



COMPETITIVE STRATEGIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: SCALE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *Leveraging on resource based-view theory, this paper shows strategies adopted in higher education to remain competitive. Using scale development method, 60 questionnaires as survey instrument was distributed and 58 respondents completed and returned. The result of socio-economic demographic variables, factor analysis and validity using the statistical packages for social science. Five dimensions were adopted: cost leadership strategy, service differentiation strategy, cost focus strategy, integration strategy and diversification strategy. The validity and reliability result as well as managerial implication, limitation and future research were discussed.*

Keywords: *Competitive strategies, Cost leadership, Focus strategy, Differentiation, Higher Education Institutions*

1. INTRODUCTION

Every organization strives to remain relevance in its industries or environment. Strategy is usually long term which is geared towards the efforts of the organization to remain competitive in line with Porter's generic strategies which involves cost leadership, differentiation, developing unique products or services for different customers and focus (Grant 2002). Competitive strategy ensures an increase profitability and sustainability in an organization over its competitors. Business organizations needs to identify its competitors and develop strategies to win its competitors. As stated by Harvard Business School Professor

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Porter on competitive advantage, “just because a company is the market leader now, does not mean it will be forever”. This is to say that a company must define its objective, goals and strategies to be relevant in business. It is the search for a favorable position in an industry; the fundamental arena in which competition occurs (Porter 1996). In recent times higher education has expected growth and competition among private universities have increased (Tam 2007). Covenant University being one of the leading private universities in Nigeria is the case study of this research. In this study the researcher focuses on various competitive strategies using Porter’s theory of competitive advantage.

As individuals find different or unique ways of achieving a personal goal so are organizations. Porter, (1996) states that competitive strategy is about being different. This involves choosing a different way of doing things to achieve a goal and add value to oneself or organization. The number of private universities in Nigeria is fast rising so is competition. Competition for relevance and survival serves as a guiding force for existence. Also, development and progress of civilization has made competition complex. However, the core competence of the organization is reflected in its commercial activities and the most competent is the winner having the large market share and leading in the industry. The organization is faced with uncertainty in its environment and needs to ensure that its resources and capabilities are enough to achieve its objectives (Podder and Gadhawe 2007).

Some researchers have carried out studies which focused on the conceptual model of research and the empirical was neglected. This constitutes to major in this research. Private universities are faced with the challenge of scarce resources, this has led to budgeting for additional fund to enhance scarce resources (Hardy 2004). As every business is faced with competition by competitors in the industry so is the environment of higher education and competition must be strategic to attract new students and maintain the existing ones (Maring et al, 2006). Having known that higher institution operates in a complex environment, it is important that the management of the institution to develop strategies that would enable its organization to compete and remain relevance in the industry.

A competitive strategy gives an organization a competitive advantage over its competitors and guarantees its sustainability in the market. In other words, a firm without an appropriate strategy risks its relevance and existence. Organizations need strategies to enable them to overcome the competitive nature of its environment (Mwenda 2007). Competitive strategy in higher institution gives the higher education to have edge over its counterparts. This present study focuses on the resource-based view theory to determinants of competitive strategy and advantage in Covenant

University. The resource-based view states that an organization can achieved competitiveness and remain relevance in its industry by delivering high quality goods or services innovatively. This theory focused on identifying strategically, resources and using those resources to achieve competitive advantage against an organization's rivalry (Barney 1991). Research carried out on competitive strategy has indicated the new entrant, the competition among rivalry and pressure from substitute products or service are factors that led to competitive strategies (Porter 1996, Carnillus 1997, Hutzchenreuter and Israel 2009).

The research-based view theory is centered on three major categories, namely; the human capital, financial capital, physical and organizational capital. These are very essential resources in the organization that drives organizations or institutions to achieve competitive advantage over its competitors in the industry (Barney, 1991). This study involves the significant of all these resources mentioned and how the institution has strategically remained competitive in terms of differentiating its cost and service delivery. In the study of competitive strategy, some research has shown that organizational structure and organizational resources and capabilities are important factors in organizational performance (Hutzschenreuter & Israel, 2009).

This study has contributed to the research-based theory in the sense that the institution has its unique capabilities and resources that shaped the foundation for its strategy. A firm's performance is based on its unique capabilities and resources than its structural characteristics in the industry (Barney 1991). However, management are interested in growth and sustainability which can be achieved through the competitive strategy adopted. In addition, research-based view theory was adopted to find out how Covenant University been one of the leading private university in Nigeria gained competitive advantage through innovative delivery of value for money services to its students and stakeholders.

The study is structured in into different parts. We would further propose that the resource-based view of an organization can also be best used in higher institution setting including summaries on the literature. In addition, we stated the measures of the concept, methodology which is based on qualitative and quantitative studies and our results. Lastly conclusion was drawn from our findings which will give directions for more detailed research in future.

2. CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Resource base view theory of competitive strategy

The resource-based view focuses on how strategic organization identifies its resources and use their resources to develop a sustainable competitive advantage over its rivalry in the industry (Barney 1991). One cannot carry out a study in competitive strategy without mentioning Porter's competitive advantage as a strategy for an organization to remain relevance in its industry, which include cost leadership, market focus, differentiation, integration and diversification strategy. Firms including higher educational institutions must compete for the limited resources that are needed for its sustainability (Malburg 2000).

In this study, resource-based theory view on competitive strategy include the Porter's generic strategy also known as cost leadership (Malbury 2000). This strategy is said to focus on having competitive by giving the lowest cost in the industry (Porter, 1996; Cross 1999). An organization must have a large market share in other to have a large market share (Hyatt 2001). The various ways to achieve the cost leadership include economies of scale, technology, product or service design, access to raw materials, input cost, mass distribution and capacity utilization of resources (Malburg, 2000). Market focus is based on selection of market niche where clients have preference distinctively (Stone 1995)

Integration could be horizontal or vertical. Horizontal integration is for long term strategy which is focused on growth through the acquisition of firms in the same industry (Pearce & Robinson, 2000). However, vertical integration involves the expansion of the firm's services, products and other activities (Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, 2005). In service organization, product differentiation is a basic way of differentiating the organization's offer from its rivalry (Porter, 2001).

2.2 Competitive strategy

Strategic management deals with the analyses, decisions and cations taken by an organization to have and maintain competitive advantage over its rivalry (Dess, Lumpkin, & Eisner, 2008). However, it is important to note that competition is a complex phenomenon. Management of every organization make strategic decisions that provides an edge or advantage over competitor. Research has shown that the different literature on this subject matter. In higher institution, teachers' power influences the competitiveness in a meaningful way is influenced by teachers or the institution service providers (Mintberg & Rose, 2003). In addition,

the application of Porter's model requires the adaptations to enable usefulness in the construction of competitive strategies for higher institution (Michael, 2005).

Strategy is a firm's long-term plan to create a competitive advantage over its competitors (Pearce & Robinson, 2000). Strategy as stated by Ansoff & Mc Donnell (1990) is a set of decision creating rules for the guidance of organizational behavior. The uniqueness of a firm lies on its unique capabilities and resources (Barney 1991). The cost leadership includes having cost attached to products or services to penetrate the market. Differentiation strategies deals with giving services that differentiates an organization from its competitor. cost focus strategy involves creating a niche in the market (Porter 2001).

3. METHOD

This methodology section shows the process the researcher adopted in carrying out the research on competitive strategy in higher institution using Covenant University as the case study.

3.1 Item generation and content validity

3.1.1 Study 1

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. Sixty (60) questionnaire was distributed and fifty-eight (58) was completed and returned. The population in which this research was carried out involved the students and staff of the university. In other words, primary data was used for this research is the distribution of questionnaire targeted population. A research population is referred to as the total collection of elements which a researcher uses to make gather information (Cooper & Schindler 2000). The respondents include the people with different personal data including education qualification and experiences. However, their responses were strictly confidential. The data gathered were properly examined making use of descriptive statistics known as mean and standard deviation. Part of the challenges the researcher encountered during the distribution of the survey instrument include some reluctant attitude on respondents.

The researcher distributed questionnaire to different respondents, thus, this method allows investigation and insight into complex problems. This method is usually required when undergoing study that requires major investigation. Questionnaire is highly valued in social sciences, especially studies in respect to education (Gulsecen & Kubat, 2006). There has been limitation in some research

methods which some scholars argued about lack of in-depth explanations of the subject matter. The use of quantitative and qualitative data has helped to explain the method and result of a phenomenon during investigation and analysis (Tellis, 1997). The questionnaires were administered to students and staff of the university, some were returned immediately while other were collected by the researcher from respondents later.

Qualitative collection of data is supported by interpretation. Collection of data requires detailed information as qualitative evidence are needed, however, there exist no difference and analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Qualitative data analysis usually results to more useful outcomes. It includes structing of raw data, organizing and writing them into graphs and tables. This enables the researcher the efforts for identification and comparison of data to base the study (Denscombe, 2010). Thematic analysis gives the chance of coding and categorizing data into themes, in addition, processed data can be classified in line with its relationship and variations (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Respondents stated the cost leadership strategy they perceived the university adopted. Answers were also provided by respondents on the service differentiation strategy, cost focus strategy, integration strategy and diversification strategy. These respondents include both the senior and junior staff of the university and the post graduate student of the university. Respondents perceived that research and development capability are central to competitive advantage. Majority of the respondents agreed that the university offers wide range of differentiated supplementary services than its competitors such as sports centers, modern internet services as well as state of the art library. As shown below in table 1 which indicate the dimension to competitive strategy.

This stage focuses on item generation which involves scale as developed by Simon (2013) and Muiagi (2015). The questionnaire was divided into two sections which include the demography and different strategies the university may have adopted to remain relevance in its industry. Questionnaire is one of the methods used in research that allows respondents to answer questions provided. The Likert type of questionnaire ranging from SD – strongly agreed, A – agreed, U – undecided, SD – strongly disagree and D – disagree was the structure. The distribution of survey instrument was among the post graduate (PG) students which include MSc, MBA and PhD, and staff of covenant university.

Table 1 Dimension of competitive strategy

Competitive strategy dimension	Examples from the questionnaire
Cost leadership strategy	The university set its school fees slightly lower than that of other private universities.
Service differentiation strategy	The university committed to place students after graduation.
Cost focus strategy	The university unique services with more effective equipment maintenance and replacement policies.
Integration strategy	The university use horizontal integration (such as establishing other university to ease competition).
Diversification strategy	The university is into other businesses.

3.2 Item purification

3.2.1 Study 2

Data gotten from the population was obtained by the post graduate students and staff of the university. The study focused on the competitive strategies adopted by the university. Questionnaire was designed, printed and circulated to various respondents. The survey instrument size was 60 in number and 58 was returned while the remaining two was misplaced by some respondents. The 58-sample size returned were coded and validated. While the importance of using random sampling was to have enough size of extreme statistical strength (Suellen, Geoffery, Janet & Jilian, 2011).

The population includes both male and female between the age of 18 to 50 and above. The marital status of the respondents is single and married which include 63% and 36% respectively. The total of 27 males represented 46% and 31 females represented 53% participated in the study. 34% of respondents had BSc degree. 39% of respondents had MSc. 6% had MBA while 19% of the respondent had PhD. The respondents experience in the university, 53% had between 1 – 4yrs experience, 43% had between 5 – 10yrs experience while 3% had between 11 – 15yrs experience as shown in table 2.

Table 2 Socio- economic demographic variables.

INDICATOR	MALE (N=27)	FEMALE (N=31)	18-20 (N=21)	25-30 (N=19)	31-40 (N=10)	41-50 (N=7)	ABOVE 50 (N=1)
CLS	3.0556	3.1855	3.1905	3.1316	3.1750	3.0714	1.5000
SDC	3.9222	4.1778	4.0429	4.0760	3.9767	4.2286	3.7000
CFS	3.5309	3.7258	3.6667	3.6491	3.6667	3.4048	4.0000
IS	3.9630	3.9355	3.7619	4.1404	3.9333	4.0952	3.3333
DS	3.6420	3.9035	3.6667	3.8772	3.8000	3.9048	3.3333
TOTAL- $\sum f/\text{No. of indicators}$	3.62274	3.78562	3.66574	3.77486	3.71034	3.74096	3.17332

INDICATORS	SINGLE (N=37)	MARRIED (N=21)	DIVORCED (N=0)	BSC (N=20)	MSC (N=23)	MBA (N=4)	PHD (N=11)	1- 4 Y R S (N=31)	5- 10 Y RS (N=25)
CLS	3.0878	3.1905	-	3.0500	3.2500	2.6875	3.1591	2.8790	3.4800
SDC	4.0282	4.1127	-	3.8483	4.3193	3.7500	4.0091	3.9778	4.1680
CFS	3.5946	3.7063	-	3.3000	3.9058	3.9167	3.5758	3.5161	3.8733
IS	3.9550	3.9365	-	3.8333	4.0000	3.9167	4.0606	3.8172	4.0533
DS	3.7658	3.8095	-	3.7500	3.7971	4.0833	3.6970	3.6559	3.9867
TOTAL- $\sum f/\text{No. of indicators}$	3.68628	3.7511	0	3.55632	3.85444	3.67084	3.70032	3.5692	3.91226

INDICATOR	11-15YRS (N=2)	16-20YRS (N=0)	ABOVE 21YRS (N=0)	CBSS (N=31)	CST (N=16)	COE (N=10)	OTHERS (N=1)
CLS	2.5000	-	-	2.9194	3.3906	3.3000	3.5000
SDC	3.9500	-	-	4.0885	4.1042	3.9700	3.3000
CFS	2.5000	-	-	3.6613	3.6667	3.6000	2.6667
IS	4.6667	-	-	4.0430	3.8333	3.8667	3.6667
DS	3.1667	-	-	3.8925	3.6667	3.6667	3.3333
TOTAL- $\sum f/\text{No. of indicators}$	3.35668	0	0	3.72094	3.7323	3.68068	3.29334

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Item reduction and exploratory factor analysis

To confirm the validity of competitive strategy scale, a sequence of exploratory and confirmatory analysis was conducted (Bearden, Hardesty & Rose, 2001). All the survey instruments were properly checked to identify and test for violation of the hypothesis of multivariate analysis. The data was computed using

the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 25) including the principle exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Scale analyses was computed and the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin shown appropriately.

The exploratory factor was developed which the researcher used main component analysis and obli-min rotation as there was need to suggest the existence of interrelated dimension. However, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olki Measure of sampling Adequacy was 0.696 indicating that factor analysis was appropriate. Second process was deployed to disregard low loading and high cross items (Hair et al., 2006) which brought about the retention of 23 items as shown in table 3. The last factor analysis includes five components with eigenvalues more than one, that together showed 67% of the total variance.

The first-dimension deals with the cost leadership strategy (CLS) which focuses on how the university set its fees to remain competitive in its industry. The second factor includes service differentiation (SD) strategy which examines wide range of differentiated service the university offers. The third dimension states the cost focus strategy (CFS), the fourth deals with integration strategy (IS) while the fifth dimension examines the diversification strategy (DS) the university adopt. In addition, Cronbach's alpha for the five dimensions were 0.761, 0.710, 0.595, 0.426 and 0.099 respectively. Cost leadership and service differentiation strategies were above the 0.70 limit endorsed (Hair et al., 2006) indicating the five dimensions are unpredictable.

Table 3 Factor analysis

Scale items	Factor loadings
<i>Cost leadership strategy (CLS)</i>	
Item 7 The university set its school fees slightly lower than that of other private universities. (CLS)	0.473
Item8 The university cost minimization is more Important than high quality services. (CLS)	0.480
Item 10 The university's charges lower late registration fees than other private university. (CLS)	0.504
Item 11 The university concentrate on provision of unique program different from its competitors. (SD)	0.437
Item 12 The university differentiates its products/services on customer value proposition. (SD)	0.604
Item 13 The university offers a wide range of differentiated courses than its competitors. (SD)	0.541
Item 14 The university offers wide range of differentiated supplementary services than its competitors such as sports centers, modern internet services as well as state of the art library. (SD)	0.469
Item 15 The university committed to place students after graduation. (SD)	0.445

Scale items	Factor loadings
Item 17 The university has a peculiar way of monitoring her students. (SD)	0.524
Item 18 The university uses online registration for both new and existing students. (SD)	0.435
Item 19 The university is unique by publishing results before a new academic semester or session. (SD)	0.485
Item 20 The university offers e – learning. (SD)	0.490
Item 21 The university unique services with more effective equipment maintenance and replacement policies. (CFS)	0.604
Item 22 The university offers unique services and maintains competitive pricing. (CFS)	0.695
Item 23 The university concentrates on one key areas of expertise or service. (CFS)	0.451
Item 25 The university use horizontal integration (such as establishing other university to ease competition). (IS)	0.502
Item 27 The university use market development (such as opening new campuses in new cities within and outside the country. (DS)	0.277
Item 29 The university emphasis coordination amongst its different services/program. (DS)	0.461
<i>Service differentiation (SDC)</i>	
Item 16 The university is committed to ensure high discipline but freedom and responsibility. (SD)	0.474
Item 24 Use vertical integration (such as acquiring or establishing of high schools) (IS)	0.449
<i>Cost focus strategy (CFS)</i>	
Item 26 Research and development capability are central to competitive advantage (IS)	0.399
Item 28 The university is into other businesses. (DS)	0.516
<i>Integration strategy (IS)</i>	
Item 9 The university provides lower accommodation fees than other private university. (CLS)	0.482

Note: Initial classification of items: CLS = cost leadership strategy, SD= service differentiation, CFS = cost focus strategy, IS = integration strategy, DS = diversification strategy.

The factor analysis shows the cost leadership strategy (CLS) the university set its school fees slightly lower than other private universities. The (CLS) also indicated how the university provides lower accommodation fees than other private university. The university cost minimization is more Important than high quality services. Cronbach's alpha shows 0.761 which indicates that (CLS) exceeds the 0.70 limit endorsed.

The second factor which considers the service differentiation strategy (SD) from the survey instrument focuses on how the university differentiates its products/services on customer value proposition. The university offers wide range of differentiated supplementary services than its competitors such as sports centers,

modern internet services as well as state of the art library. However, the Cronbach's alpha shows 0.710 stating that service differentiation exceeds the 0.70 limit.

The third dimension considers the cost focus strategy (CFS) from the questionnaire, which allow the respondents to give opinion on how the university unique services with more effective equipment maintenance and replacement policies. The Cronbach's alpha shows 0.595 which is lower than the 0.70 limit endorsed. The fourth factor examines the integration strategy (IS) and the fifth dimension using Cronbach's alpha shows 0.426 and 0.099 respectively. These strategies were below the 0.70 limit endorsed.

4.2 Validity and Reliability

The validity and reliability result as shown in table 4 explains the relationship between the variables. The result of measuring a data or population is deemed reliable if one gets the outcome or result remains the same at all time (Ross, Hogaboam-Gray & Rolheiser, 2002).

The coefficient alpha was 0.60, 0.60 and 0.69 for variables under cost leadership dimension, 0.47 and 0.44 for variables under service differentiation dimension, 0.39 and 0.51 for variables under cost focus dimension while 0.48 for integration dimension. The outcome of the computation shows that inconsistency exist in each dimension as they are below the 0.7.

Table 4 Validity and reliability

Result of Validity and Reliability							
		Loading	Indicator	Error	Composite	Average	No. of
	Variables	> 0.7	Reliability	Variance	Reliability	< 0.5	Indicators
				< 0.5	> 0.8	< 0.5	
						0.4042	
Cost leadership strategy	Customer value	0.604	0.3648	0.6352	0.3648		1
	proposition	0.604	0.3648	0.6352	0.3648		1
	Unique services	0.695	0.4830	0.5170	0.4830		1
	Competitive pricing						
						0.2131	
Service Differentiation	High discipline	0.474	0.2247	0.7753	0.2247		1
	Vertical integration	0.449	0.2016	0.7984	0.2016		1

			Loading	Indicator	Error	Composite	Average	No. of
		Variables	> 0.7	Reliability	Variance	Reliability	< 0.5	Indicators
					< 0.5	> 0.8	0.2127	
Cost Strategy	Focus	Research and development	0.399	0.1592	0.8408	0.1592		1
		Other Businesses	0.516	0.2663	0.7337	0.2663		1
							0.2323	
Integration Strategy		lower accommodation fees	0.482	0.2323	0.7677	0.2323		1

All loadings are significant at $p < 0.0001$

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The research work creates numerous contributions to the theory and procedure using the multi-trait method and the scale development which is based on empirical validation. The research also lay its contributions to the resource-based view theory of competitive strategies, thus the study shown that the different literature on this subject matter. In higher institution, teachers' power influences the competitiveness in a meaningful way is influenced by teachers or the institution service providers (Mintberg & Rose, 2003).

Furthermore, the various ways to achieve the cost leadership include economies of scale, technology, product or service design, access to raw materials, input cost, mass distribution and capacity utilization of resources (Malburg, 2000). However, Covenant university being one the best universities in Nigeria has remained competitive and maintained relevance in its industry. The study shown that the university service differentiation strategy is peculiar and different from other private universities. The study carried out a detailed analysis of the survey instrument using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 25) including the principle exploratory factor analysis (EFA).

The questionnaire was structured and distributed to the population which includes the post graduate students and staff of the university. The *cost leadership strategy dimension* shows the how the university sets its school fees compare to other private universities. The *service differentiation dimension* shows how the university differentiates its products/services on customer value proposition, offer wide range of differentiated supplementary services than its competitors such as sports centers, modern internet services as well as the state-of-the-art library. The

cost focus strategy dimension reflects on the key areas of expertise or service. The *integration strategy dimension* reflects on the use of vertical integration (such as acquiring or establishing of high schools). The *diversification strategy dimension* reflects on whether the university is into other businesses.

The study shows that there are different strategies that an organization can adopt to remain relevant. These strategies would enable the university to achieve a competitive position in the higher institution industry. The findings were based on the respondent's answers to the questionnaires distributed, some people were reluctant to accept the questionnaire as they suggested their identity should not reflect. However, all information gotten was for research purposes and identity of respondents not required. A competitive strategy gives an organization a competitive advantage over its competitors and guarantees its sustainability in the market. In other words, a firm without an appropriate strategy risks its relevance and existence. Organizations need strategies to enable them to overcome the competitive nature of its environment (Mwenda 2007). Competitive strategy in higher institution gives the higher education to have edge over its counterparts.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

Inclusive, the form of results shows the competitive strategies of a higher institution. The factor analysis scale includes twenty-three items that has five dimensions thus an appropriate method to evaluate an organization competitive strategy. This study shows that strategies are useful to an organization that desires to succeed and have competitive advantage over its competitors. The university and its management should maintain a competitive strategy that its competitors will find difficult to imitate. For instance, differentiation strategy goes a long way to show the university concentrate on provision of unique program different from its competitors. Further, the scale shows real significance as it will enable management to understand the best strategy to adopt.

7. LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

From the findings of the study there exist few limitations. The survey instrument method used for the study was gotten from a source which may depend on respondent's point of view. The respondents were unwilling to answer the questions for fear revealing their identity by the researcher. However, the researcher assured respondents of treating all information strictly as confidential and for academic purposes. Secondly, the study was carried out putting into consideration

the post graduate and academic staff of the university not including the undergraduate and the non-academics staff. The questionnaire was not distributed to the office of the vice chancellor, registrar and dean of various colleges.

Finally, the research focused on covenant university, two or more private universities should be part of the future research to give room for more robust study. The limitations mentioned are recognized however, they have not affected the significance of the study, rather offer a foundation for future study. The researcher suggest that future study should investigate challenges that higher education face in adopting competitive strategies as these issues could hinder performance.

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