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Article

A Competitiveness Gap Map for a Private University: Priority Rather than Gap Magnitude (The Case of ISFT Institute)

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Abstract: Survey-based diagnostics of university competitiveness usually end with a list of the lowest-rated factors, and resources go where the gap is largest. The paper shows that this rule diverges from a rule that accounts for the importance of each factor in university choice. The study uses a survey of the target audience of a private university in Tashkent (1,471 questionnaires, August–October 2026; 664 in the analytical sample after screening). Factor weights were obtained with two forced-choice instruments: a constant-sum allocation across blocks and the frequency of choosing a factor as decisive within blocks. The integral competitiveness index equals 0.692; the largest share of the shortfall falls on the employment and career block (18.5 per cent). The factor with the largest gap, discounts and scholarships, ranks nineteenth of twenty-two by priority. Excluding respondents who failed the attention check (50.7 per cent) lowers the index from 0.740 to 0.692 and the student net promoter score from +14.1 to +1.7. Consideration of the university and its choice at equal prices are associated with unaided awareness (odds ratios 2.36 and 3.63) but not with aided awareness. Ranking managerial tasks by priority, keeping screening rules constant across repeated measurements and using unaided awareness as the brand indicator are recommended.

Keywords: University Competitiveness, Gap Map, Importance-Performance Analysis, University Choice Factors, Survey Data Quality, Brand Awareness, Private University

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1. Introduction

A private university funded primarily through tuition fees must allocate its limited marketing resources among several areas, each of which influences prospective students' decisions in a different way. A typical assessment of competitiveness relies on a survey in which respondents rate the institution against a series of statements; the lowest-rated attributes are then designated as areas for improvement. The implicit rule-address the largest gaps first-fails to account for the relative importance of each attribute in university choice.[1][2]

For Uzbekistan's private higher education sector, resource allocation has become particularly pressing. Non-state institutions account for 44.6% of higher education institutions, with 60 of the 99 institutions of this kind operating in Tashkent. Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 403 (2025) established quantitative requirements for these institutions, including the allocation of 80% of net profit to development during their first five years of operation. Private higher education enrols approximately one-third of students worldwide (Levy), but Uzbekistan's private sector has emerged over only a few years, and a national database of comparable indicators for private universities is not yet available. Surveys of an institution's own target audience therefore remain the principal

source of evidence about its competitive position. Under these circumstances, mistakes in setting priorities are particularly costly for private universities: inadequate student recruitment threatens their primary source of revenue.[3][4]

The comparison between attribute importance and performance originates in the importance–performance analysis developed by J. Martilla and J. James. Their framework allocates attributes to four quadrants and directs particular attention to those combining high importance with low performance (Martilla & James). Although widely adopted, the method produces groups rather than an ordered list of interventions, and its results are sensitive to how importance is measured. Comparisons of importance-elicitation methods have demonstrated differences in the resulting weights (Louviere & Islam), while scale-based ratings are susceptible to response styles that introduce bias independently of question content (Baumgartner & Steenkamp).[5][6]

Studies of university choice identify a recurring set of influential factors, including programme content and quality, tuition costs, institutional reputation and employment prospects (Wijesinghe et al.). At the same time, the review by J. Hemsley-Brown and I. Oplatka highlights methodological and substantive heterogeneity in this literature, alongside several unresolved questions (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatk). From a private university management perspective, a less frequently examined issue is how the importance of choice attributes can be combined with perceptions of a particular institution to produce an actionable sequence of decisions.[7][8]

A second issue concerns survey data quality. Online surveys may contain a substantial proportion of careless responses, whose identification requires specific procedures (Meade & Craig). One such procedure is the instructional manipulation check introduced by D. Oppenheimer and colleagues (Oppenheimer et al. in 2009). When inattentive responses are prevalent and systematically inflate ratings, competitiveness and loyalty indicators calculated without screening may reflect the data-collection process more strongly than the target audience's views.[9][10]

A third issue concerns brand metrics. Universities commonly measure aided brand awareness, whereas branding theory distinguishes recognition from unaided recall and links recall more directly to choice when the brand is not presented at the point of decision (Keller). According to G. Laurent and colleagues, different brand-awareness indicators reflect a common underlying construct but involve different thresholds (Laurent et al.). Which indicator is associated with university consideration has not been tested in the context of private higher education in Uzbekistan.[11]

This article aims to develop a priority-ranked competitiveness gap map for a private university and establish how its ordering differs from a ranking based solely on gap magnitude. It addresses three research questions: (1) Does priority-based ranking coincide with gap-size ranking? (2) How does the removal of careless responses affect competitiveness and loyalty measures? (3) Which brand-awareness measure is associated with university consideration and choice?

2. Materials and Method

The data come from an original survey entitled 'What Matters When Choosing a Private University', administered in Uzbek and Russian to ISFT Institute's target audience in Tashkent between 18 August and 17 October 2026. The questionnaire included a 27-attribute importance scale; an allocation of 100 points across seven attribute domains; selection of five decisive factors; questions on the awareness and consideration of private universities; evaluations of ISFT against 22 statements; a 0–10 likelihood-to-recommend question; and items addressing international opportunities. In total, 1,471 questionnaires were collected.[12]

Exclusion criteria were established before data collection. Questionnaires were removed if respondents failed an instructional attention check ('select option 2 here')

(Oppenheimer et al.), gave the same response to every scale item, or submitted duplicate questionnaires associated with the same telephone number. The final analytical sample comprised 664 questionnaires. Second- to fourth-year students accounted for 58.4% of this sample, and almost half the respondents were older than 25. Consequently, the sample captures retrospective assessments of attribute importance among people who had recently made an enrolment decision and is skewed towards the Institute's own audience.[13]

Importance weights were derived in two stages. Domain weights were obtained using a constant-sum approach based on 320 questionnaires whose allocated totals fell between 90 and 110 points. Tightening the admissible range to 95–105 points (n = 288) changed no domain weight by more than 0.2 percentage points. Within each domain, its weight was distributed among attributes according to the frequency with which each attribute was selected among the five decisive factors. Both stages thus relied on forced-choice instruments. ISFT performance scores were rescaled to the unit interval using $x = (\text{rating} - 1) / 4$. Because respondents' evaluations of competitors were not measured, the upper bound of the rating scale served as the benchmark. The composite competitiveness index, attribute gap and priority score were calculated as follows:

$$K = \Sigma\, w_i \cdot x_i ; \quad Gap_i = 1 - x_i ; \quad Priority_i = w_i \cdot Gap_i \qquad (1)$$

Under these definitions, the sum of priority scores equals the shortfall of the composite index from its theoretical maximum: $\Sigma\, w_i \cdot Gap_i = 1 - K$. Each attribute's priority can therefore be interpreted as its contribution to the overall shortfall. Net Promoter Score (NPS) was calculated from the likelihood-to-recommend item (Reichheld). Associations between brand awareness and both university consideration and hypothetical choice at equal tuition prices were assessed using logistic regression, adjusting for respondent status, budget, region, language-of-instruction preference and age. Holm's correction was applied to multiple segment comparisons (Holm). Differences between audience preferences and university ranking methodologies were examined by comparing the relative importance of international attributes within their domain with the corresponding weights used by QS and Times Higher Education (QS World University Rankings: Methodology, n.d.; World University Rankings 2026: Methodology, n.d.).[14]

3. Results

Composite index and gap map. ISFT Institute's composite competitiveness index was K = 0.692, implying a shortfall of 0.308 from the theoretical maximum (Table 1). Employment and career prospects accounted for the largest share of the shortfall (18.5%), followed by tuition costs and payment terms (16.0%) and programmes and faculty (15.6%).

Table 1. ISFT Institute's composite competitiveness index by attribute domain

Attribute domain	Domain weight, %	Mean rating (1–5)	Contribution to K, points	Share of shortfall, %
Employment and career prospects	13.8	3.35	8.1	18.5
Tuition costs and payment terms	15.5	3.57	10.6	16.0
Programmes and faculty	20.7	4.00	15.9	15.6
International opportunities	12.3	3.57	7.9	14.4
Awareness and prestige	14.1	3.92	10.2	12.4

Information and applicant engagement	12.6	3.83	9.0	11.9
Campus and student life	11.0	3.74	7.5	11.3
Total	100.0	-	69.2	100.0

Source: Author's calculations based on survey data (n = 664).

Ranking attributes by priority produces a different ordering from ranking them by gap magnitude (Table 2). Discounts and scholarships exhibit the largest gap (0.458) but rank nineteenth out of 22 attributes in priority because their importance weight is only 1.94%. Degree prestige illustrates the reverse: despite a moderate gap of 0.267, its weight of 7.59% puts it in third place. Three employment-related attributes appear among the seven highest-ranked priorities; they were evaluated using three separate statements and received similar ratings, ranging from 3.33 to 3.37.[15]

Table 2. ISFT Institute competitiveness gap map: priority rankings

Rank	Attribute (domain)	Weight, %	Rating (1–5)	Gap	Priority: % of shortfall
1	International programmes and partnerships (G)	12.33	3.57	0.358	14.4
2	Job-placement assistance (F)	5.50	3.35	0.413	7.4
3	Degree prestige (D)	7.59	3.93	0.267	6.6
4	Internships and employer links (F)	4.59	3.33	0.417	6.2
5	Tuition fee level (B)	4.50	3.35	0.413	6.0
6	University awareness (D)	6.46	3.90	0.276	5.8
7	Graduate salaries (F)	3.72	3.37	0.407	4.9
19	Discounts and scholarships (B)	1.94	3.17	0.458	2.9
22	English-medium instruction (A)	1.61	3.63	0.342	1.8

Source: Author's calculations based on survey data (n = 664).

The composite index is relatively robust to the weighting scheme, but the ranking of priorities is not. When domain weights are allocated using mean scores from the importance scale, K equals 0.685, while the rank correlation between the two priority

orderings is ϱ = 0.604 (p = 0.003). The composite index is also similar for second- to fourth-year students (0.683, n = 388) and other respondents (0.693, n = 236).[15]

Effect of response screening. A total of 746 questionnaires (50.7%) failed the attention check; 390 of these respondents selected the extreme response of 5 for the check item. Those who failed the check assigned higher importance to the attributes (4.08 versus 3.91 points; Mann–Whitney test, $p < 0.001$) and rated ISFT more positively on each of the 22 performance statements. The composite index was 0.740 in the full sample, compared with 0.692 in the screened analytical sample. After screening, overall NPS declined from +16.5 (n = 1,447) to +5.2 (n = 651); among first- to fourth-year students, it fell from +14.1 (n = 842) to +1.7 (n = 402).

Brand awareness and consideration. ISFT was named spontaneously by 27.9% of respondents, whereas aided awareness reached 93.7%. In logistic regression models, unaided awareness was associated both with considering ISFT and with choosing it at equal tuition prices, after adjustment for other respondent characteristics (Table 3). No corresponding association was identified for aided awareness.

Table 3. Association of unaided ISFT awareness with consideration and choice: logistic regression (n = 634)

Predictor	Considers ISFT: OR [95% CI]	Would choose ISFT at equal cost: OR [95% CI]
Spontaneously names ISFT	2.36 [1.51; 3.70]***	3.63 [2.41; 5.45]***
Currently a university student	1.44 [1.00; 2.08]	0.95 [0.67; 1.34]
Budget below UZS 10 million	1.08 [0.74; 1.57]	1.11 [0.78; 1.58]
Resides in Tashkent city	0.74 [0.46; 1.18]	0.60 [0.39; 0.93]*
Prefers Uzbek-medium instruction	1.05 [0.66; 1.68]	1.53 [0.99; 2.38]
Age 25 or older	0.95 [0.65; 1.38]	1.77 [1.25; 2.51]**
McFadden pseudo-R^2	0.033	0.081

Source: Author's calculations. OR = odds ratio; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

International dimension. Of five international attributes directly observable by the target audience, the ranking methodologies explicitly include only the proportion of international faculty (weighted at 5% by QS and 2.5% by Times Higher Education). Yet this attribute received both the lowest importance score (3.31 points) and the smallest share of its domain's importance weight (14.3%). A semester abroad, a second degree and international accreditation-all more highly valued by respondents-are not included as distinct indicators in these methodologies. Overall, 58.4% of respondents were willing to pay a premium for a dual-degree programme, while 31.8% were actively considering study abroad.[16]

4. Discussion

The divergence between priority rankings and gap-size rankings is consistent with the logic of importance–performance analysis: an attribute with low performance but little importance does not warrant immediate intervention (Martilla & James). Nevertheless, the proposed procedure differs from the original method in two respects. First, it produces an ordered sequence rather than four quadrants, allowing each attribute's priority to be interpreted as its share of the composite-index shortfall. Second, importance is elicited through forced-choice instruments rather than a rating scale. The case of discounts and scholarships demonstrates the practical implications: a gap-size rule would direct

resources towards discounts, whereas priority-based allocation would emphasise job-placement support, internships and employer partnerships.[17]

A further distinction relates to the finding by J. Louviere and T. Islam that importance weights depend on how they are elicited (Louviere & Islam). The present results appear to support this observation and extend it to managerial decision-making: changing the within-domain weighting scheme has little effect on the composite index (0.692 versus 0.685) but materially alters the order of priorities ($\varrho = 0.604$). This suggests that priority rankings, rather than index levels, may be particularly sensitive to measurement choices in university management. Selecting the weighting instrument should therefore be treated as a substantive methodological decision.[18]

The proportion of questionnaires failing the attention check was high, at 50.7%. This is consistent with A. Meade and S. Craig's findings on the prevalence of careless responses in online surveys (Meade & Craig), although the observed proportion may exceed typical levels. One possible explanation is the questionnaire's design: a lengthy, homogeneous scale with repeated response formats can encourage mechanical answering, as suggested by the frequency with which respondents selected an extreme value on the attention-check item. The systematic inflation of ratings among respondents who failed the check is compatible with the account of response styles as a source of content-independent bias (Baumgartner & Steenkamp). The practical implication is that screening criteria form part of the measurement protocol: repeated surveys applying different rules could register an apparent change caused by procedure rather than underlying perceptions.

NPS proved particularly sensitive to screening, declining among students from +14.1 to +1.7. F. Reichheld introduced the metric as a single measure associated with company growth (Reichheld), whereas T. Keiningham and colleagues found no superiority over other satisfaction measures in predicting growth (Keiningham et al.). The present data cannot establish the predictive validity of NPS. They do, however, add a methodological consideration to this debate: the comparability of repeated NPS measurements depends on response-quality controls no less than on consistent question wording.

The association of choice with unaided rather than aided awareness accords with K. Keller's argument that brand recall matters particularly when decisions are made without the brand being presented (Keller); university choice appears to be one such context. At first glance, this finding might conflict with G. Laurent and colleagues' account of different awareness measures as manifestations of a common underlying construct (Laurent et al.). The apparent contradiction may be explained by a ceiling effect: aided awareness had reached 93.7% and thus offered little ability to distinguish among respondents, whereas unaided awareness retained discriminatory power. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that unaided awareness is the more actionable monitoring metric for an established brand within a local market, while aided awareness is especially informative for emerging brands.

The discrepancy between audience preferences and ranking methodologies reinforces E. Hazelkorn's observation that an emphasis on rankings can reshape universities' priorities (Hazelkorn). For a private university not represented in such rankings, this realignment may be especially costly: investments in faculty internationalisation indicators may carry little weight for its target audience, while mobility opportunities and dual degrees valued by prospective students are not separately recognised by the rankings. Demand for overseas education is consistent with the push–pull model of international student mobility (Mazzarol & Soutar) and suggests that dual-degree provision may enable private universities to retain some students who would otherwise study abroad.

This study has limitations arising from sample composition. Most respondents had already made their university choice, and the sample was skewed towards ISFT's own audience. The resulting weights therefore describe the retrospective importance of

attributes; these data cannot support valid comparisons between ISFT's brand and those of competitors. Moreover, the cross-sectional design precludes causal interpretation of the regressions: unaided awareness may be a cause or a consequence of interest in the institution.

5. Conclusion

ISFT Institute obtained a composite competitiveness index of 0.692, with employment and career prospects accounting for the largest share of the shortfall. The priority-based ordering of management interventions differs substantially from ordering by gap magnitude: the attribute with the largest gap ranks nineteenth among 22 attributes. Management should therefore rank interventions by weighted priority and allocate resources first to mechanisms that facilitate the transition from education to employment.

Removing careless responses changes the reported results rather than merely refining them; quality-control criteria must remain consistent across measurement waves. Unaided brand awareness should be adopted as a principal brand indicator in the monitoring system. Future research should survey prospective students currently making enrolment decisions and test the stability of priority rankings in repeated surveys.

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