



Strategies for enrolment management in private universities in Ghana during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has negatively affected the educational systems of most countries, most especially, private universities in Ghana. The study assessed the strategies adopted by private universities in Ghana for effective enrolment management practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The descriptive qualitative research method was used to solicit primary data through interviews, document/system reviews, and observations from private universities. The study established that the private universities were able to deploy some strategies which had positive impact on enrolment management at the universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the strategies adopted include transition to the digital learning experience (using digital learning experience ZOOM, LOOM, Microsoft Team, and Google Meet); establishing an enrolment command center to coordinate and support the decision-making activities regarding students' access, recruitment, admission, persistence, retention, and completion during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond; and the deployment of virtual tour services by improving tour services virtually and making navigation points on the university websites. Furthermore, the use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp) and financial aid served as strategies for effective enrollment management. The findings of the study provide empirical and practical support and information for university administrators, academic advisors, educators, and researchers on the strategies that they can deploy for effective enrolment management practices in private universities during epidemics or pandemics and beyond.

1. Introduction

This period in our history is one that organizations and schools, specifically, universities have never seen before. Many universities are coming to terms with the possibility of a severe impact on their enrollments as the globe continues to deal with the disruption created by the worldwide pandemic brought on by COVID-19. Agreeably, the pandemic came as a shock and took most universities unaware and unprepared for such a pandemic.

Universities have been adopting strategies for the new situation as they attempt to weather the storm the epidemic has caused. Several universities in Ghana, specifically, private universities have been deploying several strategies to manage their enrolment management for decades, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and the post-pandemic era. The present pandemic crisis has made it more important for universities to address enrolment issues more critically both in the short and long term. Reduction of school fees, granting flexible

payment terms, granting scholarships, and deployment of technology and infrastructural systems to aid virtual teaching and academic activities have been some of the strategies that private universities have been deploying to manage their enrolment.

Private universities in Ghana largely depend on the enrolment and the fees from students for sustainability. They, therefore, put in more effort to increase admission and enrolment, reduce attrition, and increase retention rates. The COVID-19 pandemic brought more hardship to most economies which equally affected private universities. Private universities, therefore, have been devising new strategies and mechanisms for effective enrolment management in order to be competitive, sustainable, and ultimately, ensure the quality of teaching and learning. They have been deploying strategies to ensure that their students are safe and enjoy quality tuition and education despite the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study thus sought to assess the various strategies deployed by private universities to manage enrollment during the COVID-19

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pandemic. The study serves as a guide to universities to deploy strategies to manage their enrolment. Furthermore, it helps universities that have or are already deploying strategies to learn from other universities and adopt other and new strategies to effectively manage their enrolment. Finally, offers recommendations and consideration for managers of educational institutions, specifically, universities, on the way forward in the management of enrolment during general pandemics and COVID-19 in specific.

2. Literature review

2.1. Enrolment management

All universities must manage enrollment in order to be successful (Mwirigi & Muthaa, 2015). Concern over managing enrollments in universities was the driving force behind the creation of an operational unit (Langston et al., 2016) that would improve the strategies of those areas to strengthen articulation with prospective students and increase the integration, efficiency, and effectiveness of key operations (Harvey-Smith, 2019).

Enrolment management is an institutional response to the challenges and opportunities (Lehman et al., 2021) that recruiting and retaining the right student body present to a school's financial health, image, and students' quality (Hacker & Bellmore, 2020). It is again seen as the process of achieving institutional goals by developing the best strategy for student recruitment, retention, and graduation (Smith & Harris, 2021). Hossler and Bontrager (2014) and Govindarajan (2021) generally understood it as an organizational concept and systematic set of operations intended to provide educational institutions better control over their student enrollments. It involves following and communicating with students from the time of their first encounter till their graduation as a process (Sonnenschein et al., 2019). Through marketing, recruiting, admissions, and financial assistance, the procedure affects the number, composition, and characteristics of the student body (Nakae et al., 2021). Gilstrap (2020) presented a comprehensive definition of enrolment management. Thus, enrolment management is the ability of institutions of higher education to exert more systematic influence over the number and characteristics of new students, as well as influence the persistence of students to continue their enrollment from the time of their matriculation to their graduation (Gilstrap, 2020).

These definitions highlighted some key element of enrolment management to include students' recruitment or admission, retention, financial assistance, communication and care, and graduation. Enrolment management has a bigger impact on student services, orientation, attrition and retention studies, institutional research, and academic counseling (Sonnenschein et al., 2019). Additionally, the process directs institutional activities in the areas of new student recruiting, student support services, and curriculum development (Delcours & Carmona, 2019).

To position a university for future success, enrolment management has to be strategic, institutional-wide, and dynamic (Ruffin, 2015). The entire institutional community must support the enrolment management process (Harvey-Smith, 2019), including the heads or principals (Ni et al., 2018); management staff members like the registrar, librarian, and ICT director; administrative staff, and all levels of faculty (Ni et al., 2018; Angelopulo, 2013). This will enable the university to win the support of all departments (Ni et al., 2018). Universities can pursue their strategic objectives in informed, deliberate, and integrated ways with the help of enrollment management strategies (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014).

For effective enrolment management in universities, a variety of methods or strategies are employed, including: analyzing demographics; enhancing access; connecting costs, assistance, and institutional budgets; attaining student diversity; and persuading and supporting foreign and adult students (Mwirigi & Muthaa, 2015), developing retention programs, developing and managing a database of students (Zaripova, 2021), having marketing, improving on student outreach services

(Delcours & Carmona, 2019). However, Lips (2021) and Isom-Payne (2022) advise enrollment managers to first concentrate on desired objectives like student academic performance, which would, in turn, propose acceptable techniques, before establishing such strategies and tactics. These tactics will facilitate efficient enrollment management.

As an activity, enrolment management is designed to attract and retain students (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014). These activities are made up of recruitment and admission of students, pricing and financial aid (Hossler & Bontrager, 2014), providing academic assistance, guidance, and counseling, retention program, the choice and transition to college by students (Delcours & Carmona, 2019), student attrition and retention, and student outcomes (Lips, 2021). Enrolment management encompasses obvious functions, such as admission of new students, retention of continuing students, and student completion of and graduation from academic programs.

2.2. Universities and COVID-19

Many educational institutions were impacted by COVID-19 (Upoalkpajor & Upoalkpajor, 2020). This has changed their teaching, learning, research, and information-sharing approaches (Nkansah et al., 2020). It has significantly impacted teaching, research, learning, and ultimately, quality of education in educational institutions (Chidambaram, 2020). Due to their incapacity to continue operating, numerous educational institutions closed during this time, which had an impact on the standard of instruction (Sarpong et al., 2022). The closure of educational institutions had an impact on contact hours, which had an adverse effect on the quality of education (Adzaku et al., 2022).

Although the impact is acknowledged to be bad, some attempted to implement methods and tactics to raise the standard of education (Sabates et al., 2021). Adopting e-learning platforms and enhancing knowledge distribution are a couple of these options (Dei, 2018). Similarly, to guarantee high-quality instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities all around the world restarted or implemented virtual education (teaching, research, learning, and information distribution (Dei & Asante, 2022). Others used the web-based method for information distribution while the majority of universities adopted the social media platform (Dei, 2020). Dei et al. (2022) also indicated that social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Skype, and Viber have been embraced by universities in developing nations like Ghana to aid teaching, learning and information dissemination. Students may seek, share, and receive information via social media and it can be a source of news or a waypoint for accessing news online (González-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco, 2020). Once more, social media allowed for the simultaneous broadcast of information to a large number of users and allowed individuals to maintain connections (Kircaburun et al., 2020).

Again, Mobile online public access catalog (MOPAC), mobile e-journal, mobile databases, short messaging services (SMS) for reference services, mobile collections (e-books, audio materials), mobile digitized thesis, and mobile library tour/instruction (Acheampong & Dei, 2020) are a few of the mobile technology-based systems and services that were adopted to ensure quality of education as a sustainable development goal during the COVID 19 (Dei & Asante, 2022).

2.3. Strategies

Strategies are the actions taken by managers to attain set goals (Steiss, 2019). Strategies identify the activities and resources of organizations (Ogbudinkpa, 2021), allocate and integrate these resources by aligning them to the outlines and general direction of organizations (Ogbudinkpa, 2021) within the organizational environment to meet the goals and objectives of the organization (Steiss, 2019). They are the blueprint of decisions in an organization that shows its objectives and goals (Leskaj, 2017), the key policies, and plans for achieving these goals (Leskaj, 2017), and define the activities to be carried out by the

organization (Bryson & George, 2020), the type of economic and human organization it wants to be (Thind, 2017; David & David, 2017), and the contribution it plans to make to its shareholders, customers and society at large (Ogbudinkpa, 2021; David & David, 2017). Strategies determine the way the skills, resources, and competencies of organizations can be put together to create a competitive advantage (Henry, 2021).

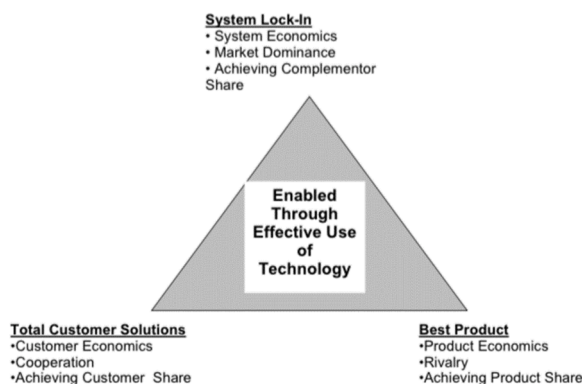
Within the educational setting, universities keep deploying different strategies to be competitive, have a competitive advantage, gain market position, and manage their enrolment (Uchendu, Nwafor, & Nwaneri, 2015). Universities fundamentally provide the opportunity for students to advance their academic careers and to achieve desired professional development.

Researchers have proposed numerous approaches to strategy process, that is, ways in which strategy is (or should be) formulated. Some of these include the design school which views strategy formation as a deliberate process (Soliman et al., 2019). The design school opine that one has to think first, then act on the thinking by formulating and implementing the strategy (Ibarra, 2015). An example of the design school approach is the use of Porter's Five Forces. The learning school, on the other hand, takes the position that strategies can form as well as be formulated (Erlangga, 2022). According to the learning school, strategy in an organization emerges as a result of trial-and-error learning within an organization. It recognizes that strategy must be consonant with the patterns of behavior and response that are inherent within an organization (Quaye, Osei, Sarbah, & Abrokwah, 2015).

2.4. Theoretical framework

The Delta Model serves as the foundation for this investigation. The Triangle in the model represents the three strategic positioning options: Best Product (BP), Total Customer Solutions (TCS), and System Lock-In (SLI). The BP embodies conventional thinking, whereas TCS and SLI present modern approaches to competition based on ties with the customer.

The Delta Model suggests that to align the three (3) core and achievable competencies with the PIHLs, which are SLI (creating an attractive business environment), TCS (providing clients with all the solutions they require), and BP (focusing on offerings and services that can be best priced), they must be identified. In light of this and concerning universities, the basic competencies of the Delta Model imply that if they are well managed, it may result in improved enrolment management. Therefore, these attainable competencies heavily rely on the institutions' leadership philosophies, which might also have an impact on enrolment management.



It also makes use of technology, with its previously unimagined potential for universities, as well as the technologies surrounding business activities. Furthermore, the technology allows the possibilities of new strategies in universities to support the virtual learning environment via eLearning, a completely new entrant in the education sector, which is currently being used by most universities both locally and

globally for competitive advantages.

In this regard, universities must start and adapt new methods of doing things to survive the 21st-century educational industry and successfully begin enrolment management, and gain a competitive advantage. To develop a business plan for the universities that aims at an innovative restructuring of the customer/clients and enrolment management, universities must therefore shift their strategic attention from merely developing and providing academic programs and services to the development and offering of programs for their customers. Additionally, by presenting a value proposition that puts the customer at the heart of the universities strategy, the business plan aids in the creative segmentation of the consumers of the universities.

3. Methods

In this study, the researchers used descriptive research to accurately and systematically describe the phenomenon or situation under study. Instead of addressing the why of the research problem, the descriptive research enabled the researchers to address the what, when, where, and how. To build an inductively derived grounded theory about the study, the researchers used a systematic set of methods in the qualitative research technique in this study. Thus, descriptive qualitative research was used to gather data and analysis to aid the description of the research problem for this study. This enabled the researchers to comprehend each phenomenon in its own environment. Data from qualitative descriptive research generated a subjective account of the "who," "what," and "where" of events or experiences (Doyle et al., 2020).

The study was restricted to 20 private universities in Ghana. From each university, the researchers purposely selected the Registrar to serve as the principal respondent. Further probes and data were obtained from other key officers of the PUs through the registrar. Thus additional data were obtained from the Deans of students, ICT directors/officers, and other officers with relevant data to support the study. These additional participants were deemed competent for the study based on the recommendation of the principal respondents. Also, since they are officers who have been employed in the universities and have a direct influence on enrolment management.

Both primary and secondary sources provided the data for this study. The secondary sources were from already published books, journals, papers, reports, and other materials that aimed to answer specific questions related to the topic of the study. Due to their increased flexibility, lower costs, and convenience for participants, telephone interviews and system reviews were deployed in this study. The system review allowed the researchers to evaluate and understand pertinent papers, systems, and exhibits in support of the data gathered for analysis, just like they could with any other qualitative research method (Sileyew, 2019). The observation was included as an additional data source to support and strengthen the interview and system review.

In order to evaluate the interviewees' responses, "content analyses" were first performed on the data obtained through interviews. The interviews were then verbatim transcribed, and the results were compared to the audiotape recordings to make sure there had been no factual distortion. The researchers next explored the notion and accepted concepts that correspond to the research objectives before coding and categorizing each of the transcribed data for interpretation. This led to the interpretative and descriptive presentation of the outcome.

4. Findings

The study established different strategies deployed by the PUs to manage enrolment during COVID-19. These include:

- 1 Establishing enrolment command center
- 2 Transition to digital experience
- 3 Deploying social media systems
- 4 Improvement of information technology infrastructure

- 5 Use of virtual tour and experience
- 6 Financial management (fee cut, reduction, discount, and flexible payment terms)

4.1. The Enrollment Command Center (ECC)

The study established that most of the universities set up a committee known as the enrolment command center (ECC) to coordinate the activities of enrollment management. The universities had different names for the ECC. These include

- Covid-19 committee
- Transition committee
- E-learning committee
- Rapid response committee

While the ECCs served as a stand-alone committee as a strategy for enrollment management at the PUs, the researchers discovered that 8 of the PUs had sub-committees under the ECC. Similarly, the researchers discovered that some of the statutory and standing committees of the PUs such as the health committee, students affairs/welfare committee, and safety committee which were inactive were reconstituted, activated, and mandated to work on their core duties as stipulated in the statutes and handbooks of the universities.

The composition or membership of the ECC somehow varied among the universities. The main composition identified by the researchers include

- Marketing/Admissions/Recruitment
- Students' relations/affairs
- Public relations/corporate affairs
- Information technology

Other universities went beyond this composition to include a representative from the following unit(s)/department(s)/school(s)

- Library
- Registry
- Deans of programs

The researchers discovered that the composition of most of the universities excluded the Rectors although the Rectors had lots of input in the composition and activities of ECC. However, these universities had a representative of the Rector on the ECC. Where the Rector or Vice-Rector is a member of the ECC, the Rector or the Vice-Rector chairs the ECC. In other cases, the representative of the Rector was assigned the

chairperson's role/portfolio. The researchers discovered that only one university's composition of the ECC had to elect a chairperson among the members.

The research further established that the ECC's core mandate was to coordinate and support the decision-making activities to support students' access, recruitment, admission, persistence, retention, and completion during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Largely, the researchers found out that this core mandate was achieved.

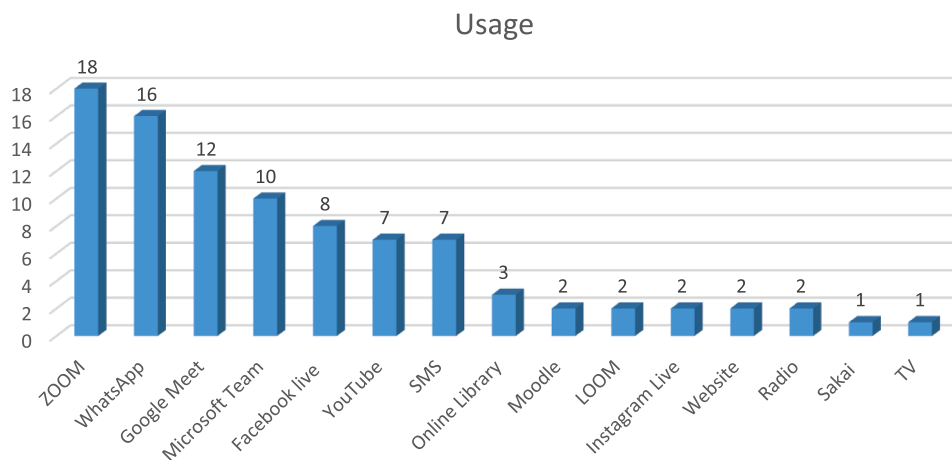
The ECC of five (5) of the universities also focused on developing a holistic approach to current trends of enrolment, graduation period of senior high schools, gathering data on students' needs and activities, and some basic safety needs to fight or minimize the impact of COVID-19 on academic activities. Furthermore, they created a university-wide collaboration, engagement, creative thinking, and consensus building on enrolment management activities. They served as the cross-functional hub to address any challenge that may arise as a result of COVID-19 and its impact on the universities. Through collaboration with other committees and stakeholders of the universities, the ECCs were able to largely minimize the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on enrolment management.

The study further established that due to the setting up of the ECC, the universities were able to share and disseminate enrollment information and recommend best practices for managing enrollment; collaborate with the various organs and committees of the universities to develop, implement, and assess strategies of enrollment management; increase collaboration and engagement in recruiting and retention strategies.

The researchers further discovered that some of the universities had a sub-committee of the ECC which included a recruitment committee, retention committee, e-learning, and rapid response committee. Thus, while these sub-committees were seen as the main and synonymous committee to the ECC, they served as sub-committee of the ECCs.

4.2. Transition to digital learning experience

One of the foremost strategies deployed by universities is the transition to the digital learning experience. This is premised or built on the existing, upgraded, and or newly deployed information technology infrastructure. This digital learning experience deployment varied from university to university as most of the universities mainly depended on open-source digital systems such as ZOOM, LOOM, Microsoft Team, and Google meet, among others, some of the universities had customized/in-house e-learning systems that they leverage on. They were able to deploy and used multiple digital systems. The most popular digital systems were ZOOM, Google meet, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp.



The study discovered that ZOOM was the most popularly used digital learning system as 18 of the PUs said they deployed it for teaching and learning during the pandemic. This was followed by WhatsApp with usage at 16 PUs, then Google Meet, Microsoft Team, Facebook live, YouTube and SMS. Only 3 of the PUs were able to use the online library as a digital learning platform. Moodle, LOOM, Instagram Live, Website, and radio were used by only two PUs respectively while the Sakai and use of TV were found to be used at only 1 PU(s). The aim of these is to sustain the interest of the students and teachers in the teaching and learning process despite the temporal closure of the universities. These findings to some extent corroborate the findings of Dei et al. (2022) who revealed that WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform used by students for information dissemination, followed by Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube respectively.

The system review by the researchers also showed similar findings as the researchers discovered that ZOOM was more popular with teachers and students. While some of the universities had a license for their lecturers to use ZOOM which has unlimited usage, others were using commercial and general ZOOM account which has limited usage time. The same applies to Google Meet and Microsoft Teams.

The researchers further observed that 18 of the universities had no policy document on digital transformation, digital learning, and the use of these systems for teaching and learning. However, it was again revealed that most of them are now working on the policy document. Most of them are at an advanced stage.

4.3. Optimizing virtual tour visibility

Making tours simpler for students to identify and access was one of the most important strategic lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers discovered that some (9 out of the sampled universities) were able to deploy this strategy by improving tour services virtually and making navigation points on the university websites. The universities have different names for the virtual tour services deployed by the universities. These include YouTour, VirtualTour, Virtual Experience, TourMe, TourUs, Online Experience, and Virtual Visibility. Some of the respondents opine that

- *“In order to drive traffic and facilitate engagement with the virtual tour services by the universities”*
- *“Our website has a tagging option where we are able to track the conversation and interaction after any students complete a virtual tour which allows the university to personalize further communication with that student(s) or prospective applicant”*
- *“We have a virtual touring service that enables students to have a virtual tour experience of our campus and the facilities available”*
- *“We drive awareness by connecting virtual tours to our website and all our marketing channels”*
- *“The university has embedded or linked our virtual tour to the homepage of our website for our students to access and tour the facilities”*
- *“Our prospective students are able to access the university and have a feel of the campus using the TourUs system”*
- *“The navigation bar enables students to have a virtual experience and visibility of the facilities”*
- *“The virtual tours were included on the universities’ website pages with particular content, such as those dedicated to e-learning, athletics, financial assistance, e-library, e-books, health services, counseling services, and student accommodation, among others”*
- *“The virtual tour visibility enabled students to be directed immediately to pertinent material and information by the universities rather than being required to travel to the university campuses and have face-to-face interactions”*

These responses showed that the virtual tour services deployed by the universities have enabled the students to have access to the programs, facilities, and services of the universities. As the students’ surf

through the universities website, the tour services on the websites were able to immediately address the queries of the students.

Furthermore, it was revealed that the optimization of the virtual tour visibility system deployed by the universities was effective as it promoted and made self-directed research and increased interaction across all mediums. Also, prospects who went through the virtual tour experience were more certain about enrolment than those who did not do that.

It was revealed that there was an increase in virtual tour traffic based on the statistics at the universities. The virtual tour included important pages like admissions, student life, facilities, recreational centers, eatery/cafeteria, library, and electronic resources, among others. The admission team provided a virtual tour link to the prospective applicants/students for preview and enrolment decisions.

4.4. Use of social media systems

Another great strategy deployed by the universities was the use of social media systems such as Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. While some of them (8 out of the 20 universities) embedded the social media systems with the websites of the universities, others were not able to do that. Thus, most of the universities decoupled the social media systems from their websites.

The use of social media was to amplify the virtual tour services and to reach out to the students. Some of the respondents said

- *“The social media system enabled us to reach out to most of our students faster as most of them are young and use the social media system a lot”*
- *“We use the social media system to interact with our students”*
- *“WhatsApp has a conference facility and this enabled us to easily communicate and collaborate with students”*
- *“We used the Facebook page of the university to disseminate information to our students and the general public on academic issues and measures put in place to manage COVID-19”*
- *“Some of our lecturers made use of YouTube as a means of uploading content and lecture notes for students to access”*
- *“Most of our prospective students or applicants use social media. It is thus easy for us to reach out to them by deploying the various social media system”*

Based on these responses, it is evident that social media systems have been very useful to universities during COVID-19. This is vital for other universities to deploy social media to augment the face-to-face medium of interaction even after COVID-19.

4.5. Financial aid

The study further established that all the universities deployed a financial aid strategy to the students. This came in the form of discounts, rebates, fee reductions, flexible payment terms, and deferred payments. This strategy is aimed at attracting the students and retaining them due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses which translates into the low income of the students and the parents or guardians or sponsors. It was discovered that some of the students were being sponsored by organizations or businesses that were shut down or operations went down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These businesses/organizations were mainly offered deferred payments as a strategy since they were unable to continue the sponsorship within that period. In effect, the students were able to continue with their education. Some of the comments include:

- *“Due to the impact of the pandemic on businesses, we contacted the organizations sponsoring some of our students and offered a deferred payment system for them. This is aimed at ensuring that we maintain our relationship with the organizations and our students”*

- “Flexible payment terms were offered to our students to minimize the impact of COVID-19 on our students and their parents”
- “The university offered a fee reduction to our students so as to enable them to pay their fees on time”
- “The university decided to offer a rebate to our students to encourage them to pay their fees early”

4.6. Challenges of managing enrollment during COVID-19

Despite the measures put in place by the universities to effectively manage enrollment, they still encountered some challenges. Some of the challenges outlined by the respondents included.

- “We had no e-learning system before the pandemic. The pandemic thus exposed us in terms of information technology infrastructure unavailability”
- “Initially, we were unable to teach and retain our students due to the unavailability of an e-learning system. We then had to depend on social media which wasn't appropriate”
- “Finding an alternative method of communication with students and the university community during this Pandemic was our major challenge. It was very difficult for us to substitute physical campus visits as a recruitment/conversion strategy to adopting modern means to reach out to our potential students”
- “Our team had to go outside the box to personalize virtual outreach because face-to-face interaction makes it so much simpler to develop relationships and enthuse kids about a higher education experience”
- “Some of our staff and lecturers have been so traditional and prefer the face-to-face medium of interaction and instruction. They found it difficult to accept the modern means of instruction via the e-learning system and social media which could be attributed to their lack of skills and know-how to use them”
- “Our operations and admissions efforts have been seriously hampered by the suspension of in-person instruction and the end of conventional face-to-face instruction during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Our applicant pool fell by 10% as a result of our inability to meet face-to-face with potential students who resided outside of our local market”
- “The Pandemic came unaware as we were not prepared nor ready for it. We were not ready for the technological and human resources needed to contain and manage it”
- “Some students were unable to continue with their education as a result of the impact of the pandemic on the businesses and finances of their parent”

These comments show that universities were adversely affected by the emergence of COVID-19. The challenges mainly had to do with the limited information technology infrastructure, unavailability of e-learning systems, lack of interest and know-how to adopt the new technologies (e-learning and social media, and difficulty in raising funds to pay school fees, among others.

5. Discussion of findings

As outlined in the findings section, the study discovered a series of strategies that the PUs deployed to manage enrolment. Among them was the setting up of the enrolment command center. While this committee was statutory in some PUs, other PUs set them up as ad-hoc committees with varied names. These committees are mainly charged to ensure the continuation of academic work and ensure the safety and welfare of the members of the PUs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In the opinion of [Farris and Gmelch \(2020\)](#), committees play central role in ensuring the success and performance of academic intuitions. In this regard, their core function and mandate should be well defined and structured for the benefit of the institution. The findings of this study have confirmed that when universities are able to deploy strategies that are customer centered such as committees to seek the welfare and well-being of students, they will be able to attract and retain more students. Thus, able to

manage their enrollment more effectively. This serves as a total customer solution to the students as expressed in the delta model. It has proven that all the universities were able to set up a committee (whatever name was given to it) to mobilize and coordinate enrolment management issues and sustain the enthusiasm of the students. [Poole et al. \(2020\)](#) and [Bates \(2014\)](#) disclosed that committees tend to formulate policies and strategies that are geared toward improving the enrolment initiatives of universities. Also, the findings have established the important role and activities of the committees during COVID-19 and that they have been extremely helpful. This is in consonant with the TCS (total customer solution) element of the Delta Model. The TCS of the Delta Model suggests that when institutions like universities set up customer-centric strategies such as committees to superintend the welfare and wellbeing of the customers, it leads to productivity and success of the institutions.

The study further discovered that the universities transited to digital learning experience and optimization of virtual tour visibility as strategies for the management of enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This digital learning experience mainly depended on open-source digital systems such as ZOOM, LOOM, Microsoft Team, and Google meet, among others, some of the universities had customized/in-house e-learning systems that they leverage on. As disclosed in this study, the use and aim of this social media deployment was to sustain the interest of the students and teachers in the teaching and learning process despite the temporal closure of the universities. These findings to some extent corroborate the findings of [Dei et al. \(2022\)](#) who revealed that WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform used by students for information dissemination, followed by Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube respectively. Again, the optimization of the virtual tour visibility system deployed by the universities was effective as it promoted and made self-directed research and increased interaction across all mediums. These findings also corroborate the delta model as it also makes use of technology. Thus, technology allows the possibilities of new strategies in universities to support the virtual learning environment via eLearning.

Another great strategy deployed by the universities was the use of social media systems such as Facebook, LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. [Al-Hail et al. \(2023\)](#) posited that social media usage for teaching and learning seeks to attract and sustain the interest of both the instructors and learners. The study established that the deployment of social media systems as an enrolment management strategy have been very useful to universities during COVID-19. Critical to this is the absence of policy document on digital transformation, digital learning, and the use of these systems for teaching and learning. The need for a policy document on digital transformation and e-learning was also necessitated by the pressure from the Ghana Tertiary Education Commission (GTEC) for the universities to develop the policy document.

This is vital for other universities to deploy social media to augment the face-to-face medium of interaction even after COVID-19. The findings corroborate the findings of [Asafo-Adjei et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Dei et al. \(2022\)](#) as they establish that the most social media platforms used by students are WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram.

The study again established that the deployment of financial aid in the form of discounts, rebates, fee reductions, flexible payment terms, and deferred payments served as a strategy for managing enrollment at the universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses which translates into the low income of the students and the parents or guardians or sponsors, this strategy largely helped in attracting and retention of students, ultimately helping to manage enrolment during the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with [Dynarski et al. \(2022\)](#) who opine that fee discounts, fee reduction, and financial support services positively affected enrolment. Again, according to the best product of the delta model, when products are affordable and cost-efficient, customers will patronize the product. In this regard, the deployment of financial aid and support largely affected the retention and enrolment of students during the COVID-19

pandemic positively.

Although the universities put in place these strategies which largely helped to manage enrollment during the COVID-19 era, the study by the universities to effectively manage enrollment, they still encountered some challenges. The challenges mainly had to do with the limited information technology infrastructure, unavailability of e-learning systems, lack of interest and know-how to adopt the new technologies (e-learning and social media, and difficulty in raising funds to pay school fees, among others. These were corroborated by Mesmar and Badran (2022) and Lofaso (2021) who established that the transition to an online instructional environment occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a disconnect and inability for students to have a face-to-face engagement with their lecturers. It also corroborates the findings of Bulman and Fairlie (2022). Bulman and Fairlie (2022) found that the COVID pandemic affected admission, attrition, and graduation.

6. Conclusion

This study assessed the various strategies deployed by private universities to manage enrollment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study established different strategies deployed by private universities to manage enrolment during COVID-19. These include establishing an enrolment command center; transitioning to digital experience; deploying social media systems; improving information technology infrastructure; using virtual tours and experience; and financial management (fee cuts, reduction, discounts, and flexible payment terms). These strategies are not exclusive. The formation of an enrolment management committee was very crucial to the survival of the universities. This committee was largely implemented successfully. The committees directed and coordinated the activities of enrolment and ensured other strategies were also successfully implemented.

The research was limited to private universities. Although the core functions of private universities (teaching, research, innovation, development, and consultancy) are the same as the public or state-owned universities, their structure, corporate governance, and administration are somehow different from those of public or state-owned universities. In this regard, while the strategies and findings of the study will be useful to both private and state-owned universities, the leadership or management of universities, particularly, private universities, are encouraged to assess these strategies based on their usefulness and deploy them appropriately to help in the effective management of enrolment. These strategies, when carefully implemented by other universities, will help them manage their enrolment better and more effectively even after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare there is no conflict of interests.

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