

Marketing and Managerial Recommendations for University-Based Professional Development Programs (Analytical Research Study)

توصيات تسويقية وإدارية لبرامج التطوير المهني الجامعي
(دراسة تحليلية)

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المستخلص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف الآثار التسويقية والإدارية لبرامج التطوير المهني في الجامعات ، في ضوء فرص واتجاهات السوق الحالية ، والقيمة المضافة لمقدمي الخدمات والمشاركين ، ومنهجيات مقدمي الخدمات المتنوعة في إطلاق هذه البرامج ، والتحديات التي يواجهها مقدمو الخدمات. تبنت هذه الدراسة الاستكشافية منهج البحث النوعي، حيث أجريت مقابلات شبه منظمة متعمقة مع المديرين التنفيذيين للجامعات وصناع القرار في جامعتين خاصتين في مصر في مراحل برامج التطوير المهني المبكرة. تقدم نتائج الدراسة العديد من التوصيات التي قد تساعد مقدمي الخدمات في صياغة برامج تطوير مهني فعالة توفر قيمة لكل من مقدمي الخدمات والمشاركين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المهنية ، التطوير ، البرامج ، الجامعات ، التسويق ، الإدارة ، التوصيات.

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the marketing and managerial implications of university- based Professional Development Programs (PDPs), in the light of the current market opportunities and trends, value-added to providers and participants, the diverse providers' methodologies in launching these programs, and the challenges faced by providers. This exploratory study adopted a qualitative research method approach, where semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with university executives and decision makers of two private universities in Egypt in their early PDP stages. The findings of the study provide several recommendations that may aid providers in the formulation of efficient PDPs that provide value for both providers and participants.

Keywords: Professional, Development, Programs, Universities, Marketing, Managerial, Recommendations

1. Introduction

PDPs have been offered by various universities and institutions since the nineteenth century (McCarthy *et al.*, 2016), and a considerable amount of funds have been allocated to a wide variety of PDPs from diverse sources (Ingvarson, *et al.*, 2005), with the purpose of encouraging employers and employees to reflect on their skills, ideas, and values, as well as their management styles, and consider alternative strategies and approaches to problem solving (Vicere, 1989). PDPs are considered multicultural environments where instructors must relate their delivery methods and content to fit the needs of different participants of varying backgrounds (Wlodkowski, 2003).

Professional Development (PD) has undergone a gradual but radical transformation over the years. The programs operating today are more learner centered, much more innovative, and relevant to the organizations' needs than before. PD has become a strategic tool for many organizations, designed to develop the employees' skills and knowledge, improve management effectiveness, and enhance overall leadership (Conger & Xin, 2000).

Business schools have become players in numerous and diversified PD markets (Amdam, 2016; Smith & Keaveney, 2017; Stanton & Stanton, 2017). However, with all the resources spent on PDP, there is little evidence that it has added value to participants or their firms (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Tushman, *et al.*, 2007). Universities are often viewed as impractical, providing academic perspective without corporate experience (Lombardi, 2007), and current teaching methods offer little added value for participants. In addition to that, there is an ever-widening gap in the balance between research and practice in PDPs (Hoffman, 2004; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2005; Starkey & Madan, 2001). University-based PDPs either lack efficient program design, inadequate teaching experience, or poor learning methodologies.

Further research is needed to come up with cost-effective solutions (Lombardi, 2007) and ideas that would make PDPs more useful and value- adding to participants and their respective organizations (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007).

Consequently, the objective of this research is to explore the marketing and managerial considerations required to effectively deliver a PDP while shedding the light on degree and non-degree university-based PDPs from the perspective of the providing universities. Specifically, this research aims to identify the current market trends and opportunities, the challenges faced by providers and possible ways to overcome them, and the business model needed to properly design/ deliver a degree and non-degree PDP.

The research initially presents the empirical findings and reviews existing research to provide the reader with context and perspective about PDPs, in terms of the current trends, purpose, value, providers' methodologies, and partnerships, as well as the program design and content. Followed by the research methodology, which outlines the scope of the research and explains the methodology used as well as the rationale behind it. After that, the results of the research are presented, followed by the discussion of the main findings, their implications and the main recommendations that may aid PDP providers in the formulation of efficient and competitive PDPs. Finally, the conclusions, limitations and suggestions for future research are presented.

2. Literature Review

This section presents a broad examination of literature findings regarding two types of university-based PDPs: degree-based PDPs and non-degree-based PDPs. The study tackles the following: (1) *the marketing element* to identify the latest marketing trends and opportunities, as well as the key factors that encourage participants, and (2) *the managerial element* to identify the managerial key factors that should be applied by the provider for an effective PDP strategy.

2.1 The Market Opportunities

PDPs are viewed as products, but with modular components, where faculty teach their material routinely and with limited linkage to practice. Such offering is standardized and is typically built around faculty that are in control, which accordingly results in less learning from participants, stunted organizational impact, as well as distancing of faculty research from participants (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Pearce, 2004). Unfortunately, universities are not known for their ability to be change oriented, progressive, and flexible, to effectively respond to the changing needs of corporate partners (Fulmer, 1997).

Just as universities seek to adapt their content to adjust to the demands of the rapidly changing environment, many are scanning the environment for new opportunities and new markets for continued growth. The ongoing demand of individuals seeking PD presents a clear opportunity, but also presents a dramatically distinct set of expectations and challenges. Corporate expenditure on development activities and PD has been increasing significantly, and it is expected that this expenditure level will continue to increase (Vicere, *et al.*, 1994).

For universities, PDPs are considered another source of revenue (Kerr, *et al.*, 2007). However, in this era, it is vital for PDP providers to ask for a greater return from this investment (Tushman, *et al.*, 2007). PDPs allow providers to expand their relationships with area corporations, which can also provide consulting opportunities for the faculty's individual competencies and experiences (Hura, 2013). Moreover, in the PDP setting, where practitioners engage in programs to make a connection between research and managerial challenges, there is an opportunity to forge a collaborative relation of research-practice, or a potential to couple both research and practice (Anderson, 2003; Conger & Xin, 2000).

2.1.1 PDPs Target Audience

Nowadays, PDPs are offered all around the world and are available for all classes, university sizes and business schools. However, when it comes to target markets, the one size fits all approach is inapplicable. Audiences of PDPs are neither unified nor internally cohesive (Fessler, 2001; Garvin, 2007; Mento & Larson, 2004). PDPs are comprised of differentiated student profiles and differentiated educational environments. Moreover, the educational motivations, expectations, and needs of these diverse groups are highly distinct, which mandates careful thinking to design and deliver the courses successfully for each (Smith & Keaveney, 2017).

It is noticeable that enrollments in the MBA programs are increasing worldwide, which creates an interesting market opportunity targeting people working in applied sciences sectors (engineering, medicine, and more), who have never studied business subjects before their MBA enrollment. MBA programs offered by universities are trending not only for philosophical or practical reasons, but for market reasons as well. As a result, MBA graduates in developing countries are considered the economic agents for the Multi-National Companies (MNCs) in this part of the world. Another audience sector is the potential applicants to non-degree-based Programs, provided by universities for professional people willing to improve their marketing edge with new professional skills or improving on their existing skills, hence a new competitive advantage in their professional career (Alam, *et al.*, 2020).

2.1.2 Ensuring Relevance to Target Audience

Nowadays, corporate audiences have various choices when it comes to program providers. It is assumed that modern or visionary business school are going to evolve into a networked entity, both inside and outside the academic fraternity, leading innovative, and thought leadership research that is undertaken by cross-functional or cross-institutional teams. As a result, the

remaining business schools need to work hard, develop modified and even new range of capabilities to respond to such challenges and retain relevance in the PD climate. Deep knowledge of the market trends and the needs of the clients is required to identify, design, and develop complex program solutions. The two essential ingredients are (1) to have outstanding understanding of the clients, which is needed to candidly reveal the challenges faced as well as the available resources, and (2) the willingness of the educator to spend considerable efforts and time, to reveal the needed mentoring and teaching requirements (Dover, *et al.*, 2018).

According to the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS), it is vital to be responsive to these new market shifts and opportunities. The market is in need of course content that reflects the skills needed for professional development. Business schools need to start adapting their offerings to meet such needs (CABS, 2017).

As previously mentioned, the market for PD will continue to grow; however, the main challenge will be what the third-party organizations will get. The losers here will be PDPs that offer lack of relevance since the abstract concepts will no longer be sufficient to ensure the satisfaction of the clients. Providers will need to differentiate their offering and constantly work on delivering the clients' perceived value to sustain a lasting competitive advantage (Büchel & Antunes, 2007).

2.1.3 Establishing Distinction and Competitive Advantage

PDPs in business schools are faced by a genuine challenge and are threatened by the emergence of training organizations, consultancies, and other providers, as well as the internationalization of provision from corporate clients who provide programs that are grounded in their own organizational reality (Starkey, *et al.*, 2004; Friga, *et al.*, 2003). Business schools, coaches, consultants, and others provide diverse advantages and disadvantages. For example, business schools

may have the advantages of being better able to focus on enhancing the cognitive and the behavioral complexity of the participants, as well as expansion to their mindsets. This would enable participants to develop mental models and improve their behavioral repertoire or their weakness areas. However, they may lack knowledge of the practical applications in specific organizational contexts. Consultants, however, would be better able to gain a better understanding of the organizational contexts, their issues, and problems, but would lack the educational or academic skills that are needed in delivering a lasting change for participants (Büchel & Antunes, 2007).

To develop rapprochement between the scholarly demands for the intellectual rigor and the need for the practical relevance, PDPs within business schools must better understand and exploit their distinctive strength and articulate how it can turn into a genuine competitive advantage (Harrison, *et al.*, 2007). Corporates are recognizing PDPs as a vital tool to develop the skills and capabilities of their managers and employees (Büchel & Antunes, 2007). As a result, PDPs must be distinctive, so that managers and employees would immediately seize the opportunity in front of them (Lockhart, 2013). Business schools need to employ their distinct and unique intellectual assets and other supporting services to resolve any complex problems from clients. This can be achieved by offering tailored learning methods that has resultant measurable outcomes, including the application of the concepts learned to the activities of the company, or offering new and enhanced capabilities that are based on the core learning and the application needs of a company (Dover, *et al.*, 2018).

As a means for competitive advantage, it is vital that business school providers focus on their unique selling propositions. Every provider has a range of factors which differentiate it from others (such as specialist expertise and knowledge, reputation, customizable programs, location, connections- either locally, nationally, or internationally (CABS, 2017). To cope with the

fierce competition, a PDP provider must provide real world impact for those involved, this will not only yield higher income, but will also lead to customer satisfaction and business retention. Hence, reinforcing the brand image and reputation (Lorange, 2002).

Promoting distinctiveness should allow providers to reconcile their internal and contemplative impulses more strategically, with the rising demand for active engagement and greater visibility with the external world (Harrison, *et al.*, 2007).

2.2 Provider's Strategy for Efficient PDPs

This section overviews the key concepts and main findings presented by other researchers to assist PDP providers in the formulation of the most suitable strategy for an optimal and efficient PDP; this includes the methodology used in the PDPs' assessment process as well as the technological tools that can make them more appealing to the market. It also tackles how partnerships between providers and participants contribute to a successful PDP, the role of multidisciplinary PDPs in creating a competitive advantage to the provider, and the key factors required for a successful PDP. Finally, this section explores the main weak points in the performance of executive leaders that slow-down the achievement of the PDPs' objectives.

2.2.1 Importance of Technology in PDPs Methodology

Using technology in PDPs will provide all tools needed to assess the success and value of the process. This will enable PDP participants to implement the skills they developed in their respective business environment, leading to more efficiency and better work performance (Lo & Ng, 2021). Well-established companies use technological sources to develop new products, offer new services and ensure sustained communication processes with various stakeholders (including customers, suppliers, and competitors). Moreover, the diverse technological tools make it easier for providers to update their services according to the needs

of participants in an easier and a more efficient manner. Hence, the technological environment provides more attractive PDPs that are highly adaptive to the market needs. This fact is fundamental, given the systemic and interactive nature of the innovation process (Vasconcelos & Ferreira, 2004).

Digital technologies enhance work practices and can easily adapt to the needs of other institutions, which enhances effectiveness in providing instruction, support, and resources through various digital channels. In addition to that, to acquire an effective action learning program, a combination of educational theories and technological practices is necessary (O'Neil & Pegrum, 2018). There has been an increased demand for business education through online platforms in the marketplace (such as the Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC)), especially for entrepreneurship courses, followed by management and then e-commerce (Mozahem, 2021).

2.2.2 Provider's Strategic Intelligence

On another note, academic research has proven that among PDPs, some major topics are now merging diverse professions to multidisciplinary environments (Lombardi, *et al.*, 2017), developing real-life skills that are reflected in groups (Belet, 2007), and shifting the learning process from a professor/student relationship to a researcher/mentor relationship instead (Cho, *et al.*, 2021).

Academic institutions looking for higher competitiveness, in the MENA region and in Egypt particularly, are willing to achieve strategic leadership through differentiated performance (Mohamed, *et al.*, 2019). According to Radwan (2019), there is a positive relationship between intellectual capital and the level of performance of university-based PDPs in Egypt. Human capital remains to be the most influential element when it comes to the quality of graduates, scientific research contribution, and community services or environmental awareness.

Continuous competitive vigilance improves both the marketing and managerial performance levels of PDPs in Egypt. As a result, a provider should identify other competing PDP providers' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, through regular SWOT analyses, to compare other competitors' market value and evaluate their service offerings to undergraduates, postgraduates, and executives. This would enable a provider to modify and adjust its PDP to adapt to the new challenges and techniques provided by competitors (Mohammed, 2021).

2.2.3 Business Model Characteristics of University Based PDPs

Research provided several important factors to be considered in university-based PDP's business model. These factors were ranked based on their importance to the provider. The first highly ranked factors were related to *having an additional source of revenue* and *an enhanced reputation*, followed by the *research factor* as an important element for the executive education strategy, followed by *acquiring new PDP participants which affects* the providers market share, especially when (1) the provider is more selective to whom they accept as participants, and (2) when a differentiated service is offered (when the provider offers customized PDPs based on the needs of potential participants). In addition to that, and for enrichment and diversification, some PDP providers bring- in experts from other institutions (that have a mix of both academic and corporate experience) to deliver some of the PDP courses. Furthermore, alliances with other schools can provide an added value to the PDPs offered and increase competitive advantage (Laidlaw Jr, 2000).

For a better strategic perspective, the PDP model reflects on four sources of self-efficacy that include (1) stimulating learning through peer observations, (2) conducting microteaching and group activities, (3) carrying out interactive sessions for social experiences inclusion, and (4) setting contact sessions to create

proficiency experiences. Such teaching techniques that are adapted to the needs of the participants enable them to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge in a flexible learning environment. Moreover, throughout the program, providers should ensure a safe learning environment for participants and reduce any feelings of stress or anxiety by creating a sense of community (Noben, *et al.*, 2021).

It is also vital to build partnerships between providers and professional organizations through sharing the planning procedures and companies' enrollment of their transferred employees in PDPs. For a swift and rapid transfer adaptation, organizations have an obligation towards employees to provide them with the needed PDPs to enhance their work performance and increase their productivity. Such partnerships are considered a solution where everyone benefits, since the provider achieves their PDP strategic objectives, while the organization realizes better productivity by upgrading their human capital's professional skills (Ryan & Moriss, 2007).

2.2.4 PDPs Challenges for Providers and Potential Participants

The main elements that are lacking in the performance of executive leaders include organizational integration, adequate support from the top management, and good alignment with the company's objectives (Cohenno, 2004).

Findings showed that although PDPs are valuable for both providers and participants, they present a challenge to companies (Schrader, 1985). Research recommends that efficient DPs should be a shared task between the human resources (who recommend to the top management the best PDP providers) and the training & development (who determine the employees/ executives in need of these PDPs). This improves the performance of the employees/ executives and holds them

accountable for the business results they achieve in front of the upper management (Cohenno, 2004).

As mentioned previously, PDPs are also considered a challenge for providers to offer high quality programs with the proper investment that attune to potential participants and ensure good career incentives (Schrader, 1985).

In the light of this literature review and the above-mentioned research gap, the current study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. *What are the new market trends and opportunities of a degree and non-degree-based PDP?*
2. *What are the challenges faced in a degree and non-degree-based PDP and how to overcome these challenges?*
3. *What are the marketing and managerial considerations required to successfully deliver a degree and non-degree-based PDP?*

3. Research Methodology

To reach the research objectives and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation, this exploratory study adopted a qualitative research method approach, in the form of semi- structured face-to-face in-depth interviews.

Qualitative research was utilized in this study since most of the studies conducted on PDPs adopted that approach, such as: Büchel and Antunes (2007), CABS (2017), Harrison, *et al.* (2007), and many others. Moreover, this approach is vital in the process of examining certain concepts and identifying related constructs. In addition to that, semi-structured interviews were utilized since they enable the researcher to bring preliminary issues to the surface, determine and understand what factors need more investigation, and help explore several factors that may be central and vital for the broad problem area. Furthermore, face-

to-face interviews enable researchers to adapt and clarify the questions to the interviewees as necessary, and make sure that the responses obtained are properly understood (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009).

To achieve the research objectives, the study focused on two private universities in Egypt during their early PDP stages. A total of six interviews were conducted, where three interviews were conducted to analyze Provider A (a university launching a degree-based MBA program), and three interviews were conducted to analyze Provider B (a university launching non-degree-based certified courses). Interviewees included (1) *decision makers* in charge of the strategic side and future vision of the schools aligned with the university's strategic objectives from this newly added service, (2) *marketing research specialists* for the technical marketing aspect, and (3) the *PDP coordinator* responsible for the coordination between all the parties involved in the PDP project, to ensure efficient communication between internal and external stakeholders.

The process of planning and conducting the in-depth interviews included several steps. The researcher started by specifying the objectives of the qualitative research, and the information that needed to be collected. Then a detailed interview guide was developed, which consisted of the questions and issues that needed to be explored during the interviews. The interviews had a carefully designed outline. However, the outline was adjusted during the interviews according to the feedback or answers obtained. For pre-testing, the interview questions were reviewed by a panel study, to ensure that questions were well written and measured what they were intended to measure.

The collected information was informative and relevant to the research objectives. The next section explains the main insights obtained from the interviews to ensure the success of newly launched PDPs.

4. Results

This section presents the main findings of the study.

4.1 Provider A: Degree-Based PDP

After graduating the first cohort of students from the bachelor's degree program, and after successfully establishing a brand name and building a good reputation in the market, the provider's focus shifted to launching a degree- based PDP.

The provider is currently negotiating with several foreign universities to formulate a partnership and launch an MBA program. From the provider's point of view, a partnership is better, especially if it is created with a well-established international university that has a strong brand name and image, since participants would have more trust in the program, believe that the service quality is outstanding, this will accordingly attract more participants to the program. Currently, the provider is in the process of finding the right partner that has (1) substantial experience in PDPs, (2) a good university ranking, and (3) affordable financial requirements.

Based on the market research conducted, Egyptians prefer degree-based programs. The provider decided to start with an MBA program because in the business field, the people who need PDPs are more than those in need for academic programs, especially since academic programs are limited to those working in academia. Professionals and people working in corporations prefer PDPs, such as MBA programs, which results in a higher demand for PDPs.

The focus now is directed towards the launch of the MBA program; since it is always better to focus on one thing at a time. However, for the future, launching academic programs (such as master programs and PhDs) are being considered, since it is important to be up to the market needs and participants' demands. Furthermore, since this program is a general MBA program,

including more specialized programs that are more oriented toward participants specializations are in the agenda (for example, some programs can be designed exclusively for engineers or pharmacists, and so on), since it is always better if programs are tailored based on the needs of the participants and the society.

There are a lot of competitors in the market who offer a wide variety of PDPs. In the light of the market research conducted, all competitors who offer similar programs were analyzed in terms of the types of programs offered, curriculum design, and tuition fees. For the provider, one big challenge was to be able to stand out and compete within this fierce competition. However, the differentiation elements will take place in terms of both quality and price. This will be done through providing superior & exceptional quality and including more practical applications than just theoretical knowledge with competitive prices. In addition to that, another way to create value lies in the choice of partners, since if chosen wisely, they would be attractive to the target audience and would grab more participants to the program.

Another challenge relates to obtaining and retaining the best staff members who can strengthen, enhance, and improve the quality of the program, especially since most of the existing MBA providers do not really get or hire superior quality instructors. PDP instructors must have a mix of both professional and academic experience. This is because besides having the academic skills, knowledge and talents required to deliver the courses, instructors also need to have the professional background or corporate experience that would enable them to explain to the participants the kind of problems they may encounter in their professional lives by providing them with real life cases and situations. This would provide participants with better insights, more knowledge, better experience, and value. It would also guide them in how to overcome similar challenges.

To launch an MBA program, the approval of the Supreme Council of Universities in Egypt. In addition to that, various elements that are dependent on the provider's budget need to be considered. Such constraints will shape and base the program. However, the feasibility study and the cost-wise analysis should provide the provider with all this information. These important considerations include (1) *the facilities* needed to launch a PDP, that include the location & classrooms, computers, internet stream, servers, and logistics, (2) *the faculty/ instructors* needed and whether they are internal (a part of the provider's existing workforce) or external (outsourced/ or to be hired for the program), and (3) *the curriculum design*, which will be jointly designed by both the provider and the partner university.

PDPs have tremendous benefits and add value to providers, it links the provider with the market, the industry, and applications, and it enhances the provider's brand name and image, and gives it a better reputation in the market. It is also considered another source of revenue that increases the provider's financial position.

PDPs add value to participants as well. It develops them professionally and upgrades their work performance. It provides them with the knowledge, skills, and experiences needed to make them better decision makers and problem solvers who can better respond to the workplace challenges faced in the future. However, real studies assessing what kind of benefits and value PDPs have added to participants are needed. Online questionnaires, follow-ups, and proper communications with the program participants are essential to consider the real benefits of these programs, such aspects are vital to be analyzed in research as well. It is important to ensure that this feedback is not solely obtained from the PDP participants, but from those who are best able to observe the participants' learning outcomes as well (such as the participants' bosses, supervisors, peers, and subordinates).

Proper marketing is essential for the success of PDPs. As a result, marketing will take place in several ways and forms, to ensure that participants are aware of the program, its benefits, and value proposition. This will be done through the provider's marketing team, under the supervision of the business school. If necessary, an external marketing agency may be also hired or outsourced.

Looking into the future trends and the market needs, anything that has to do with computer applications, digitalization, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) applications in various fields are needed and have become relevant to all disciplines (including engineering, medical fields, pharmaceuticals, and others). These are the booming topics nowadays and are accordingly needed as knowledge and skills in the marketplace. As a result, it is expected that corporations will start adding and utilizing digitalization and AI in different fields, which makes it mandatory to embed such topics in future PDPs.

4.2 Provider B: Non-Degree-Based PDP

The belief that PDPs were not rewarding and sustainable enough, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, delayed the launch of the PDP despite its high potential. From the provider's perspective, the main reasons to create a PDP are to increase their financial returns and create a competitive advantage.

Starting non-degree PD courses was the provider's first objective. Courses target different segments of participants; depending on the course topic, some of which require no experience, others require a minimum of three years of professional experience, whereas others target directors and top managerial levels. The duration of each course ranges from one to two months, through which participants receive a certificate of attendance at course completion.

Based on the market research conducted, participants joining PDPs are usually interested in acquiring new knowledge or skills to help them improve their job performances and get promoted, they also prefer a recognizable certification accredited from a well reputable professional/academic institution. Executives are always looking for self-development, whether by taking courses in their own specific field, or in different fields in general. Besides, most of the organizations invest yearly on employees' developments, look for courses that would help their employees, and enhance their knowledge & skills, especially in some trending fields, such as digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and medical awareness courses for non-professionals.

For the future, offering a wide range of courses is being considered. These courses may vary in duration (from a one-day workshop to a diploma extended over many semesters, types of certificates offered (certificates of attendance, accredited certificates from renowned professional institutions and diplomas) and the delivery channels (online courses and on campus courses). Moreover, launching an academic master's degree is on their agenda. However, to do that, the provider needs to allocate a higher budget, have the needed infrastructure, and meet the requirements of the Supreme Council of Universities in Egypt. Since governmental approvals are needed for degree-based PDPs, unlike non-degree courses that do not require governmental approvals.

For financial feasibility purposes, the PDP determined fees are not a differentiation element for the provider. The provider's competitive advantage lies in their well-centered location & attractive campus, the prime quality facilities, and having several highly qualified instructors in different specializations. Moreover, the courses offered are designed to be appealing to the market needs in various sectors. For a better brand image and to increase the competitiveness of the program, the provider plans

to get accreditation in the future, from a foreign external professional institution.

Based on the feasibility study, the allocated budget for the PDP should respond to the required resources as well as the financial and marketing returns expected by the provider. The main resource types needed for the PDP are: (1) *facilities and infrastructures*: including classrooms, technological devices, and a good internet stream, (2) *human capital* (whether internal or external instructors), and (3) *content development*. If any of these resources are not available, the university will have to rely on external suppliers (rent a class, projectors, etc.), which will result in an increase in the service costs.

With regards to the selection of faculty members, there is a required profile for an efficient instructor, who should adjust his/her teaching style to the target audience and have both a practical and academic background. A professional background is necessary for any course instructor. Internal instructors (that are a part of the provider's faculty) are more likely to be committed and have fewer financial implications than external instructors.

The course content is designed by either internal or external course developers, depending on the course and the instructor delivering that course. However, as a rule of thumb, the developer should be someone who not only understands the market, but also the ways to serve the market needs in detail.

Challenges in the launching phase are expected, and the management's support is crucial for the success of the program. The challenges of the PDP for the provider include the limited budget as well as the moderate support from the top management. Another challenge was related to setting an imprecise date for the launch of the PD, which was the reason for the limited number of registrations. Hence, some of the courses had to be postponed until the minimum number of participants required was reached for the financial feasibility of the course. The launching date is

crucial for the success of the PDP, it is recommended to announce the courses to the target companies during the first and second quarters of the company's financial exercise, to have necessary budget allocation to finance the yearly staff PD. Moreover, marketing activities should target the company's HR departments, since they are the best to screen and point out employees who need training and capacity building.

In this stage, the main priority remains to be offering a competitive course content that responds to the market needs, ensuring attractive and credible instructors, spreading the word, and creating a buzz of the newly launching PDP, defining potential client sectors, and the common interesting topics. Relying on online marketing channels was the plan at that stage to cut down the costs. The marketing channels focused on included the university's magazine, social media channels, student's union buzz, and Word of Mouth (WOM). In addition to that, the connections and networks of the upper management and the external instructors were utilized.

5. Discussion

The paper highlighted that PDPs offered by universities are viewed as products with modular components. This idea corresponded to the literature findings by Kolb & Kolb (2005) and Pearce (2004), which suggested that traditional university offerings tend to be standardized and faculty-centric, resulting in limited learning from participants and distancing of faculty research from practice. The paper also referenced the increasing corporate expenditure on development activities and PDPs, in line with the findings of Vicere *et al.* (1994). In addition to that, results revealed that the target audience for PDPs is diverse and differentiated, requiring careful design and delivery of courses. This aligns with the literature by Fessler (2001), Garvin (2007), Mento and Larson (2004), & Smith and Keaveney (2017), who discussed the differentiated profiles, motivations, expectations, and needs of PDP participants. According to the findings,

business schools offering PDPs need to have a deep understanding of market trends and the needs of the clients to develop relevant program solutions. This idea was supported by the literature, such as the Chartered Association of Business Schools (CABS, 2017), which emphasized the importance of adapting course content to meet the skills needed for professional development. Furthermore, the paper highlighted the challenges faced by business schools offering PDPs, including competition from training organizations, consultancies, and corporate clients. The literature by Starkey, *et al.* (2004), Friga, *et al.* (2003), Büchel and Antunes (2007), & Harrison, *et al.* (2007) was referenced to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different providers and suggested that business schools should leverage their distinctive strengths, such as enhancing cognitive and behavioural complexity, while also addressing the practical applications in specific organizational contexts.

6. Recommendations

In looking to the future and based on the insights obtained from the interviews as well as the challenges faced by the providers, the current study has arrived at the following recommendations that are applicable for both degree- based and non-degree-based PDPs.

Recommendation #1: Carefully and Continuously Scan the Market

It is crucial to carefully scan the environment and conduct market research prior to launching either a degree-based or a non-degree-based PDP, to realize the latest trends & market opportunities to seize them and pinpoint the threats to find ways to overcome them. It is also essential to carefully analyze the competition and assess what current competitors are offering, to identify the best possible ways to differentiate one's offerings and stand out from the competition. It would also be beneficial to conduct interviews with the decision makers of the target companies, to realize the potential client companies' expectations and what they are

looking for. In addition to that, with regards to non-degree-based PDPs, it is vital to carefully select the appropriate time to launch the PD courses, after establishing a brand name and after the financial exercise of the target companies has been determined, to ensure that the budget needed for their staff professional development has been set. Finally, it is worth mentioning that not only is it important to conduct market research in the preliminary stages of the program development, but constantly scanning the market for opportunities and threats is essential in every stage of the PDP life cycle, for the PDP providers to make the necessary adjustments to their plans or programs.

Recommendation #2: Ensure Relevance of Content and Adjust Content based on participants Needs

As mentioned previously, the one size fits all approach is no longer applicable to PDPs. PDPs are comprised of differentiated student profiles and differentiated educational environments, who have distinct educational motivations, expectations, and needs. This mandates careful thinking to design and deliver the courses successfully for each. Participants joining PDPs are either looking for a degree-based PDP or a recognizable certification accredited from a famous professional institution. Moreover, participants' interest in degree-based PDPs has been increasing worldwide over the past years, especially in Egypt, for philosophical, practical, and market reasons. As a result, a deep knowledge of the market trends and participants' needs is necessary to identify and design complex program solutions. Program content and topics should always be based on the learning needs of participants or their organizations. In the light of the interviews and the market research conducted by the providers, nowadays, most of the organizations are focusing on the trending fields that has to do with computer applications such as digital transformation and AI, that are relevant to all sectors including engineering, medical fields, pharmaceuticals, and others. These trends are booming nowadays and are needed in the marketplace. Accordingly, it is recommended to offer more specialized

programs that are either more oriented towards meeting the organization's needs or the participants specializations. Tailoring programs to meet the needs of the participants as well as society would result in more efficient programs, higher satisfaction rates, better WOM, and a competitive advantage.

Recommendation #3: Make use of Corporates and Client Collaboration

For better efficiency of the PDPs offered by universities, a win-win relationship is vital between the provider and the participants/corporations. Providers need to carefully know their corporate market and build relationships with several diverse corporations. Every provider has unique connections and relationships with local corporations, through these relationships the seeds of the program should be planted. This means that corporations may guide PDP providers by communicating the specific learning objectives that can help participants achieve the strategic learning needs of their organizations. Corporates may be actively involved in discussions, the choice of topics, and recommend the appropriate learning design. In addition to that, referrals from such corporations can help in expanding the entire program to other organizations and businesses. Accordingly, continuous, and frequent consultations between the providers and potential client organizations, including public and private sectors as well as the civil society is recommended, to ensure a quality business and management education that answers the local and global market needs.

Recommendation #4: Set a Well-Defined Profile for Instructors

One of the main elements that has an influence on the PDP's success is the instructors delivering the program. To ensure the success of the PDP, instructors must be knowledgeable enough to teach a variety of levels, demonstrate the ability to consult, and conduct research. Hence, obtaining and retaining qualified instructors who can adjust their teaching styles based on the participants' needs can strengthen, enhance, and improve the

quality of the program. Internal instructors (who are part of the provider's faculty) are more likely to be committed and have fewer financial implications in comparison to external instructors. However, providers must set a well-defined profile for instructors and need to choose those who have a mix of both academic and professional experience, because besides having the academic skills and talents required to deliver the program courses, instructors need to have the professional or corporate experience, as well as a "deep" market understanding, since they are the ones involved in program delivery and post-program assessment. This would help participants deal with the perceived need and grasp the opportunities that can enable them to develop new behaviors, become effective in implementing innovative ideas, or get rid of dysfunctional behavior patterns, which will eventually lead to successful transformation in organizations. Moreover, academics need to develop the capacity to not only apply and utilize their own research to the individual and organizational context, but to also create research content that relates and matters to practice.

Recommendation #5: Communicate Competitive Advantage and Value Proposition

To effectively compete in this environment, providers need to have a focused agenda, and focus on precise areas of internal competencies and expertise. Providers should identify their strength elements and carefully seize them to distinguish themselves from competition and create a competitive advantage. Providers will need to differentiate their offering and constantly work on delivering the participant's perceived value to sustain a lasting competitive advantage. They need to offer innovative PDPs that are attractive for potential participants. In addition to that, choosing the right partner that has a well-established brand name and image can attract more participants to the program and make them confident that the quality of the program is outstanding. Such differentiation elements must be well communicated by providers through their marketing activities. If providers are strict about budget, they may rely on their internal

marketing department and their own digital marketing channels. It would also be beneficial to make use of the providers' connections and networks of the upper management to communicate their competitive advantage. If necessary, an external marketing agency may be hired/ outsourced to create awareness and communicate the programs perceived value.

Recommendation #6: Meet the Requirements of the Supreme Council of Universities

Governmental approvals are needed for degree- based PDPs, unlike the non-degree programs/ courses that do not require governmental approvals. Providers who wish to launch a degree-based PDP need to allocate a higher budget, have the needed infrastructure and the needed resources to meet the requirements of the Supreme Council of Private Universities in Egypt. Especially since Egyptian governing policies for degree-based PDPs are subject to national regulations regarding faculty hiring, student recruitment and curriculum design.

Recommendation #7: Follow up on the Real Added Value from PDPs

It is essential to assess what kind of benefits and value PDPs have added to the participants, in terms of whether it helped them get a better job, get promoted or become better problem solvers, and to whether these programs have broadened their perspectives and expanded their future vision. Accordingly, online questionnaires, ongoing follow ups and proper communications with the participants are essential, to consider the real benefits of these programs. In addition to that, it is important to ensure that this feedback is not only obtained from the PDP participants, but also from those who are best able to observe the participants' learning outcomes (such as their bosses, supervisors, peers, and subordinates), to investigate the real effectiveness and benefits of the program and make the appropriate adjustments, as necessary.

7. Conclusion

The professional world is constantly changing and has become increasingly competitive. PD has become a strategic tool for many organizations, designed to develop employees, improve management effectiveness, and enhance overall leadership. PDPs and continual learning have become vital for individuals to achieve their career goals and become successful. Moreover, it has become crucial for individuals to constantly advance their skills and sharpen their knowledge to stay up to date on the industry trends and knowledge.

As previously mentioned, PD has undergone a radical transformation and programs have become more learner centered, much more innovative, and relevant to the company needs than before. However, unfortunately, with all the resources spent on PDPs, there has been little evidence that it has added a real value to participants or their firms. In addition to that, current teaching methods offer little added value for participants and further research was needed to come up with ideas that would make PDPs more useful to individuals and their organizations.

The aim of this study was to investigate the marketing and managerial implications for degree based and non-degree-based PDP providers in Egypt, in the light of the current market opportunities and trends, program's purpose and value-added, the diverse providers' methodologies, and the program design.

To reach the research objectives and obtain a comprehensive understanding of the topic under investigation, this exploratory study adopted a qualitative research method, where semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with university executives and decision makers who had extensive knowledge of the market needs, and a vast experience with academia and PDPs. The study focused on two private universities in Egypt, during their early PDP stages, one

launching a degree-based MBA program and the other launching non-degree courses.

The study presented seven main recommendations that may help providers in the formulation of efficient PDPs. These recommendations included the following: carefully and continuously scanning the market for opportunities and threats, ensuring relevance of content and adjusting the content offered based on the participants needs, making use of corporates and client collaboration, setting a well-defined profile for instructors, communicating competitive advantage and value proposition, meeting the requirements of the supreme council of universities, and following up on the real added value from PDPs.

This study serves as a foundation for future research. To provide a more comprehensive picture, it is recommended to thoroughly investigate what the participants and employers look for in PDPs, since this study only focused on the providers' perspective. Secondly, and to make the findings of the study more generalizable, it is recommended to investigate the case of public universities as well, since this study was limited to private universities in Egypt. Finally, real studies assessing what kind of benefits and value PDPs have added to participants are needed, not only from the participants' perspectives, but also from those who are best able to observe the learning outcomes, such as their bosses, supervisors, peers, and subordinates.

Research Glossary

PDP: a Professional Development Program provided by a university as an additional service targeting potential participants with a professional background to develop their professional skills and knowledge.

A degree-based postgraduate PDP: refers to an MBA (Master of Business Administration) degree that helps participants build on their relevant employment experience and develop their professional skills and knowledge.

A non-degree-based PDP: are certified non-degree courses intended to help employees and employers to improve their skills, competences, and professional knowledge.

Provider: the university offering degree or non-degree-based PDP to potential participants.

Participant: any person enrolled in a university-based PDP.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. How did you realize the market opportunity to launch a professional development program?
2. Did you conduct market research analysis?
3. What were the results of the market research conducted?
4. What gap are you filling in the market?
5. How will you establish difference and value proposition?
6. Is there a clear business model for the professional development program to build and maintain relationships with the participants?
7. Who are the people involved from the management and marketing departments? Are they internal or external entities?
8. Who is going to design the curriculum for your professional development program?
9. What are the benefits and importance of the professional development program launch? For both the university and participants?
10. Does the launch of the program help in the development of the university's brand name/ image?
11. Who are the participants in that program?
12. How did the participants make you think differently?
13. What are the resources you think are needed to effectively launch a professional development program?
14. What are the internal or external challenges that you are facing?
15. What marketing channels are the most important in this stage?