

## Research article

# The Role of Competitive Advantage in Mediating the Relationship Between Educational Program Differentiation, Perceived Tuition Fees, and Digital Marketing on New Students' Decisions to Choose UNAS

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**Abstract:** The number of new UNAS students in the last 5 years has fluctuated even in the 2020/2021 academic year experienced a decline. Then managed to increase again in 2021/2022, but until 2022/2023 it has not succeeded in returning to its original position in 2019/2020, even experiencing a decline again in 2023/2024, so that this study aims to examine the effect of Differentiation of Education Programs, Perceptions of Education Costs, and Digital Marketing on the decision of new students to choose UNAS either directly or through the intervening variable of competitive advantage. This study uses two methods, namely descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. The analytical tool used is Structural Equation Modeling using SmartPLS with data collection methods through questionnaires to new student respondents at UNAS. The results of this study indicate that differentiation of education programs, education costs and digital marketing have no direct effect on the decision to choose new students at UNAS. Competitive advantage has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose. differentiation of education programs and digital marketing have a positive and significant influence on competitive advantage, perception of education costs has no effect on competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is proven to be able to mediate the relationship between differentiation of educational programs, and digital marketing on students' decisions to choose UNAS. Competitive advantage is not able to mediate the relationship between perceived tuition fees on students' decisions to choose UNAS.

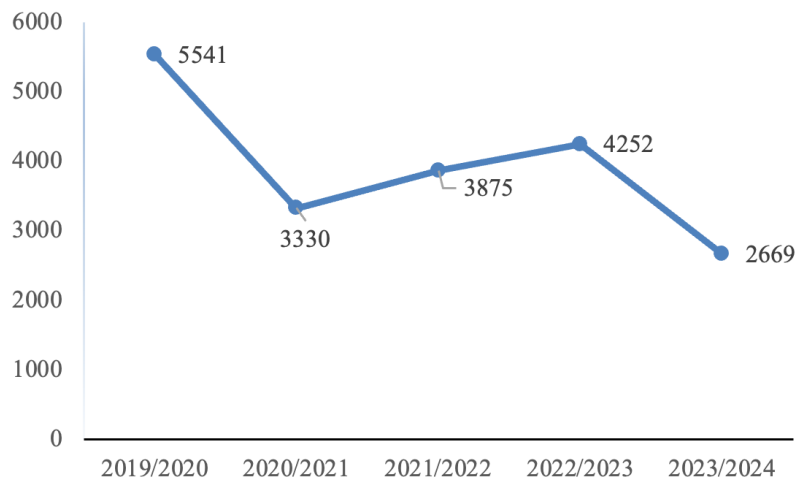
**Keywords:** perceptions of education costs, digital marketing, purchase decision

## INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Research, Technology, and Higher Education aims to decrease the number of private universities, as many are deemed to lack adequate performance and standards. One proposed solution is merging institutions of the same type (Prodjomaroeto & Muhyidin, 2020). This initiative has been established as a concrete policy, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of numerous private universities, highlighting the need to ensure their financial stability, and have stronger infrastructure. Recorded from 2015 to 2020, the merger resulted in 179 PTS out of 458 PTS targeted by the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kasih, 2021). As a result of this policy, the existence of each private university in Indonesia struggles to be the best. One of them is by increasing the decision to choose prospective new students, including the National University (UNAS). UNAS strives to always have a place in society as a trusted and

quality educational institution. As a current condition, UNAS has succeeded in obtaining several important achievements at the national and international levels. As one manifestation of the impact of these efforts, among others, UNAS has active students in the academic year 2023/2024 odd period of 10,498 students. The following is data on the number of new UNAS students in the last 5 years:

**Figure 1**  
*Number of UNAS Freshmen in the Last 5 Years*



Source: <https://pddikti.kemdikbud.go.id/>

Based on Figure 1, it can be seen that the number of new students at UNAS has fluctuated. Even in the 2020/2021 academic year experienced a decline. Then it managed to increase again in 2021/2022, but until 2022/2023 it has not managed to return to its original position in 2019/2020, even experiencing a decline again in 2023/2024. This means that there is a problem with the interest of new students at UNAS, namely how to increase the number of new students so that UNAS is able to survive in the competition in the world of education and create a sustainable quality of education. In general, there are many factors behind purchasing decisions, which in this case are decisions to determine the choice of universities and study programs. Various factors considered in choosing a college include product differentiation factors, price (perceived cost of education), and digital marketing.

**Table 1**  
*Empirical gaps*

<b>Description</b>	<b>Affected (Significant)</b>	<b>Not Affected (Not Significant)</b>
Product differentiation on purchasing decisions	Vinny and Suhardi (2020); Saeful Anwar and Siswanto (2020); Febriyanti et al. (2024); Ayes et al. (2024)	Sholeh et al. (2018); Sabrina et al. (2019)
Perception of tuition fees on purchasing decisions	Hakim and Saragih (2019); Anggraeni and Soliha (2020); Sengetang et al. (2019)	Sukmawati and Setiawati (2021); Setyarko (2016); Katili et al. (2018); Sari et al. (2018)
Digital Marketing on purchasing decisions	Ma'ruf et al. (2024); Putra and Telagawathi (2024); Syah et al. (2024)	Listiana and Zulfahmi (2023); Prabowo and Harsoyo (2023)

Based on the findings of previous research on the relationship between product differentiation, perceived tuition fees, and digital marketing on purchasing decisions, some state that the relationship is significant, but some say it is not significant, so it can be concluded that in purchasing decision research there is a research gap in the form of an empirical gap, namely the inconsistent relationship between these variables which is a research gap (see Table 1).

Therefore, this study adds competitive advantage variables as intervening variables to close this gap. As stated by (Wu & Zumbo, 2008) that the solution to inconsistent research is to provide intervening variables. Competitive advantage is anticipated to influence the decision to choose, and can also be influenced Through product differentiation, perceived tuition fees, and digital marketing, the competitive advantage variable serves as an intervening variable in this study, mediating the relationship between these factors and the decision-making process of choosing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Theory of Consumer Behavior**

According to Mowen and Minor (2002), consumer behavior explains the process by which consumers make decisions on a product, starting from receiving, buying, using, and determining what goods and/or services to use. From the definition of consumer behavior, it can be concluded that consumer behavior includes actions taken by consumers, starting from feelings of need and want, then trying to get the desired product, consuming the product and ending with post-purchase actions, namely, feeling satisfied or not.

### **Choosing Decision**

According to Kotler and Armstrong (2012), student decisions are analogous to purchasing decisions. The purchase decision is the final decision of consumers to buy a product or service, taking into account certain considerations. Consumer purchasing decisions reflect the extent to which marketers seek to promote a product to consumers. A purchasing decision is a process in which consumers identify specific products or brands, assess how effectively each alternative addresses their needs, and ultimately decide on a purchase (Tjiptono, 2020).

### **Competitive Advantage**

Competitive advantage refers to a company's ability to outperform its competitors by offering lower prices or delivering greater benefits that justify higher prices, ultimately providing more value to consumers (Armstrong & Kotler, 2005). According to David (2021), "Competitive advantage lies at the core of a company's performance in competitive markets. It fundamentally stems from the value or benefits a company creates for its buyers. By successfully implementing one of the three generic strategies, a company can achieve a competitive advantage

### **Product Differentiation**

According to Sahetapy (2013), product differentiation is the activity of modifying products to be attractive. This product differentiation usually only changes a few product characteristics, including packaging and promotional themes without changing the physical specifications of the product even though it is necessary. Meanwhile, according

to Rochmah (2014), product differentiation is an effort to produce similar goods but differentiated in packaging, quality, brand, or color. According to (Johari & Supriyono, 2022) product differentiation is the activity of modifying products to make them more attractive.

### **Perception of Tuition Fees**

Education costing is a social inclusion approach that involves building personal capacity and financial resources to meet one's potential economic and participation needs. Costs, in this context, encompass a wide range of expenditures associated with providing education, including monetary expenses, goods, and labor contributions.

### **Digital Marketing**

Digital Marketing, according to Dewi et al. (2022) is a great opportunity for a company or organization to be known by potential customers. The marketing process that previously still used traditional methods such as newspaper print media has transitioned into the digital era through social media, advertising, and other platforms that utilize advances in internet technology. Where companies and organizations adapt technology to communicate, market and deliver marketing messages to potential customers. Widhi Aningrum and Achmad (2024) argue that by utilizing digital marketing, marketing will be much easier because there are no time limitations and can target all levels of society.

### **Differentiation of Educational Programs and Student Decisions in Choosing a University**

Someone before deciding on a purchase will look for information first, including about the product. Likewise with prospective students who seek information in advance regarding the programs offered by the university. The university creates a unique program that is perceived by prospective students as a distinctive and different program through the differentiation characteristics presented. This can attract the attention of prospective students and parents and choose the university. This means that the more unique the differentiation of education programs offered by the university, the higher the confidence of students to decide to choose the university. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior and the results of research by Vinny and Suhardi (2020); Saeful Anwar and Siswanto (2020); Febriyanti et al. (2024); Ayes et al. (2024) that the differentiation of education programs has a positive and significant effect on choosing decisions.

### **Perceived Tuition Fees and Student Decisions in Choosing a University**

Someone before deciding on a purchase will look for information first, including about the price. The price is not only seen from the nominal, but also what the benefits of the product are in accordance with the nominal he paid or not. Whether or not the price is appropriate will be a consideration for consumers in making choices. Likewise with the cost of education. Prices will influence students in making University selection decisions because students consider prices based on affordability, price compatibility with quality, and compatibility with service benefits. Price is a factor that can encourage students to make University selection decisions. This means that the higher the prospective student's perception of the cost of education, the higher the student's confidence in deciding to choose the university. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior and the results of research support (Hakim & Saragih, 2019),

(Anggraeni & Soliha, 2020), and (Senggetang et al., 2019) that perceived education costs have a positive and significant effect on selection decisions.

### **Digital Marketing and Student's Decision to Choose a University**

Someone before deciding on a purchase will first seek information through various sources and media. The more positive information obtained by prospective students and parents will be considered by consumers in making choices. Digital marketing is a strategy designed to increase awareness and understanding of university services. It involves leveraging online platforms such as social media and Google searches, supported by consistent SEO (search engine optimization), content creation, and marketing efforts. These components work together as part of a continuous marketing process, which contributes to sustained results, such as an increase in new student enrollments. The more extensively a university utilizes digital marketing, the greater the confidence students exhibit in choosing that institution. This aligns with consumer behavior theory and is supported by research findings from Ma'ruf et al. (2024); Putra and Telagawathi (2024); Syah et al. (2024), which indicate that digital marketing has a positive and significant impact selection decisions.

### **Competitive Advantage and Student Decisions in Choosing a University**

To design market offerings that deliver more value than competitors trying to win the same market, companies must understand customers and develop strong relationships with customers. This offering is also called competitive advantage (Kotler, 2010), where the company has an advantage over competitors. Meanwhile, purchasing decisions according to Tjiptono (2020), a process where consumers recognize their problems, seek information about certain products or brands and evaluate how well each of these alternatives can solve their problems, which then leads to a purchase decision. This means that the higher the value of competitive advantages owned by the University, the higher the confidence of students deciding to choose the University. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior and the results of research supporting (Lauras & Natalia Siringo Ringo, 2017; Hastuti et al., 2023) that competitive advantage has a positive and significant effect on selection decisions.

### **Education Program Differentiation and Competitive Advantage**

Someone before deciding on a purchase will look for information first, including about the product. Likewise with prospective students who seek information in advance regarding the programs offered by the university. The university creates a unique program that is perceived by prospective students as a distinctive and different program through the differentiation characteristics presented. This is to be a competitive advantage because it has attracted the attention of prospective students, strengthened its position in the market competition, and is able to withstand competitive pressures. This means that the more unique the differentiation of educational programs offered by the university, the higher the University's competitive advantage. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior and the results of research by Wulandari and Murniawaty (2019); Nurrohmah et al. (2022); Tampi (2015); Misi (2021) that differentiation of educational programs has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage.

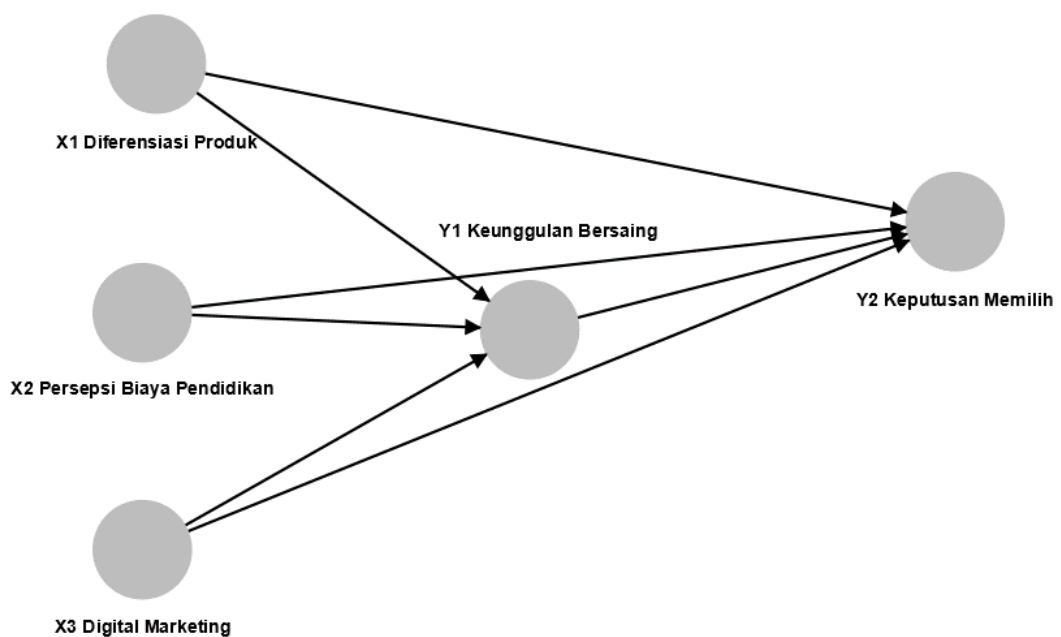
### Perceived Tuition Fees and Competitive Advantage

The perception of price or cost at the University is also identified as a factor that influences the competitiveness of the University. Because the cost of education that is appropriate and feasible with the educational service program provided is the basis and reference for parents of students and prospective students to determine the choice of university. The cost factor or unit cost is a calculation of the nominal amount of all cost requirements required for one year of the University's tridharma activities. The total cost is the value of money that stakeholders convert in the form of the value of the advantages they receive or the fees charged for educational products or other services provided by universities (Sunarto, 2010). This means that the better the prospective students' perception of the cost of university education, the higher the University's competitive advantage. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior and the results of research supporting (Yucha & Cahyani, 2022; Aulia, 2022; Nursyamsi et al., 2024; Lenggogeni & Tae Ferdinand, 2016; Gong et al., 2019) that perceived tuition fees have a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage.

### Digital Marketing and Competitive Advantage

Universities are required to always innovate both in internal university affairs and to increase competitive advantage. One innovation in marketing that can be done is by utilizing technology in the form of digital marketing. By using digital marketing, the transaction process is easier and cheaper because the communication media only costs credit to support communication. Thus, digital marketing can be an added value for universities in conducting promotions because it makes it easier for prospective students to find information. This means that the higher the University promotes through digital marketing, the higher the University's competitive advantage. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior and the results of research by Swastuti (2020); Wardhana (2015) that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage. The framework is provided in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**  
*Analysis Framework*



Based on the analytical framework, the hypotheses proposed in this study are as follows:

1. Differentiation of education programs has a positive and significant effect on students' decisions to choose National University.
2. Perceptions of tuition fees have a positive and significant effect on students' decisions to choose National University.
3. Digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on students' decisions to choose National University.
4. Competitive advantage has a positive and significant effect on students' decisions to choose National University.
5. Differentiation of education programs has a positive and significant effect on the competitive advantage of National University.
6. Perceptions of tuition fees have a positive and significant effect on the competitive advantage of National University.
7. Digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on the competitive advantage of National University.
8. Differentiation of education programs has a positive and significant effect on students' decisions to choose National University through competitive advantage.
9. Perceptions of tuition fees have a positive and significant effect on students' decisions to choose National University through competitive advantage.
10. Digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on students' decisions to choose National University through competitive advantage.

## **METHOD**

The data collection technique employed in this study was a questionnaire. According to Ferdinand (2020), a questionnaire is a data collection method consisting of a series of questions or written statements presented to respondents to obtain their answers. This study utilized a Likert scale and distributed the questionnaire via Google Forms. The sampling method applied in this research was probability sampling, as described by Ferdinand (2020), which ensures equal chances for each member of the population to be selected as part of the sample. Specifically, the research adopted the stratified random sampling technique, which, according to Ferdinand (2020), involves dividing the population into smaller groups or strata based on specific characteristics. The total population in this study was 8.063 individuals. Using the Slovin formula, the sample size was determined to be 367 respondents. Proportional sampling was used to ensure that the sample size for each study program corresponded to the population proportion within each program. This research employed two analytical methods: descriptive analysis and inferential analysis. The primary analytical tool was Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), conducted using SmartPLS software.

## **RESULT**

### **Outer Model Test (Measurement Model)**

All variables pass the validity test because the Loading factor value  $> 0.7$ , Average Value, with the Cross-loading test it can be seen that the loading value of the indicator to the measured construct is greater than the loading to other constructs, with the Fornell-Larcker Criterion test it can be seen that the AVE square root value of each construct is greater than its correlation with other constructs, and the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio

(HTMT) value  $< 0.9$ . All variables passed the reliability test because the Cronbach's Alpha value of all variables  $> 0.7$  and the Composite Reliability value of all variables  $> 0.7$ .

## 2. Inner Model (Model Structural)

The R-squared ( $R^2$ ) test shows that the Y1 equation model has a strong predictive ability while the Y2 equation model has a moderate predictive ability. The F-squared ( $F^2$ ) test shows that the Y1 equation model has a medium predictor effect while the Y2 equation model has a small predictor effect. The GOF test shows that this research model has strong predictive ability. This study also has a fit model because the Square Residual (SRMR) value  $< 0.08$ , the Normed Fit Index (NFI) value  $> 0.9$ , and the Exact fit criteria ( $d\_ULS$  and  $d\_G$ )  $> 0.05$ .

### Direct Effect Test

Of the 7 hypotheses proposed, only four hypotheses were accepted. Directly, the variables that influence the decision to choose are only competitive advantage, while directly the variables that influence competitive advantage directly are differentiation of educational programs and digital marketing. This can be seen from the statistical t value  $> 1.96$  and p value  $< 0.05$  (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Path Analysis Results*

Effect	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Value
Differentiation of Education Programs → Choosing Decision	0.101	1.445	0.074
Perception of tuition fees → Choosing Decision	0.057	1.143	0.127
Digital Marketing → Choosing Decision	0.118	1.499	0.067
Differentiation of Education Programs → Competitive Advantage	0.496	9.379	0.000
Perception of tuition fees → Competitive Advantage	0.032	0.755	0.225
Digital Marketing → Competitive Advantage	0.431	7.904	0.000
Competitive Advantage → Choosing Decision	0.631	6.752	0.000

### Mediation Test

Of the 3 hypotheses proposed, only 2 hypotheses were accepted. Competitive advantage is able to mediate the relationship between differentiation of educational programs and digital marketing on the decision to choose a college. This can be seen from the value of t Statistics  $> 1.96$  and p value  $< 0.05$ .

**Table 3**  
*Indirect Effect*

Indirect Effect	Original Sample (O)	T Statistics	P Value
Differentiation of Education Programs → Competitive Advantage → Choosing Decision	0.313	6.192	0.000
Perception of tuition fees → Competitive Advantage → Choosing Decision	0.020	0.745	0.228
Digital Marketing → Competitive Advantage → Choosing Decision	0.272	4.891	0.000

## DISCUSSION

The results showed that the Differentiation of Education Programs had no effect on the decision to choose a college, Differentiation of Education Programs had a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage, competitive advantage had a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a college, and competitive advantage was able to mediate the relationship between differentiation of education programs to the decision to choose. This effect is called Indirect-only Mediation. This means that in attracting decisions to choose a university by students, the differentiation of educational programs offered by study programs or universities must be a competitive advantage when compared to similar study programs from other universities. The university creates a unique program that is perceived by prospective students as a distinctive and different program through the differentiation characteristics presented. This is to be a competitive advantage because it has attracted the attention of prospective students, strengthens the position in market competition, and is able to withstand competitive pressures. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior and the results of research by Wulandari and Murniawaty (2019) Nurrohmah et al. (2022); Tampi (2015); Misi (2021) that differentiation of educational programs has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage and (Lauras & Ringo, 2017; Hastuti et al., 2023) that competitive advantage has a positive and significant effect on selection decisions.

The results indicated that perceived tuition fees did not have an impact on the decision to choose a college, nor did it affect the competitive advantage. However, competitive advantage was found to have a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a college. Additionally, competitive advantage was unable to mediate the relationship between perceived tuition fees and the decision to choose a college tuition fees on the decision to choose. This means that the perception of tuition fees is not a factor that is considered an advantage by prospective students and is not the main factor for students in choosing a college. These findings suggest that in the context of college selection, competitive advantages built on non-financial factors play a more important role than perceived tuition fees. This emphasizes the importance for colleges to focus on building and communicating the college's unique value to prospective students. This supports the results of research according to Dewi and Falah (2022) that perceived tuition fees have no effect on competitive advantage and according to Sukmawati and Setiawati (2021); Setyarko (2016); Katili et al. (2018); Sari et al. (2018) that perceived tuition fees have no effect on the decision to choose a college.

The results revealed that digital marketing did not have an effect on the decision to choose a college. However, digital marketing had a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage. Furthermore, competitive advantage was found to have a positive and significant effect on the decision to choose a college, and it was able to mediate the relationship between digital marketing and the decision to choose a college Digital Marketing and the decision to choose. This effect is called Indirect-only Mediation. This means that in attracting decisions to choose universities by students, the Digital Marketing Strategy carried out by universities must be a competitive advantage when compared to promotions through digital marketing carried out by other universities. Digital marketing not only increases a university's visibility, but also enables a more personalized and informative approach in reaching out to prospective students. To win the competition, universities need to integrate these strategies into a holistic approach that reflects their unique identity and strengths. The key to success is consistency, authenticity

and the ability to adapt quickly to changing preferences and technology. Successful universities will blend digital innovation with traditional educational values, creating an engaging and meaningful experience for prospective students in this digital age. This is in line with the theory of consumer behavior, along with research findings by Swastuti (2020); Wardhana (2015), suggests that digital marketing has a positive and significant effect on competitive advantage. Additionally, studies by Lauras and Ringo (2017); Hastuti et al. (2023) indicate that competitive advantage has a positive and significant effect on selection decisions.

## CONCLUSION

Differentiation of education programs, tuition fees and digital marketing perceptions of education costs and students' decisions to choose UNAS. The findings indicate that while competitive advantage has a positive and significant influence on the decision to choose UNAS, neither the differentiation of education programs nor digital marketing directly affects the decision. Both differentiation of education programs and digital marketing significantly impact competitive advantage. However, the perception of education costs does not influence competitive advantage. Competitive advantage is shown to effectively mediate the relationship between differentiation of educational programs, digital marketing, and students' decisions to choose UNAS perceived tuition fees on students' decisions to choose UNAS.

### Implication

In attracting prospective students to choose National universities, National Universities must have a competitive advantage over other Universities. Universities need to focus on building and communicating their competitive advantage, rather than competing solely on cost. The college's marketing strategy should emphasize on the added value and uniqueness offered, not just on the financial aspects. While cost remains relevant, colleges need to integrate it into a broader value proposition, rather than as a separate factor. To win the competition in education, an effective digital marketing strategy should focus on innovation, personalization, and meaningful engagement. Successful universities will blend digital innovation with traditional educational values, creating an engaging and meaningful experience for prospective students in this digital age. With the right differentiation strategy, universities can stand out among competitors and increase their appeal to prospective students, ultimately strengthening the university's position in the higher education competition. Educational Program Strategies include unique study programs, integrated curriculum, specialization, modern facilities, interdisciplinary programs, digital approach, etc.

### Limitation and Future Direction

It is recommended for further researchers to be able to add other factors that influence voting decisions to add other intervening variables and also moderating variables to see what factors can strengthen and weaken student voting decisions.

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