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Original Research Article

Focus Strategy and Performance of Online Programs among Private Universities in Nairobi Metropolitan Area, Kenya

Winnie Gathere[1*], Justice Mutua, (Ph.D)[1], Laban Chesang, (Ph.D)[1]

[1]School of Business and Economics, Daystar University

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Abstract: The higher education sector is undergoing a significant transformation as universities increasingly adopt online learning as a strategic tool for expanding access, promoting flexibility, and enhancing competitiveness. In Kenya, private universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area have embraced online programs to remain competitive in a rapidly digitalized academic landscape. However, the performance of online programs, remains inconsistent across institutions. This study examined the effect of focus strategy on the performance of online programs among private universities in the Nairobi Metropolitan Area, Kenya. The study adopted a positivist philosophical paradigm and a cross-sectional explanatory research design. Data were collected from 149 respondents drawn from 20 private universities using stratified random sampling. Descriptive and inferential statistics were computed using SPSS version 29.0, with diagnostics conducted to confirm normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity assumptions. The results indicated a statistically significant and positive relationship between focus strategy and performance of online programs ($R=0.573$; $R^2=0.328$; $F=71.819$; $p<0.05$). The regression coefficient ($B=0.527$, $t=8.475$, $p<0.05$) showed that a unit increase in focus strategy leads to a 0.527-unit improvement in online program performance. These findings suggest that universities implementing targeted market segmentation, customized content delivery, and distinct marketing initiatives record superior outcomes in enrolment, completion, and ranking performance. The study concludes that focus strategy significantly enhances institutional competitiveness and sustainability by aligning educational offerings with the specific needs of niche markets. The study recommends that university management should institutionalize focus strategies through specialized program design, adaptive digital content, and niche marketing to attract and retain specific learner groups. Policy makers and regulators such as the Commission for University Education (CUE) should support specialized online programs aligned with market and professional demands.

Keywords: Focus Strategy, Online Program, Private Universities.

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Introduction and Background to the Study

The rapid transformation of the higher education sector has led to an unprecedented expansion of online learning programs globally (Barrow *et al*., 2024; Yuanyuan *et al*., 2016). In Kenya, private universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area have embraced online education as a strategic response to increasing competition, technological advancement, and shifting learner preferences. However, the performance of online programs remains varied across institutions and is often evaluated in terms of enrolment numbers, completion rates, and university rankings (Liu, 2022; Willging & Johnson, 2019). Despite government efforts to promote digital learning through policies such as the Kenya Digital Master Plan (2022-2032), many universities face challenges related to low enrolment growth, poor student retention, and limited global visibility. For instance, while enrolment in online programs has increased moderately, attrition rates remain high, with completion rates often below 60% (Nguyen *et al*., 2021; Yuanyuan *et al*., 2016). Moreover, Kenyan universities continue to lag in international rankings that consider the quality and reach of digital education.

***Corresponding Author:** Winnie Gathere
School of Business and Economics, Daystar University

This underperformance highlights a strategic gap in how institutions position their online programs within an increasingly competitive higher education environment. While public universities often rely on economies of scale, private universities depend on strategic differentiation and market focus to attract and retain students (Barrow *et al*., 2024; Yuanyuan *et al*., 2016). The dynamic nature of digital learning, characterized by evolving learner expectations, rapid technological changes, and diversified market needs, necessitates the adoption of targeted strategic approaches to enhance competitiveness and sustainability. Hence, there is a growing need to examine how strategic focus contributes to improved institutional performance in the context of online education.

This study is anchored on the focus strategy as the independent variable and the performance of online programs as the dependent variable. Focus strategy, one of Porter's generic strategies, entails concentrating organizational resources on a specific market segment to deliver tailored products or services that meet distinct customer needs better than competitors (Nguyen *et al*., 2021; Yuanyuan *et al*., 2016). In the context of higher education, it involves designing, marketing, and delivering online programs targeted at well-defined learner groups. The study operationalized focus strategy through three constructs: specific market targets, tailored content delivery, and distinct marketing initiatives. Specific Market Targets: This construct refers to the identification and prioritization of distinct learner segments such as working professionals, international students, and postgraduate learners seeking flexible learning schedules (Barrow *et al*., 2024; Yuanyuan *et al*., 2016). By understanding the demographic, professional, and psychographic characteristics of these groups, universities can align their online programs with targeted learner needs and preferences. Tailored Content Delivery: This entails the customization of course materials, teaching methodologies, and digital platforms to suit the specific learning requirements of the chosen market segments. It includes adaptive learning systems, flexible scheduling, and interactive tools that enhance learner engagement, satisfaction, and completion rates. Distinct Marketing Initiatives: This construct focuses on the adoption of unique and targeted marketing strategies to promote online programs. It encompasses branding campaigns, social media outreach, and partnerships that communicate the unique value propositions of the programs, thereby increasing visibility and enrolment among the intended audience. Through these three dimensions, focus strategy enables universities to achieve competitive advantage by aligning program design and delivery with niche market demands, enhancing the perceived value of their online offerings.

Objective of the Study

The specific objective of this study was to examine the effect of focus strategy on the performance of online programs among private universities in the Nairobi Metropolitan Area, Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

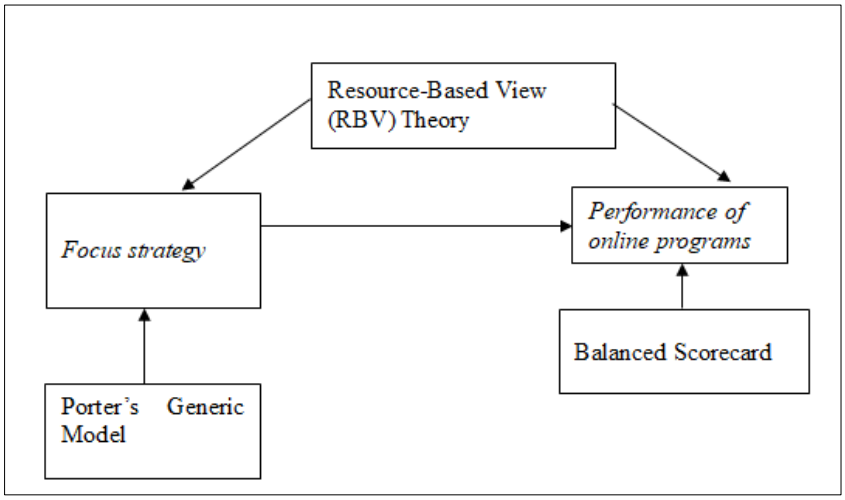

Figure 1: Theoretical framework
Source: *Researcher (2025)*

DISCUSSION

The theoretical framework integrates Porter's Generic Model, the Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory, and the Balanced Scorecard to explain how focus strategy affects the performance of online programs in private universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area. Porter's Generic Model (1980) anchors the study's independent variable cost leadership illustrating how universities position themselves competitively through operational efficiency. The RBV Theory by Barney (1991) complements this by emphasizing that sustainable performance arises from leveraging valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable internal resources such as digital infrastructure, skilled faculty, and institutional culture

that fosters innovation. The Balanced Scorecard provides the performance lens, measuring outcomes across financial, customer, internal process, and learning and growth perspectives (Kaplan & Norton, 1992). The framework therefore posits that the alignment between strategic positioning and internal capabilities drives superior performance of online programs, with RBV explaining the internal resource mechanisms and the Balanced Scorecard operationalizing performance outcomes across multiple dimensions.

Empirical Review

Focus Strategy and Performance of Online Programs

In their 2019 study, Estelami and Mao conducted a quantitative analysis that employed an exploratory survey design to investigate the determinants of tuition for online MBA programs. The study employed a sample size of 200 universities and collected data through online surveys targeted at program administrators. Utilizing regression analysis in SPSS, they found a significant correlation between pricing strategies, specifically cost differentiation and program prestige and enrollment figures, reporting an R^2 of 0.71 with a p-value of less than 0.01. These findings underline the importance of competitive pricing in attracting students to online programs. However, the study highlighted a gap in understanding the influence of non-monetary aspects, such as institutional reputation, on competitive strategies. The current research aims to address this gap by further exploring these non-monetary factors. Empirically the study focused on MBA online programs. Conceptually, lacked integration of institutional factors as moderating variables. Contextually, conducted in India, thus lacking relevance to the Kenyan context. Methodologically, relied solely on self-reported data without triangulation. The current study addressed the contextual and conceptual gaps by examining competitive strategies in online programs, while incorporating institutional factors as moderators in a Kenyan setting. It also considers CUE reports to triangulate self-reported data.

Another significant contribution is presented in the work by Levin *et al*., (2016), which utilized a randomized controlled trial design with 150 university student participants to assess web-based self-help interventions for mental health. The data was collected through pre- and post-intervention surveys, and analysis techniques such as ANOVA revealed that the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy-based intervention showed significant outcomes, with p-values indicating statistical relevance ($p<0.05$). This study underlined innovative strategy integration within online programs as crucial for enhancing student engagement and performance metrics. Yet, it lacked a direct exploration of competitive strategies affecting academic performance, thus exposing a conceptual gap that the current study will seek to fill through a comparative analysis of various strategic frameworks. Gap wise, the study focused more on student satisfaction than institutional performance indicators with limited generalizability. The present study builds on Levins (2016) by integrating performance metrics such as enrollment, completion rate, and institutional rankings. It also adopted a more robust methodology and aligns with Kenyan CUE guidelines.

Jiménez-Crespo's (2021) qualitative case study provided crucial insights into feedback mechanisms in online translation courses, emphasizing the engagement and performance benefits that arise from timely and constructive feedback. This research, based on a sample of 30 undergraduate students, utilized thematic analysis and revealed that feedback acts as a critical differentiator in competitive strategies for online learning environments, with findings demonstrating statistical significance ($p<0.05$). However, the study's contextual applicability and lack of diverse settings raise questions about its generalizability. The current research adopted a broader approach, incorporating various program contexts to yield a more comprehensive understanding of effective feedback strategies in competitive environments. The current study addresses these gaps by employing a quantitative approach to measure performance outcomes statistically and examining the moderating effect of institutional factors like technological infrastructure and leadership.

Lastly, a recent study by Maware *et al*., (2023) focusing on transitioning lab-based training to online modalities utilized a design-based research methodology with a sample size of 45 participants. The study aimed to determine differing performance levels between online and in-person program formats, relevant findings suggested a correlation ($R^2=0.55$, $p<0.01$) demonstrating the feasibility of quality education online. However, an empirical gap regarding industry-specific applications emerged, as did a methodological gap related to longitudinal knowledge retention assessments. The present research intended to address these by examining various contexts and incorporating longer-term follow-up evaluations of learning outcomes. Conceptually, the study excluded moderating role of regulation and leadership. Empirically, it did not analyze specific performance indicators like student completion rates or enrollment trends. The current study expanded on Maware *et al*., (2023) by incorporating performance indicators such as enrollment, student completion rates, and institutional rankings, and includes government regulation as a moderating factor.

In synthesizing these studies, a recurring theme of the tension between cost leadership and differentiation strategies emerges. While Estelami and Mao emphasize cost strategies, other studies, like Jiménez-Crespo's, articulate the value-based differentiation through feedback mechanisms. Discrepancies in the findings of Levin *et al*. regarding direct links to competitive strategies are acknowledged, suggesting a need for further exploration into how varied strategies might

coexist and influence performance metrics. The focus of the current study provided a holistic view of how competitive strategies impact online program performance by integrating qualitative and quantitative methods that bridge the identified gaps.

Conceptual Framework

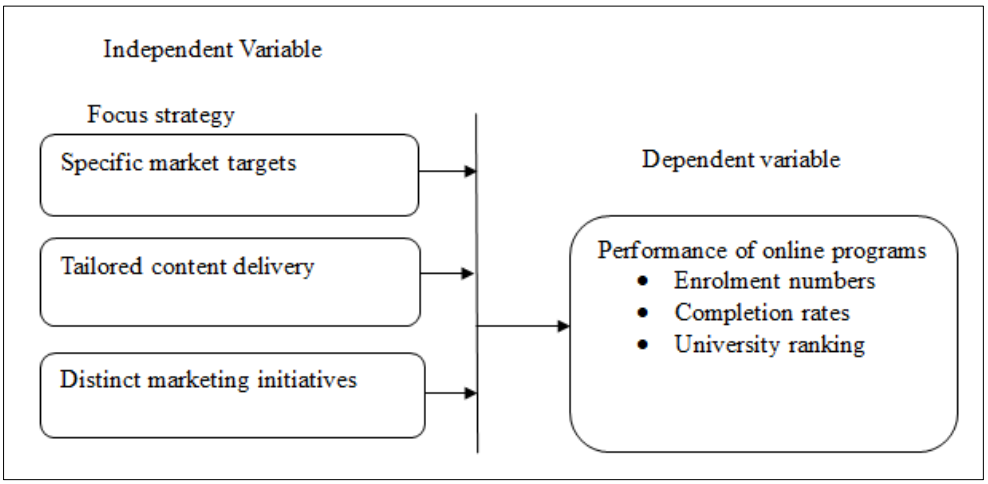

Figure 2: Conceptual framework
Source: Researcher (2025)

DISCUSSION

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between the independent variable, focus strategy, and the dependent variable, performance of online programs in private universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area. The framework posits that focus strategy, operationalized through specific market targets, tailored content delivery, and distinct marketing initiatives, directly influences how universities perform in the competitive online education landscape (Kimiti *et al.*, 2021& Gill, 2016). Institutions that define clear market niches such as executive programs or specialized professional courses can design content that aligns with the learning preferences, professional needs, and expectations of those targeted segments (Hilman and Kaliappen, 2024). Additionally, tailored content delivery enhances engagement and learning outcomes by addressing the unique requirements of identified student groups, while distinct marketing initiatives help universities strengthen visibility, attract qualified enrollments, and enhance institutional reputation (Kinyuira, 2024; Lechner and Gudmundsson, 2022). The performance of online programs, captured through metrics such as enrollment numbers, completion rates, and university ranking, reflects the effectiveness of these strategic focus elements (Demir *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, the framework suggests that adopting a well-structured focus strategy enables universities to differentiate themselves, optimize resource utilization, and achieve superior outcomes in student recruitment, retention, and institutional competitiveness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a positivist philosophical paradigm and a cross-sectional-explanatory research design. The total population comprised of all the 20 private universities offering online programs in the Nairobi Metropolitan Area, where a target of population of 251 senior and mid-level managers was obtained. A sample of 155 was obtained using the Yamane formula and selected using stratified sampling technique. Primary data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires administered as google forms electronically. Quantitative data was subsequently entered into SPSS version 29.0 and processed and analysed descriptively using mean and standard deviation. Diagnostics tests such as multicollinearity, homoscedasticity, linearity and normality were done to establish the assumptions requisite for the statistical methodologies employed. Data was further analysed inferentially using correlation and regression analysis.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

Table 1: Response Rate

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Targeted Sample Size	155	100.0
Actual Responses Received	149	96.1
Non-Responses	6	3.9
Total	155	100.0

Source: Field Data (2025)

Table 1 presents the response rate obtained from the study's data collection process. Out of the 155 targeted respondents, a total of 149 responses were successfully received and analyzed, representing a response rate of 96.1%, while 6 questionnaires (3.9%) were not returned or were incomplete. This high response rate demonstrates strong engagement and cooperation from the study participants, which significantly enhances the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the research findings. According to Mugenda and Mugenda (2019), a response rate above 70% is considered excellent for social science research, suggesting that the achieved rate of 96.1% provides a robust empirical foundation for subsequent statistical analysis and interpretation. The minimal non-response rate also indicates that data loss was negligible, thus minimizing the likelihood of non-response bias and ensuring that the collected data accurately represents the views of the target population.

Table 2: Descriptive analysis of focus strategy

	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)
Specialized courses are developed for distinct market segments.	3.83	0.742
The institution offers flexible scheduling options for niche student groups.	3.85	0.881
Marketing campaigns focus on unique needs of target groups (e.g., working adults).	3.86	0.806
Alumni networks are leveraged to attract students to specialized programs.	4.01	0.951
Data on market trends is used to identify emerging areas of focus.	3.88	0.929
Partnerships with organizations strengthen specialized offerings.	3.85	0.883
Tailored instructional methods are employed for specific learning groups	3.86	0.782
Overall Mean / SD	3.88	0.853

Source*: Field Data (2025)*

Table 18 shows an overall mean of 3.88 and a standard deviation of 0.853, indicating a generally positive perception of focus strategy practices with moderate variation. The item "Alumni networks are leveraged to attract students to specialized programs" had the highest mean at 4.01, surpassing the overall mean by 0.13, implying that leveraging alumni networks is a key strategy in attracting niche student groups. The item "Marketing campaigns focus on unique needs of target groups" (M=3.86, SD=0.806) and "Tailored instructional methods are employed for specific learning groups" (M=3.86, SD=0.782) are both slightly below the overall mean, indicating moderate alignment with the overall perception. The lowest mean was observed for "Specialized courses are developed for distinct market segments" (M=3.83, SD=0.742), 0.05 below the overall mean, suggesting moderate but not strong segmentation in course design. The relatively low SDs (0.742-0.951) suggest stable perceptions across items. Overall, the findings reflect that the institution is effectively implementing focused strategies, particularly through alumni engagement and flexible scheduling for specific markets.

Table 3: Descriptive analysis of performance of online programs

	Mean (M)	Std. Dev. (SD)
Online programs contribute significantly to the university's overall rankings.	3.99	0.775
Students complete online programs at a satisfactory rate.	3.87	0.738
Employer feedback on graduates of online programs is positive.	3.61	0.760
Faculty retention rates for online teaching roles are high.	3.83	0.873
Online programs generate significant revenue for the university	4.13	0.836
Students report high levels of satisfaction with online learning.	3.81	0.928
The university effectively manages and scales its online education operations	3.91	0.841
Overall Mean / SD	3.88	0.822

Source*: Field Data (2025)*

As shown in Table 20, the overall mean for performance of online programs was 3.88 with a standard deviation of 0.822, denoting strong performance perceptions with relatively consistent responses. The item "Online programs generate significant revenue for the university" recorded the highest mean of 4.13, exceeding the overall mean by 0.25, highlighting the financial contribution of online programs as their most notable success indicator. "Online programs contribute significantly to the university's overall rankings" (M=3.99, SD=0.775) and "The university effectively manages and scales its online education operations" (M=3.91, SD=0.841) also scored above the overall mean, underscoring institutional efficiency and reputational benefits. On the lower end, "Employer feedback on graduates of online programs is positive" (M=3.61, SD=0.760) was 0.27 below the overall mean, implying that while performance is strong, graduate outcomes and market perceptions could be enhanced. The narrow SD range (0.738-0.928) reflects a stable consensus among respondents. Overall, the findings depict a well-performing online education

system with strong financial, operational, and reputational outcomes, though stakeholder satisfaction could be further strengthened.

Table 4: Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.573a	0.328	0.324	0.446277

a Predictors: (Constant), Focus strategy

Source: *Field Data (2025)*

The results in Table 32 indicate that the correlation coefficient (R=0.573) reflects a moderately strong positive relationship between focus strategy and the performance of online programs in private universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area. The coefficient of determination (R^2=0.328) implies that approximately 32.8% of the variation in online program performance is explained by focus strategy, while the remaining 67.2% is attributed to other factors not captured in the model. The Adjusted R^2=0.324 demonstrates a minimal difference from the R^2, confirming the model's reliability and goodness of fit after adjusting for sample size. The standard error of estimate (0.446) indicates that the actual observed values deviate minimally from the predicted values, showing that the model provides a good estimation of performance outcomes based on the focus strategy. This suggests that universities employing well-defined market targeting, customized course delivery, and distinct marketing approaches tend to achieve measurable improvements in their online program performance.

Table 5: ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	14.304	1	14.304	71.819	.000b
	Residual	29.277	147	0.199		
	Total	43.581	148			

a Dependent Variable: Performance

b Predictors: (Constant), Focus strategy

Source*: Field Data (2025)*

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) results presented in Table 33 reveal that the overall regression model is statistically significant, with F (1,147)=71.819 and a p-value=0.000, which is less than the 0.05 threshold. This confirms that focus strategy has a statistically significant influence on the performance of online programs. The regression sum of squares (14.304) compared to the residual sum of squares (29.277) demonstrates that a substantial portion of variation in performance is explained by the predictor variable. The high F-statistic further supports that the regression model fits the data well and that the relationship observed did not occur by chance. Therefore, the ANOVA results validate the hypothesis that adopting a focus strategy contributes significantly to the enhancement of online program performance in private universities.

Table 6: Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.838	0.244		7.548	0.000
	Focus strategy	0.527	0.062	0.573	8.475	0.000

a Dependent Variable: Performance

Source*: Field Data (2025)*

The coefficients results in Table 34 provide detailed insights into the predictive power of focus strategy on online program performance. The constant term (B=1.838, t=7.548, p=0.000) represents the baseline level of performance when focus strategy practices are absent. The unstandardized coefficient for focus strategy (B=0.527, t=8.475, p=0.000) indicates that a one-unit increase in focus strategy leads to a 0.527 unit increase in the performance of online programs, holding other factors constant. The standardized coefficient (Beta=0.573) reinforces that focus strategy has a strong positive influence on performance. The corresponding regression model derived from these results is expressed as:

$$Y=1.838 + 0.527X + \varepsilon,$$

Where Y represents performance and X represents focus strategy. The significant p-value (< 0.05) confirms the predictive strength of focus strategy. These findings imply that universities that emphasize niche market segmentation, tailor course content to meet specific learner needs, and apply distinctive marketing initiatives experience improved enrollment, completion rates, and institutional rankings. Consequently, the null

hypothesis (H_{01}) stating that focus strategy has no statistically significant effect on online program performance is rejected, affirming that focus strategy positively and significantly enhances performance outcomes.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study aimed to determine the effect of focus strategy on the performance of online programs in private universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area. The findings revealed a statistically significant and positive relationship between focus strategy and performance, as demonstrated by the regression results ($R=0.573$, $R^2=0.328$, $F=71.819$, $p=0.000$). This implies that focus strategy explains 32.8% of the variation in the performance of online programs, with the remaining variation attributed to other strategic or institutional factors. The descriptive analysis (overall $M=3.88$, $SD=0.853$) further indicated that respondents largely agreed their institutions effectively implement focus-oriented practices such as market segmentation, tailored instructional delivery, and leveraging alumni networks to attract niche student groups. Specifically, leveraging alumni networks ($M=4.01$) emerged as the most influential aspect of focus strategy, highlighting the role of social capital in driving enrollment and retention. These results align with Porter's Generic Model, which posits that institutions gain competitive advantage by targeting specific market segments and tailoring their offerings to those segments. The regression coefficient ($B=0.527$, $t=8.475$, $p<0.05$) confirms that improvements in focus strategy lead to proportional improvements in online program performance. These findings corroborate past studies by Kimani and Wambugu (2021) and Ouma *et al*., (2023), who reported that specialization, customized marketing, and targeted delivery significantly enhance the competitiveness and operational outcomes of online programs. Overall, the study demonstrates that private universities adopting a well-structured focus strategy anchored on market differentiation, flexible delivery, and strategic partnerships achieve improved performance in terms of enrollment growth, completion rates, and institutional ranking.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that focus strategy significantly and positively affects the performance of online programs in private universities within the Nairobi Metropolitan Area. Institutions that specialize in niche market segments, design tailored instructional content, and leverage alumni and organizational partnerships experience enhanced enrollment, student satisfaction, and overall institutional reputation. By aligning online education initiatives with the specific needs of targeted student groups, universities can strengthen their market position and optimize performance outcomes across financial, academic, and reputational dimensions. Therefore, focus strategy serves as a critical driver for competitive advantage and long-term sustainability in the growing online education sector.

Recommendations to Stakeholders

1. University Management: Should institutionalize focus strategies by identifying and investing in niche markets such as executive, professional, or postgraduate programs that align with market demand and institutional strengths.
2. Academic Departments: Should design and continuously update curricula tailored to the unique learning needs of specific student groups to enhance satisfaction and completion rates.
3. Marketing Teams: Should intensify specialized campaigns that target working professionals, corporate partnerships, and alumni networks to boost visibility and enrollment in specific program areas.
4. Policy Makers and Regulators: Should encourage universities to develop and accredit specialized online programs that meet emerging market and professional needs, thus improving national competitiveness in digital education.
5. Technology and Innovation Offices: Should support the creation of adaptive learning platforms that cater to the preferences of identified student segments, enhancing engagement and learning efficiency.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. Future research should examine the moderating role of institutional factors such as leadership, culture, and technological infrastructure on the relationship between focus strategy and performance.
2. Additionally, a comparative study involving both public and private universities would help determine whether sectoral differences influence the effectiveness of focus strategies in online education.
3. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to assess how sustained implementation of focus strategies impacts institutional performance over time, providing deeper insights into strategic management in digital higher education.

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