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# Attaining sustainable competitive advantage through product differentiation in the tertiary education institutions of Botswana

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## Abstract

The present study is an attempt to assess the performance of tertiary education in private tertiary education institutions in Botswana and also to identify the critical factors in tertiary education sector for gaining competitive achievements. The study examined how product differentiation strategies may be employed by private tertiary education institutions in order to achieve competitive advantage. The study used descriptive survey research and the findings revealed that the private universities have not done enough to clearly stand out as differentiated universities. The study recommends that the universities need to work together with key stakeholders and continually seek ways to attain competitive advantage through product differentiation.

**Keywords:** Product differentiation; Competitive advantage; Private Tertiary Institutions; Botswana

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## 1. Introduction

Private tertiary education institutions are wrestling with decisions of how to effectively compete in local and international markets, but the quality of the programmes is not appreciated by students and the industry at large. Students in some institutions have occasionally voiced their concerns regarding the operations of the institutions, poor facilities, poor quality lecturers (Obasi, 2008), among other things. In Botswana most students prefer to enrol in programmes offered by international and public institutions over private institutions. Students and the public at large continue to rate private tertiary education institutions second to public and international institutions despite the homogeneity of educational and training programmes between the two groups of institutions. There is also massive competition from online and distance learning programmes and a growing concern about the ever-increasing unemployment rate amongst their graduates. Critics indicate that the government's investment in private tertiary education only serves to saturate the market with graduates who do not possess the competencies that appeal to prospective employers. The present study is an attempt to assess the performance of tertiary education in private tertiary education institutions in Botswana and also to identify the critical factors in tertiary education sector for gaining competitive achievements. In this era of globalisation and tertiary education landscape becoming highly competitive, only those institutions that are competitive and differentiated are more likely to withstand the competitive pressures within the industry. Competitive advantage is defined as what makes a company better than its competitors in customer's minds (Amadeo, 2011). The aim of this research study is to describe product differentiation strategies tertiary education institutions may employ to achieve competitive advantage.

According to Desker.com (2021) differentiation is a marketing tool used to distinguish a product from others in the same category. Chiguvu (2021) views differentiation as a strategy of presenting the features and benefits of the goods or services in a way that differentiates them from other similar goods or services. Differentiation means the firm delivers better benefits than anyone else by providing a unique or high-quality product, faster and in a way that reaches the customers better (Amadeo, 2011). Mateus (2017) noted that differentiation is more concerned with providing unique and innovative products, and should be regarded as going beyond product or service attributes to encompass everything that positively influence the value that customers derive from it. Porter (1985) argued that differentiation is the only source of competitive advantage in an economy where only certainty is uncertainty. The creation and adoption of differentiation strategies means that institutions can be able to resist competitive pressures from both local and international markets, enabling them to improve and offer better quality products/services to create a competitive advantage. Mateus (2017) explained that differentiation creates customer experience as it serves as a bridge to engage customers. As tertiary education institutions face competition from around the globe, they must respond to the complex factors that have an impact on attracting and retaining customers. In the context of Botswana, the players in the tertiary education sector are facing fierce competition due to any array of factors. Chief among them include use of the same qualification program, reduced student sponsorship by the government since the advent of Covid 19 in 2022 to date. One of the strategies for the players in the tertiary education sector to survive is to use product differentiation strategy. According to Kopp et al. (2021) Product differentiation is the key aspect or aspects that distinguish a company's products or services from the competition. Successful product differentiation leads to brand loyalty and an increase in sales. A product differentiation strategy involves identifying and communicating the unique qualities of a product or company while highlighting the distinct differences between that product or company and its competitors. Product differentiation goes hand in hand

with developing a strong value proposition so that a product or service is attractive to a target market or audience (Chiguvi, 2021). This study therefore seeks to explore how tertiary education institutions may gain competitive advantage through pursuance of product differentiation strategies. Competition has also intensified due to the increase in number of degree choices making prospective students have a wider variety of universities from which to choose from (Soko et al., 2015; Cubillo et al., 2006). In today's competitive academic environment where students have many options available to them, factors that enable universities to attract and retain students should be seriously studied (Soko et al., 2015 and Hasan, 2008). Universities which want to gain competitive edge in the future, may need to begin searching for effective and creative ways to attract, retain and foster stronger relationships with students (Soko, et al., 2015). Competitive advantage occurs when an organization acquires or develops an attribute or combination of attributes that allows it to outperform its competitors or rivals (Soko et al., 2015; Eden and Ackermann, 2010).

This research aims to assess how product differentiation in tertiary education contribute to gaining competitive advantage. It determines the critical factors in differentiating the tertiary education institutions in Botswana.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Overview of the Botswana tertiary education sector

The Botswana Tertiary Education sector has grown quite significantly. The latest statistics from Human Resources Development Council (HRDC) report (2020) indicated that there was a rapid increase trend in student enrolment in Botswana from 37859 in 2010 to 56666 in 2020. The statistics also indicated that the number of student enrolment is higher in public institutions than in the private institutions since 2013 to date. In 2020, public institutions have enrolled 37061 students, while private institutions have 19605. These statistics clearly indicated that private tertiary institutions in Botswana need to step up their marketing efforts in order to have a sustainable competitive advantage. HRDC report (2020) also indicated that (91%) of the students of the students in Botswana are enrolled at undergraduate level and only (4%) are enrolled at Masters and PhD level. This infers that educational institutions in Botswana are Degree and Diploma Mills Universities. This means that Universities should develop new world class postgraduate programs as differentiation strategy and to gain sustainable competitive advantage. The fact that in 2020 alone, (91%) of the students have enrolled for undergraduate qualifications is a great signal that there is a huge lucrative potential market for postgraduate studies in Botswana. The Universities must start to develop market driven post-graduate programs for the future in areas of artificial intelligence, Space technology, Climate change, digitization, green businesses, technology among other national and global requirements. Universities that are going to position themselves in these areas are likely to gain sustainable competitive advantages over others.

In 2020, tertiary education in Botswana is provided by 35 registered (private and public) institutions and operates under the Tertiary Education framework, guided by the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research, Science and Technology. According to NDP11 report, (2017) education is considered the most critical factor in Botswana's transformation to knowledge economy and society and has been a key priority development for the country receiving the highest budget. Botswana's Tertiary education is offered through a combination of public and private universities and colleges who offer various qualifications ranging from certificates, diploma,

graduate and post graduate qualifications. The Botswana's tertiary education sector is highly regulated by two key institutions, namely the Botswana Qualifications Authority (BQA) and the Human Resource Development Council (HRDC). The HRDC report (2020) also revealed that the government is the main sponsor of tertiary education in Botswana. For example, of the 56666 students enrolled in tertiary education institutions in 2020, 39446 (70%) were on government sponsorship while only 12646 (22%) were on self-sponsorship and 4574 (8%) were sponsored by entities. Statistics from the same report, also revealed that the number of foreign students is low in Botswana. The total number of foreign students enrolled in Botswana's tertiary institutions was 1204 in 2020. The highest share of that paltry number was made up of students who come from neighbouring SADC countries. This is another opportunity for the players in the tertiary education sector. The players should improve their infrastructure and start to provide decent accommodation services in order to attract this untapped foreign market. New world class programs must be developed in order to attract foreign student. The Universities must have highly qualified staff in the ranks of Professors, Doctors and senior Lecturers as product differentiation strategies. The physical ambience must be world class in order to increase the competitiveness of the Universities. Sustained competitive advantage can only be achieved when the resource is valuable, rare, is difficult to imitate, has no substitutes and is taken advantage by the organization. If resources lack some of these can only give temporary competitive advantage or competitive parity or can even be a disadvantage to an organization. Therefore, in order to gain and sustain competitive advantage, Universities need to evaluate resources that give them sustained distinctive competence and build them. In the context of Botswana, world class infrastructure, highly qualified staff is needed, global market driven programs are required among other resources.

Boyd (2012) noted that given the struggling economies, tertiary education institutions are dealing with declining revenues and searching for ways to do more for less can be found through employment of unique strategies. He suggested that in order to achieve this, tertiary education institutions should place a reviewed focus on exceeding expectations and needs of their customers since students are seeking educational opportunities in institutions that meet their needs. To survive and remain competitive, private tertiary education institutions need to keep abreast, adapt to the competitive landscape and differentiate their institutions to attract both local and global students and satisfy industry and national needs. The purpose of differentiation is to create a product or service, which will differ from other products or services that are provided by the competitors (Smith, 2013). The tertiary education environment has become competitive and many public and private have begun to adopt market-oriented strategies as a result (Leland and Moore, 2007). There is need for Botswana private tertiary education institutions to operate like any other consumer driven markets, introducing new demands and taking greater risks. Competition places great pressure on the business models of most colleges and universities. Over the past years, several institutions were faced with low or no enrolment in certain programmes and have relied on certain key segments or programme to sustain their business models. Universities have traditionally been product-based organisations, with product providers (faculty and academics) having substantial power to determine product offerings (programmes, courses) and delivery methods. There is need to build institutions that clearly understand which consumers they are targeting, what those consumers need, and how they prefer to be serviced (Ernst and Young, 2011). The main challenge for tertiary education institution is to unleash product strategies that set themselves apart from competition and increase competitiveness in the market in a bid to position themselves to stakeholders as a "university of choice". According to Pearce and Robinson (2007) resources are classified into three basic groups tangible, intangible assets and organizational capabilities. Tangible assets are physical and financial

means a company uses to provide value to its customers (Soko et al., 2015). They are the types of resources found on a firm's balance sheet. They include production facilities, raw materials, financial resources, real estate and computers. Although tangible resources may be essential to a firm's strategy, because of their standard nature, they are only occasionally a source of competitive advantage. Intangible assets are resources such as brand names, company reputation, organizational morale, technical knowledge, patents and trademarks, and accumulated experience within an organization. These assets often play important roles in making a firm gain and sustain competitive advantage. This infers that private tertiary institutions in Botswana must invest intensively

## 2.2. Differentiation strategies used by tertiary education institutions

Kotler (2009) argues that education institutions can differentiate their offerings by using strategies such as product (programme) differentiation, service differentiation, personnel differentiation, channel differentiation and image differentiation as indicated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Major Differentiation Variables

Major Differentiation Variables					
	Product	Services	Personnel	Channel	Image
<b>Differentiation Variables</b>	Form	Ordering Ease	Competence	Coverage	Symbols
	Features	Delivery	Courtesy	Expertise	Media
	Performance	Installation	Credibility	Performance.	Atmosphere
	Conformance	Customer Training	Reliability		Events.
	Durability	Customer Consulting	Responsiveness		
	Reparability	Maintenance & Repair	Communication		
	Style Design.	Miscellaneous.			

Source: Kotler (2009)

## 2.3. Product/ service differentiation

Product differentiation is concerned with the bending of demand to the will of supply. It is an attempt to shift or to change the slope of demand curve for the market offering of an individual supplier (Smith, 2013). From a strategy viewpoint, Baker (2001) explains that product differentiation is securing a measure of control over the demand for a product by advertising or promoting differences between the product and products of competing sellers. Product differentiation is a competitive business strategy whereby firms attempt to gain a competitive advantage by increasing the perceived value of their products and services relative to the perceived value of other products and services (Nolega et al., 2015; Rahman, 2016). Nolega et al. (2015) explained that product differentiation in business occurs when products sold within the same industry have

small and sometimes large differences. They further noted that product differentiation occurs within products sold by a single seller and between the products sold by different sellers. Milan et al. (2016), noted that in a highly differentiated system, each college and university would have sufficiently distinct strategy mandates, research profiles and academic programmes.

Jacob (2010) noted that differentiation within education institutions involves the growing diversification of programmes, courses and fields of study. In tertiary education institutions, different programmes such as academic versus professional courses are introduced at different levels of certificates, diplomas, bachelor, masters and post graduate levels. Thus, differentiation provides more opportunities in terms of programme levels, and less privileged students are diverted to lower tiers, whereas elite institutions remain highly socially selective in favour of privileged social strata. Shavit et al. (2020) in Jacob (2010) found that in a highly diversified tertiary education system, attendance rates are higher than in systems that are less differentiated even in the first-tier institutions.

**Table 2.** Measures of product differentiation strategy

<b>Kotler and Keller (2008)</b>	<b>Morgan, Kaleka &amp; Katsikeas (2004)</b>	<b>Chenhall &amp; Langfield-Smith (1998)</b>	<b>Monehim (2021)</b>	<b>Dirisu, Iyiola and Abidunni (2013)</b>
• <b>Design</b>	• High product quality	• High quality product	• High Product quality	• High product quality
• <b>Style</b>	• Design	• Changes in design	• Dependability	• Product Design
• <b>Form</b>	• Packaging	• Fast deliveries	• Geographic location	• Product Innovation
• <b>Features</b>	• Style	• Unique product features	• Price	• Unique Product
• <b>Performance</b>		• Introducing new products	• Unique Product Features	
• <b>Durability</b>				
• <b>Reparability</b>				

Education and training is a challenging product since it involves offering of service. Services involve special challenges because of their characteristics and as such, most services do not exist until the provider performs them. Akareem and Hossain (2016) noted that recent studies identified the dimensions of quality higher education as quality of students, faculty credentials, academic features and administrative supports. Since tertiary education product is a service, it is therefore intangible because it has no physical properties, cannot be seen, felt, tasted or tested before purchasing it (Egboro, 2009). The programmes and courses offered possess the characteristics of inseparability, variability and perishability and hence there is need discuss service differentiation.

#### 2.4. Service differentiation

Service differentiation is the extent to which a company focuses on service as its core offering and the extent to which customers regard the organisation as a service provider (Gebauer, 2011). Service differentiation comprises such aspects as intensity of interaction with customers' intensity of personal relationships with

customers, customer loyalty and satisfaction. The importance of service differentiation to tertiary education institutions lies in its distinct linkage to client-perceived value, competitive advantage and target market focus (Chenet et al., 2010). Potential strategic avenues for service differentiation in tertiary education institution include; student support services, business consulting, integrated services or operational service and as such, service differentiation translates into different ways to achieve competitive advantage through services (Gebauer et al., 2011). Egboro (2009) noted that when a product cannot easily be differentiated, the key to competitive success may lie on adding valued services and improving their quality. He noted that service differentiation strategies seek to produce a competitive edge by incorporating attribute and features in a company's products and services offering that rivals do not have. Gebauer et al. (2011) noted that service differentiation either has a direct effect or a moderator effect. The direct effect represents competitor orientation, which is part of market orientation and has a direct effect on business performance. The moderator effect of service differentiation happens when the organisation chooses its services differentiation on the basis of understanding of the business environment and the chosen service differentiation directs the company's attention to certain performance dimensions such as revenue and profit, and finally exceeds its existing performance levels by employing various activities that enhance and reduce customer centricity and innovativeness.

## 2.5. Product/ service quality

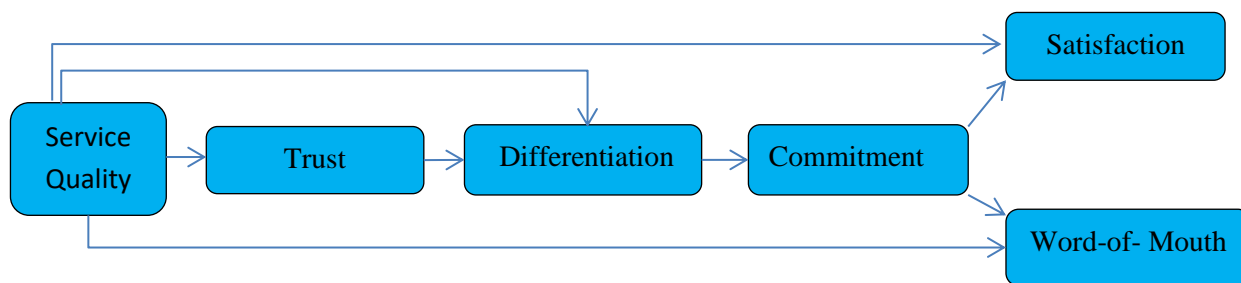
Product quality is a key market differentiator, resulting in many organisations defining and improving processes, adopting and implementing total quality management systems and attaining quality standard accreditation (Dirisu et al., 2013). Recent trends in tertiary educations have seen the introduction of quality assurance in curriculum development and operations to improve the quality of educational and training programmes as well as all activities taking place within the institution. Quality assurance for higher education systems has become an important issue worldwide, instigating collaboration among quality assurance agencies at international and regional levels (Akareem and Hossain, 2016). Tertiary education need to fit within the national and international quality assurance standards in order to be considered to be of quality. Akareem and Hossain (2016) identified the dimensions of quality higher education as quality of students, faculty credentials, academic features and administrative supports. Most tertiary education institutions have now established the quality assurance departments in a bid to comply with regulatory authorities.

**Table 3.** Definition of quality of higher education

<b>1. Transcendent Quality</b>	<b>Result of reputation of and expertise of academic staff.</b>
<b>2. Manufacturing Quality</b>	Service conforms to specifications and is fit to be used in manner for which it was designed.
<b>3. Product Based Quality</b>	Increased student learning produced by curriculum and academic staff.
<b>4. Value Based Quality</b>	Acceptable performance an acceptable price.
<b>5. User Based Quality</b>	Student's needs wants and preferences.

Source: Akareem and Hossain (2016)

It is imperative therefore, that students and parents assess the quality tertiary institutions. Quality measures encompass in an institution include quality of infrastructure, quality of staff, quality of students and the research output (Chenet et al., 2010). Chenet et al. (2010) found that service quality and trust has an impact on differentiation and how differentiation in turn acts on customer commitment and ultimately satisfaction and word of mouth communication. They concluded that service differentiation fully mediates the impact of both service quality and trust on commitment to the service firm. This leads to customer satisfaction and increased word of mouth.



**Figure 1.** Service quality, Trust, Differentiation, Commitment and Relationship outcomes (Source: Chenet et al., 2010)

Quality as a competitive tool is one of the fundamental ways in which tertiary education institutions can successfully compete and differentiate themselves in the global market place. Quality in tertiary education can be achieved through accreditation, assessment and audit. Accreditation and assessment monitor the quality of teaching and learning, while audit focuses on internal procedures adopted by an institution in order to achieve its objectives (Kis, 2005). Programme choice is not determined by price, but by reputation of the institution, accreditation/recognition of the programme by regulatory bodies, quality of services (personnel), which increases the chances of students' employability. Product quality has a huge effect on demand and consumer welfare and is an important element of competition in a wide range of markets and industries (Dirisu et al., 2013). An effective management strategy can be pursued by differentiating the firm's offer through superior quality. Dirisu et al. (2013) explained that this strategy serves to insulate firms from competitive rivalry by creating customer loyalty, lowering customer sensitivity to price and protecting the business from competitive forces that reduce price-cost margins.

## 2.6. Service delivery

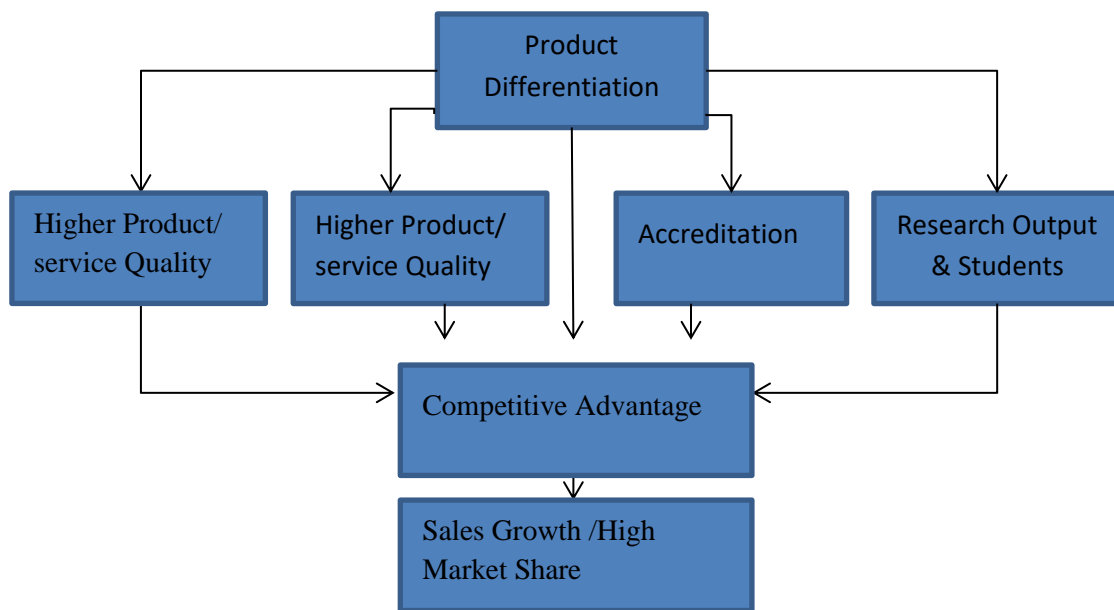
Service quality is generally associated with service delivery (Hoque et al., 2013). Service quality in higher education has become a fundamental aspect of educational excellence (Hoque et al., 2013). Students are seeking for access to educational and training services through new technologies and flexible delivery options. When students perceive the institution's quality and standardised learning environment facilitated with intellectual faculty as well as appropriate facilities of learning and infrastructure, their interest in the institution will be explicitly retained wherein their motivation reflects both the academic and administrative efficiency of a particular institution (Hoque et al., 2013). Service quality in educational institutions is mostly



recognised through cooperation among the administrative staff, academic staff and the students of the institution and as such institutions must train its staff members in a way that creates a sense of facilitation by means of co-ordination, co-operation, compassion, empathy and accountability (Hoque et al., 2013). Although service differentiation is not widely researched, Kurniarty et al. (2015) argued that companies who succeed in offering substantial value for buyers, in a way that competitors cannot, tend to be more successful at retaining customers. Ewers (2010) recommended that institutions should have employees attend customer service training sessions to learn the basics of customer service. Service factors of admission, teaching and management and administration play a vital role in for tertiary education institutions in achieving outstanding service delivery quality. Chan (2000) argues that sustaining a competitive advantage based on service quality is possible but requires unrelenting effort on the part of an organisation to continually improve service and only then can high service quality standards be attained and sustained.

### 2.7. Product Design and development

According to Dirisu et al. (2013), product design is the totality of features that affect how a product looks and functions. Kotler and Keller (2009) noted that a well-designed product offers both functional and aesthetic benefits to consumers, which could be a source of differentiation. Dirisu et al. (2013) explained that a good product design can be a point-of-difference in the marketplace aiding consumer acceptance through its ease of use, durability, reliability or packaging, thereby service as a source of competitive advantage. Product design and development in tertiary education incorporates the design and introduction of new modules from certificate to degree programmes, to meet the needs and wants of the stakeholders. As institutions go through the transitioning process, from colleges to universities, need arises for the development and introduction of graduate and post graduate programmes aimed at meeting the industry needs and curb the problems of skills mismatch.



**Figure 2.** Product differentiation (Source: Adapted from Dirisu et al., 2013)

Durkin et al. (2016) carried out research on product development in higher education marketing and concluded that the almost exclusive reliance on academics to develop new initiatives means they risk being predominantly based on research interests of academics, rather than on the actual needs of students and other stakeholders of the universities. They found that there is a clear opportunity to increase the flow of new ideas into universities by actively engaging non-academic staff, students, parents, industry and commerce and government, in the process.

### 3. Research methodology

This research study employed a descriptive survey design. This descriptive study seeks to describe how tertiary education institutions might employ the product strategies to create competitive advantage. In this study, quantitative approach was employed and both primary and secondary sources of data were utilised. The secondary data sources provided essential information for understanding the Botswana tertiary education sector. In this study, probability -stratified random sampling was used, where the target population was stratified into two institutions, University A and University B and random samples were drawn among students and staff members in management position. Two private universities were examined with emphasis on Gaborone Campuses. In this study, the target population was stratified into two institutions, University A and University B and random samples were drawn among existing students and staff members in management position. The researcher targeted 200 respondents, distributed proportionately among the target population of 8971 as shown in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Sample Size Determination

<b>Stratum</b>	<b>Approximate Number in stratum</b>	<b>Number in sample</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
University A- BU	5928	134	67
University B - BIU	2943	66	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>8971</b>	<b>200</b>	<b>100</b>

A total 156 responses were obtained out of 200 distributed questionnaires. Of the 156 respondents, 62 were from University A, with 94 were from University B. Sixteen of the respondents were staff members, with 141 being students in different faculties. Staff members targeted were those occupying management positions in universities. Data was collected through the use of interviewee completed questionnaire using drop-and-pick method of questionnaire administration. As cited in Jackson-Smith et al. (2016) drop-and-pick survey result in higher completion rates (Riley and Kiger, 2002; Steel et al., 2001), thus reducing the potential problems for non-response bias (Singer, 2006). Questionnaires for staff members were dropped in their offices and picked-up later at an appointed time. Students were intercepted at reading areas and around the campuses

and were given time to complete the questionnaires. The questionnaires were collected immediately after completion to ensure that they were not lost. The researchers applied to the Ministry of Tertiary Education, Research, Science and Technology requesting for permission to collect data from the institutions. Data was analysed using a Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 software. Cross-tabulations, mean scores and frequency analysis were used to present the data findings of the study. Cronbach alpha was used to measure the internal reliability of the questionnaire and a score of 0.889 was obtained indicating that the research instrument was internally consistent and was able to measure what it intended.

**Table 5.** Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.889	32

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1. Product differentiation variables

Findings as depicted in Figure 3 show that the issue of product differentiation is of importance to stakeholders of higher tertiary education. Generally, the responses obtained indicate that both students and management staff in this sector concur as to what should be done by institutions to differentiate and remain competitive in the long term. Although a large number of respondents were generally in the neutral, the majority of them however, leaned on the side of agreeing to the assertions that product differentiation is achieved though impacting key attributes of services in the tertiary education sector. Forty two percent (42%) and nine percent (9%) of the respondents agree and strongly agree respectively, that their institutions offered programmes of high quality, that are accredited by various regulatory authorities in the country against 30% and 15% disagreeing and strongly disagreeing respectively. This point to the fact that some institutions still offer programmes that are deemed lower quality, hence unaccredited or unapproved by the regulatory authorities. This means that for institutions to have a competitive advantage, they must develop programmes of high quality. The results indicated in Figure 3 revealed that on average 50% of the programmes offered are of high quality. This means a lot need to be done by the institutions to improve the quality of programmes to gain a competitive advantage. Respondents articulated to various other factors that facilitate product differentiation. These variables include the offering of unique programmes that allows for articulation, both horizontal and vertical to other potential qualifications. Fifty five percent (55%) and fifteen (15%) of respondents agree and strongly agree that programmes developed should be industry driven which increases chances for employment. This means that for institutions to be competitive, they need to develop programmes which are industry driven. Currently HRDC report (2020) results has shown that there is mismatch between programmes on offer and what is needed by the industry. Respondents has also concurred to the same sentiments.

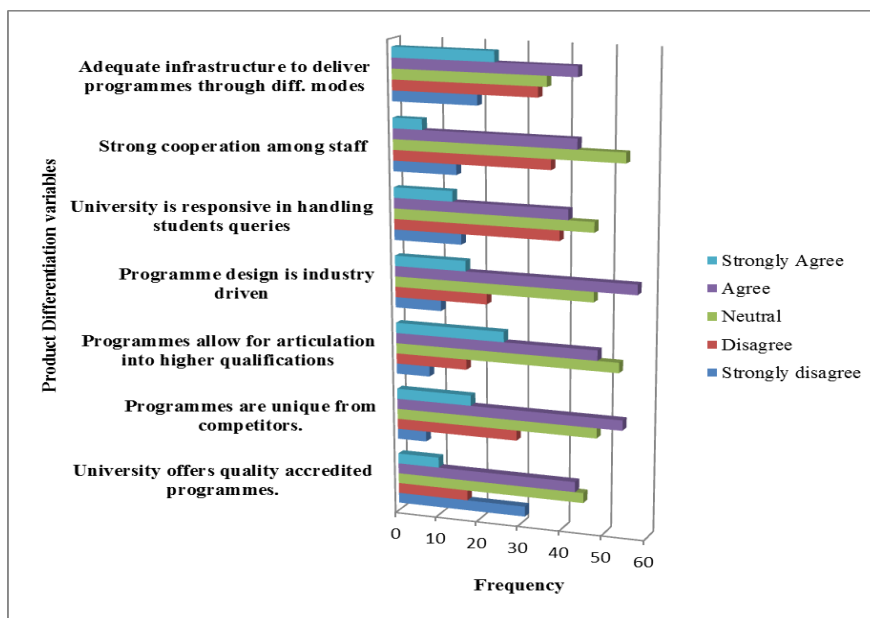


Figure 3. Product Differentiation

Table 6. Cross Tabulation–Product Differentiation and University

UNI		Quality Accredited Programmes	Programmes unique from competitors	Articulation into higher qualifications	Programmes industry driven	Responsive in handling students' academic complaints	Strong cooperation between university staff	Adequate infrastructure to offer programmes thorough different modes
A	Mean	3.06	3.48	3.44	3.37	3.15	2.97	2.65
	N	62	62	61	60	62	61	62
	Std. Deviation	1.186	1.052	1.118	1.104	1.129	1.080	1.202
B	Mean	2.79	3.18	3.44	3.27	2.88	2.92	3.41
	N	95	94	91	94	95	95	95
	Std. Deviation	1.193	1.026	1.035	1.059	1.129	1.018	1.225
Total	Mean	2.90	3.30	3.44	3.31	2.99	2.94	3.11
	N	157	156	152	154	157	156	157
	Std. Deviation	1.194	1.044	1.066	1.075	1.132	1.039	1.269

With regard to infrastructure and services, the respondents echoed that for institutions to be competitive, educational institutions must make the right infrastructure available if there are to offer quality programmes that are differentiated. About 43% of respondents believe that the issue of infrastructure is a primary one, particularly for science-based qualifications, in the form of e-learning infrastructure, laboratories and other important apparatus and in this competitive market, where the markets are not just local but global. Findings support Boroto et al. (2012) who concluded that a new trend in higher education is linked with high investments in new technologies, modern libraries and students' campuses. Other product factors respondents considered critical in differentiating a tertiary education institution for competitive advantage stress the need for unique/accredited programmes (25%), extra curriculum activities (14%), offering of practical than theoretical courses (9%) and provision of research resources (11%) among others as presented in Figure 4.

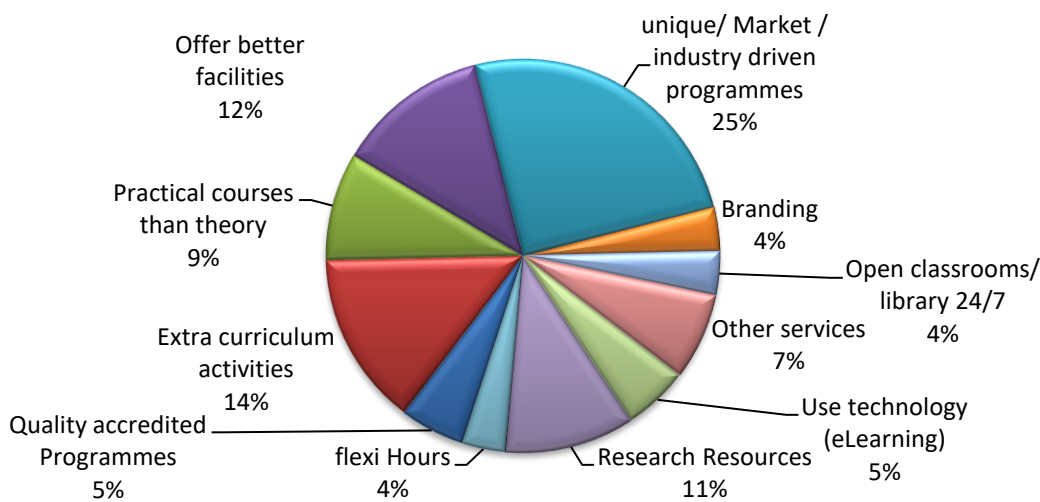


Figure 4. Other Product Factors to create Competitive Advantage

The study found that institutions can achieve competitive advantage if they offer accredited programmes (13%) that are market driven (12%) and benchmark with or franchised from international institutions (11%). Improving the quality of programmes (13%), delivering programmes/courses in a practical way as opposed to theoretical way (16%), and increasing industrial exposure for students will help institutions gain competitive advantage. Recruiting, selecting and hiring qualified staffs (8%) and provision of facilities (sports, accommodation, classrooms, among others) were considered essential to achievement of competitive advantage. It can be concluded that aggressive marketing/advertising can assist tertiary education institutions to convey clear messages to all stakeholders, and move them from a level of unawareness to awareness, and awareness to reinforcement. Other actions suggested by respondents included the need for tertiary education institutions to be interactive and engage with students, engage in social responsibility activities, have institution representatives in international forums and provide financial support for staff and their dependents on educational programmes. The findings support Kettunen 2003; Kettunen, 2005, who suggested that a strategy of differentiation can be achieved by brand image, technology, customer service, high quality teaching, intensive support for students, good marketing abilities, reputation for quality and the ability to attract highly skilled labour.

Table 7. Critical Factors for Competitive Advantage

	Frequen cy	Percen t	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Accredit courses	12	7.6	12.8	12.8
Improve quality of programmes	12	7.6	12.8	25.5
Benchmark / franchise programmes from reputable institutions	10	6.4	10.6	36.2
Focus on practical than theory	15	9.6	16.0	52.1
Industy driven/ marketable / unique programmes	11	7.0	11.7	63.8
Prioritise students' needs	3	1.9	3.2	67.0
Facilities (Sports/ hostels/ labs/ learning)	13	8.3	13.8	80.9
Hire qualified Lecturers/ Personnel	7	4.5	7.4	88.3
increase industrial exposure	4	2.5	4.3	92.6
Improve Policies (Fees, staff, curriculum)	4	2.5	4.3	96.8
Staff motivation and retention	1	.6	1.1	97.9
Advertise / Market aggressively	2	1.3	2.1	100.0
Total	94	59.9	100.0	

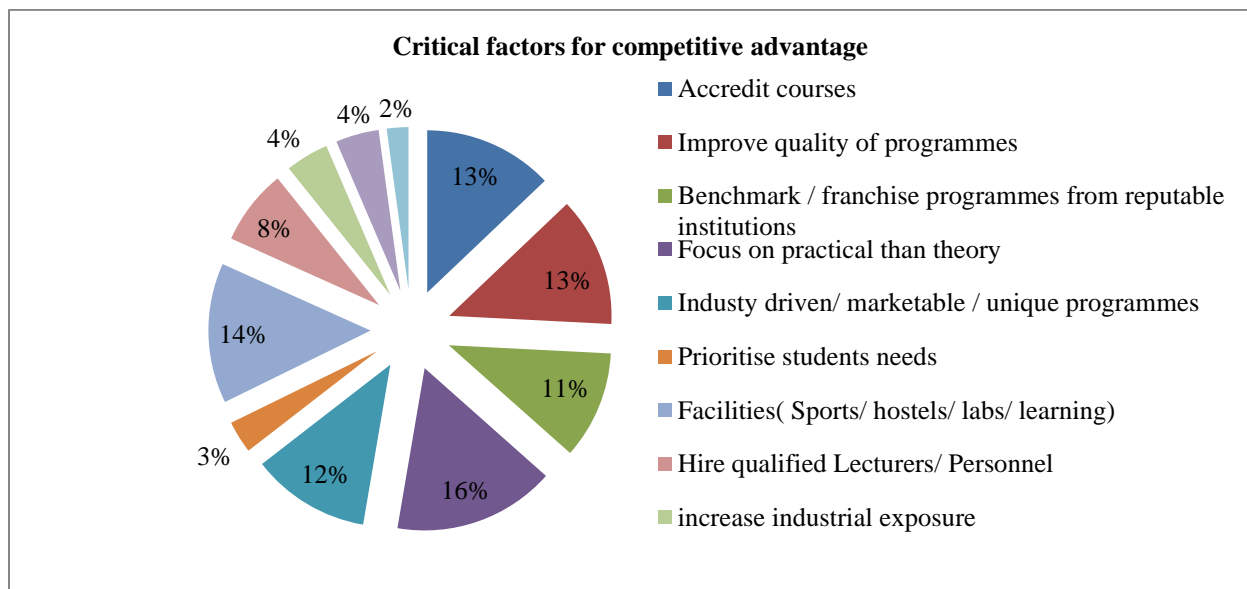


Figure 5. Action for Competitive Advantage

## 4.2. Discussion of the results

The research findings on product differentiation concur with Kettunen (2003), who noted that students acknowledge that the superiority of the differentiated education is based on extensive research and educational planning (industry driven courses and that allowing for articulation), high quality teaching and intensive research. Findings also corroborate with Zekiri and Nadalea (2011) who noted that a strategy of differentiation involves offering a different product, a different delivery system, or using a different marketing approach. It can be assumed that offering unique programmes through different modes can assist private tertiary education institutions in achievement of competitive advantage.

Findings concur with Dirusu et al. (2013) who found that product differentiation can be achieved through product innovation and product design, higher product quality and unique product and as such, companies that do not meet the criteria of differentiation will find it difficult to achieve competitive advantage (Kurniaty et al., 2015). Differentiation entails offering a product or service that is perceived as unique in the industry and therefore offers unique attributes that are valued by the customers so that competitive advantage can be achieved (Dirisu et al., 2013).

Kurniarty et al. (2015) noted that organisations sustain competitive advantage as long as the services they deliver and the manner in which they deliver have attributes that correspond to the buying criteria of substantial number of customers. It can be concluded that competitive advantage requires a customer orientated philosophy; therefore, tertiary education institutions in Gaborone must implement these actions to gain competitive advantage.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

The researchers concluded that product differentiation can be achieved through paying attention to government factors, policies and regulations. Findings indicated that both students and staff value quality accredited programmes, unique programmes which are different from competitors, allowing for articulation into higher qualifications.

To gain competitive advantage private institutions should offer programmes that are industry driven, be responsive to students' academic needs and ensure strong cooperation among all staff. Acquisition of adequate infrastructure is also essential in attaining competitive as evidenced by high ratings. It was recommended that tertiary education administrators should educate stakeholders about their products (programmes). This will give institutions an opportunity to increase the flow of new ideas into universities, hence actively engaging non-academic staff, students, parents, industry and commerce and government, in the process. Tertiary education institutions management should create a strong brand name and positive image to differentiate their institutions for the achievement of competitive advantage. Activities such as improving the scenic beauty of the institutions, community engagement and promotional activities will help increase the visibility of the institutions and hence gain competitive advantage. Use of Brand Ambassadors and reputable spokespersons or endorsers can assist in increasing word –of mouth communication as opposed to use of media which is normally perceived as biased. The researchers recommended that institutions must invest in research resources, technology and facilities to offer practical courses and move away from theory it impacts on the quality of graduates and institution's competitiveness. Quality measures in tertiary institutions encompass

quality of infrastructure, quality of staff, quality of students and the research output. Private tertiary education institutions should continually adopt product development (new and modified programmes and services) and market development markets strategies to improve financial position of the institutions and maintain differentiation in a bid to keep abreast with ever changing market needs and to avoid skills mismatch. This will involve development of new programmes that will allow for articulation (including postgraduate programmes), targeting new geographical markets and new market segments through different modes of programme delivery. Government was also encouraged to ensure that policies are consistent and any changes must be communicated in advance so that private tertiary education institutions are able to develop and implement competitive strategies. These policies relate to sponsorship, accreditation, and other matters relating to the administration of institutions. The study recommends that students must be careful in selecting private tertiary education institutions by checking that both the institution and the programmes are accredited with regulatory authorities. Future research should be done using larger samples involving all key stakeholders to increase representation of private tertiary education institutions.

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