (Brainard,
2000). As new markets emerge, new ICT give rise to new types of programs and
delivery. As providers of HE worldwide manoeuvre for position, competition is
intensifying rapidly so traditional universities need to re-invent themselves, and to
find new ways to compete (Bradmore & Smyrnios, 2009).

Marketing Communication Strategy in Higher Education

Global HE marketplaces have become transitory through technological advancement
and led to customer-driven and focused marketing environments. With this
environment, technology has enhanced marketing communication strategies, building
upon traditional advertising and unconventional marketing practices (Kitchen &
Burgmann, 2010).

Marketing communication strategies form part of an overall marketing plan geared
towards achieving objectives. Educational marketing strategies can be viewed as a
tool for enhancing the effectiveness in retaining, attracting, and servicing students
(Kotler & Fox, 1995). To this end, HEIs need to provide value and quality as
perceived by the students. Earlier, Nicholls (1989) asserted that the marketers of
educational services needed to have a form understanding of marketing strategy,
marketing mix 4Ps, buyer behavior, and segmentation. Increasingly, marketing
principles and strategies are being employed to help determine programs needs,
institutional, strengths and weakness, and how best to remain competitive (Edmiston-
Strasser, 2009).

Kitchen and Schultz (2000) suggested that enterprises remained fixated on tactical
coordination of promotional components rather than moving towards financial and
strategic integration. Similarly, Holm (2006) noted that educational cultures posed an
obstacle for HEI to move IMC from tactics to strategy.
As noted by Mazzarol and Sourtar (2002), it is not easy to recruit new students. Institutions needed to have effective marketing and promotional strategies, as well as providing sufficient information to prospective students so that they felt in control of the decision process. Additionally, these investigators suggested that a key to success is having a coherent strategy, to enable institutions to position their offerings to target market segments. For instance, local colleges in Malaysia use a mix of promotional strategies such as advertising, publicity, sales promotion, and personal selling, as a way to communicate and distinguish their capabilities (Quraeshi & Luqmani, 2009).

Lack of effective marketing planning and marketing research seems to be a common among HEIs. A number of lessons can be drawn from Mazzarol and Soutar (2008) study. As indicated earlier in this chapter, it appears that on the surface, most educational institutions lack coherent strategies as confirmed by findings from several studies (Oplatka, 2004; Jugenheimer, 1995; Michael et al., 1993). Goldgehn (1990) concluded that most HEIs do not have marketing strategies and/or marketing plans that are integrated and used in a systematic manner. Moreover, marketing was seen as an excellent technique to attract students but it was not generally viewed as a mean to increase student satisfaction, and develop strategic and competitive advantage in the market. For many institution’s marketing was still under the responsibility of admission officers and regarded merely as a sales and promotional function.

Notably, lack of funding seems to be common in marketing higher education (McGrath, 2002; Jugenheimer, 1995). Funding is not only a problem for promotion but also a major constraint for the successful implementation of IMC and other forms of educational marketing. Almost 25 year ago, Michael et al. (1993) claimed that funding is the most significant constraint on institutional marketing as many educational administrators do not regard funds allocated to marketing as highly as investment in research activities. This view remains current, today. For example, only a small number of HEIs in Alberta are engaged in marketing research or had developed a comprehensive marketing plan. Likewise, Jugenheimer (1995) stated that a shortage of funds remains a significant problem for university advertising. Colleges and universities appear to generally do an unsatisfactory job when it comes to
advertising because of improper planning, resistance to advertising, inexperience, and lack of a comprehensive marketing plan.

The findings of Michael et al. (1993) and Jugeheimer (1995) are in line with Oplatka (2004) who identified that fiscal resources are a major constraint for community educational centres in Israel. These constraints made it difficult for centres to develop and conduct professional and high-cost marketing strategies. Duncan and Everett (1993) noted that there is a need for HEIs to allocate sufficient budgets to foster increases in student recruitment and to enhance institutional reputation. It is thus crucial for PHEIs to view marketing as an investment rather than a cost.

**Integrated Marketing Communication as a Strategy in Higher Education**

Pickton and Hartley (1998) stated that integrated marketing communication (IMC) is not a new concept. According to some commentators, (for example, Kitchen, 2005; Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010, 2015) integration can culminate in financial, competitive, and effectiveness benefits. IMC combines, integrates, and synergizes different elements of the communication mix, as the strengths of one element can be used to offset the limitations of another (Kitchen, 2005). Kitchen and Burgmann (2010, 2015) highlighted that when applied in a strategic way, IMC create synergies among different promotional mix elements to achieve short-term and long-term objectives. IMC is likely to be associated with high levels of consistency among messages and functions, and cost savings, improved working relationships between different units, effective utilization of media and promotional mix elements, enhanced returns and efficiencies.

In this regard, Holm (2006) concluded that institutions need to adjust their objectives and strategies to ever changing marketing conditions. Owing to the rapidly changing and highly competitive global environment over the previous decade, strategically-oriented IMC that moves from tactics to strategy appears to be one important approach. Notwithstanding, there are number of criticisms of IMC (Kitchen, 2005). This approach requires a complete marketing communication strategy, which coordinates all promotional mix tools.
Coordinating Promotional Mix Tools through the Application of Integrated Marketing Communication Procedures in Higher Education

Utilization of IMC in promoting HE is widely acknowledged by researchers (Alkhas, 2011; Edmiston-Strasser, 2009; Horrigan, 2007; Wong, 2006). Horrigan (2007) suggested that universities were able to reposition themselves in the HE marketplace by employing IMC strategies targeted at building their brand.

Edmiston-Strasser (2009) noted that institutional leadership is another powerful determinate of a successful IMC strategy. Thus, a key to successful execution of IMC strategy is an ability to integrate marketing communications efforts through collaborative efforts that allow individual marketing units to share their input and maintain certain levels of control within their unit areas (Horrigan, 2007). Edmiston-Strasser (2009) also highlighted that formal communication mechanisms across an institution are essential for effective IMC implementation. To this end, IMC can focus on coordinating an organization’s communication, while concurrently targeting specific message to specific audiences.

IMC amalgamates promotional mix elements, whether it is advertising, direct marketing, interactive/internet marketing, sales promotion, publicity/public relations or personal selling, combining these tools to provide consistency and to maximize communication impact (Rehman & Ibrahim, 2011). In this regard, IMC moves beyond communication to a process of employing promotional elements in a unified way so that synergistic communication effects are notably created but also achieved. IMC can help businesses to integrate these promotional tools along with other components of the marketing mix to gain a sustainable competitive advantage and to build long-term consumer relationships (Brunello, 2013).

More than one promotional tool is required to reach different consumer groups (Economist, 2007; Keller, 2001; Nowak & Phelps, 1994). One advertising agency alone or corporate units is not able to implement a cost-effective IMC program, because of the level of coordination and integration of communication disciplines required (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). Thus, the involvement of top management is a
necessity (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010; Edmiston-Strasser, 2009; Horrigan, 2007). Therefore, in today’s globalized society HEIs need to employ IMC programs that go beyond the usual marketing concepts such as the marketing or promotional mix.

The concept of IMC has evolved over four fundamental stages: From tactical coordination of promotional elements, redefining the scope of marketing communication, and application of information and communication technologies, to the integration of finances and strategies (Schultz & Schultz, 2004). In the digital world, IMC obviously needs to be concerned with creating presence, relationships, and customer value. In response to the emergence of IT revolution, digital technological and social media networking has been employed as part of HE marketing strategies (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Alkhas, 2011; Almadhoun et al., 2011; Glynn Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Social media can be regarded as a hybrid element of the promotional mix because it combines characteristics of traditional communication tools with word-of-mouth (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Electronic word-of-mouth and related forms of endorsement (e.g., “likes”) can foster customer support and influence service delivery new customers (Rowley, 2004, 2001). A marketing channel, the internet is interactive, accessible, and universal. It has the capability to integrate marketing communication with commercial transactions and delivery of services (Rowley, 2004; 2001). In this regard, digital-based media can have an immediate impact on education marketing. Needless to say, it is how students communicate in this day-and-age. It is apparent that the online communication, for example, has contributed to the development of creative ideas, and consistency in communication (Gurau, 2008). But, it has required considerable adaptation to changes in marketing and communication realities (Holm, 2006).

Gurau (2008) explained that the online environment generates not only opportunities, but also challenges for marketing communication process. The transparency of the websites makes online information available to different audiences, reinforcing the important of consistency in the planning, design, implementation, and control of marketing communication (Hart et al., 2000). This raises important issues regarding
capacity, marketing communication tools, the availability of financial resources, and customer information (Gurau, 2008). The changing marketing environment appears to demand a particular leadership and managerial skills sets (Horrigan, 2007).

Edmiston-Strasser (2007) indicated that one of the prime challenges in using IMC in HEIs is that most individuals do not fully understand the process and value of implementing IMC in their organizations. As alluded to earlier, there is a tendency to view marketing as a cost rather than driver of value (Edminston-Strasser, 2007). In line with this view, Gurau (2008) emphasized that a lack of understanding of IMC and its value contributed to challenges in relation to plan, expertise, and budgets.

This interpretation is consistent with Kitchen et al. (2005) who suggested that the successful development of IMC relies heavily on marketing budgets, staff, skills, and infrastructure. Thus effective IMC strategy is not based solely on the integration of promotional mix elements. Notwithstanding, it would seem that IMC can be applied in most contexts (Schultz & Schultz, 2004), such as low and middle income nations including the Lao PDR. In sum, IMC plays a very important role in the ability and capacity of institutions to innovate and successfully deliver competitive value added offerings to their customers (Rehman & Ibrahim, 2011). Creating brand awareness, delivering information, educating the market, and portraying a positive image of an institution are important elements in the marketing mix. Thus, it can be argued that IMC is a potential and important model for HE but has yet to be widely implemented in the HE field or adequately researched in the academic literature.

The Relationship between Marketing Communication and Integrated Marketing Communication, and between Integrated Marketing Communication and Promotional Mix

This section reviews the literature that explores the interrelationship between MC, PM and IMC. This interrelationship is depicted in Figure 3.2. It is necessary to review this body of work because it seems that research has focused only on the bivariate relationships between MC and IMC, and between IMC and PM. It is surprising that all three components have not been discussed concurrently. The present section discusses
these links and concludes with an examination of the importance of considering all elements concurrently in the private higher education sector.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3-2 Interrelationships between MC and IMC, IMC and PM**

*The Relationship between Marketing Communication and Integrated Marketing Communication*

Marketing communication plays a key role in building partnerships, fostering stakeholder relationships, and in leveraging these relationships, particularly in relation to brand and channel equity (Reid et al., 2005). In contrast, IMC recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that takes into account the strategic role of advertising, direct marketing, direct responses, sales promotion, public relations, and personal selling. Integrated marketing communication combines these elements tools to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact (Rehman & Ibrahim, 2011; Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). Integrated marketing communication has been widely applied around the world, as an approach to reach consumers and other stakeholders (Kitchen & Li, 2005).

It seems that the marketing communication elements such as advertising, public relation, direct marketing, and sales promotion have developed independently (Schultz & Patti, 2009). The greater utilization of marketing communication tools in an IMC approach can lead to a better overall outcome and may also convey a more holistic picture than otherwise (Smith et al., 2006; Reid, 2002; Schultz, 1996). Owing to the advent of digital communication, changes have emerged across the marketing communications domain. The information revolution led to its emergence (Kitchen et al., 2004). An IMC approach can increase the likelihood of all communication mix tools being integrated and supportive of each other, culminating in synergistic effects. Academics and practitioners regard IMC as an effective approach for strengthening the effects of promotional mix elements at the tactical level (Kitchen & Burgmann,
IMC approaches can help to appreciate the significance of marketing strategies and corporate branding of communication tools including direct marketing, internet marketing, or different types of sales promotions (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). IMC also encourages message integration and consistency, thus facilitating the interpretation of information for customers.

Additionally, IMC enables the coordination of consistent messages across various channels of communication, and is a strategic business process focusing on long-term brand value and customer relationship management (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). This approach places an emphasis on stakeholder groups and customer loyalty, which is created through strategic relationship building (Cornelissen, 2000; Eagle & Kitchen, 2000).

With the multiplication of media channels, the coordination of different messages aimed at representing unique image to stakeholders groups has become both important and challenging. Kitchen and Burgmann (2010) noted that IMC does not mean working with one message or a single unifying brand, but rather an integrated approach that encourages managers to work with multiple targets and achieve integration of different brands, communication messages, and functions across an organization. Thus, IMC has the potential to fundamentally change the meaning of marketing communications (Kliatchko, 2005).

Today, technology enhances traditional (e.g., advertising) and new forms of marketing communication strategies. To end this, it is incumbent on practitioners to utilize new forms of communication, including, the internet, networks, value chains, direct marketing campaigns, and databases, all of which impact substantially on companies. Technology not only can assist consumers to connect and communicate with each other but it can also act as a facilitator in establishing relationships with individual or groups of customers and companies (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010).

The Relationship between Integrated Marketing Communication and Promotional Mix

Recently, IMC is necessary owing to the heightened globalization and the resulting interdependence between countries and marketplace (Kitchen et al., 2005). A review
of the literature reveals a numbers of significant reasons for the application of IMC and PM elements in the PHE sector (for example, Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010; Eagle et al., 2006; Pickton & Broderick, 2005; and Shultz, 2004). An aim of IMC is to create synergy among the different marketing elements in order to achieve short-and-long-term returns (Kitchen & Burgmann, 2010). Pickton and Broderick (2005) stated that an IMC approach can lead to high levels of consistency among various communication messages and functions. Other benefits include cost savings, easier working relations between different departments and a better utilization of media and promotional mix elements. This review argues with Kitchen and Burgmann (2010) who indicated that an IMC approach is likely to be a feature of successful organizations.

As a case in point, it could be argued that a single promotional mix element such as advertising alone should not be utilized for building a brand, because a brand is an asset which belongs to the entire organization (Eagle et al., 2007; Shultz, 2004). McGrath (2005) suggested that a healthy brand relationship with customers is best achieved via the use of multiple promotional tools such PR campaigns, TV commercials, and magazines in order to convey the best message.

In this regard, it is vital that HEIs or education marketers recognize a need to involve more than one promotional tool to reach different target customers (e.g., students, parents, mature age adults). It is also clear that a combination of promotional mix elements is essential for development of IMC. By coordinating these promotional efforts, HEIs take advantage of the synergy among promotional tools and develop more efficient and effective IMC programs.

Integrating marketing communication utilizes traditional promotional elements which extend beyond a fragmented media through the adoption of new technologies. IMC recognizes the importance of non-traditional forms of marketing communication activities, including the interactive media and the internet. Owing to increasing pressure from clients and decreasing marketing budgets, Kitchen and Burgmann (2010) suggested that advertising agencies should exploit IMC approaches to include promotional mix elements in their functions.
With increasing competition, building long-term relationships with customers is regarded as essential for business. Consequently, corporate and brand managers need to coordinate the actions of their global and even national brands with the aim of integrating elements of promotional mix. Accordingly, this consideration is important in the higher education sector.

**Conclusion**

Several factors have contributed to the exceedingly competitive nature of the HE environment. One such factor includes the intensification of global competition. Another factor involves the transformation from a narrow elitist to a broadly-based mass PHE system which has expanded the scale of institutions and placed weight on intellectual capital. At the same time, the internationalization of the educational system via a rapid growth in the international student market has contributed in no small way to a commercialized HE sector. These factors have led to significant competition among international HEIs for market share.

Given the level of competition for students, internationally, it is crucial for PHEIs to adopt IMC strategies because of the complexities, and to help them to stay competitive and become market-oriented. PHEIs need to have sound strategies that coordinate their marketing communication efforts to achieve their institutions marketing goals. Thus, PHEIs need systems that integrate and synergize different promotional mix tools such as electronic media. These strategies need to include quality communications, methods of assessing, cost efficiencies, approaches for improved selectivity of students, and measurement of the impact on image and brand.

There is an urgent need for PHEIs to build knowledge and help to foster the capabilities of college staff, academic and marketing management teams with respect to the relevance of marketing communication strategies; and how to best employ promotional mix tools, IMC, and electronic media. In addition, academic and administrative staff need to become aware of how to build brand image and how to foster a positive relationship between brand and a customers, as a means of increasing
student enrolment numbers and to garner a sustainable competitive advantage in the market.

The emergence of technological-based media communication has become one of the most significant promotional tools in HE marketing. This relatively new communication format has become a major factor that has influenced various aspects of consumer behavior. Thus, HEIs need to include electronic media in their marketing communication strategies to gain market share. It would seem that PHEIs in the Lao PDR need to train personnel and/or hire IT professionals to update technological and social-media based of information and their websites. These developments could help PHEIs to expand access into higher education sector. It would appear that governments also have an important role to play in providing infrastructure and subsidies.

The following chapter (Chapter 4) reports on Study 1: the way in which PHEIs utilize several promotional mix tools as part of marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of tertiary private colleges. This study aims to provide marketing communication strategies employed by key stakeholders (directors, marketing managers, academic) to attract new and retain existing students in their market share.
Chapter 4
Study 1
Utilization of Promotional Mix Tools for Marketing Communication
Purpose by Private Higher Education Providers as a Way of Influencing
Students and Parents’ Choice of Lao Tertiary Educational Private Colleges

Overview

This chapter reports on the ways in which private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in the Lao PDR employ promotional mix tools as part of their marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of college. The overall structure of this chapter takes the form of five sections. To start with, the chapter presents the purpose of this study and research question. The second section of chapter focuses on the methodology for Study 1. Five directors, five marketing managers, and five academics were interviewed. The third part presents findings and discussion of this study. Overall, a thematic analysis of semi-structured interview material identified six broad themes: use of different promotional mix tools, roles and functions, short-term and long-term strategic marketing communication planning, allocation of financial resources, marketing research, and limited experience and knowledge of key stakeholders. The fourth section highlights that these findings have important implications for practice, research, and government policy. Additionally, major limitations are presented. Finally, concluding remarks for this chapter are presented.

Purpose and Research Questions

Study 1 explores internal key stakeholders’ views concerning their use of various promotional mix tools elements in tertiary educational institutions as part of their colleges’ marketing communication strategies targeted at increasing their student enrolment numbers. Principal areas concentrated on marketing communication strategies and promotional mix tools, involving familiarity with and implementation of various traditional promotional mix and marketing communication techniques.
The main research question addressed in Study 1 is RQ: How do key stakeholders (director, marketing manager, academic) in the Lao PDR utilize different promotional mix tools to influence students and parents’ choice of tertiary educational private college?

**Method**

**Participants**

Five directors, five marketing managers, and five academics from five private colleges (i.e., A, B, C, D, and E) in the Vientiane Capital, participated in this study. The key informants were selected purposively, based on their expertise and/or knowledge of marketing communication strategies and higher education management. These colleges had been established for over 10 years. The profiles of respondents’ information background for each key stakeholder are shown in Table 4.1, below.

**Directors.** Table 4.1, shows that a majority of the directors are male (around 80%). Directors are aged between 25 and 35, and over 46 years. One director holds a Doctoral degree, and (60%) have Masters’ degree, and another director holds Bachelors’ degree. About 60% have over 10 years working experience in educational management, and marketing communication in tertiary educational institution. 40% have less than 10 years working experience in tertiary private college.

**Marketing managers.** 60% of marketing managers are female, aged between 25 and 45 years. All respondents hold Bachelor’s degree. Two marketing managers have over 10 years working experience in educational management and marketing communication, and 60% have had working experience of between 7 and 10 years (Table 4.1).

**Academics.** Most academics (80%) are male, aged between 25 and 35, and over 46 years. One participant holds Masters’ degree, and 80% hold a Bachelors’ degree. All academics have had working experience in educational management, and marketing management of between 4 and 11 years.
### Table 4.1 Profile of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College n=5</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>Work Experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Marketing and Communication Strategies Experience</th>
<th>Educational Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Profile of Directors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Doctoral degree</td>
<td>Over 23 years</td>
<td>Director &amp; (Owner)</td>
<td>Responsible for determining policy and marketing strategies and planning.</td>
<td>Has experience in managing curricula, teaching and learning, academic affairs, staff and student, financial, banking, and accounting programmes as well as former President of the Lao Private Education Association (for two terms, the total of 8 years).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>2 years for work for private education sector &amp; over 10 years for public sector</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>Marketing experience through running a special course at public university.</td>
<td>Experience in managing teacher training schools, technical school, Faculty of Law and Political Science.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C3</strong></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Director &amp; (Owner)</td>
<td>Experience in marketing activities such as designing brochures, flyers, organizing interviews, and advertising on newspapers, television, and radio.</td>
<td>Experience in managing academic affairs such as curricula, and credit structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D4</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36+ years</td>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>Director</td>
<td>No experience in marketing strategy.</td>
<td>Experience in managing school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E5</strong></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>Director &amp; (Owner)</td>
<td>No experience in marketing strategy.</td>
<td>Experience in managing school as well as being engineering consultant company.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4.1 Continues ...*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>Work Experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Marketing and Communication Strategies Experience</th>
<th>Educational Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 18 years</td>
<td>Head of student affairs office and Marketing assistant officer</td>
<td>Learn from recruiting students through public relations and advertising techniques.</td>
<td>Experience in office management, external and internal relations, staff, managing timetabling for teachers, lecturers, and students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>35+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 7 years</td>
<td>Deputy director</td>
<td>Learn from advertising through different tools (e.g., television, radio and newspapers).</td>
<td>Experience in student management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Director &amp; (Owner)</td>
<td>Learn from distribution of brochures, and flyers to advertisement and conducting interviews with TV reporter and newspaper journalist.</td>
<td>Experience in academic affairs such as curricula and credit structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 7 years</td>
<td>Head of academic office</td>
<td>Learn advertisements through print media and other media.</td>
<td>Experience in supervising curricula implementation and teaching and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>Head of cabinet &amp; admin officer</td>
<td>Learn from work experience in marketing and self-learning by reading international marketing and marketing communication strategies theories and textbooks.</td>
<td>Experience in managing college accounts and finance as well as managing student records and enrolment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. All Marketing managers have marketing experiences on their job.*

Table 4.1 continues ...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>Work Experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Marketing and Communication Strategies Experience</th>
<th>Educational Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Deputy Director, Dept of SME</td>
<td>Involved in promoting SEM as well as a guest lecturers to teach marketing at College A.</td>
<td>Experience in cooperation with concerned agencies about the process of implementation, monitoring and evaluation of marketing activities related to business practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>Head of student management &amp; teacher</td>
<td>Involved in marketing communication team</td>
<td>Used to responsible for extra curricula activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>36+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Academic staff, admin &amp; English section</td>
<td>Involved in planning advertisements and recruit new students in each academic year</td>
<td>Does academic work-task and being assistant in educational management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 6 years</td>
<td>Head of academic staff</td>
<td>Involved in checking information, especially messages in advertisements on print media</td>
<td>Supervising curricula implementation in teaching and learning rather than marketing communication course or practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 4 years</td>
<td>Academic staff, admin &amp; English section</td>
<td>Gives advice on teaching and learning, and physical facilities college attractions</td>
<td>Experience in college administration rather than marketing communication section</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. All Academics have marketing experiences on their job.*
Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Face-to-face interviews with directors, marketing managers, and academics offered a broad understanding on their views concerning utilization of promotional mix elements to influence students and parents’ choice of college (Drew et al., 2008). Interview questions sought participants’ background information, the role and functions of the marketing communication strategies play in the institution; type of promotional mix elements or advertisement the college usually use; and how college director, marketing manager and academics intend to use marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ on their choice of colleges; short-term or long-term marketing communication strategic planning; conducting marketing research; and follow up questions was to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses in relation to their limited experience and knowledge, funding for marketing research and marketing communication activities, and the improvement in college marketing communication strategies as a way of increasing student enrolments. Table 4.2 (see page 8) shows director, marketing manager, and academic interview schedule.

This data collection method was seen to be culturally appropriate to the Lao context where informants were not familiar with this kind of research. A qualitative interview is an effective method where a researcher wishes to gain insight into the intentions, feelings, purposes and comprehensions of the interviewee (Cruiskhank, 2012). In this regard, it is apparent that the interview can also be indicative of insights into how key stakeholders interpret and well understand the use of marketing communication strategies in their institution.

Horrigan (2007) noted that prior to carrying out interviews, research guideline needs to be developed. For this reason a series of open-ended questions were asked sequentially to ensure all critical topics were covered. Participants were asked open-ended questions in a way that they felt free to express their opinions or think about the topic, and respond openly (Crewell, 2008; Drew et al., 2008). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2011) stated that responses can lead to further questions which may increase the richness of data. Thus, it was appropriate to engage directly with participants in order to obtain their genuine views on their practice of different marketing communication
strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of private higher education institutions.

Table 4.2  Director, Marketing Manager, and Academic Interview Schedule (DMMAIS)

General Information

Gender:  Male  Female

Age:  (1) Between 25 to 35 years; (2) Between 36 to 45 years; (3) Over 46 years

1. Describe your work experience, length of time, working at this college, position held in the higher education sector, marketing communication experience, and other management experience.

2. What role does marketing or advertising media play in your institution if any. What type(s) of promotional mix tools does your organization use to promote your institution?

3. Does your college have a marketing communication strategy? If yes, please tell me about it. If not, why not?

4. Do you use promotional mix tools as a way of recruiting students? If so how do you use these tools to influence students and parents’ choice of college? Do you have a marketing communication plan? If yes, please tell me about it. If not, why not?

5. Do you plan your marketing communication or media communication strategies for the short-term or long-term? If yes, what strategies do you use? Who is involved? What role do they play in developing, and marketing and media strategic planning?

6. Do you think that the media communication strategies and promotional mix tools are effective as a communication tools? If so, how, if not, why not?

7. Does your college allocate financial resources for marketing communication activities, such as marketing research? If yes, how does your college support this allocation in practice?

8. In your opinion, what would you suggest to improve your college’s marketing communication and/or media communication strategies as a way of increasing student enrolments?
Procedure

During the field work in Vientiane, scheduled interviews were carried out with 15 key informants. The interviews were conducted at the colleges’ premises and each interview lasted for between one to one-and-half hours. The data collection period was from 23 April - 8 May, 2013 (16 days). All interviewees were informed that they were not obliged to answer any particular question if they did not wish to. Participants were asked to sign a consent form before the interview started. Additionally, they were informed about the confidentiality of the interview and that the data would be used only for the purpose of the study and publication.

All key informants consented to the documentation of their interviews. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Key issues and important notes were also taken by the researcher in case of mechanical failure with the recorder. The recorded interviews were downloaded to the researcher’s personal laptop computer and a desktop computer with a protected password. The recorded interviews were later transcribed. Data analysis began during the act of transcribing interview data into written forms in order to conduct a thematic analysis; the process of transcription was time consuming, frustrating and at times boring. However, it was an excellent way for the researcher to start familiarising herself with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During the field work, as soon as each interview was completed, the researcher listened to the recordings and made preliminary transcription of the raw data into Lao. Short comments on the data were made. Upon the researcher’s return to Melbourne, the data were then fully translated from Lao to English. The notes taken during the interviews served as a reminder so that the researcher could fill the gaps as soon as possible. Field notes, raw data and clean data were kept on a password protected laptop. Information was also shared with the researcher’s supervisors in Melbourne.

Data Analytic Procedures

Thematic analysis was utilized to manage qualitative data. Thematic analysis is often described as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This point of view is in line with Alhojailan
(2012) who stated that thematic analysis is a qualitative procedure used to analyse, classify and present themes (patterns) in relation to data. Thematic analysis is appropriate for data interpretation, deductive and inductive approaches, coding, and categorising. Ritchie et al. (2003) highlighted that thematic analysis involves the identification of initial themes or concept with a data set; labeling or tagging the data; sorting the data by themes or concept; and summarizing or synthesizing the original data. Similarly, Braun and Clark (2006) identified a six-phase guide to conducting thematic analysis, which includes familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

Notwithstanding, Mile and Huberman (1994) outlined a model of the thematic analysis process, comprising of three streams: data reduction, data display, and data conclusion drawing/verifying as depicted in Figure 4.1, below.

Thematic analysis is a flexible approach, which enables researchers to deal with data collected at different intervals (Mile & Huberman, 1994), to display and classify data according to similarities and differences, and to categorize and note patterns. However, Alhojailan (2012) stated that data tapping into the perceptions of participants required comparative methodologies such as the use of instruments questionnaires such as involving a deductive approach.

![Figure 4.1 Component of data analysis - collaborative model in Miles and Huberman (1994, p.12)](image-url)
In the context of the present research, thematic analysis involved data interpretation, deductive and inductive approaches, coding, and categorizing (Alhojailan, 2012; Braun & Clark, 2006; and Ritchie et al., 2003) and was consistent with the adapted collaborative model of Mile and Huberman (1994) employed to analyze the interview data. The data analysis procedures involved searching for and identifying themes, and sorting data by themes. In order to study the data and make sense of it, a table was developed to organize data for each of the five stakeholders’ groups. This descriptive coding technique helped in categorising unstructured and messy data into a manageable process (Richards & Morse, 2007). Thus, the researcher noted patterns and themes, hence aided in pulling together separate pieces of data solicited from the college directors, marketing managers, and academics to generate meanings (Mile & Huberman, 1994).

**Findings and Discussion**

This section reports on and discusses the ways in which college directors (CD), marketing managers, and academics utilize various elements of promotional mix tools to influence students and parents’ choice of college. Principally, directors, marketing managers, and academics coordinate diverse promotional mix tools through the application of integrated marketing communication procedures in HE: traditional media advertising; electronic media; discount offers; provision of sponsorships and college activities; college information and orientation and open days; brochures, school visits and internships; and face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication to target their market. The use of different promotional mix elements are divided into seven themes. Each theme is discussed below.

*Traditional Media Advertising*

Findings revealed that most college administrators utilize advertising via print and electronic media to promote their institutions. Advertising include television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and billboard/posters. Directors, marketing managers, and academics use different tools of advertising for the recruitment and students’ enrolment. This suggested that newspapers, television, radio and billboards/posters,
are common commercial media used by private colleges in competition for the market share. Thus, in agreement with Kittle (2000), television, newspapers and radio were ranked as the top three commercial media used for advertisement by higher education institutions.

College A director stated that: Our College advertises on newspapers, television and radio. Similar to College B and C marketing managers indicated that: Usually our colleges advertise through magazines, newspapers, and radios while College E marketing manager revealed that: We use posters and flyers. We put them in front of the college and also display them at upper secondary schools.

Their views share some similarities and differences with Messah (2011), arguing that print and electronic media (i.e., newspapers, brochures) are classified highly as the most effective marketing communication tools to give information to potential students while other marketing communication such as billboards, poster, radio, university newsletters and alumni magazines are rated as less effective tools to reach and provide information to prospective students.

Electronic Media

Nowadays, digital technology, social media, websites, and ICT are commonly used globally in HEIs. In the Lao PDR private colleges, the internet, college-websites, Facebook, and YouTube are predominantly used in colleges’ advertising and communication. The electronic media is fast and suitable for young students who live in urban and rural areas. Students access the college information quickly and widely. Moreover, technology media is cost effective for both students and colleges. These finding are supported by Almadhoun et al. (2011), Alkhas (2011), and Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011). For example, in Kenya, Messah (2011) stated that the use of technology media and social media were rated as the most impact factor in influencing prospective students and parents’ choice of college. Digital media is a powerful tool for attracting students, parents, and sponsors, as well as for providing access to up-to-date information about institutions (Alkhas, 2011). Internet social media marketing tools enable a global reach (Alkhas, 2011).
College A director noted that: *Currently our college advertises through the college-website and Facebook, which is developed by the college. The college can provide up-to-date information at any time. This method is low in cost, modern and effective.*

College E academics highlighted that: ..... *Based on our student survey, we mostly use the internet-website and Facebook through our mobile phones.*

Utilization of social media, social networking, media sharing, and websites provide a powerful medium for strategic and marketing communication planning (Almadhoun et al., 2011; Deanne Brocato et al., 2015). Almadhoun et al. (2011) noted that social media is employed increasingly as a promotional tool in the Malaysian higher education sector because it has been shown to be an effective and direct communication way across large audiences, a situation which is necessary in the Lao PDR. It is important for PHEI providers to focus on the social media for their advertising campaign. This is because, in recent years, many print media and broadcast media channels have faced major challenges as newspapers and television channels have lost their audiences due to technological advances such as the www. With the emergence of digital technology media, it is apparent that Lao PHEIs need to integrate this marketing communication tool into their strategic planning in order to gain a sustainable competitive advantage. Websites are viewed as one of the most effective promotional tools in HE, allowing prospective students to visit institutional websites repeatedly and interact with representatives from colleges and universities (Messah, 2011). Prospective students can make considerable use of the internet to access information on courses, programs, and institutions prior to making a final decision (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2012). This type of medium can be viewed as a positive investment for the long-term as it is cost-effective and a primary source of information for increasing numbers of college-age people (Alkhas, 2011).

*Sales Promotion: Discount*

Most private colleges offer discount on tuition fee for students who elect to pay 12-months in advance, who are enrolled in more than two programs, and who have two or
more siblings studying at the same college. They also give between 5 and 10 per cent discount on tuition to students who convince their friends to study at the college.

College A marketing manager revealed that: *Our College has a policy to give 5 per cent discount to students who pay a whole year tuition fee, and 5 per cent discount to students who have two siblings studying at our college. In addition, we also have discounts on tuition fees of around 15, 20, and 30 per cent for our staff, teachers, and lecturers’ children.*

A discount offer is commonly practiced among private colleges in HE in competition to attract students’ enrolments. Providing discounts for tuition fees can attract students (Wiese, 2008). This type of sales promotion would seem to be another form of promotional mix element for institutions to convince their prospective students to choose studying at their college and maintaining current students and college staff. This finding is supported by Kim and Periyayya (2013) who reported that one of the important factors for influencing an individual’s choice of college is the educational fee. A discount offer provides financial benefits to students as it lowers college tuition fees and makes customers and learners impressed and satisfied with the education market and trade provided by the colleges. Similarly, in Malaysian context, a private college’s tuition fee is very reasonable where the most common strategy used by a number of private colleges is the provision of cost comparisons of various options where they compare tuitions, books and materials, fees and living expenses (Quraeshi & Luqmani, 2009).

College C director reported that: *For students, if they have brothers or sisters studying in our college, we will give them a discount. If it is staff’s brother or sister or teacher’s brother or sister or relatives, we will also give them a discount.*

Additionally, these institutions utilize different types of financial incentives by providing scholarships to outstanding students, students who are in the first or second place, students who come from poor families, and colleges’ professional staff and lecturers’ children, and relatives, who study at the college. Moreover, some colleges
use tuition fee payment receipts/invoice as part of a lucky draw to receive free tuition for one year.

College A Director articulated that: *Our College offers discounts, providing scholarships to outstanding students, organize a lucky draw during the celebration of the Lao New year by collecting tuition payment receipt.*

College D marketing manager stated that: *We offer 8 per cent discount to students who pay a whole year tuition fee in one instalment before the commencement of the semester. We also offer 30 per cent of tuition fee to college staff and their children.*

College E academic emphasized that: *We provide scholarships to good students who have grade point average of 3.5 and above. Our College also gives scholarships to poor and disadvantaged students who have the ability and are good students.*

These findings share some similarities with the work of Al-Fattal (2010). Al-Fattal (2010) found that Syrian private HE implement a range of discount strategies. Students are provided up to 10% discount if they come from local areas, 7.5% reductions on tuition fees for siblings, 35% tuition fee discounts for the highest achieving students in an academic year, and 100% fee waivers for students who receive academic scores greater than 90% in any module (Al-Fattal, 2010). Full fee waiver scholarships are also given to the best achievers in the National Secondary School Exams and other equivalent educational assessments. The aim of these strategies is to attract quality students.

It is apparent that providing financial incentives is an essential marketing communication strategy for PHEIs not only to stimulate students’ learning but to also offer benefits for students. This type of sales promotion creates good relationships between students and institutions. In this regard, the pricing element of the promotional mix involves payment of tuition fees. This method has always been of importance in student’s decision to return to full-time study (Ivy, 2008). Findings of this study indicate that a cost leadership strategy is seen as a means of gaining competitive advantage. Thus, institutions compete by achieving a lower cost structure than other competitors (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008).
Provision of Sponsorships and College Activities

College directors either provide scholarships or sponsor the public’s social activities. These activities include the provision of scholarships to Miss Lao contest, and to an outstanding upper secondary school student competition. In addition, private colleges engage in community and public services on special occasions, such as donating blood, promoting sports, making donations to national important days, and helping disadvantaged children in rural remote areas by contributing books, textbooks, other learning materials, and sport equipments.

College A director asserted that: *We organize college activities to help society by participating in the community...., become a sponsor for Miss Lao contest, primary and secondary school outstanding student competition, make donation to traditional festivals and promote sport, art and culture.*

College C academic reported that: *On behalf of our college, teachers and students we give out school materials such as books, textbooks and sport equipment materials to disadvantaged students who live in rural areas.*

College D director stated that: *We plan to do community service by sending students out to help society, particularly disadvantaged people.*

The college activities are regarded as other powerful tools in marketing communication strategies and promotional mix tools for HEIs. In order to build good relationships among students, academics, and college staff in the institution, some college directors use a wide range of activites such as culture dance and song contests, sport competitions, and academic quizzes to give students awards.

Marketing manager for College A highlighted that: *We organize different activities with students including general knowledge quizzes for English subject, sport competitions, singing contest and other activities to build good relationships among students, lecturers and staff.*
College E marketing manager stated that: *We found out that the majority of students like to study here because they like our activities such as celebrating Lao New Years, sport competitions, study visits to other provinces, which they like the most.*

This technique can reach a large scale of prospective students, and publicize private colleges’ image and reputation as well as strengthen relationships between the colleges, students, teachers and the community. This finding is in agreement with Amiso (2000) who reported that US-based HEIs can use various types of college activities and special event to improve its image and attract students. These activities involve organizing special events to attract attention and raise funds for scholarships. Other activities which help at a community level include arranging presentations about the university to various organizations.

**College Information, Orientation and Open days**

With regard to public relations or college/special information, participants reported that school visits, orientation and open days to introductory programs for upper secondary school students are the most commonly practiced among private colleges before the commencement of a new semester.

College A marketing manager informed that: *Our college directly gets access to target customers such as grade 12 students. We invite them to visit our college and organize an orientation session to give them guidance for further study (where they should go to study). We also establish good relationships with teachers in each secondary school because these teachers will be our voice to help us publicize our college to students so that they come to study at our college.*

This finding is consistent with that of Messah, (2011) who reported that orientation and open days are effective marketing communication strategy tools for enhance student enrolment in promoting HEIs. Orientation and open days provide opportunities for institutions to change the perceptions of and to build relationships with prospective students and their parents (Wiese, 2008). Visiting an institution is considered to be an effective way for students to narrow their college choice (Pampaloni, 2010). The goal of campus visits are to provide students with a
substantial understanding of a wide range of aspects of what a tertiary institution is about educationally, culturally and socially (Rudd & Mills, 2008). However, attending open days and campus visits can be problematic for students and parents who live far away (Pampaloni, 2010).

In order to effectively communicate special information with prospective students and the public, private institutions give speech on special events, and special days such as graduation ceremonies, the National Teacher’s Day and education exhibitions. They also provide special information by inviting newspapers, magazines’ journalists, and television reporters. Messah (2011) and Amiso (2000) revealed that providing information can have a significant role in attracting students from different backgrounds. Messah (2011) highlighted that providing special information to prospective students, and organizing event speeches and exhibitions are effective tools for attracting and maintaining students in private Kenyan universities.

College E academic reported that: *We give a talk on important days such as National Day, Teacher’s Day and graduation ceremony in the college.*

College A expressed a similar view with that of college C marketing manager, that: *We organize an interview with television reporter and newspaper journalist regarding our college information before the commencement of new academic year by inviting them to come to our college to interview a marketing team.*

The marketing managers reported that they also allow private colleges to have direct contact with potential students and provide college information on the spot. Through these channels, prospective students and related college administrators are well-informed about their colleges so that they have sufficient information for making appropriate decision on their choice of college.

**Brochures, School Visits and Internships**

Distributing brochures and flyers, and organising study visits and internships are popular promotional mix tools that form part of direct marketing and marketing
communication strategies. These elements present another potential source of important information. PHEI providers use the same method and geographic location with upper secondary students. This technique has led to significant competition among PHEIs for market share.

College A marketing manager uttered that: We distributed flyers/leaflets during the recruitment of new students in a new academic year. We distributed brochures to grade 12 students during the leavers’ exams at different examination centres. In addition, we put up advertising sign/banner around the college.

College E academic asserted that: We distribute brochures and flyers. We stick flyers/leaflets in many different places of our target groups, such as upper-secondary schools and community areas, including at the supermarket or mall or a place where teenagers like to go.

Distributing brochures, flyers, and leaflets as well as organizing study/school visits/career days are common direct marketing tools utilized by HEIs (Messah, 2011; Kittle, 2000; Amiso, 2000). The use of institutional print media such as brochures and flyers can play an important role when it comes to advertising private colleges, particularly in developing countries (Kittle, 2000). As a case in point, in Kenya, distribution of brochures has been found to be an effective marketing communication tool because of the type of information provided to potential students (Messah, 2011).

Another finding is the consensus view that distributing brochures and flyers allows the college staff to give clarification to students’ questions and parents directly. Moreover, the students can continuously obtain information about colleges from the brochures and flyers/leaflet. If they have further questions, they can contact institutions based on college information provided in print. Owing to enhance enrolment, HEIs should utilize a combination of ads in local prints media and recruitment visits in order to increase student enrolment (Amiso, 2000). In addition, school visits and internships are other types of marketing communication tools that are used to provide students’ knowledge and skills, as well as to create job prospects.
College A director stated that: *We provide school visits course for year 1 and 2 students. Year 3 students are asked to enroll in internship course (three months).*

College B marketing manager reported that: *We build confidence/trust for students and parents to ensure that if they study here we will offer them internships to prepare them for the job market.*

**Face-to-face and Word-of-mouth Communication**

Face-to-face communication via college staff can be regarded as a unique method of direct communication (personal selling) employed by PHEIs, followed by words-of-mouth through personal networks (i.e., former students, alumni, people-to-people, teachers, friends, family). Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) revealed that international students were likely to be influenced by institution’s alumni base, and word-of-mouth referral process.

College B director explained that: *We use face-to-face communication through staff, teachers and students who study at the college because they all know-well our current information so they can pass on messages to others.*

Similarly, College C academic reported that: *We communicate face-to-face by using staff and teachers. When we have a teacher meeting, we advise them to pass on information about our college. Some teachers introduce their children, nieces and nephews to come to study here, its part of word-of-mouth.*

A closer look at the data indicates that the use of face-to-face communication through college staff, teachers, and students is another influential promotional mix tool for Lao tertiary private institutions. This method shows that oral communication and personal networks are the key success technique to increase the institution population. Thus, direct communication through college staff allows institution to deliver the same message directly to prospective students in order to encourage them to study at the college.
Face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication play a significant role in disseminating messages about higher education programs (Constantinides & Stagno, 2011; Messah, 2011; Wiese, 2008). Kim and Periyayya (2013) noted that face-to-face communication via senior students at open days, recruitment fairs, and awards ceremonies help to promote brand of an institution, because these approaches can influence decisions made by parents and students. For example, in a South African study, students rated that word-of-mouth via parents, high school teachers, and an alumnus as useful source of information when it comes to selection of a HEI (Wiese, 2008).

College B marketing manager stated that: *We communicate face-to-face with students and parents who come to make inquiries about education information at the college. We have marketing staff or personnel to clarify students’ and parents’ inquiries, explain the goal of the college, what experience students will get and what kind of jobs they can have in the future.*

Oplatka (2004) revealed that word-of-mouth communication was an effective technique for determining the market’s needs and demand for an educational institutions. In addition, targeting parents segment is a powerful method because they can play an influential role in decision-making choice of college for their children. To effectively use word-of-mouth communication, HEIs need to ensure that current students, alumni, secondary school teachers, and other well-connected people are part of the target groups to be informed about the strengths, accomplishments, and successes of an institution (Wiese, 2008).

College A marketing manager highlighted that: *Our college use different tools of direct communication such as people-to-people, word-of-mouth through current students or former students, teachers, lecturers, and college staff passing on information to others people.*

Similarly, the Marketing manager from College E said: *We use word-of-mouth or face-to-face communication from friends-to-friends. We ask students to pass on college information to their friends and cousins to convince them to study at our college.*
This finding provide confirmatory evidence by Constantinides and Zinck Stagno (2011), that recommendations from family, friends and acquaintances continue to play a major role in students’ choice of university. To effectively use this media channel, PHEI providers need to employ marketing experts who hold qualifications in marketing communication or integrated marketing communication education area in order to perform this task as well as know how to deal with prospective students and parents’ inquiries. However, it is very challenging for local private institutions to employ staff while retaining their affordability in an intensely competitive environment (Quraeshi & Luqmani, 2009). Along similar lines to Lao colleges’ administrators, many PHEIs spend more money as well as improving the quality of physical facilities and hiring competent lecturers in order to promote their institutions’ image and reputation.

Table 4.3 shows a summary of each key themes on findings from the three groups of participants: directors, marketing managers, and academics’ views concerning the use of different promotional mix tools for influencing students and parents’ on their choice of tertiary private colleges (the next following page).

A thematic analysis of interview material culminated in the identification of five other related main themes: Roles and functions of key stakeholders; limited experience and knowledge of key stakeholders; short-term and long-term planning; allocation of financial resources; marketing research procedures employed. These themes are discussed below.

**Roles and Functions of Key Stakeholders**

Leadership is critical for the development of marketing communication strategies (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009). Directors, marketing managers, and academics have multi-roles and functions in their institutions. The empirical analysis of this study suggest that the multi-roles entail: entreprenuers, marketing managers, and academics. In addition to this, these key stakeholders are involved in developing marketing communication plans and strategies, designing brochures and their content, planning
recruitment for student enrolments, and formulating student retention strategies, and so on.

College A director stated that: *I am responsible for overall management. I am also accountable for determining college policy and marketing communication plans in order to disseminate information about our college as well as to promote and publicize our college so that the public know about our college and make decision to study at our institution.*
Table 4.3 Summary of Key Theme of Promotional Mix Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Directors</th>
<th>Marketing Managers</th>
<th>Academics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional media advertising</td>
<td>Newspapers, magazines, display banner and posters are more likely common commercial media advertising strategies for college directors practiced in their institutions. Television and radios are less likely used by private colleges.</td>
<td>Newspapers, Magazines and radios as the best media advertising in private college.</td>
<td>Newspapers, magazines, and radios are the best media tools to reach across large audience target market.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological-based media</td>
<td>Facebook, college-websites, and the internet are the second powerful promotional mix tools for student recruitment and enrolments.</td>
<td>Advertise through college websites and Facebook is another potential for institution to communication directly with target audience.</td>
<td>Internet, websites and Facebook through their mobile phones is the most commercial online communication.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discount offers and financial incentives</td>
<td>Discount offers on tuition fees for students who elect to pay 12-months in advance, who are enrolled in more than two programs, and who have two or more siblings studying at the same college are commonly practiced among Lao private colleges competition in HEIs.</td>
<td>Financial incentives is another potential tool of sales promotion by providing scholarships to outstanding students, college staff, teachers and lecturers’ children who study at the college. These are aimed at building good relationship with students, teachers, and college staff.</td>
<td>Provide scholarships for good students who have Grade point of average 3.5 and above.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College activities and Sponsorships</td>
<td>College activities is a powerful tool for promotional strategies in private colleges for influencing young students to come to study at their institutions. The activities include culture dance, song contests, sport competitions. This is followed by being sponsorships for public social, helping social disadvantaged children, and participating in the community services.</td>
<td>Helping public social by sending college staff, teachers, and students participating in the community and social activities such as donating blood, promote sports competition, make donation to the National special day.</td>
<td>Helping disadvantaged children in rural remote areas by contributing, textbooks, other learning materials, and sport equipment.</td>
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Table 4.3 Continues the next page...
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Directors</th>
<th>Marketing Managers</th>
<th>Academics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College/special information, orientation and open days</td>
<td>Orientation and open days for upper secondary school students are the most popularly used among private colleges. Colleges have direct contact with potential students and provide college information on the spot.</td>
<td>Providing college special information by inviting newspapers, and magazines journalists, and television reporters.</td>
<td>Give a talk on important days such as National Day, Teachers’ Day and graduation ceremony in the college is another type of providing special information.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochures, School visits, and Internships</td>
<td>Distributing brochures and flyers at the different places is found to be the potential information source for marketing communication strategies in HEIs. School visits and internships is another type of promotional mix tool to provide students knowledge and skills as well as create job prospects.</td>
<td>Distributing brochures and flyers are commonly practiced by institutions.</td>
<td>Distribute brochures and flyers. Stick flyers/leaflets at different places (e.g., upper-secondary schools and the shopping mall or a place where teenagers like to go).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face and Word-of-mouth Communication</td>
<td>Face-to-face communication via college staff is the most effective marketing communication for influencing parents and students practiced by private colleges. Words-of-mouth though personal networks (e.g., former student, cohort students, friends, and family) is another type of unique Lao culture.</td>
<td>Face-to-face communication through college staff is commonly practiced by private colleges. Word-of-mouth via friends, family members, former students, and current students are common in Lao culture.</td>
<td>Face-to-face via staff and teachers. This is another method to disseminate the college information directly to students and public enquires.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: YouTube, Blogs, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, and MySpace are new social media tools to use in higher education institutions even in the University, and Tertiary College in the Lao PDR based on the findings revealed from those participants.*
Similarly, marketing managers “wear different hats” in their role. They work as marketing staff, deputy director, deputy head of marketing office, head of students affairs’ office, head of cabinet and personal office. They have a responsibility to check words and spellings in advertisements and other errors from typing, and carry out advertising practices. In addition, they are in charge of academic affairs, including supervising curricular implementation, teaching and learning in the college, managing college accounts and finances as well as students’ records and enrolment. They also assist in marketing communication planning for their institutions.

College D marketing manager claimed that: I am involved in checking information, especially messages in our advertisements and other types of media and brochures. In our college, I also organize curricula and learn timetabling as well as select lecturers to teach for each subject.

Additionally, academics act as advertising agents rather than policy and strategy makers.

College C academic noted that: Before a new academic year begins each year I am involved in thinking and planning advertisements and how to recruit new students for each academic year’s programs. Basically, I am involved in our college marketing communication planning.

The complexity of roles and functions of directors, marketing managers and academics obviously results from the lack of specific marketing managers, marketing teams and units to be responsible for marketing communication and promotional strategy in their organizational structure.

College C director indicated that: We do not have a particular person in the marketing area. Everybody help each other among our management team. For example, before a new academic year begins, our management teams meet and plan our advertisement together where everybody shares their ideas.

College D director highlighted that: we do not have a marketing team but we have academic affairs office and students activity office, responsible for marketing communication and media channels.
Similarly College E director noted that: *Our college management and technical teams are involved in marketing and media channels planning because we do not have a specific marketing team.*

The findings in this study highlight that one possible explanation for the lack of marketing units in PHEIs could be limited human resource in HE, available in the Lao labor market. Another reason could be budgetary constraints to hire additional marketing experts. It seems possible that these are due to the fact that in the Lao PDR, HE marketing is still at the pioneer stage. Besides this, for many institutions, marketing communication is still under the responsibility of the admission officers, and regarded as sales and promotional function (Goldgehn, 1990).

**Limited Experience and Knowledge of Key Stakeholders**

In relation to key stakeholders’ experiences and their knowledge, empirical findings in this study suggest that none of them are trained in educational marketing communication and promotional field. All directors, marketing managers, and academics are trained in education management, finance and banking, accounting, English, office management, economics, and Lao literature and language. They learnt marketing communication and promotional mix from their work experience and international marketing communication strategy or business marketing theories and books.

College D director stated that: *I never had marketing communication experience.*

Similarly College E marketing manager reported that: *I did not have marketing communication experience before. I learnt about it on my job and actual experience plus theories that I acquired from my education.*

Overall, these findings indicate that most PHEI providers had limited experience and knowledge in marketing communication, promotional mix, and IMC filed. This marketing knowledge and capacity are one of the key elements of promotional mix for tertiary educational institutions marketing. The findings of this study corroborate those of Goldgehn (1990) who asserted that on one hand, marketing is seen as an
excellent technique to attract students. On the other hand, it is not generally viewed as a means to increase student satisfaction and develop strategic and competitive advantages in the market (Goldgehn, 1990). The present study provides the implication that private college staff needs to have capacity development on marketing communication strategies if they aim to survive in the competitive HE environment. All university staff including academic, administrative and support staff are considered to be the people element of the promotional mix that interacts with prospective students. Thus, the role, the image and status of these people in recruitment of students is important (Ivy, 2008).

**Short-term and Long-term Strategic Planning**

On the issue of planning, the two colleges (College A and E) implement short-term and long-term plans for their institutions’ marketing communication strategies. Short-term plans generally focus on three, six, or 12 months periods, and tend to be operational in nature. Long-term plans, however, cover an extended period, sometimes involving three-to-five years, and tend to be strategic and are consistent with the mission and vision of the organization. These strategies are in line with current changes, needs and demands of the labor market. Additionally, the marketing communication strategies will also correspond to the colleges’ vision and the national education reforms as part of government policy, and the socio-economic development strategic plan of the Lao PDR.

College A directors stated that: *The long-term plan is a five to ten years IMC plan which is aligned with the college’s vision and follow the government’s national education reforms. And a short-term plan is based on the application of the long-term plan which annually develops as detailed implementation plan by dividing the long-term plan in different areas....*

Contrary to the college A and E, the other three colleges (College B, C, and D) implement only a short-term strategic plan on a yearly basis. They plan year by year in order to evaluate their marketing communication and promotional strategies for
improvement. The college also plan, strategies aimed at increasing the number of students’ enrolment for the following semester.

College B director noted that: *So far we have short-term planning (e.g., monthly), and the longest planning is a one year plan.* Similarly, College D marketing manager said that: *We have a short-term planning for our marketing activities year by year.*

It is interesting to note that in most cases, PHEIs formulate and implement short-term marketing communication. It would seem that institutions do not have a proper marketing communication strategic planning, which integrates marketing activities throughout an organization. These findings are in line with a number of other studies (Michael et al., 1993; Jugenheimer, 1995). Goldgehn (1990) noted that most HEIs do not have clear articulated marketing strategies and/or marketing plans that are integrated in an overall institutional plan and used in a systematic manner. Mazzarol and Soutar, (2002) suggested that a key to success is having a coherent strategy, to enable institutions to position their offerings to target market segments.

**Allocation of Financial Resources**

Two college directors confirmed that they allocate funds annually to marketing communication and promotional activities.

Director College A and E reported that: *We allocate funds for marketing communication and promotional activities for our college annually. Each year we spent around 50 million Kip for advertisement on newspapers, brochures, orientation and open days, and making banners, etc.*

On the contrary, three college directors reported that they do not have specific allocated funds for marketing communication or promotional activities each year. It depends on the actual cost of advertising activities.

Director of College C (similar to the view noted by Director college D) stated that: *we do not really allocate specific funds for marketing communication activities but we make payment based on the actual cost of each advertising activity.*
This study suggests that college directors view lack of funds for marketing communication activities as the most significant constraint on institutional advertising or promotional mix tools for the Lao private colleges. The present findings seem to support previous studies (Michael et al., 1993; Jugenheimer, 1995; Kitchen & Li, 2005). These studies found the issue of limited funding for marketing communication to not only impacts on promotion frequency, but it also influence the market analysis (Kitchen & Li, 2005). It is thus critical for tertiary private institutions to regard budgetary funds for marketing communication and promotional mix tools as investments.

Lack of funding seems to be common in marketing higher education (McGrath, 2002; Jugenheimer, 1995). Michael et al. (1993) have earlier supported this view, that funding is probably the most significant constraints on institutional marketing as many educational administrators do not regard funds allocated to marketing as highly as investment in research activities. Similarly, Jugenheimer (1995) stated that a shortage of funds remains a significant problem for university advertising. The findings of Michael et al. (1993) and Jugeneheimer (1995) are in line with Oplatka (2004) who identified that limited fiscal resources are a major constraint for community educational centres in Israel. In a similar view, Duncan and Everett (1993) suggested that there is a need for HEIs to allocate sufficient budgets to foster increases in student recruitment and to enhance institutional reputation.

**Marketing Research Procedures Employed**

The results of this study confirmed that all investigated institutions either did not conduct any marketing or market research or did so on a limited basis. Research help to elucidate in formation about markets which forms a critical part of strategy development. PHEIs only used basic questions as part of a survey to elicit information from students regarding the quality of teaching and areas that can be improved. These surveys tend to be undertaken on an ad hoc basis. For example, PHEIs distribute questionnaires or interview current students before the commencement of a new academic year in order to improve and develop their marketing communication activities relating to teaching and learning effectively and efficiently (i.e., the quality
of teaching, academic development, teaching and learning material resources, college facility and staff service).

Marketing manager of College A indicated that: *At the end of each academic year our college conducts marketing research to find out student and lecturer satisfaction on teaching and learning by distributing questionnaire to students and lecturer in order to identify our college strength and weakness.*

Similary marketing manager of College E higlighted that: *We do marketing research by asking students what they like and why they choose to study here after they come to study at our college.*

Overall, these findings revealed that their marketing research predominatly to focused on the institutions’ provision of their educational service and quality. It would seem that PHEI providers confuse marketing communication strategy and promotional mix tools with the quality of teaching. In addition, it is apparent that private colleges do not have a systematic marketing process such as the use of marketing research, strategy or plan (Oplatka, 2004). The issue of limited marketing research also supports (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2004) findings, that most schools do not have formal marketing plans, for example, conducting marketing research, positioning and segmentation of the market using a systematic theory-based approach. Even though the school management teams were familiar with marketing aims, the majority of schools used simple and unreliable techniques for their marketing research. Table 4.4 shows a summary of each key theme across the three groups of participants: Directors, marketing managers, and academics, the next following page.

This study identifies the marketing communication strategies, employed by key stakeholders (director, marketing manger, and academic), to influence students and parents’ choice of PHEIs. However, the overall findings indicated that all key stakeholders perform multi-roles and functions, in addition to their normal responsibilities. While directors act as entrepreneurs, marketing managers and academics, they are also required have to assist in academic affairs, manage accounts.
and finances. Academics not only perform their teaching responsibilities but also assist in marketing and management duties.
### Table 4.4 Cross-case Analysis of Key Themes Relating to the Employment of Marketing Communication Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Directors</th>
<th>Marketing Managers</th>
<th>Academics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roles and Functions of Key stakeholders</td>
<td>Marketing units and marketing teams for strategic planning in their institutions. Perform multi roles and functions: As entrepreneurs, marketing manager, and academic.</td>
<td>Have multi roles and functions in their institutions: Responsible for checking information in ads, carry out advertising practices, in charge of academic affairs including supervising curricular, managing accounts and finance.</td>
<td>Assist in marketing planning prior to the commencement of each semester. Other roles include teaching, developing curricular, and timetabling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited experience and Knowledge</td>
<td>Limited experience and knowledge in IMC and marketing communication for their institutions, due to the fact that none of them are trained in marketing and IMC areas.</td>
<td>Trained in education management, finance, accounting, economic and banking, and Lao literature and language.</td>
<td>They learnt marketing and IMC from their work experience and international marketing strategy or business marketing theories and books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term and Long-term Strategic</td>
<td>Two private colleges implement short-term and long-term strategic marketing plans based on year-by-year planning. Other three colleges implement short-term plans on a yearly basis.</td>
<td>Plan year-by-year in order to develop and evaluate their colleges marketing strategies.</td>
<td>Implement short-term planning year by year for the colleges’ strategic planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing Planning</td>
<td>Two colleges have a specific allocation of funds for marketing activities. While the other two colleges do not. It depends on actual cost of advertising activities for each year.</td>
<td>Limited allocated budget for marketing advertising and activities.</td>
<td>Limited allocated funds for marketing advertising and activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allocation of Financial Resources</td>
<td>None of college directors conduct marketing research in IMC areas. They use basic ad hoc questionnaires with students. Limited experience in educational IMC, and marketing and media communication.</td>
<td>They distribute basic questionnaires or conduct interviews with current students before the commencement of a new academic year in order to improve and develop their colleges’ marketing strategies.</td>
<td>The marketing research tends to focus on the provision of educational service and quality. (e.g., they concentrate on the quality of teaching, academic development and staff service).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interestingly, none of these key stakeholders have had training in marketing communication or IMC. Marketing communication or IMC skills have been developed and based on work experience. Stakeholders hold different views on short-term and long-term strategic planning for marketing communication purposes. Directors claimed that their colleges use both short-term and long-term marketing communication planning but marketing managers and academics argued that they implement short-term, year-by-year plans. These findings clearly confirm that most colleges do not have proper marketing communication strategy. Most private colleges have limited funds for marketing communication, research, and promotional activities, that tend to be implemented on an ad hoc basis.

Notwithstanding, it appears that directors, marketing managers, and academics share similar views concerning the utilize of various promotional mix tools for influencing students and parents’ choice of an institution. These elements include the use of discount offers and financial incentives; college activities; and scholarships; brochures, school visits and internships; face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication.

With regard to discount offers, these promotional strategies are likely to be used for discounts on tuition fees, family and financial incentives. Provision of information regarding outstanding scholastic achievements and top students are influential marketing communication strategies used to increase students enrolments. Additionally, they found that college activities such as cultural dance, song contests, and sport competitions were other powerful for marketing communication strategies. They considered scholarships/sponsorships for public social activities that involve helping disadvantaged children, participating in the community service, and social activities as the effective marketing communication strategies. Moreover, key stakeholders found that distributing brochures and flyers had a potential to influence student recruitments. Only directors viewed school visits and internships as another form of effective marketing communication method. Besides, they viewed that face-to-face and words-of-mouth communication via college staff, teachers, and personal networks as the most influential marketing communication strategies.
Directors, marketing managers, and academics differ on their views concerning the use of traditional media advertising; technological-based media; college/ special information and orientation and open days. In terms of technological-based media, directors and marketing managers had similar views on the use of newspapers and magazines. However, they differed in opinions relating to broadcast media. Directors reported that television and radio were less likely to be effective, while marketing managers suggested that radio was the best form of media advertising. Only directors considered billboards and posters as powerful marketing communication tools. Additionally, directors and academics had different views on technology media, and social media. The academics considered that the internet, college-websites, and Facebook as the most significant sources of information, while directors ranked these tools as the second powerful promotional mix technique.

In relation to orientation and open days, key stakeholders had different views. Directors perceived orientation and open days for upper secondary school students the most influential technique as the colleges had direct contact with the respective students. Students could also obtain information on the spot. Marketing managers and academics considered various ways of providing college information as the most effective marketing communication technique. These include providing information to newspapers and magazine journalists, and television reporters, and giving a talk on important days such as National Day, Teachers’ Day and graduation ceremony.

**Implications and Limitations**

A number of important practical, research, and policy implications emerge from Study 1. Practical implications for PHEIs concern marketing communication strategies; human resource management and related support; inter collegial and institutional collaboration; and use of technological-based media. In relation to future research investigators should consider re-examining how PHEIs in the Lao PDR employ different promotional mix tools for marketing communication purposes, whether these tools are used with other approaches, what might be the concerns to their adoption, and importantly whether they increase their effectiveness and how?
Additionally, the types of strategies that are commensurate with the target market are important, focusing on the ways in which PHEIs employ electronic media (i.e., social media, websites, and ICT) as part of their marketing communication strategies as a means of increasing student enrolment numbers and to garner a sustainable competitive advantage in the market. Policy implications suggest that the Lao government need to examine ways to further support and encourage investment in human resource capital; government needs to consider providing sources of information for HEIs, parents, and students and encourage investment in digital technology, social media, websites, and ICT; government must also examine the level of support and implement policies on strategic marketing communication planning to enable PHEIs to be more innovative and creative; finally, government needs to provide a framework for the effective of marketing communication strategies for public and private HEIs. These implications are discussed below.

**Practice**

*Marketing communication strategies and Promotional mix tools*

A clear implication of this study is that the level of competition in PHEIs market in the Lao PDR is increasing. Evidence suggests an absence of strategic marketing communication planning, owner-managers having limited marketing knowledge and capacity, as well as short-falls in financial support for marketing communication activities and marketing research. It is critical for PHEIs to have knowledge and understanding of strategic marketing communication planning in regard to competitive strategy development. A key success for an education institution is to have a coherent marketing communication strategy that enables an organization to position its offerings effectively to target market segments (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008). For example, local colleges in Malaysia utilize a mix of promotional strategies involving advertising, publicity, sales promotion, and personal selling, as a way to communicate and distinguish their capacities (Quraeshi & Luqmani, 2009).
Building a strong image has also become essential to HEIs (Morris & Brent, 2001). The intangibility and inseparability of HE services makes branding even more critical; branding in HE helps students and their parents to identify particular services offered and can persuade them to pay for services (Curtis et al., 2009). In order to compete effectively in the marketplace for the best students, and qualified faculty and professional staff, HEIs need to have a well-built business brand (Curtis et al., 2009). Universities with strong historical and cultural legacies have benefits in offering a clear basis for their commercial brand. Top ranking universities use this system of ranking to enhance their market image (Curtis et al., 2009). Reid et al. noted that marketing communication plays an important role in fostering relationships in relation to brand and channels equity. Thus, it is obvious that the power of image and brand play a vital role in marketing communication of HE and in forming positive attitudes towards the institutions. Therefore, investigators should consider how Lao PHEIs could develop and implement marketing communication as a part of IMC strategy for building their image and brand.

**Human Resource Management and Related Support**

In order to develop institutional coherent marketing communication strategy and marketing research, PHEIs need qualified marketing human resources and financial support. Duncan and Everett (1993) stated that institutions need to employ people who can do multi-tasks, including marketing communication and administrative functions. One possible solution is to hire external advertising agencies who are involved in IMC in order to promote their colleges, and allocate sufficient funds aimed at increasing student recruitment and enhancing their institution reputation (Duncan & Everett, 1993). Additionally, PHEIs need to train existing college staff (i.e., marketing managers, academics, administrative officers) in marketing communication capacity building, through the provision of workshops and seminars to help to improve and evaluate their marketing communication strategies in order to increase student enrolments and retention and to foster institutional image and reputation. College staff must have a clear understanding of IMC, marketing and media strategies, how to disseminate the right information, and direct students and parents to the most appropriate sources of information.
**Inter Collegial and Institutional Collaboration**

Cooperating with a foreign university is a key priority for facilitating the development of higher education in terms of quality (Xaysomphou, 2006). PHEPs need to collaborate with foreign universities or colleges if they want their institutions to be competitively sustainable. This includes a strategy for recruiting and attracting new students from other regions, especially from neighboring countries such as Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and China. Many countries in this region, such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, are importers of transnational education from Australia and UK (Lee & Healy 2006) and this can be a similar case for Lao PDR.

Government should consider creating systems that provide international partnership opportunities for PHEIs as a way of helping them to deal with the intensification of global competition for students. Cross-border collaboration in HE is vital to infuse new ideas and to encourage the introduction of new models of effective practices (Asian Development Bank, 2012). As shown in this research, all PHEIs are small in terms of size and local in their reach; and they often lack knowledge base, networks and experience necessary to form cross-border partnerships. As noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, only NUOL has developed an internationalization direction by cooperating with various foreign HEIs and receiving international students (Xaysomphou, 2006).

**Digital Technology and Social Media**

With the emergence of social media, the tools and the strategies for communicating with target markets have changed considerably (Almadhoun et al., 2011). This shift in communication calls for PHEIs to invest in social media, technological-based media, online platforms, and institution’s website. In recent years, HEIs have shown heightened increased interest in powerful technology media and social media networking as a marketing communication tools (Almadhoun et al., 2011). As noted in Chapter 2, the application and use of the internet and social media networks is growing among the young generation and parents with 129,660.29 users in the capital and main towns in the Lao PDR (UNESCO, 2012). Research (Almadhoun et al., 2011) from the University of New Hampshire found that Facebook and YouTube are
the most popular social media platforms with college students. 96% students said they use Facebook day-on-day, and 84% use YouTube. Only 20% said they use blogs, 14% use Twitter, MySpace (12%), and 10% use LinkedIn.

A noted example of the key role played by digital media is that of the Western Sydney University where, around 2,181,417 individuals accessed YouTube to view (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buA3tsGnp2s) the brief history of a Sudanese who become a refugee lawyer in Australia. This case highlights a potentially effective new platform involving social media networking to reach large audience in a short period of time (Accessed the Western Sydney University on 08 March 2016, time 3.51PM).

Accordingly, PHEPs need to place greater weight on the application of the different types of social media tools, the internet, and technological-based media in their marketing communication strategies, and program in their institutions. These tools have the potential to attract students, parents, and sponsors while also providing access to up-to-date information about their colleges. There are a variety of different forms of social media tools, publishing tools (e.g., Blogs, BlogSpot, and Twitter), social networking (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, and MySpace), media sharing facilities (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, and Flickr), and website (e.g., Wikipedia) that can be utilized (Deanne Brocato et al., 2015). Accordingly, this study not only highlights their importance in strategic and marketing communication planning but also provides an understanding of how these platforms can be employed. Creating attractive social media applications and connecting with potential students is therefore a major challenge for educational marketers.

Research

To the author’s knowledge, this study is the first investigation on the ways in which PHEIs employ promotional mix tools as part of marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of PHEIs in the Lao PDR. Thus, this thesis contributes to marketing communication, promotional mix tools and IMC strategy area as it relates to the Lao educational, cultural, and social context.
Two research implications emerge from findings of this investigate: First, future research should consider re-examining how PHEIs utilize promotional mix tools as part of marketing communication strategies to influence students and parents’ choice of institutions, and the types of marketing communication strategies to be employed. Second, another area to explore is how PHEI providers conduct marketing research in their institutions given the low levels of financial support and limited experience and training in marketing communication, promotional, and IMC strategy.

Third, an important area for future research needs to focus on use and suitability of social media, technological-based media, ICT, and college websites. In recent years, the use of these media tools has increased and been employed for marketing communication purpose to garner a sustainable competitive advantage in the market share (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Almadhoun et al., 2011; Deanne Brocato et al., 2015).

**Government Policy**

*Government needs to examine ways to further support and encourage investment in human resource capital*

To intensify PHEIs to recruit more students and to respond to financial pressures, the government needs to assist PHEIs to explore alternative funding options available to them as they face issues relating to revenue generation and cost containment. For example, the government should consider conducting regional workshops that offer opportunities for cross-border sharing of strategies, policies, and procedures that private colleges and universities have found to be effective in revenue generation and cost containment, while ensuring quality (Asian Development Bank, 2012). These workshops would have the dual purpose of establishing information sharing on policies, procedures, and experiences related to financing and cost management, while concurrently creating a network of relationships among those involved in the operation of PHE across the region.
**Government needs to consider encouraging PHEIs investment in digital technology, social media, websites, and ICT**

Findings from this research demonstrate that PHEIs are making use of variety of effective sources of information and incorporating various elements of promotional mix tools to ensure that they reach prospective students and parents. It is clear that material directly from PHEIs, such as brochures, school visits, traditional media advertising, electronic media, as well as word-of-mouth communication, is the best way to disseminate information to prospective students and parents. Therefore, government should consider providing sources of information for HEIs, parents, and students so that they are well-informed about current educational policies and practices as well as to effectively promote higher education.

With regard to communication purposes, it is essential to reach the parents of prospective students as they have a strong influence on their children’s aspirations to continue with their study (Wises, 2008). In addition, parents are influential on the college’s choice process (Canterbury, 2000). Therefore, it is important for the Lao government to critically analyse their existing marketing communication as well as recruitment strategies by identifying their strengths and weaknesses concerning the most useful sources of information for all concerned stakeholders.

As indicated above, noticeably rapid developing technologies and a massive number of social media users have highlighted the potential power and implications for using social media in education marketing (Almadhoun et al., 2011; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011). Empirical evidence from this research also suggest that PHEIs are beginning to embrace social media and realize the potential influence and implication for using it as an element of their marketing communication strategies or promotional mix tools. In Malaysia many HEIs have successfully taken advantage of social media as a promotional mix tools (Almadhoun et al., 2011). Therefore, the foregoing discussion implies that one possible solution to help government establish effective sources of information for HEIs, parents, and students is to encourage investment in digital technology, social media, websites, and ICT. Seeking new methods or information sources will not just ensure effective communication, but will also
provide a possible way of differentiating and competing with other HEIs (Wises, 2008). For example, websites create outstanding opportunities for HEIs to quickly and effectively make information available to prospective students and constantly updating their information as well as indicating a move towards the increased use of technology for communication and recruitment purposes (Wises, 2008).

In addition, the use of social media and online platforms is an excellent platform for social interaction and information seeking (Almadhoun et al., 2011). This research highlights the importance of word-of-mouth as a very powerful source of information so considering the extent of use of this social networking combined with the behavior of future students in social media environments will be relevant to the Lao educational market.

*Government needs to examine the level of support and implement action of policies and marketing communication strategies and planning to enable PHEIs to be more innovative and creative*

Based on this research, HEIs are operating in competitive and dynamic environments, which establish the need for effective strategic planning (Cann & George, 2004). This research shows that most colleges do not have proper marketing communication strategies and top management have limited access to on-going professional development. The lack of marketing and strategic planning was also raised in Chapter 2 of this thesis and this problem seems to have been neglected in educational policies, plans, and strategies. It is evident that PHEIs are struggling to meet their current demands for educating a rapid growing student population and to remain sustainable in a competitive environment.

To strengthen PHEIs’ marketing communication strategic planning capacity and gain an optimal market share as well as a sustainable competitive advantage, government should examine ways to further support and implement policies and marketing communication strategic planning so that PHEIs are able to become more innovative and creative in their marketing communication strategies. Marketing communication strategy development is a crucial action designed to develop and implement marketing
plans and activities to address issues such as competition in turbulent environments in which the institutions operate (Cann & George, 2004).

In addition, a key to successful college marketing communication is being adaptive, in which institutions operate systems for monitoring and interpreting important environment changes and show a readiness to revise their mission, goals, strategies, and organization to be aligned with their opportunities (Johnson, 1989). This perspective indicates that PHEI marketing communication plans need to be customer-orientated, focused, and adaptive (Messah, 2011). With current strategies identified in this research, government should encourage and foster through policies ways to further improve education for future generations.

Government needs to examine to provide a framework for the effective of marketing communication for public and private HEIs

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, the rapid growth of PHEIs in the Lao PDR, in part, has contributed to the success in expanding overall HE provision and cutting governments’ costs in this sector. In addition, a finding from this research suggests a gap in marketing communication framework for public and private HEIs. HEIs appear to have implemented piecemeal marketing communication strategies with a lack of holistic framework. The lack of a sufficient market-orientation, targeting the domestic market, which has low-economic demand and it, can be attributed to the low-income status of the country. Separate marketing communication strategies for both public and private HE for individual institutions may result in poorly implemented marketing communication strategies and leave Lao higher education non-competitive in regional and global markets in the future.

Since PHEIs actively participate in human resource development alongside public education institutions (Ministry of Education, 2011), there is a need for a cohesive marketing communication framework for public and private HE. Given the importance of PHEIs in absorbing demand for access to HE while also reducing the cost of government, it is significant that they are successful (Asian Development Bank, 2012). With regard to the current issues raised in this research, government
needs to examine existing HE markets and provide comprehensive policies in order to adequately support the development of the HE marketing communication framework as a whole particularly in terms of improving HE marketing and provision of quality education so that institutions are able to adapt to the changing environment.

**Limitations**

Three limitations have been identified which may have impacted on the interpretability of the findings. These include: a relatively small number of participants with limited marketing experience; employment of a cross-sectional design; and participants’ reluctance to disclose potentially sensitive information. These limitations are discussed below.

First, the views of a relatively small number of directors, marketing managers, and academics, with relatively low levels of marketing communication training and education provided information for this study. Another related limitation is the fact that none of the participants were trained in marketing communication, promotional, and IMC, in addition limited experience and skills in marketing management for higher educational purposes. Consequently, the findings might be different if another cohort had been involved, raising some doubt about the external validity and generalizability of the findings.

A second limitation concerns is employing a cross-sectional design. This type of study provides only a snapshot of the issues. Ideally, it may have been more appropriate to have followed-up participants over a lengthy period of time. On the positive side, three persons (directors, marketing managers, and academics) from each college were interviewed, involving a degree of multi-level analysis and comparison of data. Interviewing multiple individuals from the same institution culminated in a broad range of findings.

A third limitation involves the reticence or reluctance of college director, marketing managers, and academics to disclose seemingly fully confidential information. This study focused on private colleges that were; in part directly communicating that they
held some concern about losing their comparative advantage if confidential strategic information was disclosed either wittingly or unwittingly. This possible problem could have culminated in not obtaining a full partial understanding of the issues.

Conclusion

The present study examines marketing communication strategies employed by PHEIs. Findings from this investigation demonstrate that to effectively communicate with current and prospective students, PHEIs need to adopt IMC strategies because of the complexities and to assist institution to sustain competitive and become market-oriented. It is important for PHEIs should have sound strategies that coordinate their marketing communication efforts to reach their institution marketing goals. Some marketing communication strategies have relatively little influence on a student’s decision to study at a particular institution. It is significant for PHEIs to revise and even revisit their marketing communication or promotional mix tools to determine which ones more or less effective in reaching prospective students to enhance student enrolment. Thus, PHEIs need systems that integrate and synergies different promotional mix tools such as technological-based media. A mixture of marketing communication tools is better positioned for effectiveness and for creating an impact and appeal response to increase student enrolment (Messah, 2011).

Consequently, there is an urgent for PHEIs need to build knowledge and help to foster the capabilities of college staff, marketing management teams, and academic with respect to the relevance of marketing communication strategies; how the best employ promotional mix tools, IMC, and technological-based media. In addition, college administrative staff and academic need to become aware of how to build brand image and how to foster a positive relationship between brand and a customers in order to increase student enrolment numbers to gain their institution market share.

This investigation also highlights the role of marketing communication, promotional mix and IMC strategy as they hold a fundamental place for PHEIs, in a competitive landscape. Having marketing communication strategic planning is imperative for PHEIs in order to attract and recruit new and current students in the borderless
education industry. As suggested by Horrigan (2007), the development of marketing communication strategy involves the coordination and combination of promotional mix elements, and it is coordination of these elements that enables HEIs to meet students’ needs and provide value. Thus, HEIs need well-developed, comprehensive marketing communication strategies that are communicated throughout the institution. In addition to traditional promotional mix, PHEIs need to consider coordinating new technological-based media and social media in their marketing communication strategies. These tools can be most effective, affordable, and measureable enabling HEIs to create awareness and market their institutions to prospective students.

Chapter 5 reports on Study 2, an investigation of the ways, if any, different promotional mix tools influence students and parents’ choice of Lao tertiary educational private colleges.
Chapter 5
Study 2
The Influence of Promotional Mix Tools on Students and Parents’ Choice of
Lao Tertiary Educational Private Colleges

Overview

This chapter reports the findings of students and parents’ views on the influence of
different marketing communication (i.e.; promotional mix tools) on their choice of
tertiary educational institution in the Lao PDR. Briefly, the chapter outlines the
purpose of Study 2 and research questions, followed by a description of the method
including instruments used, procedures, and data analytic procedures. Following a
presentation of the results, the chapter concludes with a discussion of findings and
implications for future research.

Purpose and Research Questions

Study 2 investigates students and parents’ views on the influence of different
promotional mix tools on their choice of tertiary private colleges. Promotional mix
include advertising (television; radio; newspapers, billboards/posters), sales promotion
(discount offer; financial incentives), public relations and publicity (special
information; provision of sponsorships; college activities), direct marketing
(orientation and open days; brochures), personal selling (direct communication, i.e.,
word-of-mouth; face-to-face), and electronic media (Facebook; college websites; the
internet). These elements are appreciated in the higher education sector (Almadhoun
et al., 2011; Ivy, 2008; Wong, 2006; Fill, 2005; Rowley, 1998).

Study 2 addresses two principal research questions (see Table 5.1)

Method

Study 2 involved two phases: Phase 1 is a survey of private college students. Phase 2
comprises semi-structured interviews with parents of prospectives students. The
methodology for these two phases are depicted in Table 5.1 below.
Table 5.1 Methodology for Survey and Semi-Structured Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Measures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1</td>
<td>What is the relationship between demographic variables, especially region and ethnic background, and the influence of different promotional mix tools factors on students’ choice of Lao tertiary educational private colleges?</td>
<td>Student Survey of Private College ($n=211$)</td>
<td>Questionaire level of influence of Promotional Mix Items on students’ choice of college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>RQ 2: In what ways do different promotional mix tools influence parents’ choice of college selection for their children?</td>
<td>Interviews with Parents ($n=3$)</td>
<td>Semi-Structured Interview Schedule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase 1: Private College Student Survey**

*Participants*

Respondents are 250 current undergraduate students from five private colleges in the Vientiane Capital. Fifty students from each private college were selected. In the 2012 and 2013 academic years, around 4,109 students were enrolled at five private colleges, where this research was conducted (Education Statistics Information and Technology Center, Ministry of Education and Sport, 2012).

From April to May 2012, questionnaires were distributed to 250 students from five tertiary educational institutions in Vientiane. In this study, there were 211 completed questionnaires. However, 39 were unusable as respondents completed less than 85% of the questions/items (see Table 5.2). Possible reasons for not completing the questionnaire can be attributed to time, study, and levels of interest/disinterested factors. Table 5.2 shows the response rate breakdown between the five tertiary private colleges.
Equivalent fulltime student enrolments at colleges & related sample size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>EFSE</th>
<th>Number of Questionnaire Distributed (n)</th>
<th>Number of Questionnaire Completed (n)</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College A</td>
<td>966</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College B</td>
<td>552</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College C</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College D</td>
<td>894</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College E</td>
<td>929</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4,109</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>211</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unusable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These colleges were willing to provide information on promotional mix tools for the marketing communication strategy in higher education. Colleges had been established for over 10 years and the numbers of students on these private colleges had increased dramatically in each academic year. College selection was based on ongoing marketing communication activities in the private education market.

Demographic Profile of Students

The demographic profile of students is shown in Table 5.3. Descriptive statistics include information on gender, age, marital status, number of family members, classification of ethnic, regions, types of education institutions attended previously, education qualification completed, occupation, monthly incomes, study sessions, year level and study programs.

Table 5.3 shows that a slight majority of the students are male (around 51%). The majority of the students (61.6%) are aged between 20 to 24 years. As expected, over 97% of students are single. About 55% of students report having four-to-five siblings and 27% reside in families with six to eight siblings. As expected, over 97% speak Lao while ethnic background (namely Mon-khmer, Sino-Tibetan, Hmong-Mien and others) account for around 3% of student/respondents. 59% of students originate from the Vientiane Capital and 24% from the Northern provinces. A majority of the students graduated from public government schools before entering their current colleges (79%), with 18% participants having graduated from private schools. About 86% hold upper secondary education level, followed by those who attained post-secondary (5%).
Table 5.3 *Demographic Profile of Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Profile of Students</th>
<th>% (n=211)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50.70% (n=107)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>49.30% (n=104)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (year)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 20 years</td>
<td>28.00% (n=59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 - 24 years</td>
<td>61.60% (n=130)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 24</td>
<td>10.40% (n=22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>96.70% (n=204)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>3.30% (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of family members</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – 3 Sibling</td>
<td>13.30% (n=28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 – 5 Sibling</td>
<td>54.50% (n=115)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+</td>
<td>32.20% (n=68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classification of Ethnic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lao speakers</td>
<td>96.70% (n=204)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic background</td>
<td>3.30% (n=7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Regions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vientiane Capital</td>
<td>59.20% (n=125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern province</td>
<td>24.20% (n=51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central province (Excluding Vientiane Capital)</td>
<td>11.80% (n=25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern province</td>
<td>4.70% (n=10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Types of education institutions attended previously</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public school</td>
<td>79.10% (n=167)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private school</td>
<td>20.90% (n=44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational qualification completed</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper secondary</td>
<td>85.80% (n=181)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary</td>
<td>14.20% (n=30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student full-time</td>
<td>81.00% (n=171)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>19.00% (n=40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monthly Income</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No income</td>
<td>59.70% (n=126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>40.30% (n=85)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study sessions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mornings</td>
<td>58.30% (n=123)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evenings</td>
<td>41.70% (n=88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 1</td>
<td>38.40% (n=81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 2</td>
<td>43.10% (n=91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year 3, 4 &amp; 5</td>
<td>18.50% (n=39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Study programs</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banking, finance and accounting</td>
<td>41.70% (n=88)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>34.60% (n=73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other courses</td>
<td>23.70% (n=50)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A large portion of students (81%) are full-time, while 9% are engaged in the workforce. A majority of students (59.7%) report having no income, followed by those who have monthly income, accounting for (12.8%). As expected, over 58.3%
students choose to study in morning sessions, followed by those who study in the evening sessions, covering (41.2%). About 43.1% are year 2 students and 38.4% students are in year 1. Around 41.7% of students study Banking, Finance and Accounting course, followed by those who are in a Business Administration program (34.6%) (see Table 5.3 above).

**Instrument**

**Promotional Mix Items**

Data were collected utilizing the promotional mix questionnaire (PMQ) developed specifically for the purpose of this thesis, to elicit students’ views concerning the influence of different promotional mix tools on their choice of tertiary educational institution. Similar questionnaires have used in studies of higher education marketing (Helgesen, 2008; Edmiston Strasser, 2009; Morgan, 1996).

Items are grouped under three broad headings: Part 1: Background and demographic information. Part 2: Students’ views concerning the influence of different promotional mix tools on their choice of college (including closed-ended questions), and Part 3: Additional comments and suggestions, comprising opened-ended questions. These three parts are detailed below (see Table 5.4).

**Part 1: Background and Demographic Information**

Questions 1-13 sought socio-demographic details of respondents such as: gender, age, marital status, number of family members and classification of ethnics, as shown in Table 5.4.

**Part 2: Students’ Views Concerning the Influence of Different Promotional Mix Tools on Their Choice of Lao Tertiary Private College Selection**

Promotional mix items are derived from the literature (Wong, 2006; Ivy, 2008; Messah, 2011). This section requires respondents to rate items comprising a list of five elements of promotional mix item (PMI). These five components consist of Advertising (7 items; e.g., television), sales promotion (4 items; e.g., scholarship for
outstanding students, discount offer), public relations (5 items; e.g., orientation and open days, college/special information), direct marketing (3 items; e.g., brochures, college guide book), and personal selling (3 items; e.g., face-to-face, word-of-mouth communication). Respondents were invited to consider each element of PMI influencing their choice of college selection, and then rate the information sources that had the highest influence on their college choice. All 22 items are rated on 5-points Likert scales ranging from Not at all (1) To a very large extent (5). The Likert attitude scale “is based upon the assumption that each statement/item on the scale has equal ‘attitudinal value’, ‘importance’ or ‘weight’ in terms of reflecting an attitude towards the issue in question” (Kumar, 1996, p.129) (See Table 5.4).

Part 3: Students’ Additional Comments and Suggestions on PMQ

The final section involved two open-ended questions, requiring student to provide further comments and suggestion. Question 1 invited students to outline any other factors or media that impacted their choice of college selection. Question 2 elicited their suggestions of marketing communication or media tools or processes that could help promote private higher education in the Lao PDR.
**Table 5.4 Socio-Demographic, Promotional Mix Item Questionnaire, and Additional comments and suggestions**

**Part 1: Socio-Demographic of Respondents**

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| 1) Male | 1) Below 20 years | 1) Single | 1) Nuclear family (1-3) | 1) Lao | 1) Vientiane Capital | 1) Public school | 1) Business Administration | 1) No income | 1) Mornings | 1) Year 1 |
| 2) Female | 2) Between 20 to 24 years | 2) Married | 2) Extended family (4-5) | 2) Mon-Khmer | 2) Northern province | 2) Lao private school | 2) Business English | 2) Below 500,000 Kip | 2) Evenings | 2) Year 2 |
|   | 3) Between 25 to 30 years | 3) Divorced | 3) Between 6-8 sibling | 3) Sino-Tibetan | 3) Central province (excluded Vientiane Capital) | 3) International school located in Laos | 3) Associate degree or equivalent | 3) 500,000 – 1,000,000 Kip | 3) Afternoons | 3) Year 3 |
|   | 4) Between 31 to 35 years | 4) Widowed | 4) More than 8 sibling | 4) Hmong-Mien | 4) Southern province | 4) Associate degree or equivalent | 4) Bachelor’s degree | 4) 1,000,001 – 2,000,000 Kip | 4) Special sessions | 4) Year 4 |
|   | 5) Above 36 years |   |   | 5) Others |   |   |   | 5) More than 2,000,000 Kip |   |   | 5) Year 5 |

**Part 2: Promotional Mix Item Questionnaire**

<p>| | | | | | | |</p>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Additional comments and suggestions**

- Part 1: Socio-Demographic of Respondents
  - Gender
    - 1) Male
    - 2) Female
  - Age
    - 1) Below 20 years
    - 2) Between 20 to 24 years
    - 3) Between 25 to 30 years
    - 4) Between 31 to 35 years
    - 5) Above 36 years
  - Marital Status
    - 1) Single
    - 2) Married
    - 3) Divorced
    - 4) Widowed
  - Number of Family Members
    - 1) Nuclear family (1-3)
    - 2) Extended family (4-5)
    - 3) Between 6-8 sibling
    - 4) More than 8 sibling
  - Classification of Ethnics
    - 1) Lao
    - 2) Mon-Khmer
    - 3) Sino-Tibetan
    - 4) Hmong-Mien
    - 5) Others
  - Place of Origin
    - 1) Vientiane Capital
    - 2) Northern province
    - 3) Central province (excluded Vientiane Capital)
    - 4) Southern province
  - Types of Education Institutions Attended Previously
    - 1) Public school
    - 2) Lao private school
    - 3) International school located in Laos
    - 4) Overseas
  - Educational Qualification Completed
    - 1) Upper secondary
    - 2) Technical and vocational level
    - 3) Associate degree or equivalent
    - 4) Bachelor’s degree
  - Occupation
    - 1) Student
    - 2) Work for the government
    - 3) Work for private business
    - 4) Work for an international organization
    - 5) Private business owner
    - 6) Other jobs
  - Monthly Income
    - 1) No income
    - 2) Below 500,000 Kip
    - 3) 500,000 – 1,000,000 Kip
    - 4) 1,000,001 – 2,000,000 Kip
    - 5) More than 2,000,000 Kip
  - Study Sessions
    - 1) Mornings
    - 2) Evenings
    - 3) Afternoons
    - 4) Special sessions
  - Year Level
    - 1) Year 1
    - 2) Year 2
    - 3) Year 3
    - 4) Year 4
    - 5) Year 5
  - Study Programs
    - 1) Business Administration
    - 2) Business English
    - 3) Business Law
    - 4) Banking, Finance and Accounting
    - 5) Hotels and Tourism
    - 6) Other Courses
### Part 2: Promotional Mix Items Questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotional Mix Items</th>
<th>Level of Influences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not at all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent have the following media communication influenced your choice of college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Television</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Radio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Newspapers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Technology Media (e.g., Internet, College-Websites)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Social Media (e.g., Facebook, Blog, YouTube)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Magazine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Billboard/Posters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent have the following college-based incentives influenced your choice of college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Provision of Scholarships (e.g., outstanding students)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Discount offers (e.g., tuition fees for students who elect to pay 12-months in advance, student who enrolled more than two programs, and students who have two or more sibling studying at the same college)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. No refund after a census date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Education exhibition at Lao special events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent have public relations and events influenced your choice of college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Orientation &amp; open days for upper secondary schools</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. College/Special Information (e.g., invite newspaper, magazines, television reporters to college special events)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Scholarships/Sponsorships (e.g., government officials from MOES* and National sport competitions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Public Service (e.g., blood donation, participating in the community services, helping people in the rural area)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. College Activities (e.g., singing contests and sports competition)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent have direct marketing influenced your choice of college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Brochures (e.g., distribution at opening new terms, graduation ceremony and outdoor exhibition)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. College Guide Book</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. School visits and Internships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To what extent have personal selling influenced your choice of college?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Word-of-mouth communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Face-to-face via College staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Tele-Marketing communication (telephone, email &amp; text)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*NB: Lao Ministry of Education and Sport (MOES)*

### Part 3: Additional Comments and Suggestions

1. Are there any other factors or media that have impacted on your choice of college selection? If yes, please specify

........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

2. Other comments.
Reliability and Validity of the PMQ

An effective measurement tool must always meet the criteria of being reliable and valid (Wiese, 2008). Neuman (2007) noted that reliability means dependability or consistency of the measurement process or measurement instrument itself. A reliable instrument for a piece of research will yield similar data from similar respondents over time (Cohen et al., 2011). In quantitative research reliability measurement can be increased through the pilot testing (Neuman, 2007). Thus, the PMQ was pre-tested to uncover possible problem areas before using the instrument to collect data. In this study, the instrument’s reliability was determined by using Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient. It was implemented to assess internal consistency among responses (Adriene, 2013).

Validity means truthfulness and refers to the match between a construct or the way a researcher conceptualize the idea in a conceptual definition, and a measure (Neuman, 2007). Amongst several types of validity measurement, this research pays particular attention to construct and content validity. Construct validity in quantitative research can be achieved through correlation with other measures of the issue or by rooting the researcher’s construction in a wide literature search, which teases out the meaning of particular construct and consistent elements (Cohen et al., 2011). In content validity, the instrument must show that it fairly and comprehensively covers the domain or items that support to cover (Nueman, 2007).

Pre-testing of the PMQ

The purpose of the pre-test is to check clarity of the instrument and the appropriateness of the instrument (Cohen et al., 2011). To establish reliability and the validity, a survey questionnaire was designed and distributed to 30 students and three experts in the area of marketing communication, in one randomly sampled private college.

Content Validity

Content validity indicates how well the questions in the survey are represented regarding all the possible questions that a researcher could ask about the content
(Creswell, 2008). Typically researchers go to a panel of judges or experts and have them distinguished if the questions are valid (Creswell, 2008). To test the survey content validity in this study, three marketing communication experts were requested to review the survey instrument. Emphasis was made on designing a clear and self-explanatory questionnaire that involved, unambiguous question that could be understood by respondents. This was particularly important for respondents who could not understand the concept of marketing communication and promotional mix approaches.

**Reliability**

The questionnaire was also tested for internal reliability utilizing Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient (Adriene, 2013). Values between $\alpha = 0.96$ and $\alpha = 1.00$ are generally considered acceptable value for Cronbach’s Alpha. For the present questionnaire values range between $\alpha = 0.88$ and $\alpha = 0.94$ (see Table 5.5). After the pilot study, the final survey questionnaire was refined based on the comments received from both students and experts.

Table 5.5 *Pilot study: Reliability of survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Students views on different PM tools influence on students’ choice of Lao tertiary private college providers</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha ($\alpha$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>0.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Direct marketing</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Personal selling</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Sales promotion</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Procedure**

Three research assistants reviewed 30 minutes of training on how to distribute and to complete the questionnaire with students. A formal letter was sent to the Ministry of Education and Sport (MoES), requesting permission to collect data from five tertiary private colleges in Vientiane for research purposes. Ethics clearance was obtained from RMIT University. After permission was obtained, formal letters were sent to five private colleges’ principals, requesting approval to distribute questionnaires at their institutions.
Private colleges’ officers distributed questionnaires to 50 students from each college. In an attempt to achieve a high response rate, the implementation of the survey involved multiple contacts and response mechanism to include paper, e-mail and fax (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009). Data were collected over a two weeks’ period between 23 April and 08 May, 2013.

Data Analytic Procedures

Data analyses progressed through 3 steps: exploratory data screening tests of statistical assumptions; exploratory factor analysis; and correspondence analysis.

Phase 2: Private College Parent Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants

Three parents from three private colleges (i.e., A, D, and E) participated in this study. However, the original intention was to interview five parents from five colleges. These two parents declined to be interviewed for personal reasons. Table 5.5, shows that all interviewees are male, aged over 46 years. Two parents hold Master’s degree and all have had over 10 years working experience in education management.

Table 5.6 Profile of Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College Parent</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Educational Qualification</th>
<th>Work Experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Education Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>Director of planning &amp; cooperation Dept, college lecturer</td>
<td>Experience in teaching business management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Master degree</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>Principal of secondary school</td>
<td>Experience in secondary school education management.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>46+ years</td>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>Over 10 years</td>
<td>College lecturer</td>
<td>Experience in teaching finance and accounting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

This research uses a qualitative research method that provides an opportunity to cover rich and complex information from an individual; it is particularly useful in encouraging the interviewee to share intrinsic opinion through face-to-face interactive process (Wong, 2006). Interview questions sought participants’ background information and their views concerning the influence of different promotional mix elements on college choice for their children or child. Table 5.6 outlines the present parental interview schedule.

Table 5.7 Parent Interview Schedule (PIS)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Male Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: (1) Between 25 to 35 years; (2) Between 36 to 45 years; (3) Over 46 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Describe your work experience, tenure position held in your organization.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Main Questions

The following questions explore the determining factors in your and your child’s choice of college.

1. Have different commercial media such as advertising influenced your choice of college selection for your children or child. If so, how?

2. Is the cost of education a consideration for your child? If so, how? And why?

3. Are you aware of tertiary private college providers using different media to influence your choice of college?

4. If so, what have you observed?

5. What are your views regarding the ways tertiary private college providers use marketing such as technology media, social media, discount offers, financial incentives, the provision of scholarships, college/special information, orientation and open days, face-to-face, and word-of-mouth communication).
**Procedure**

Scheduled face-to-face interviews were carried out and managed at the colleges’ premises. The purpose of these interviews was to explore parents’ views on the influence of different promotional mix elements on their choice of college for their children. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. All interviews were conducted between 23 April – 8 May 2013. The interview procedure and data analytic methods utilized are the same as those employed with directors, marketing managers, and academics (Chapter 4, Study 1) and will not be described in this section.

**Data Analytic Procedures**

Thematic analysis is employed to conduct qualitative data. In an effort to avoid repetition, opened-ended responses for students and interview material from parents are reported in close proximately to each other in the following results section.

**Results**

**Exploratory Factor Analysis**

An Exploratory factor analyses (EFA) involving Alpha factoring with an oblimin rotation procedure culminated in eight factors. Table 5.8 shows items associated with each promotional mix factor and factor loadings, and Table 5.9 demonstrates KMO, Cronbach’s alpha and mean associated with each factor.

Table 5.8 shows promotional mix factor and the respective factor loadings. The first factor, advertising, entails five items, all of which have loadings greater than .3. Factor 1 includes magazines (.73), radio (.62), television (.49), newspapers (.46), and billboard/posters (.34). The second factor, social media, comprises two items, social media (1.0) and technology media (.40), with loadings higher than .4. The third factor, discount offers, involves two items, discount offers (.50) and no refund after two weeks payment (.32), with loadings ranging between .32 and .50. The fourth factor, financial incentives, entails two items, education exhibition (.71) and scholarships for outstanding students (.31), with loadings greater than .3. The fifth factor, scholarships, implies three items, scholarships for public social (.62), college activities (.51) and
public service (.36), with loadings ranging between .36 and .62. The sixth factor, special information, involves two items with loadings higher than .4. Factor 6 includes special information (.68) and orientation and open days (.48).

Table 5.8 *Promotional Mix Factors and Respective Factor Loadings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Promotional Mix Factors</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
<th>F4</th>
<th>F5</th>
<th>F6</th>
<th>F7</th>
<th>F8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Advertising (F1)</td>
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<td>Magazine</td>
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<td>Billboard/ Poster</td>
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Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measures of sampling adequacy, statistics vary between 0 and 1. Kaiser (1974) suggested that values greater than 0.5 were acceptable (Field, 2005). For the present studies values range between .50 and .68. It should be noted that according to George and Mallery (2003) values of Cronbach’s’ alpha < .7 are open to questions (p.231).

Table 5.9 KMO, Cronbachs’ Alpha (α) and Mean Scores Associated with Each Factor

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables on which factor analysis performed</th>
<th>KMO</th>
<th>Cronbach’s Alpha (α)</th>
<th>Mean ( ( \bar{X} ) )</th>
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Mapping of the Relationship between Regions, Ethnic background, and Eight Promotional Mix Influence Factors: A Correspondence Analysis

Results in relation to correspondence analyses are divided into two phases: Phase 1 explores the inter-relationship between student demographics (regions and ethnic group) and eight promotional mix influence factors (i.e., direct communication, brochures, scholarships for public social, special information, financial incentives, discount offers, social media, and advertising) on students’ choice of Lao tertiary private college selection. Phase 2 explores the inter-relationship between student demographics (regions and ethnic group) and influenced of eight promotional mix factors.

Phase 1: Inter-relationship between student demographics and eight promotional mix influence factors

A. Direct Communication

Figure 5-1 Association between regions, ethnic group, and influence of direct communication on students’ choice of college

Figure 5.1 shows that students who live in the Vientiane Capital and speak Lao are more likely to be influenced by direct communication in their choice of private college. However, students who live in the Northern and the Southern provinces and who speak Lao are less likely to be influenced by direct communication in their choice.
of college. In contrast, other ethnic background speakers and who live in the Central (excluding Vientiane) province are not likely to be influenced.

Interestingly, open-ended questions reveal that students report that direct communication via words-of-mouth and face-to-face from friends, senior students, and brothers or sisters are most effective factor to motivates and convinces new students to study at that college. 12 out of 125 students from colleges A, B, C, and E provided comments on direct communication factor.

College A student said that: *I was introduced by brothers and sisters, and convinced by friends who used to study here.* Another student from the same college added that: *Apart from direct communication techniques, there are many other factors that make students choose to study at some places such as words-of-mouth and face-to-face from friends, male or female senior students.*

College B student stated that: *Words-of-mouth and face-to-face communication among students who are studying at that college have an influence on decision-making choice of college as they pass on information on how good the teaching at the college is.*

College C student affirmed that: *I decided to study at this college because senior students told me that the college employed competent lecturers and the teaching was really good and this college was well-accepted by many people.*

Similarly, College E student reported that: *The effectiveness of direct communication is passing on information to peers by using face-to-face.* Another student from the same college added that: *He/she learnt that words-of-mouth is used more than telephone, and so on.*

Interview material derived from parents reveals that information communicated via face-to-face, words-of-mouth, and Tele-marketing communication influenced their college choice for their children’s education.
College A parent said that: *Personal selling is a good method because some people do not like to read but prefer to ask questions... I think words-of-mouth have influence on decision-making, and answering phone calls will be a good way to clarify issues in a timely manner and get to the point.*

College E parent stated that: *I think face-to-face communication and welcoming parents are also important because college staff motivate students to study at the college and help parents to make decisions.* In order to be effective, private colleges need to have competent and friendly staff who can provide parents with sufficient information.

College E parent also added that: *Face-to-face communication can influence parents’ decision making ...... college staff must have a good image with good manner, and be friendly .... They also need to know how to explain and convey college information well.*

**B. Brochures**

Figure 5-2 Associates between regions, ethnic group, and influence of brochures on students’ choice of college

Figure 5.2 demonstrates that students who live in the Vientiane Capital and who speak Lao are more likely to be influenced by brochures or flyers in their choice of college, when compared with Lao speaking who live in the Northern and Southern provinces. Other ethnic groups speakers living in the Central (excluding Vientiane) province are not likely to be influenced by brochures or flyers.
Students suggested that college staff and current students should distribute brochures, flyers, college guide books, and talks to upper secondary students, parents, and public and private organizations to assert with the direct marketing. Eight students provided commentary.

College A student said that: *To inform students or parents and help them to make decision on college choice, college staff should be asked to distribute brochures, flyers and explain information ......* Another student from the same college added that: *Apart from staff, I would like students to participate in distributing brochures and flyers.*

College C student stated that: *The College must print flyers and distribute them at upper secondary schools or choose to disseminate college information about activities and teaching and learning at a school.*

Two parents report that college information communicate effectively through distributing brochures before the commencement of a new academic year at various places, such as upper secondary schools, shopping malls, and car parks as well as through a big sing/banner in front of the college.

College D parent stated that: *Each year before starting new academic year, the college sends out staff to hand out the brochures at important places such as upper secondary schools, shopping malls, and car parks, and place the brochures on a wind-screen of each car at the car park.* The same parent added that: *The College also advertises on a big sign/banner and put it up at important places and in front of the college application for new cohort of students.*
C. Special Information

Figure 5.3 illustrates that Lao speaking students and who live in Vientiane are more likely to be influenced by special information in their choice of college, when compared with students who live in the Northern and the Southern provinces and speak Lao are less likely to be influenced. In contrast, students living in the Central (excluding Vientiane) province and are ethnic background speakers are not likely to be influenced by special information.

Qualitative information from students’ comments, reveal that colleges should use their college staff, former and current students to communicate new students through the provision of special information such as curricula, programs, school activities, and facilities in order to build a relationships with students as well as the image and reputation of their colleges. Three students from College A and B provided comments on the special information factor.

College B student noted that: *Grade 12 students should get access to colleges teaching system and college students should be invited to talk about their learning experiences to Grade 12 students.*
Colleges should also organize school orientation and open days for upper secondary students, sports events, and cultural song-dance activities. This information would be communicated via different promotional mix tools.

College B student highlighted that: *The students might visit community or schools to disseminate [college information] and promote the college and conduct a question and answer (Q & A) program on TV or create a college TV program in order to advertise the college. This method will be quick dissemination and make people know about the college more.*

In order to improve public relations, colleges should also organize public service events such as blood donations and participating in National special events, and community services in rural areas.

College A student suggested that: *Private educational institutions should offer students an opportunity to formally participate on government service, such as being volunteers helping in important national functions. Colleges should encourage or grasp good opportunities for students so that they can take part in different events.*

College C student added that: *I would like the college to have community service such as visiting community to disseminate colleges’ information at important days. In addition, student from College E recommended that: Private institutions should have activities outside schools or volunteers to help in other work.*

One parent emphasizes that a college should inform college activities to parents so they can be part of their children’s college activities.

A parent from College E stated that: *I’m also often informed about college activities such as study visits, internships at various organizations, annual sport and art competitions. When the college organizes an event, parents will be informed or students tell their parents about the event so they can be involved.*
D. Scholarships for Public Social

Figure 5.4 Association between regions, ethnic group, and influence of scholarships for public social on students’ choice of college

Figure 5.4 shows that students who live in the Vientiane and speak Lao are more likely to be influenced by scholarships on their choice of tertiary private college. However, irrespective of language spoken, students from the other regions are less likely to be influenced by scholarships.

Two parents reveal that the institutions’ image and reputation was built through organizing special events, participating in the community services and being sponsorship of public social events.

College A and E parents reported that: **On special day like Teacher’s Day, college organizes a talk as this activity relates to college events. College participates in community service to help society such as blood donation and help society in other forms like being sponsors.**

College E parent added that: **College informs public information about its activities such as our students’ participation in providing services at the South-East Asia (SEA) Games including being liaison officers or voluntary officers.**
E. Financial Incentives

Figure 5.5 demonstrates that students who live in the Vientiane Capital and speak Lao are more likely to be influenced by financial incentives in their choice of college than their counterparts.

Students report that financial incentives scholarship should be provided, including the information regarding outstanding scholastic achievements and top students. To improve educational promotional strategies, colleges should organize competitions activities such as sports competitions, song contest and giving awards to good students. Ten students made comments on financial incentives factor.

College A student suggested that: *I also would like college to provide scholarships for students who gets the first place in the institution in order to promote quality students and the scholarships should be given during the year that students get the first, second and third places.*
College C student stated that: *To provide scholarships to good students in the advertisement stimulate students to come to study at the college. Another student from the same college further recommended that “good students should receive scholarships to study abroad in order to motivate students to come to study at their college.*

Most students from those five Colleges reported that: *College should have activities to attract and persuade prospective students to select their college.*

One parent reveals giving scholarships or prizes awarded for outstanding students is significant for colleges’ marketing communication strategy in order to increase students’ recruitment, motivates and influence parents’ on choice of their children prospective.

College D parent recommended that: ......., *Sales promotion motivates and convinces students to pay attention to their learning, such as providing scholarships, discount, bonus or prizes, so it good.*

**F. Discount Offers**

![Figure 5-6 Association between regions, ethnic group, and influence of discount offers on students’ choice of college](image)

**Key**
- Discount Offers Factor
- Ethnic Classification; 1= Lao, 2= Other Ethnic Group
- Regions; 1= Vientiane Capital, 2= Northern and Southern provinces, 3= Central (excluding Vientiane)
Figure 5.6 shows that Lao speaking students who live in the Southern and the Northern provinces are more likely to be influenced by discount offers in their choice of college when compared with Lao speaking students living in the Vientiane Capital. Discount offers does not seem to be on the “radar” for other ethnic groups speakers and who live in the Central (excluding Vientiane) province.

15 students report that colleges should make a number of discounts offers on tuition fee for students who pay a whole year in advance, students who study more than two programs, and students who have two siblings studying at the same colleges.

College E student revealed that:  A family member will get discount if they come to study at the college together in order to make them active in learning.

College C students also said that: If a family member studied together, they should get special discount. Students from the same institution added that: I would like to suggest to the college to provide discount offers on its tuition fee for example, if students pay the whole semesters in advance, they should get discount as well as students who study more than two programs.

Two parents assert that information communicated on different forms of sales promotion type via discount offers is significant factor influenced parents’ decision-making for their children college choice.

College A parent claimed that: Sales promotion have an influence on decision-making on the selection of college for our children because of 50% of college tuition fee for children of lecturers and this payment can be deducted from their fathers’ salary.

College E parent asserted that: …. sales promotion has a major influence on parents’ decision regarding the choice of college ….. as it helps to stimulate their learning and reduces expenditure for the parents…… I think discount offers practice can attract motivate and convince parents and those who have two children studying at the same college. It also decreases parents’ expenditure as well as providing support for students.
Discount offers are seen as a powerful marketing communication strategy as it provides various benefits and incentives that influence parents’ decision on college choice. Additionally, parents gain many advantages from sales promotion in terms of cost saving.

**G. Social Media**

Figure 5-7 Association between regions, ethnic group, and influence of Social Media on students’ choice of college

Figure 5.7 shows that students who live in the Vientiane Capital and speak Lao are more likely to be influenced by social media in their choice of college than their peers living in the other provinces.

Social media factor reveal that students from some colleges should use Facebook, the internet, college-websites, YouTube, and other types of social media to disseminate college information, activities as well as study programs. Six students from College A, C and E made comments and suggestions on social media factor.

College A student suggested that: *There should be an announcement on Facebook and Radio for secondary education graduates so they know that our college offers scholarships for students with good grades.* Student from the same college added that: *Colleges’ study programs should be publicized and widely informed through different*
types of media channels such as Facebook, internet and college-websites at important events....

College E student stated that: Private colleges should advertise through ......., internet and college websites.

Most parents reveal that information communicated should be more specific and advertised via the internet, college-websites, Facebook, and other social media.

College A parent suggested that: The College should advertise its college through various communication channels including internet- websites, face book and other types of social media.

College D parent added that: I think the college needs to use the media advertise more on internet-websites and Facebook about college activities, teaching and learning, programs.

II. Advertising

Figure 5-8. Association between regions, ethnic group, and influence of Advertising on students’ choice of college
Figure 5.8 demonstrates that Lao speaking students who live in the Vientiane Capital and Central (excluding Vientiane) province are more likely to be influenced by mass media in their choice of college than their counterparts.

Students’ comments suggest that traditional, print and technology media need to be well planned, designed appropriately and up-to-date. 10 students provided comments on the mass media factor.

College B student recommended that: Private colleges should promote their institutions and conduct a question and answer (Q&A) program on TV or create a college TV program in order to advertise their colleges. Another student from the same college added that: TV advertising makes information widely accessible to the public and promotes the college’s name.

College C student also stated that: Radio or TV and Newspapers are important source of information for students.

A clear message with key information is also regarded as important when advertising in part of billboard/posters. However, colleges should advertise the truth and ensure that the advertisement is not exaggerated. Eight students made various suggestions on the improvement of mass media.

College A student recommended that: A college should have a very big advertising sign. Another student from the same college added that: for any advertising tool either through television or other media. I would like the college to advertise the truth or that the message is not exaggerated. If the advertisement is exaggerated, it will mislead students who come to study here and they will not be happy, hence distract their learning.

Collage E student indicated that: private colleges should advertise their institutions at schools, and put up signs at various places such as villages, districts and disseminate information through radio, TV and newspapers.
College C student emphasised that: *in general, the college should be advertised through TV, Radio or by inviting successful students for interview or talk about the college’s learning and teaching experiences as well as their pride in studying at the college. These activities should be widely disseminated through TV, radio.*

Findings from three parents reveal that information is communicated effectively via television, radio and newspapers as they allow a massive scale of audience to be reached, resulting in potential students and parents knowing about the colleges.

College D parent said that: *I am aware of my child’s education activities because I get information from watching television. The college communicates their activities through television and radio.*

College E parent confirmed that: *I suggest that the college should mainly use television and radio because they are mass media and can reach people in rural and remote areas. Newspapers are usually read by people who work in offices for a short period of time.*

College A parent stated that: *The advertisement also instils memory and beliefs about colleges’ image and reputation……..the advantage of advertising is to communicate with parents who will send their children to study at the particular college.*
Figure 5.9. Association between Regions, Ethnic group, and influence of direct communication, brochures, special information, scholarships, financial incentives, discount offers, social media, and advertising on students’ choice of college.

Figure 5.9 shows underlying structure and positioning of different student demographic variables and promotional mix factors rather than exploring the relationships between a single promotional factor and student location and ethnic group. This round of analyses demonstrates the overall relationships between all eight promotional mix factors and demographics.

Several key relationships are demonstrated in this map. First, students who live in the Central (excluding Vientiane) province and who speak Lao are more likely to be influenced by advertising, direct communication, special information, scholarships, brochures, social media, financial incentives, and discount offers in their choice of Lao tertiary private college. Second, Lao speaking students and living in the Vientiane Capital are more likely to be influenced by advertising and direct communication, however, discount offers, financial incentives, social media, and brochures are less
likely to be influential. Third, students who are located in the Southern province and Lao speaking are less likely to be influenced by scholarships, special information, advertising, and direct communication factors. Finally, students who live in the Northern Province and are ethnic background speakers do not appear to be influenced by promotional mix factors in their choice of college.

Table 5.10 Summary of Key Findings

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<th>Factor</th>
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<th>Parents</th>
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<td>Direct communication</td>
<td>Students are likely to be influenced by peers.</td>
<td>Parents place high levels of weight on authority figures such as college staff.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brochures</td>
<td>Students are likely to be influenced by college staff and current students who distribute brochures, college guide books, leaflets, and who give talks to upper secondary students, parents, and various organizations.</td>
<td>Parents advise that college staff should distribute brochures before the commencement of a new academic year at various places such as upper secondary schools, shopping malls, and car parks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special information</td>
<td>Students suggest that college staff, and former and current students should disseminate college information and activities to new students via orientation and open days, at various public services.</td>
<td>Parents recommend that colleges should keep informing them about college activities so they could be part of their children’s college activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarships</td>
<td>Students did not comment on scholarships.</td>
<td>Parents suggest that colleges should organize special events such as participating in the community services and being sponsorships with public social (e.g., blood donation, support school materials and special National days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial incentives</td>
<td>Students recommend that scholarships should be providing the information regarding outstanding scholastic achievements and top students.</td>
<td>Parents propose that providing scholarships or prizes awarded for outstanding students is significant for colleges marketing strategy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discount offers</td>
<td>Students advise that discounts offers should be provided on tuition fees for students who pay 12 months in advance and who are enrolled in more than two programs, and having two or more siblings who attend on the college.</td>
<td>Parents suggest that providing discounts offers for students and family members is influential on their choice of college. Parents could gain many advantages from sales promotion in terms of cost saving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social media</td>
<td>Students propose that college should provide information, activities, and study programs through Facebook, the internet, college-websites, YouTube, and other social media.</td>
<td>Parents recommend that colleges should advertise college information via the internet, college-websites, Facebook, and other social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertising</td>
<td>Students advocate that television, radio and newspapers need to be well planned, designed appropriately to-date, should have clear messages and advertisement the truth and not be exaggerated.</td>
<td>Parents place mass media as effective factor via television, radio, and newspapers as they would able to reach a massive scale of audience as well as for knowing about colleges.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

Influence of Region and Ethnic Background on Choice of College

This study finds that demographic variables especially region and ethnic background are linked to way promotional mix elements influence students’ choice of college. Surprisingly, it appears that students who live in the Northern provinces of Laos are less likely to be influenced by promotional mix factors when it comes to their choice of college than their peers. Specific media channels might be effective in recruiting students from certain Lao regions and target markets. These findings are in line with those of several researchers (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2008; Quraeshi & Luqmani, 2009), suggesting that it is important for HEIs to have sound strategies when coordinating promotional mix tools. Similarly, Amiso (2000) and Messah (2011) reported that public relations can have a significant role to play in improving HEIs marketing communication strategy in order to attract and recruit students from different backgrounds.

Findings also demonstrate a differential impact of advertising, electronic media, face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication (i.e., personal selling), discount offers and financial incentives (i.e., sales promotion) on students with different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. This finding concurs with Wiese (2008) who stated that tertiary educational institutions need to be aware of the language preference of their students when it comes to marketing communication. Thus, these factors can be influential when it comes to enhancing student enrolment numbers or when targeting a specific market. A number of researchers (Goldgehn, 1991; Kittle, 2000) indicated that advertising plays an important role in conveying institutional messages and can form a major element of marketing communication strategies.

Influence of Promotional Mix Tools on Students and Parents’ Choice of College

Despite some differences, students and parents appear to share similar views with regard to the influence of social media, discount offers, financial incentives, special information, scholarships, and brochures on their college choice. With regard to social media, students and parents are likely to be influenced by Facebook, the internet,
college-websites, YouTube, and other social media sites. Their views are consistent with Alkhas (2011) who indicated that integrating social media into a marketing communication strategy is a cost-effective tool when compared with advertising in newspapers and magazines. Holm (2006) asserted that the emergence of new information technology has integrated three communication systems including sound, image, and writing. In this context, information can be conveyed or communicated through the application of various promotional mix tools and marketing communication strategies. Online communication, for example, has enhanced the effectiveness of creative ideas and provided enhanced communication consistency (Gurau, 2008).

Interestingly, both students and parents are likely to be influenced by various forms of discount offers including discount on tuition fees for students who elect to pay 12-months in advance, who enrol in more than two programs, and for those students who have two or more siblings studying at the same college. Parents seem to view discount offers as a powerful marketing communication strategy because of cost savings. Tuition-fee reduction strategies are another influential college selection factor as it helps tertiary private colleges to stay competitive and fulfil parents and students’ needs. Having lower tuition fees than competitors is considered to be one of the most effective promotional mix techniques for new universities in UK (Nuade & Ivy, 1999).

With regard to financial incentives, students and parents are likely to be influenced by scholarships and prizes awarded to outstanding students. This method is seen as a significant college marketing communication strategy as well as a factor contributing to student recruitment, retention, and parental college decision choice. To end this, students and parents should be well-informed about the availability of these types of financial incentives.

Students seem to be influenced by college staff, alumni, and senior students, particularly, those that disseminate special information through college/special information, orientations, and open days. Well-informed college personnel can be regarded as good ambassadors. This finding is in agreement with Messah (2011) who
indicated that public relations influence student enrolment as the colleges understand students’ perceptions and expectations, and can translate those matters into marketing communication strategies that can attract and enhance student enrolments.

Parents appear to be influenced by various forms of scholarships/sponsorships including college activities (e.g., singing contests, sports competition), special events, and public service (e.g., blood donation, participating in the community services, and helping people in the rural area). College activities seem to provide a foundation for building the image and reputation of private educational institutions. Evidently, these activities are seen to be powerful promotional mix factor for PHEIs. In supporting this finding, Kim and Periyayya (2013) concluded that the students’ college choice is driven by reputation developed and obtained from the public. It is apparent that the PHEI’s image and reputation can play a pivotal role in marketing communication and fostering positive attitudes towards an institution. Utilization of publicity, special publications, community activities, fund-raising, sponsorship of special events, and various public affairs can also enhance an organization’s image (Belch & Belch, 2003).

Furthermore, students and parents are likely to be influenced by college staff and senior students who distribute brochures and leaflets across different contexts (e.g., upper secondary colleges and other organizations). The use of institutional print media such as brochures and flyers can play an essential role in advertising private colleges, particularly in developing countries (Kittle, 2000). These findings are in line with Messah (2011) indicating that distributing brochures are regarded as probably one of the most effective marketing communication tools in Kenya, providing information to potential students.

Students and parents differ on their views concerning the influential nature of promotional mix tools such advertising, and word-of-mouth, and face-to-face (direct communication). In terms of advertising, parents are likely to be influenced by television, radio, and newspapers. In contrast, students acknowledged that television, radio, and newspaper articles that are up-to-date and have clear messages; and advertisements that do not appear to exaggerate the truth can be influential. This
finding supports the view of Messah (2011) that print media is regarded as an effective marketing communication tool that provides information to prospective students owing to its wide reach and reliability.

In regard to direct communication (word-of-mouth, face-to-face), students are likely to be influenced by peers while parents place value on authority figures, such as college staff. This finding denotes that face-to-face and word-of-mouth communications can drive students and parents in their choice of a particular tertiary private college. Again, this finding reflects the work of Messah (2011) who stated that one-to-one communication is crucial in student recruitment. This observation also suggests that when it comes to marketing communication of educational services, face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication can influence the perceptions of potential students (Duke, 2002). Similarly, Kim and Periyayya (2013) observed that television and radio is less popular among students than face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication.

Implications and Limitations

As discussed below, a number of practical/applied, research, and policy implications emerge from this investigation.

Practice

In terms of practice implications for PHEIs, providers need to consider alternate approaches for attracting students from diverse regions and ethnic backgrounds; understand how to develop websites and blogs for diverse audience targets; invest in recruiting or hiring interpreters and IT staff; and consider incorporating promotional mix tools, marketing communication, and IMC strategies in their HE strategic plans.

PHEIs need to examine the importance of attracting students who originate from diverse regions and ethnic backgrounds

To increase enrolment of students from diverse Lao regions and other ethnic backgrounds, institutions need to focus their attention on the Southern and Northern
provinces, and on students who speak other ethnic dialects. Findings indicate that these students might be less likely to be attuned to promotional mix tools. To communicate effectively with students, PHEIs need to determine the best ways to reach this target audience by coordinating the most effective promotional mix tools and by providing clear information to the relevant other ethnic minority groups. In support of this recommendation, Wiese (2008) affirmed that South African ethnic minority groups regarded word-of-mouth communication via friends and alumni students as one of the most useful sources of information.

PHEIs need to develop websites and blogs which contain up-to-date databases and information for their current and potential customers through the recruitment of interpreters and IT staff

In the light of the current findings, institutions should consider investing in developing websites and blogs that cater to a wide range of diverse Lao socio-economic and ethnic minority groups so that people who come from different backgrounds can be informed; as well as investing in recruiting interpreters and IT professionals. As discussed in Chapter 3, electronic media is widely used in HE marketing communication (Almadhoun et al., 2011; Alkhas, 2011). In order to capture new markets, both nationally and internationally, PHEIs in the Lao PDR need to integrate websites and blogs for marketing communication purposes and as part of any recruitment strategy (Alkhas, 2011; Messah, 2011). This technology media allows prospective and current students to visit websites of institutions and blogs freely and to interact with representatives from PHEIs.

Now-a-days, people want on-demand and immediate access to information at their own convenience, perceiving social media as trustworthy sources of information (Almadhoun et al., 2011). By taking into consideration the new communication paradigms, institutions are likely to derive the benefits from using websites and blogs for promotion purposes. These platforms would help to disseminate messages and provide avenues for customers to become aware, interested, and ultimately choose products (Messah, 2011).
Besides, PHEIs should also consider investing in the recruitment of interpreters and IT staff in order to develop and design websites and blogs, and to monitor social media sites. IT professional will be able to ensure that institutional websites and social media sites are up-to-date. Online systems require the daily attention of online technical specialists. Information and information-flows between students and institutions in both Lao and English languages facilitate communication with local and international students, provide a rich source of data, and help in the development and planning of marketing communication and IMC programs and strategies (Edmiston-Strasser, 2007). The use of technology media not only facilitates internal and external communications but is also critical for market research and data management purposes (Schultz & Schultz, 2004; Edmiston-Strasser, 2007).

**PHEIs need to consider integrating influential electronic media (i.e., social media, technology/digital media, websites); discount offers; face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication; provision of scholarships; orientation and open days as part of their overall marketing communication strategy**

Lao PHEIs appear to focus on traditional marketing communication techniques rather than electronic media tools (i.e., social media tools). In recent years, social media, information technology, and websites have predominated rapidly in many HEIs and are used increasingly, as powerful promotional mix tools (Almadhoun et al., 2011). Lao students and parents seem to express a preference for the use of social media, electronic media, websites, and ICT (online platforms). Online tools allow people to communicate easily, share, and discuss information as well as distribute their own content. Traditional media advertising such as television, newspaper, radio and magazines are one-way, static broadcasting technologies (Almadhoun et al., 2011).

Social media is about the conversations that are formed online to gain the trust of the audience; younger generations and parents are becoming more digital savvy enabling them to seek readily-available information about institutions. Preference to research is not through newspapers or libraries; instead, individuals are more likely to use a computer and look for reviews and support from other individuals just like them.
PHEIs can use social media to engage their audience by providing helpful information and seeking opinions and feedback (Alkhas, 2011).

Discount offers and financial incentives appear to be popular elements of Lao institutions marketing communication strategies. Pricing strategies play an important role in any marketing mix (Wiese, 2008). Thus, PHEIs need to pay careful attention to any financial discount plan, when recruiting students, especially, those people who are disadvantaged, marginalized, and from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Face-to-face and word-of-mouth communications are integral aspects of Lao culture, given the relatively small size of the country in South-East Asia. This form of direct communication should not be discarded in favour of traditional promotional mix techniques. Nevertheless, college staff need to be able to disseminate the best information directly to students and parents to help them form a comprehensive understanding of a college.

Additionally, PHEIs need to be aware of the value parents and prospective students place on access to scholarships, orientations, and open days. PHEIs should include these approaches in their marketing communication strategies and communicate the benefits and advantages associated with them. Providing financial assistance, such as offering scholarships, can motivate students to learn and reduce the financial burden on parents. A student’s first impression of HEIs is often based on his or her first interactions with the people of the institution as well as with other students, and this first-contact can occur at open-day or during an orientation. Accordingly, staff need to be made aware of this phenomenon and be trained (Weise, 2008).

**PHEIs need to have a well-developed understanding of marketing communication strategy and promotional mix approaches**

One of the challenges faced by PHEIs is their limited knowledge of marketing communication and promotional mix methods. It is imperative for PHEPs to build their capacity in this field if they are to remain competitive. Lack of understanding of its value will create challenges in terms of planning, expertise, and budgeting (Gurau,
Kitchen et al. (2004) suggested that business success and performance needs to go beyond the development of IMC, and requires a tactical combination of elements involving marketing budgets, staffing, skills, and infrastructure; it cannot be based on integration of promotional mix elements at the agency level, alone.

**Research**

As noted earlier in Chapter 4 (Study1), to the author’s knowledge, this study is the first investigation examining the influence of promotional mix tools as part of marketing communication purpose as a way of influencing students and parents’ choice of tertiary educational private colleges in the Lao PDR.

There are three research implications emerging from the findings of this research: First, future research should consider re-examining how PHEIs utilize promotional mix tools through the application of IMC procedures in HE in order to influence students and parents’ choice of colleges. Second, in what ways do different promotional mix tools, digital media, and websites impact students and parents’ choice of private colleges since the use of these modern tools has increased and been employed for marketing communication purpose to gain market share (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Almadhoun et al., 2011; Deanne Brocato et al., 2015).

Finally, an important area for further study needs to focus on the diverse Lao ethnic background, and the influence of different social media, technology/digital media, and ICT (i.e., online platforms) on students and parents.

**Government Policy**

In regard to policy, the Lao government needs to examine ways to support and provide educational loans for students; and ways in which government can encourage PHEIs to invest in electronic media (i.e., digital technology media, social media, online platforms programs, and ICT).
**Government needs to examine ways to support and provide educational loans for students**

Increasing student enrolments in PHEIs remains critical; the government needs to explore ways to assist further tertiary private colleges to expand equitable access to HE. One of the possible solutions is for the Lao government to provide educational loans for students. For example, in Vietnam the government has increased access to PHEIs through the provision of official loans to students from poor regional areas. Similarly, the Thai government provides loans to poor students enrolled in private or public universities (Asian Development Bank, 2012). In this regard, the government can assist PHEIs to play their role in promoting equitable admission to HE, particularly when PHEIs in the Lao PDR outnumber public providers and have been absorbing the growing demands for HE from society.

**Government needs to encourage PHEIs to provide suitable and sufficient information to parents and students, by encouraging institutional investment in digital technology media, social media, and online platforms programs**

PHEIs face issues relating to generating sufficient revenue and cost containment. Government can help by investing in and encouraging institutions to also invest in digital technology media, online platforms, and social media so that PHEIs can provide necessary information to parents, students, and other stakeholders. For example, in Malaysia, the Education Marketing Division in the Ministry of Higher Education has used social media in promoting Malaysian HE locally and overseas (Almadhoun et al., 2011). Since some of the PHEIs in Vientiane are already experimenting with digital and social media marketing, the government can build on their existing experience. With government support PHEIs could be encouraged to develop innovative online platforms, and connect with future students, while concurrently promoting HEIs, widely.
Limitations

There are three main limitations associated with this study: the limited number of private colleges that participated and possible associated issues concerning the generalizability of findings; the relatively low Cronbach’s alpha associated with a small number of items with several factors; and participants’ level of understanding of marketing and advertising. These limitations are discussed below.

First, five of 39 colleges participated in this study. All colleges were approached and invited to participate. Originally, eight colleges agreed but three opted out. Reasons for not participating included confidentially concerns, lack of availability, and unwillingness. Accordingly, the present findings may be limited to only the institutions studied, raising issues to do with generalizability. Thus, the results of this study might not be generalizable to all Lao private higher education providers (PHIPs). However, this study provides the basis for further research on the ways in which promotional mix tools influence stakeholders’ choice of colleges. Notwithstanding, the findings provide useful guidelines for researchers. For example, this study contributes to the field’s understanding of the application and capability for effectively utilizing promotional mix tools in HE and the relevance of IMC.

Second, the relatively low Cronbach’s alpha (α < .5) associated with a relatively small numbers of items for several factors (discount offers, financial incentives, special information) raises some concern about the internal reliability of these factors. Cronbach’s alpha is influenced highly by the number of items per factor, scale of measurement, and wording of items inter alia. This issue is without doubt an important consideration when it comes to follow-up on future studies in this area.

Finally, participants’ possible limited understanding of promotional mix approaches, which is a relatively recent phenomenon in Laos, needs to be taken into account. Although, Western-style promotional mix elements are being employed increasingly in Laos; there appears to be a lack of scholarly studies that focus on marketing communication and IMC strategies in HE. In addition, the lack of published material resources in the Lao context (e.g., textbooks in marketing communication,
promotional mix, and IMC strategies) contributes, in no small part, to the limited understanding of these factors.

**Conclusion**

This study explores students and parents’ views regarding the influence of different promotional mix elements on their choice of tertiary private colleges. The present findings indicate that it is important for PHEIs to be aware of the importance of developing effective marketing communication strategies. To be able to gain a sustainable competitive advantage and become market-oriented, PHEIs need to have sound marketing communication strategies that coordinate traditional promotional mix approaches and utilize electronic media. Strategies should include sales promotions, various promotional mix activities, and building a strong brand image. In this regard, academic and administrative staff play a key role in building brand image and reputation factors considered to be important by this target market.

In order to do so, there is an urgent need for PHEIs to build knowledge and the capabilities of their college staff and management teams with respect to marketing communication. In the long-term, it is important for HEIs to view this form of communication as an investment which will help institutions to compete effectively and to gain market share. As PHEIs expand access to HE, it is apparent that institutions require the support of government.

The following chapter conflates the findings of Study 1 (i.e., directors, marketing managers, academics) and Study 2 (i.e., students and parents), and discusses the findings in terms of marketing communication strategies, influential factors and government policy.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

Overview
The present chapter conflates the findings of Studies 1 and 2, and discusses the meaning of these findings in relation to key stakeholders, marketing communication strategies of PHEI, target markets, institutional profile and brand, and government policy and support.

Introduction
This thesis aims to explore how PHEIs utilize promotional mix tools as a way of influencing students and parents’ choice of tertiary educational private college in the Lao PDR (Study 1); and investigates the ways, if any, in which students and parents view the influence of these promotional mix tools on their choice of college (Study 2).

Study 1 finds that, in response to escalating competition, PHEIs employ various promotional mix tools as a part of their marketing communication strategies through the application of IMC procedures to attract and enhance their target market. As revealed in Study 2, parents and students demonstrate a preference for obtaining information about a college through the utilization of modern, rather than traditional technologies (i.e., electronic media; social media; websites; ICT; online platforms). Other important influential considerations for parents and students include discount offers; face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication; the provision of scholarships; orientation and open days; college image and reputation; and quality standards of the educational institutions.

As discussed below, an in-depth examination, including a gap analysis of findings emanating from and across Studies 1 and 2 suggest that:
• There might be a mismatch between the marketing communication strategies employed by PHEI providers and promotional mix tools that are likely to influence parents and students’ choice of colleges;
• PHEIs might be lagging in their understanding of the importance of electronic media as an essential promotional mix tool;
• PHEIs might not have an in-depth appreciation of their target market;
• PHEIs need to build capacity to formulate marketing communication strategic plans that align with the vision and mission of their respective institutions;
• PHEIs need to upgrade the quality of teaching, research capacity, knowledge base, and links with industry to improve their profile and brand image;
• PHEI might be unnecessarily focused on cost containment;
• Government might need to play a greater role in raising the standards and quality of higher education in the Lao PDR.

There Might be a Mismatch between the Marketing Communication Strategies Employed by PHEI Providers and Promotional Mix Tools that are Likely to Influence Parents and Students’ Choice of College

PHEI providers are required to assess their current marketing communication strategies and promotional mix tools owing to increasing student enrolment numbers and to garner a sustainable competitive advantage in the HE environment. PHEIs in the Lao PDR do not appear to have appropriate marketing communication strategies to attract and recruit new students and to influence their parents. To develop effective marketing communication strategies, PHEIs might need to consider amalgamating promotional mix tools with IMC approaches. IMC can play an essential function in coordinating promotional tools in HE marketing strategy development by combining these tools to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact (Rehman & Ibrahim, 2011). This integration has also been widely applied around the world, helping to reach new consumers and other stakeholders (Kitchen & Li, 2005).

This current finding reflects a number of studies undertaken in other countries such as the US (Edmiston-strasser, 2009; Horrigan, 2007) and Malaysia (Wong, 2006).
Alkhas (2011) concluded that in order to attract quality students, and as a mean of increasing student satisfaction, as part of an overall strategy to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in the market, PHEIs need to be creative and deliver clear messages to and seek feedback from students and parents. Educational marketing communication strategies coordinating traditional promotional mix techniques (e.g., advertising, sales promotion, public relations) with modern technologies (e.g., digital technology, social media, websites, online platforms, ICT) would seem to be appropriate in Lao PHEIs.

Discount offers, and face-to-face and word-of-mouth communication are also potentially influential methods (Duke, 2002; Oplatka, 2004). Information regarding the provision of scholarships, orientation and open days are other useful sources of information that can influence decision-making (Wiese, 2008). Interestingly, this thesis finds that social media networks, digital technology media, and college websites, are effective promotional mix tools for parents and potential students. This finding is consistent with Alkhas, (2011).

Recommendation: PHEIs need to review their promotional mix tools, marketing communication and IMC strategies so that they align with parents and students’ expectations. Accordingly, PHEIs need to be innovative in their use of an amalgam of approaches that integrate new modern technology media and traditional methods.

PHEIs Might be Lagging in Their Understanding of the Importance of Electronic Media as Essential Promotional Mix Tool

The present thesis highlights the importance and relevance of electronic media (i.e., social media) as a powerful tool for influencing students and parents’ choice of tertiary private colleges. Social media appears to be an excellent online platform for communicating directly with a target audience, offering opportunities for discussion, commentary, and feedback inter alia. Social media also provides a conduit or vehicle for influencing the college selection process (Alkhas, 2011; Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Almadhoun et al., 2011).
Notwithstanding, PHEIs seem to lack the necessary human resource capabilities, advanced IT professional skills, marketing communication, promotional knowledge, and IMC expertise. Indeed, this finding is evident in a number of respects, and if not more so in the fact that owners/-managers taking on multiple roles in which they hold limited expertise. It seems that institutions need to pay particular attention to their HRM, up-skill their resources and knowledge through training and education of staff, appoint trained IT and marketing communication personnel, and invest in up-to-date technologies (Alkhas, 2011; Edmiston-Strasser, 2007; Wong, 2006). PHEIs should recognise the benefits and potential to be derived from having personnel capable of developing sound marketing communication strategies that take these factors into account, while building college reputation and brand (Horrigan, 2007).

Findings suggest that PHEIs need to develop sound marketing communication strategy and promotional mix element that incorporate digital technology and social media. This planning would require understanding of and investments in electronic media. Effective use of social media requires up-to-date data on customers that can be used in planning, developing, and evaluating communication activities (Edmiston-Strasser, 2007). In this regard, it is important for PHEIs to retain a comprehensive and detailed knowledge about customers and prospective students in order to become market-oriented. Marketing staff also need to have access to data for planning purposes (Wong, 2006).

Recommendation: In response to the emergence of the IT revolution, and digital technology, social media networking has been employed increasingly as part of HE marketing communication strategies. Thus, PHEIs need to consider investing in modern technologies and human resource management in order to tap into this platform and to gain market share. PHEIs should also consider developing information banks concerning alumni and potential customers that can be used as part of social media marketing communication strategies.
PHEIs Might not Have an In-Depth Appreciation of Their Target Market

PHEIs need to consider re-evaluating the efficiency of their business models so that they can become more market-oriented. Market orientation involves listening and paying attention to customers and competitors (Bradmore, 2007). Customer preferences and expectations need to be translated into marketing communication strategies. As competition among PHEIs intensifies, it is critical for PHEIs to have a sound understanding of client expectations. Furthermore, to survive and succeed, PHEIs administrators should understand different students and how these segments might differ in their decision-making behaviour (Kim & Periyayya, 2013).

In this regard, PHEIs need to consider adopting promotional mix methods used in the industry product-based sector as part of their HE marketing strategies (Ivy, 2008). Promotion can play an important function in the marketing of a university (Hayes, 2002), and market success in higher education (Almadhoun et al., 2011). An appropriate mix of promotional activities and channels can increase student recruitment (Messah, 2011; Al-Fattal, 2010, Wiese, 2008; Kittle, 2000). Notwithstanding, college administrators need to understand the labor market needs and demands of their students and have the capacity to develop sound integrated marketing (Kitchen, 2005; Michael, 1999). Moreover, it is essential to reach the parents of prospective students because they can influence their children’s’ choice of college (Canterbury, 2000), and they have a strong influence on their children’s aspirations to continue with their study (Wises, 2008).

Recommendation: PHEIs should focus on students and parents’ expectations of institutions as well as market labour needs in order to sustain a competitive market share.
PHEIs Need to Build Capacity to Formulate Marketing Communication Strategic Plans that Align with the Vision and Mission of their Respective Institution

As highlighted in Chapter 4, most PHE directors are not trained in educational marketing communication and IMC. It seems that their higher educational management skills are derived from and based mainly on personal experience. Limited capacity is compounded by a shortage of funds creating real challenges when it comes to developing coherent institutional strategic plans and to managing colleges effectively. Horrian (2007) noted that the development of marketing communication strategies involve the coordination of promotional mix elements that enables HEIs to meet parents and students’ needs. Thus, HEIs need well-developed, comprehensive marketing communication strategies that are communicated throughout the institution. In this regard, Mazzarol and Soutar (2008) suggested that a key success for educational institution is to have a coherent strategy that enables the institution to position its offerings effectively to a particular target market segment. Importantly, active support of senior leadership is required and marketing communication personnel need to be empowered to reach both stakeholders (Edmiston-Strasser, 2007).

This research not only highlights an absence of strategic marketing and communication planning but also a lack of planning that is comprehensive, clear, and long-term oriented. Predominately, institutions appear to take a short-term perspective (year-by-year) and a tendency to focus on solving problems in an ad hoc manner. Marketing communication is treated in isolation. It seems that planning is neither well documented nor communicated across the institution, and is not a part of a college’s overall strategy as might be the case with established international or global universities (e.g., RMIT strategic plan 2011-2015; RMIT strategic plan 2015). To sustain a competitive advantage, PHEIs need to implement strategic management and marketing principles (Bradmore, 2007).

Educational marketing strategies can be regarded as a tool for enhancing the effectiveness in retaining, attracting, and servicing students (Kotler & Fox, 1995).
this end, HEIs need to provide value and quality as perceived by parents and students. Nicholls (1989) stressed that educational marketers need to have a solid understanding of marketing strategy, marketing mix (4Ps), buyer behavior, and segmentation inter alia. It is for these reasons that marketing principles and strategies are being employed increasingly to help determine programs needs, institutional, strengths and weakness, and how best to remain competitive (Edmiston-Strasser, 2009).

PHEIs need to formulate their institutional mission, vision, values, goals, and key priority areas. As a case in point, the mission and vision of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) with regard to graduates is to:

*Thrive in volatile environments over the long term, contribute productively as individuals and in teams ..., to achieve real world learning 2020 vision, we will invest in our staff ..., building partnerships to bring the benefits of education and research to the community ..., committed to ensuring all young people, regardless of background, know about the science, technology, engineering open to them* (https://www.qut.edu.au/about/strategic-ambitions/blueprint-for-the-future, Feb 25, 2014)

Thus, PHEIs need to be able to clearly articulate these issues, be empowered, and well-informed of current policies and practices (Edmiston-Strasser, 2007). PHE marketing communication plans must be customer-orientated, focused, and adaptive (Messah, 2011). Such strategies should be designed to help and implement marketing communication activities that address issues such as competition in turbulent environments (Cann & George, 2004).

**Recommendation:** Capacity building, leadership, and strategic marketing are key considerations that need to be taken into account when formulating marketing communication plans.
PHEIs Need to Upgrade the Quality of Teaching, Research Capacity, Knowledge Base, and Links with Industry to Improve Their Profile and Brand Image

Key stakeholders including government, academics, and parents and their teenage children expect that tertiary educational institutions provide high standards in teaching, undertake research, and have the infrastructure to support quality teaching, learning, and related experiences. To enable this type of education, PHEIs need to employ qualified academic staff, have structures and processes in place that promote teaching quality, develop research capacity, and seek accreditation from international organizations (Siharath, 2014) such as EFMD and the European Union (see http://www.efmd.org.eu-policy).

As indicated in Chapter 2 of this thesis, PHEIs face problems associated with limited qualified academics. Adoption and implementation of QA mechanisms is still in its infancy. Institutions are in need of support of well-trained academics with expertise in QA. Currently, it seems that Lao PDR PHEIs do not have internal QA units and staff is not familiar with the processes associated with development. To help PHEIs meet these challenges, the Lao PDR government has provided institutions with QA guidelines and support that enhance competitiveness and quality of HE service provision.

There are clear links between research capacity and technology absorption; quality of education, and enhanced human capital, and not to mention the profile of PHEIs, and student satisfaction (Xaysomphou, 2006). PHEIs play a significant role in creating and communicating knowledge and ideas, providing students and staff with the chance to build new and better futures for themselves and others. The current Lao PDR constitution places a priority on human resource development while recognising the importance of economic development aligned with cultural, social, and sustainable environmental development (Lao National Assembly, 2015). In this regard, education plays a central role in human resource development (Lao National Assembly, 2015).
To build research capacity, PHEIs need to pay attention to their current teaching, learning, and research practices and review their capacity. Based on their existing foundation, PHEIs need to develop their long-term research plan and identify key areas of research in order to gain government support and funding, and foster research skills. It is important for PHEIs to clearly outline their initiatives, research outcomes, and impact. These are the type of elements governments and other key stakeholders look for when deciding on supporting and making decisions. Similar principles apply to learning and teaching. Conducting scientific and technological research is essential for the optimal functioning of HEIs given that these institutions are centred of scholarships and repositories of knowledge (Government Office, 2015). Upgrading of qualifications for the majority of Lao academics relies on scholarships from foreign universities and international cooperation with universities and foreign governments to provide support both educationally and financially (Knight, 2013).

**Recommendation:** PHEIs need to strengthen and encourage academic staff to make an impact through creative and innovative solutions, educational programs, student facilities, and research. Government should also evaluate current policies relating to supporting the development of such innovations that lead to accreditation such as the EFMD Quality Improvement System (EQUIS).

**PHEIs Might be Unnecessarily Focused on Cost Containment**

Top management needs to recognise the value of marketing communication and IMC (Swain 2004; Wong 2006; Edmiston-Strasser, 2007). Despite the costs involved in training personnel, hiring IT staff, database development, adopting ITC, and utilizing promotional mix tools for marketing communication purposes, such money spend should be reviewed as an investment.

Gurau (2008) emphasized that a lack of understanding of IMC and its value contributed to challenges in relation to planning, expertise, and budgets. Kitchen et al. (2004) suggested that the development of IMC relies on marketing budgets, staff, skills, and infrastructure. Duncan and Everett (1993) reflected this view, noting that there is a need for HEIs to allocate sufficient budgets to foster increases in student
recruitment and to enhance institutional reputation. As indicated in (Chapter 3) of this thesis (literature review), a number of authors (Michael et al., 1993; Jugeheimer, 1995; Oplatka, 2004) highlighted that financial resource constraint for marketing purposes posed a major barrier for the development of effective strategies targeting student recruitment. These matters raise important issues regarding capacity, marketing communication tools, the availability of financial resources, and customer information (Gurau, 2008). As reported earlier, digital technological and social media networking are employed as part of HE marketing strategies (Constantinides & Zinck Stagno, 2011; Alkhas, 2011; Almadhoun et al., 2011; Glynne Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

**Recommendation:** PHEI providers should view marketing communication, IMC strategies, and promotional mix tools as investments in the future.

**Government Might Need to Play a Greater Role in Raising the Standards and Quality of Higher Education in the Lao PDR**

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the rapid growth of PHEIs in the Lao PDR has raised concerns about the quality and efficiency of PHEIs. Governments have an important role to play in raising standards. One way for government to act is to formulate effective policies and regulations for assessing and ensuring the quality of PHEIs (Asian Development Bank, 2012). This action strengthens quality standards to meet regional and international standards. Providing quality education is essential for creating a sustainable human resource base to support national economic objectives and labor force development (Baharun et al., 2009). Investing in HE culminates in building a high income economy that is focused on innovation, knowledge, and technology, the factors of which are needed to meet the challenges associated with an interconnected and competitive world (Mok, 2003; Baharun et al., 2009).

Assuring quality is a fundamental aspect of gaining and maintaining the credibility of programs, institutions, and a national system of higher education. Quality assurance should be a primary concern of HE providers. This shift towards HE quality assurance and standards, and monitoring of HEIs has taken hold in other ASEAN member states.
such as Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia (Lee & Healy, 2006). However, the extent to which the Lao PDR has established a formal educational accreditation and quality assurance process to respond to the rapid expansion in HE remains unclear. It appears that the Lao government faces problems of limited capacity and resources to regulate, monitor, and ensure the quality of private colleges (Asian Development Bank, 2012). As HEIs continue to grow and expand, the government needs to clarify, differentiate, and determine what indicators of quality should be used for different types of HEIs. PHEIs are increasingly subjected to external pressure to achieve greater accountability for their performance and encouraged to develop systems for self-evaluation and assessment. Thus, there is a pressing need for PHEIs to set up quality assurance task force/committees, consisting of representatives from key stakeholders to develop accreditation and self-accreditation mechanisms to ensure acceptable levels of quality.

**Recommendation:** The Lao Ministry of Education and Sports should formulate quality assurance and accreditation policies for PHEIs to ensure that minimum quality standards are met. Government and PHEIs should identify and evaluate strategies for enhancing quality assurance practices and accreditation of programs. Funding and related support could be provided or channelled to those institutions that meet quality standards.

**Conclusion**

This thesis has been a pioneering task and the first study in Lao PDR that explores the ways in which PHEIs utilize different promotional mix tools as part of marketing communication strategy of influencing customers’ choice of colleges and the ways these promotional mix influence college selection. There is clear evidence to support the view that there is a gap between PHEI intentions, strategies, and what they actually do, and what marketing communication and promotional mix tools are reported as being influential. As well, there appears to be a wide breach between marketing communication strategies and actions of PHEIs. Customers have also identified promotional mix factors that they regard as influential. PHEIs appear to fail in recognizing possible shifts in the types of promotional mix tools used by customers.
PHEIs face a number of challenges in this globally competitive environment. Their survival depends on being able to attract students, and offering quality educational products and services that are appealing and appropriate. PHEIs need to move with the times, professionalize, and invest in the future. Government support is essential for promoting future developments. Accreditation should be strongly encouraged and be an integral part of the national educational system.

There is little doubt that the emergence of new information and communication technologies and the increased demands of today’s knowledge economy require a highly educated skilled labor force capable of moving the Lao PDR forward. In other words, PHEIs will have to adapt or perish. Similar to other nations, PHEIs in the Lao PDR will become more central to the economy. It is important to ensure that PHEIs serve not only the needs of the market but also society.

In sum, whilst this thesis is a contribution for academic and policy makers, it is hoped that the Lao PDR government and other governments internationally will recognize the needs of PHEIs, particularly their educational marketing strategy requirement. Various recommendations had been identified in this thesis, and it is hoped that policy makers in the Lao PDR and other countries take them on board in the years ahead.
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Appendix 1  Notice of Approval

Notice of Approval

Date: 4 April 2013
Project number: 1000492
Project title: Integrated Marketing Communication: A Study of Private Higher Education Providers in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)
Risk classification: Low Risk
Principal Investigator: Dr Nuttavud Pimpa
Student Investigator: Miss Malina Khamsavong
Other Investigator: Dr Nihat Ramsete
Project Approved: From: 3 April 2013  To: 21 March 2016

Terms of approval:

1. Responsibilities of the principal investigator
   It is the responsibility of the principal investigator to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by BCHEAN. Approval is only valid while the investigator holds a position at RMIT University.

2. Amendments
   Approval must be sought from BCHEAN to amend any aspect of a project including approved documents. To apply for an amendment submit a request for amendment form to the BCHEAN secretary. This form is available on the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) website. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from BCHEAN.

3. Adverse events
   You should notify BCHEAN immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

4. Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF)
   The PICF must be distributed to all research participants, where relevant, and the consent form is to be retained and stored by the investigator. The PICF must contain the RMIT University logo and a complaint clause including the above project number.

5. Annual reports
   Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report.

6. Final report
   A final report must be provided at the conclusion of the project. BCHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

7. Monitoring
   Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by BCHEAN at any time.

8. Retention and storage of data
   The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

Regards,

[Signature]
Professor Relyn Russell
Chairperson
RMIT BCHEAN
Appendix 2  Invitation to Participate in Interview (English)

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Project Title: Integrated Marketing Communication: A Study of Private Higher Education Providers in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University, Australia. This information sheet describes the research project in straightforward language, or ‘plain Lao’. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

My name is Malina Khammavong, a research student in the School of Management at RMIT University. This project is being conducted as a part of my PhD. My supervisors for this project are Dr. Nattavud Pimpa and Dr. Nhati Rametse. Our research is entitled “Integrated Marketing Communication: A Study of Private Higher Education Providers in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)”. This project has been approved by the RMIT Business College Human Ethics Advisory Network (BCHEAN) and adheres to the strict guidelines set by the Ethics Committee.

This research is in response to the concerns expressed by the private higher education sector in the Lao PDR regarding the marketing communication strategies used in maintaining prospective and present students as customers. As the objective is to investigate the perception of stakeholders in private colleges in the Lao PDR regarding integrated marketing communication, it also seeks to establish how policy makers can identify the most effective strategies that will attract greater number of prospective students in private colleges in the Lao PDR. Consequently, it is hoped your institution will benefit from this research. We therefore request you to assist the researcher in the interview that she will conduct with you. Your response to the interview is critical as it has capacity to influence government policy on private colleges, but only if the interview can produce reliable outcomes.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to get involved in one on one interview. The interview will take place at a time and place that is convenient to you. Each interview will last approximately 1 hour or less depending on your time and contributions to the topic of discussion. A list of the broad questions guiding the interview is attached to this letter. With your permission I may like to consult with you more than once if you agree to participate.
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH PROJECT

Project Title: Integrated Marketing Communication: A Study of Private Higher Education Providers in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR).

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University, Australia. This information sheet describes the research project in straightforward language, or 'plain Lao'. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

My name is Mahidol Khanmanavong, a research student in the School of Management at RMIT University. This project is being conducted as a part of my PhD. My supervisors for this project are Dr. Nattavud Pimpua and Dr. Nithi Ramet. Our research is entitled “Integrated Marketing Communication: A Study of Private Higher Education Providers in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)”. This project has been approved by the RMIT Business College Human Ethics Advisory Network (BCHEAN) and adheres to the strict guidelines set by the Ethics Committee.

This research is in response to the concerns expressed by the private higher education sector in the Lao PDR regarding the marketing communication strategies used in maintaining prospective and present students as customers. As the objective is to investigate the perception of stakeholders in private colleges in the Lao PDR regarding integrated marketing communication, it also seeks to establish how policy makers can identify the most effective strategies that will attract greater number of prospective students in private colleges in the Lao PDR. Consequently, it is hoped that you as customers of this institution, as well as your institution will benefit from this research. We therefore request you to complete the questionnaire that will be provided to you. Your response to complete the survey is critical as it has capacity to influence government policy on private colleges, but only if the survey can produce reliable outcomes.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete the questionnaire survey. You will be given the questionnaires at the end of your class. You will also be requested to read both the Plain Language Statement and the consent form before completing the questionnaire. The researcher will be present to explain what they are required to do and address any queries that
Appendix 5  Student Invitation to Participate (Translated into Lao)