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# BENCHMARKING AND SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CASE: SUMMER SCHOOL AT UNIVERSITY X

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ABSTRACT

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Together with globalization, internationalization has become an emerging trend among many higher education institutions worldwide. Over the past few years, the internationalization process has moved from a reactive to a pre-active strategy. In other words, institutions are beginning to develop different approaches to catch up with current market trends and expand their international cooperation in terms of exchange or partnership. Summer school is regarded as one of the most popular projects which provide great benefits for both institutions and students.

The aim of this thesis is to develop a benchmarking research for the summer school project at university X, and suggest suitable service improvement tactics. University X is a leading institution for higher education in Austria. They have started summer school several years ago; but the latest project failed to attract international students and fulfill their interests. As a result, the team has come up with a preliminary concept of multi-country summer school. While benchmarking has been chosen as the main framework to research competitors, a customer research is also included to collect more ideas for the new concept.

This thesis follows a deductive research approach. Data collection process is supported by both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Primary data were acquired via empirical sources like interviews, surveys, observation, and questionnaire. On the other hand, secondary data were obtained through both academic sources like books, journals, and online sources like webpage and online portals.

Findings from the research reveal that the best practices of summer school in the market usually offer distinctive values in such dimensions as location, academic program, social events, price, accommodation, etc. In addition, service improvement is a long-term process that requires continuous evaluation and changes to adapt with new demand. Based on this research, the institution can figure out suitable approaches to improve their service package. Nevertheless, further research is also needed to identify better practices from other competitors, and to provide a wider understanding about international students' interests in summer school.

Key words: benchmarking, public domain benchmarking, service improvement, 7Ps service marketing mix, summer school, survey, questionnaire

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to provide an overview of background knowledge, research topic, and the author's motivation to start this study. Firstly, the background describes updated internationalization trends in higher education worldwide. Then, the thesis objectives and research questions are explained in details. The theoretical framework focuses on a benchmarking model and service improvement tactics; whereas research methodology will guide readers through research stages and data collection process. Lastly, the structure gives a brief summary of the main parts in this thesis.

### 1.1 Background

The past few years have seen an increasing trend in expanding international activities between higher educational institutions around the world. The distribution of international students has historically been heavily concentrated in the popular English-speaking destinations like Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. However, the trend is now turning to other countries like Italy, Spain, France or the Netherlands.

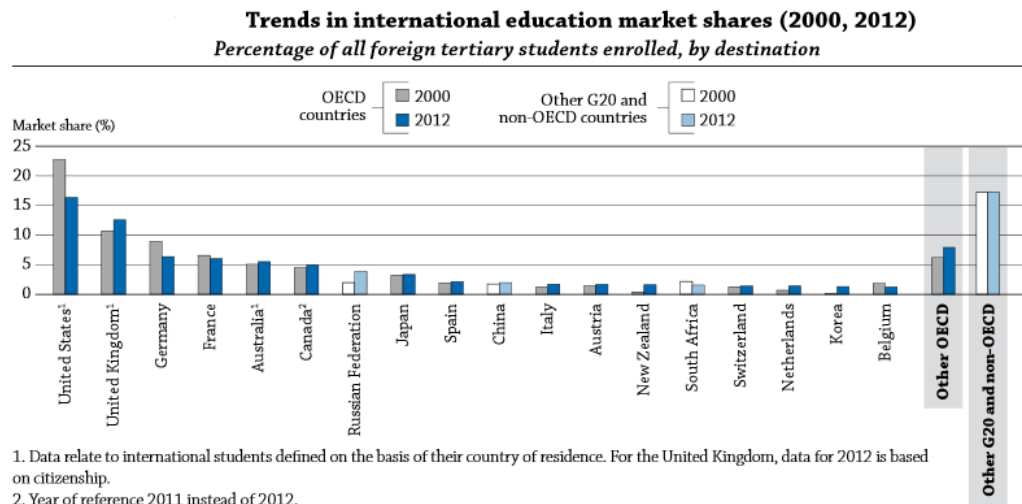


FIGURE 1. Percentage of All Foreign Tertiary Students Enrolled by Destination (OECD, Education at a Glance 2014, 346)

As can be seen from Figure 1, while the share of international students who chose the United States as their destination for tertiary education dropped from 23% in 2000 to 16% in 2012, the figures in such countries as Spain, New Zealand and Russia grew by at least 1 percentage point. Some of these changes reflect differences in countries' approaches to internationalize and establish foreign reputation. (OECD, *Education at a Glance 2014*, 345.)

One of the most popular international projects in higher education institution is summer school. This refers to a short-term course, which is usually hold in summer and lasts from one to six weeks. The concept of summer school is an exciting combination of high-quality academic education and a wide range of cultural and social activities. (INNES 2015.) The courses can be provided in different fields depending on the institutions' study programs; among them business is the dominant topic. In addition, the social programs which include activities like welcome and farewell events, company visits, workshop, sightseeing tours, cross-cultural experiences are especially appealing to international students. Therefore, summer school has become a trendy model which is acquired and developed by many universities worldwide. (Top Universities 2014.)

The author came up with the thesis topic when she was doing a six-month internship in the International Office of University X. This institution is very active in international activities and wants to attract more foreign students from all over the world. Therefore, the international team has started to organize summer school projects for several years. Summer school is very beneficial, because it can not only help to attract more international students to their summer courses but also maintain a sustainable relationship between host institution and other partners for future student mobility and cooperation. In the past few years, due to stiff competition in the market, University X has encountered numerous difficulties in attracting new participants and ensuring their summer school's quality. Therefore, the international team has come up with a preliminary concept of multi-country summer school, namely Business Train Europe. However, the concept is relatively new, which requires further and extensive research in terms of market, competitors and customers' needs.



After 3 months involved in the summer school project with the main task of market research and data collection, the author decided to develop this idea further and included it as part of this thesis. The main topic is “Benchmarking and service improvements in higher education institutions, with an applicable case of summer school in University X.”

## 1.2 Thesis Objectives, Research Questions, and Limitations

The internationalization process at University X started several years ago. They are very active in organizing such international events as exchange fair, international weeks, partner visits, summer schools, etc. However, this thesis only focuses on summer school project as it offer great benefits in attracting international students and establishing cooperative partnership with foreign institutions.

The aim of this thesis is to conduct a benchmarking process which helps to compare the current service performance of the institution with other competitors in the market. As a result, proper improvement solutions would be suggested to develop the preliminary concept of summer school at University X. The institution has already built up the overall framework for multi-summer school concept. Nevertheless, the specific dimensions, for example, location, duration, programs, price, tactics, etc. are still missing due to lack of knowledge on market, competitors and customers. Therefore, this thesis will focus on competitor’s analysis and customers’ research in order to generate a practical improvement plan.

The main question is: *How can we benchmark the preliminary concept of summer school at University X in comparison with competitors in the market? And, what improvements should be made to develop this new concept?*

Sub questions:

- What is benchmarking? And, what is Public Domain Benchmarking process like?

- What are strengths and weaknesses of the preliminary summer school concept at University X?
- What are the main features of competitors' summer schools that distinguish themselves from others in the market?
- What are the different gaps between the institution's summer school and competitors' ones?
- What are customers' expectations for the preliminary concept of multi-country summer school?
- What kinds of service improvement solutions should be applied to complete and add value to the preliminary concept?

### **Limitations**

This thesis deals with the empirical case of summer school at University X. The benchmarking research is conducted based on the institution's specific needs and requirements. Therefore, the research results can be applied to improve this summer school, but may not be suitable for other institutions. The competitor benchmarking only consists of partner institutions with University X, which are mainly distributed in Europe. Besides, this thesis also includes a customer research with target groups being foreign students outside the Europe. The author cannot do research on a huge global scale, thus only students from selected countries that the institution has partnership are reached. The customer survey is participated by a variety of nationalities; thereby we can eliminate the cultural aspects and focus more on identifying general preferences and interests. Another limitation involves the main goal of the research. The preliminary summer school concept has been already built by the University X. Hence, the author will not try to modify the summer structure, but only focus on market research and improvement plan.

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework

Benchmarking is one of the most common instruments used in business organization to improve products or process continuously. There are many different ways to define benchmarking. APQC, a nonprofit benchmarking research portal, has defined benchmarking as a systematic and continuous process for measuring products, services or practices against those of the competition so as to gain information to improve performance (APQC 1993). In other words, benchmarking is a method of measuring and improving our organization by comparing ourselves with the best (Stapenhurst 2009, 18). Despite a range of definitions, benchmarking can be considered a management tool which helps the organization to understand its own advantages in comparison with the competitors, thus can adopt the best practices for improvement strategies.

Stapenhurst (2009) has suggested that organizations should take advantage of benchmarking as an improvement tool for many reasons. Firstly, compared to the traditional research tool, it can provide detailed information on where to focus improvement activities, which performance level is appropriate or which solutions can help to achieve maximum results. Therefore, some organizations even consider it a short-cut to improvement process. Secondly, it helps organizations to set a clear target, for instance, for 5% or 10% improvement on previous performance levels. Thirdly, benchmarking helps to target competitors' weak points and build an excellent business model. In addition, some organizations use benchmarking to build up a network of like-minded people. Even though it is seldom the main purpose of benchmarking, it is regarded as a useful outcome to facilitate benchmarking-related activities like participant's forums, websites and meetings. Lastly, benchmarking can also be used to test draft proposals.

When an institution comes up with a new project or a draft proposal, they would like to search for benchmarking partners who have implemented similar procedure before. The findings of the studies either lead to the cancellation of the proposal or suggestions for improvement activities. (Stapenhurst 2009, 13.) Thus, benchmarking is chosen as the main theoretical framework for this study. The draft proposal for a new summer school has been developed. Whereas, it still

needs to be benchmarked with other competitors to learn experiences from the best practices, and add more values to service improvement plan.

In practice, there is no single right method for benchmarking. Stapenhurst (2009) has categorized benchmarking into seven most common methods, namely Public Domain, One-to-one, Review, Trial, Survey and Business Excellent Models. After reviewing the main purposes and characteristics of seven methods, Public Domain Benchmarking has been chosen as it shows the closet similarity to the scope of the study. With this method, the benchmarker collects data from public resources, analyses it and provides a report. The metrics used in this study are usually “output metrics” which measure the products in terms of customers’ experiences. (Stapenhurst 2009, 20.) For example, when comparing summer school between different institutions, the research can focus on metrics that contribute to the quality of service performance like price, duration, accommodation, academic content, social activities, etc. (Summer school in Europe 2015).

In practice, each benchmarker can tailor their own benchmarking process to acquire, analyze and report data. After reviewing all features of Public Domain and the general steps in a benchmarking model, the author has decided to follow the process below.

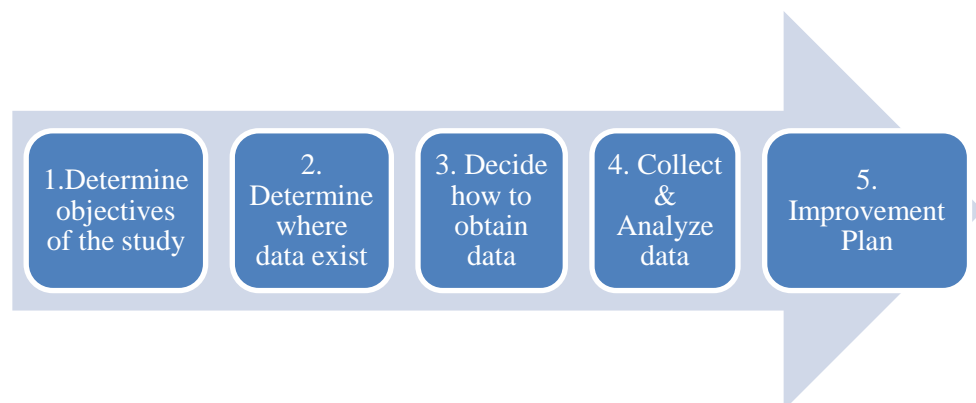


FIGURE 2. Process Flow Chart for Public Domain Benchmarking (modified from Stapenburst 2009, 25)

The basic idea of benchmarking process is very simple. It starts from defining objectives, looking for partners which are having the best practices in the market, analyzing how they achieve results, learning lessons and implementing changes. These steps are suggested to work effectively on the selected case as it can help them to catch up with the best trends in the market, add values to their own summer school, and launch the new project successfully. In addition, SWOT and Porter's 5 forces are also included to analyze situation from both internal and external perspectives. In the last step - improvement plan, the suggested solutions will be built with the help of service marketing mix (7Ps). The detailed description of all these frameworks will be explained in the literature review.

#### 1.4 Research Methodology and Data Collection

Before starting any research, it is important to decide which approach to follow. In general, there are two main ways of conducting a research: deduction and induction. With deduction, a theory or hypotheses are developed; then a research strategy is designed to test the hypothesis. On the other hand, with induction, data are collected and carefully analyzed, which can result in the formulation of a theory. (Saunders 2009, 133.)

Regarding the purpose of this research, which involves the collection of empirical data for a case study (summer school at University X) based on theoretical models, the author decided to adopt a deductive approach. This method requires a strict control of data validity, researcher independence of what is being researched and sufficient sample size to generate a proper conclusion (Saunders 2009, 130).

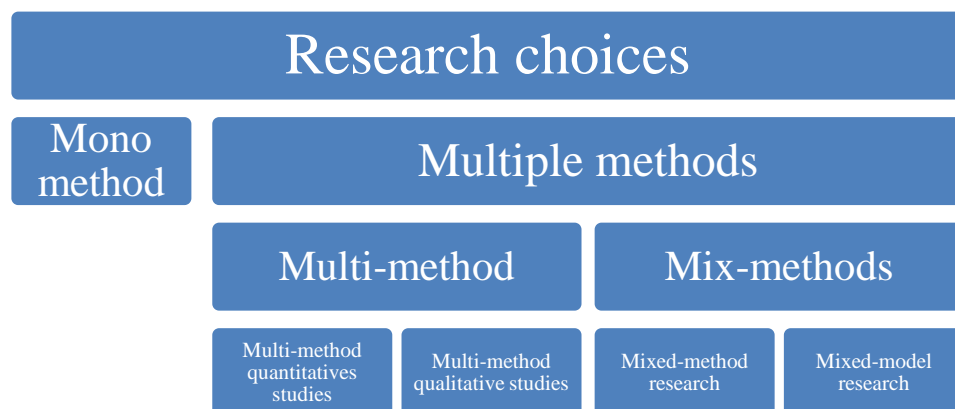


FIGURE 3. Research Choices (Saunders 2009, 152)

After a research approach has been chosen, we need to decide which research tactics should be implemented to collect and analyze data. From the model above, we can choose to use a single data collection technique (mono method) or multiple methods. Multiple methods are divided into multi-method, which combines more than one data collection techniques but restricted within either quantitative or qualitative view, and mixed-methods which employ both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques (Tashakkori 2003, according to Saunders 2009).

There are big differences between quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative refers to the methods to collect data like questionnaires, interviews or data analysis procedure such as graphs and statistics. Collected results are represented by numerical and standardized data. By contrast, qualitative refers to techniques like in-depth interviews, observation, focus group or analysis procedure that generates (or use) non-numerical data. This method tries to understand the reason why things happen or exist as the way it is. (Saunders 2009, 138.) In order to answer all the questions within the thesis scope, the author will use mixed-methods with a predomination of quantitative tactics. This research design allows data to be collected from different sources and by different techniques, therefore contributes to more detailed and trustworthy findings. However, quantitative data are analyzed quantitatively and qualitative data are analyzed qualitatively.

This research consists of four stages. Firstly, in-depth interviews with international team's members were conducted and analyzed qualitatively in order to figure out the institution's concerns regarding preliminary summer school concept as well as their research needs.

Then, a questionnaire was developed with the purpose of collecting primary data on customer's perspectives. The analysis of quantitative data helps to compare different attitudes toward duration, price, academic programs, and other features of a summer school. Due to the fact that the target customer groups are international students outside Europe, the survey was sent to 10 partner

universities overseas. The opinions are expected to be neutral, and focused on preferences concerning summer school's features regardless of different cultural backgrounds.

At the same time, a structured observation was made, using both online and offline resources, to examine existing competitors in the market. Summer school offers were collected from updated brochures and promotional materials from partner universities, school websites and online platforms.

Lastly, a semi-structured group interview with head of international team helped to clarify survey results and provide suggestions to improve the service package.

## 1.5 Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into seven chapters with two main parts: theoretical and empirical.

Chapter 1 introduces background information, research objectives, research question and its limitation. In addition, a theoretical framework and research methodology are also introduced briefly to guide the readers through the study.

Chapter 2 refers to all literature background of the research which describes Benchmarking models and how they are applied in latter empirical part.

Chapter 3 continues with an applied case of Summer School in University X. Some basic analyses about market and competitors are conducted to provide knowledge base for the empirical research.

Chapter 4 describes and analyzes the empirical research to benchmark against selected competitors and figure out customers' needs.

Chapter 5 presents some recommendation based on the empirical research results and author's own creativeness. Suggestions will focus on what kinds of marketing tactics should be implemented to increase customers' awareness and their participation.

Chapter 6 answers the thesis questions mentioned in the first part and indicate

space for further research.

Chapter 7 makes a summary of all issues mentioned and concludes the thesis.



## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter consists of literature review which describes theoretical background based on secondary sources. The most relevant terms associated with the study are presented, as well as the main framework to conduct research and analyze results.

Benchmarking in higher education is not a new concept. It is believed to bring in positive values, which includes providing a structure for external evaluation, creating new networks communication between schools and encouraging for changes (Alstete et al. 2015). This research will be conducted through the following steps.

### 2.1 Benchmarking Process

The general introduction of Public Domain Benchmarking has been made in theoretical framework. However, before implementing this method into the empirical research, it is important to understand its dimensions in details.

TABLE 1. Summary of Public Domain Benchmarking Features (Summary Based on Stapenhurst 2009, 22-24)

<b>Features</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>
Participants	The selection of participants is controlled by the benchmarker. When comparing data in Public Domain, the participants may not even be aware that they are part of the study.
Control of the study	The benchmarker usually controls all aspects of the study including time scales, data collection, data report, etc.
Risks	From the viewpoint of the benchmarker, risks are relatively low. Nevertheless, it can easily lead to a lawsuit if they cannot ensure about the right of

	<p>published information.</p> <p>The study may result in incomplete analysis which confuses the readers due to the omission of some potential participants.</p> <p>For the participants, if the study shows them as a poor performer, their image may be negatively affected.</p>
Learning opportunities	<p>Learning potential is not especially high, but organization can learn valuable experiences regarding how the competitors' products or services succeed. Therefore, this can help to provide effective drivers for improvement.</p>
Duration	<p>It can vary from a few days to several months depending on which kinds of research activities are needed to collect, analyze and report data.</p>
Benchmarking Team	<p>The study can be carried out by one person to administer the public domain and report data. In more complex situations, an expert team is needed.</p>
Uses	<p>The main use is to learn from the best practices in the market and make informed decisions to improve products or services</p>

After deciding the necessary inputs of Public Domain benchmarking, we will analyze how to conduct the benchmarking process step by step.

### 2.1.1 Determining Benchmarking Objectives

Defining benchmarking subjects is the most fundamental step to start if the

organizations need to search for solutions to improve their competitiveness or operational performance. However, there seems to be no clear procedure for identifying improvement needs, which also depends on the organization strategic goals, market segmentations, and target customers. As a result, the firm will be analyzed from both internal and external perspectives. The results would help to identify dimensions that need to be improved and benchmarked. In order to achieve this goal, SWOT model has been included.

SWOT is an acronym which stands for Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat. It is usually used to assess a business idea, a new product or service, a business venture. This analysis is not restricted to your own business but also includes competitor's ones. Hence, SWOT analysis can serve as a good foundation to build a business strategy, position a product, or examine the potential of a business proposition. Among four elements of SWOT, strength and weakness are considered internal factors that are under control of the organization; whereas opportunities and threats are external factors that firms cannot have any impacts. (Fine 2009, 15.) Each element of SWOT aims to answer different questions which are listed in the table below.

TABLE 2. Summary of Questions for Different Elements of SWOT (Summary based on Downey 2007, 5)

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your advantages (skills, capacities, resources, etc.)?</li> <li>• What does your company perform better than competitors?</li> <li>• What do customers and competitors see as your</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does your company perform badly?</li> <li>• What do customers and competitors perceive as your weaknesses?</li> <li>• What could you improve to compete with other competitors?</li> </ul>

strengths?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What should you avoid?</li> </ul>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Threats</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where are the good opportunities in the market?</li> <li>• What are the updated trends that are beneficial for your organization?</li> <li>• What changes in external factors including technology, market, government policy, lifestyles, population profiles, etc. can benefit your company?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the external factors that restraint your development?</li> <li>• What are the competitors' activities that can affect negatively to your performance?</li> <li>• Are you affected by changing trends in technology, society-culture, policy, and economics (PEST)?</li> <li>• Do you have problems in terms of finance or other resources to provide products or services?</li> </ul>

### **Internal Analysis**

In internal analysis which includes strengths and weaknesses, it important to list the most relevant factors which affect critically to the company's success. Too much information may distract the research focus, thus leading to an ineffective analysis. (Kotler 2009.) Strengths examine the organization's internal values that create factors such as assets, skills, or resources in comparison with competitors. On the other hand, weaknesses refer to disadvantages of the firms in terms of competitive strength, financial issues, reputation, operational activities, and process, etc. Apparently, it is quite difficult for the company to acknowledge its own weak points. Hence, weaknesses research should be preferably conducted from customers' points of view. (Jiju 2012.)

According to Harvard Business Essentials (2005), a nine-step method is suggested to identify a company's strengths and weaknesses. This measure involves people from different departments within the organization in order to collect ideas from

various perceptions. A diverse group of people is likely to work more effectively on matters of common interests than individuals. Therefore, the company should follow nine practical steps as follows:

1. Selecting an individual to start the analysis. This person should be considered as trustworthy to represent an objective view.
2. Creating a SWOT team which includes knowledgeable individuals from different functional areas in the company.
3. Brainstorming the strengths in each unit that focus on core competences such as finance, management, culture, human resources, quality, service, technology, etc.
4. Recording all suggestions on a flip chart. It means that you should collect as many ideas as possible and visualize them in a structured way.
5. Concentrating on the duplicate ideas, and dividing them into group. The results should be presented on the wall so that everyone can follow.
6. Clarifying ideas. It is essential to go through all the ideas once again because many attendants may still have questions about it.
7. Identifying top strengths. The number of ideas that need to be highlighted depends on the project goal or organization needs.
8. Summarizing the top strengths that have been identified in the last step, and presenting them in another flip chart.
9. Repeating from step 2 to step 8 to identify weakness factors.

(Harvard Business Essential 2005.)

### **External Analysis**

Kotler and Keller (2009) divide external factors into macro-environment forces which refer to demographic, economic, technological, political, social, and culture

element; and micro-environment forces which include customers, competitors, distributors and suppliers. In each of these dimensions, company can identify associated opportunities or threats or both.

In general, opportunities are favorable factors which influence how your company grows and earns profit in the future. Opportunities can be identified through many trends such as technology innovations, industry trends, competitors' vulnerabilities, positive policy changes, etc. (Jiju 2012.) In a marketing plan, market is the targeted area to identify opportunities. By market opportunities, we refer to customers' needs and interests that the company has high probability to satisfy and gain profit. These market opportunities can be found through three main sources. The first is to supply what is still missing in the market; thus efforts are devoted to investigate customers' needs and fulfill them. The second is to improve existing product/service with superior values to make it distinguished from competitors' offers. The last one is to exploit opportunities from other sources like technology, economy or society to develop a totally new product or service. After all the opportunities are gathered, the organization still needs to determine which one has better attractiveness and probability of success. The following questions can help to develop an effective market opportunity analysis. (Kotler 2009, 91.)

- Can the opportunities provide substantial benefits that we expect?
- Can we achieve pre-determined goals with cost-effective methods and efficient channels?
- Does the company have access to the critical capacities and resources that are required to grab the opportunities?
- Can we deliver the benefits, which the opportunities offer better, than any other competitors?
- Will the financial return outweigh the investment we put into exploiting these opportunities?

Depending on the market opportunity analysis, the company can prioritize which opportunity to respond first and which ones can be postponed to later actions.

By contrast, threats are unfavorable factors from external environment. They can

affect the organization's operation or lead to decrease in sales and profit. Therefore, they should be prepared to cope with these endangered forces in any unexpected circumstances. Some examples of threats are negative political effects, competition intensity, economic instability, loss of key staff, natural catastrophes, etc. (Jiju 2012.) In addition, the company should focus on major threats which require consistent control and urgent responses; whereas other minor threats can be ignored or postponed until later reactions.

All in all, business development is a long-term process. Therefore, once the weaknesses are identified, the organization has no need in fixing it immediately, nor does it have to exploit all the strengths. The weaknesses and strengths should also be reviewed in relation with external factors like opportunities and threats. For example, an organization can employ their strengths to limit threats and grab opportunities; in other cases, opportunities are used to improve certain strengths and limit possible weaknesses. (Kotler et al. 2009.)

Based on SWOT analysis, not only can the project be investigated from the internal organizational view but also from the external view relating to competitors and market. Therefore, it can help to determine which project dimensions should be benchmarked, for instance performance dimension, competitive dimension, marketing dimension, etc. The selection process continues with mapping the value gaps between organization and competitors to investigate improvement needs (benchmarking objectives). In theory, this step can be structurally organized with the help of analysis tools like Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), Principal Component Analysis (PCA), Common Factor Analysis (CFA). (Nayeri 2009.) Nevertheless, as mentioned in the thesis limitation, this research objective is mostly determined in accordance with specific requirements from the case institution.

### 2.1.2 Determining Where Data Exist

In Public Domain Benchmarking, after defining benchmarking objectives, the next step is to determine where to collect data. In other words, we need to identify the "right" partners and decide where they are located. Benchmarking partners

may vary from departments within own organization (internal benchmarking) to competitors in the same or different geographical markets and industries (generic benchmarking) (Kodali 2008).

For this study, benchmarking process is set against competitors, thus Porter's 5 Forces model is firstly applied to describe the overview of competitive intensity in the industry, which involves both main competitors and other important stakeholders in the market. In addition to competition analysis, there are also other ways of choosing the 'right' partner based on similarities. The organization can examine if the partners share related stakeholder groups or similar value drivers. Whereas, the final decision is most likely to associated with the following questions:

- Are they in the same regions?
- Are they operating the similar or different sectors?
- Are they widely recognized as achieving standards of performance on key indicators?

(Kelessidis 2002.)



## Porter's Five Forces

Porter's five forces is one of the most effective tools to analyze the level of competitive intensity in the market or in a specific industry. According to Porter (1980), the state of competition depends on five basic competitive forces, which are shown in figure below:

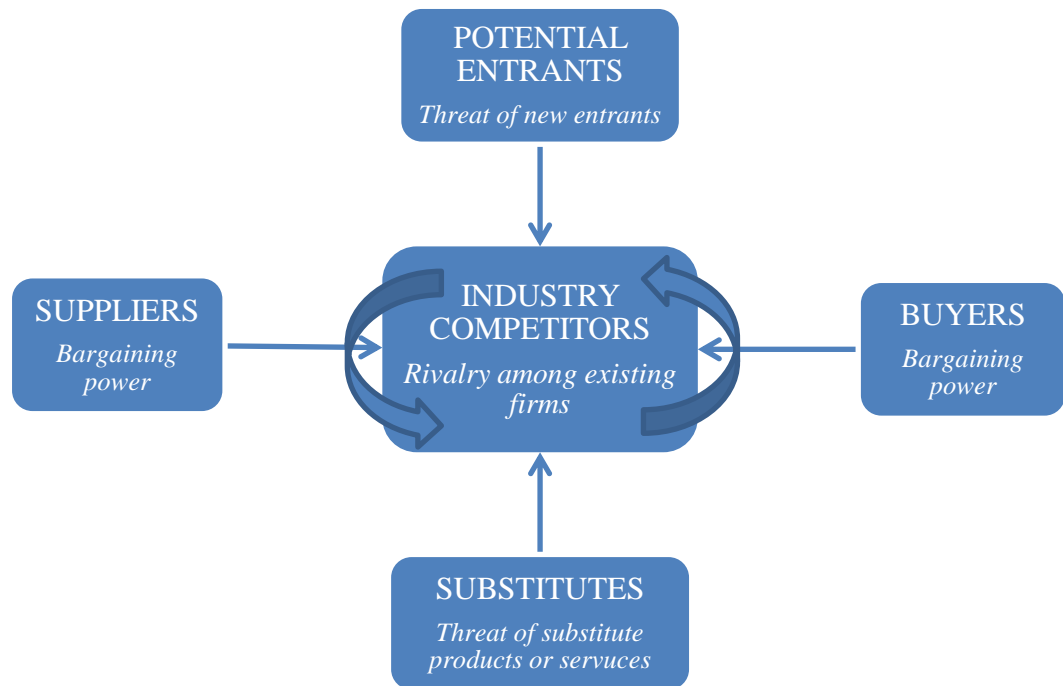


FIGURE 4: Porter's Five Forces (modified from Porter 1980)

### New entrants

New entrants bring new ideas, new capacities or new resources to the industry. Their target is to gain more market share and profit. As a result, your company may be endangered if failing to catch up with up-to-date market trends in comparison with these new entrants. Analyzing the threat of entry involves examining the barriers to entry and the expected reaction of existing firms to new competitors (Ehmke et al. 2013.) There are seven factors in entry barriers that can prevent new competitors from entering the market and create competitive advantages.

TABLE 3. Summary of the Main Barriers of Entry for New Entrants to the Market (Porter 2008, 10)

<b>Barriers</b>	<b>Description</b>
Supply-sides economy of scale	<p>When a firm produces at large volume, they can enjoy lower cost per unit as the same fixed costs can spread to more units.</p> <p>Supply-side economies of scale create barriers for entrants by either forcing them to enter the market on a large scale or to accept a cost disadvantage because of small scale.</p> <p>As a result, barriers to entry in this category are usually higher for companies involved in manufacturing than a company providing services.</p>
Demand-sides benefit of scale	<p>This barrier can also be regarded as “network effects”. To be more specific, customers’ willingness to purchase a product or service increases with the number of other buyers who also chooses this company. In other words, customers may feel more secured to be in a “network” that includes a larger number of fellow buyers.</p> <p>Therefore, when a new entrant joins the industry, customers are generally reluctant to try new product or service with a smaller fellow network.</p>
Customer switching cost	<p>Customer switching costs are fixed costs that buyers face when they change suppliers.</p> <p>Accordingly, it is more attractive for new entrants to enter an industry with lower switching costs so that they can compete better by luring customers away from their previous suppliers.</p>

Capital requirement	A large amount of financial investment can prevent new comers from entering the market. While large corporations can have advantages of huge financial resources to enter any industry, small and medium-sized enterprises have to consider this factor carefully, and examine if the return on investment can outweigh the costs of entry.
Incumbency advantages independent of size	Incumbent advantages are gained by companies that have been operating in the market in comparison with new entrants. These favorable factors include advanced technology, preferential access to limited raw material sources, experiences, brand identity, etc.
Unequal access to distribution channels	Every new entrant needs to secure their distribution channels to ensure an efficient delivery of products or services. However, if existing competitors have occupied the whole channels to reach wholesalers or final customers, new entrants have to struggle with finding a free channel or build up a new one.
Restrictive government policy	Governments can hinder the entry of new comers by issuing restricted policies, for example, on foreign investment, enterprise taxation, licensing requirements, patenting rules, safety regulation, etc.

## **Rivalry**

Competitive rivalry among existing firms is a strong force which has a direct impact on your organization. The form of competition can vary from price differentiation, marketing battles to new products or service improvement. The utmost results are to gain more market share, increase profit, or fulfill other strategic purposes. However, intense rivalry also leads to reversed effects. For example, price competition may transfer profits from sellers to buyers if the customers have free choices of switching the products. On the other hand, competition on dimensions like product features, support features, and brand image is less likely to harm profitability as it helps to improve customer value and support higher price. (Porter 2008, 11.)

The degree of rivalry intensity is determined by the following factors. Firstly, the number and capability of competitors can affect the competitive intensity in the market. An industry which has two or three dominant firms thriving to become market leaders will create a low level of competition. By contrast, when the firms compete by diverse strategies without any general “rules of game”, the rivalry is likely to become more intense. Moreover, if the customers are easy to switch to another supplier, companies will have to compete more fiercely to gain market share and maintain customers’ loyalty. Lastly, exit barrier also contributes to the level of rivalry intensity. High exiting costs may prevent the company from leaving the market even if they are earning low or have negative returns (Ehmke, et al. 2013, 13.)

## **Substitute**

A substitute refers to the competitors which can provide products/services with the same or similar function as yours. In worse case, if close substitutes offer cheaper price, they can lure your customers to switch to their products or services. As a consequence, this can reduce your company’s attractiveness in the market, ruining profit and bringing negative impacts on operational activities. Therefore, companies are suggested research market frequently and identify potential substitutes so that proper reactions can be implemented. (Porter 2008, 11.)

There are several factors that can affect the threat of substitute. The substitutes are greater if:

- Your products do not offer any distinguished benefits compared with other competitors. Thus, the company needs to investigate on the factors that can retain customers even if they can get identical offers from competitors. Some examples include better service quality, less risky options, long-term relationship, etc.
- The customer loyalty is low. In this case, if price is the main motivator, it is easy for customers to switch to another supplier that offers more benefits.
- There are minor differences in the switching costs. In other word, if the clients have a wide choice of products or services regardless of price, the substitute can be a good option if they want to change suppliers.

(Ehmke et al. 2013.)

### **Bargaining Power of Customers**

Powerful customers can have pressure to put the price down, demand for higher product quality or more services. Therefore, they will also indirectly affect the profitability of the whole industry. From the suppliers' perspectives, customers can be divided into two groups depending on their bargaining power: negotiating customers and price-sensitive customers. The first group usually takes advantage of buying in high volume, purchasing a standardized product and having low switching cost while the latter only focuses on the price and tries to bargain as hard as possible. (Porter 2008, 12.) In order to assess the bargaining power of buyers to drive prices down, the company needs to consider the following conditions:

- The number of sellers and buyers in the market. If there are several small companies that provide similar products to a few large buyers, the negotiating power is likely to be in buyers' hands.

- The industry's products are standardized or undifferentiated. Hence, if the buyer wants to find equivalent products, they can change from one provider to another to find the most beneficial option.
- The low switching costs can make it easy for buyers to have more power in negotiating process with different suppliers

(Downey 2007, 8.)

### **Bargaining Power of Suppliers**

Suppliers play an important role in many industries as they help to provide raw materials, industrial components or other necessary inputs. They can stress a considerable bargaining power in charging higher prices, limiting products or services or interrupting the whole supply chain process. The principles in determining the power of suppliers mostly depend on the industry structures, potential supplier substitutes, switching costs or input demand. (Porter 2008, 13.)

The assessment of how suppliers can gain more power is determined by the following conditions:

- The number of suppliers of each essential input. The larger number of suppliers exists in the market, the less power they have.
- The uniqueness of their product or service. If your company requires unique and expensive inputs, you may have less bargaining power when dealing with these exclusive suppliers.
- The relative size and strength of the supplier. If your purchases only account for a small proportion of the supplier business, they will have substantial power over you in negotiating process.
- The cost of switching from one supplier to another. Apparently, your supplier can easily assert their bargaining power if they realize that it is highly difficult for you to switch to another supplier.

(Downey 2007, 9.)

A general overview of five forces can provide entrepreneurs with a good understanding of the industry and market. As a result, benchmarkers will continue with further analysis, and figure out suitable benchmarking partners from the selected competitors. Additionally, as Public Domain benchmarking is chosen for this study, the data can also be collected from government sources, the internet, and other published materials (Stapenhurst 2009, 25). All in all, the key rule is to always compare to the best practices and avoid collecting too much data or leaving tremendous gaps between benchmarking partners.

### 2.1.3 Deciding How to Obtain Data

If data is not available, there are typically two choices open for the benchmarkers. The first choice is Test. The benchmarker may acquire the products or services first hand and report the findings. In this case, the benchmarker can conduct the testing secretly or publicly ask the participants to supply samples for testing. This method can help to save cost but the product/service cannot claim to be chosen randomly. The second choice is Survey. The benchmarker can examine the current or past users of the products or services. If this approach is chosen, it is suggested that you should control the whole process carefully because it can take plenty time and effort to gather reliable and efficient results. (Stapenhurst 2009, 27.)

Combining both approaches can become the third solution as the benchmarker can combine his test results with survey findings. In fact, it also depends on the specific needs and targets of the organization that the benchmarker can apply these approaches or develop a new one.

### 2.1.4 Collecting and Analyzing Data

The purpose of data collection is to assess the selected partners and identify the best-in-class practices among competitors. When choosing competitors as benchmarking partners, it is likely that obtaining information from them is the most challenging task. In general, companies always try to disclose their know-how and business information due to the risk of losing competitive advantages.

Even if you can collect data from some sources it may not ensure trustworthiness and needs special scrutiny before applying. However, the benchmarking objectives of this study are involved in a service package which are usually published and easy to access through both online and offline sources.

Data collection can employ a range of tools such as observation, interview, questionnaire, or internet search. These research techniques will be described more in later empirical part. Once data has been gathered and analyzed, conclusions are drawn, and a report is issued. The complexity of the analysis will depend on the objectives of the study and the type of data collected. In most case, the report would cover the objectives of the study, how it was carried out, where the data came from, and some conclusions on performance level compared with different participants. (Stapenhurst 2009, 27.) After investigating the report, the organization can develop a tailor-made improvement plan to add more values for their product or service.

#### 2.1.5 Improvement Plan

Based on the collected data, organizations are supposed to learn good ideas from benchmarking partners and design a plan for improvement activities. However, it is important to note that benchmarking only reveals the standards attained by the competitors but not describe under which circumstances these standards are established. Therefore, the organization is suggested to adapt the results carefully to improve their own performance. Moreover, change cannot happen at once. The organization should not become too relaxed after excelling competitors' standards. Instead, they should carry out benchmarking on a frequent basis to learn from new practices, and allow scopes for further improvements. (Nayab 2010.) The improvement plan for this research will be interpreted according to the framework of a service marketing mix.

## 2.2 Service marketing mix – 7Ps

The marketing mix is one of the most important concepts which help to develop suitable marketing strategies for your products or services. The basic idea of



marketing mix is to include a set of controllable marketing variables that the company needs to analyze and produce suitable responses to the selected market (Kotler 2009, 45). The traditional 4Ps marketing mix suggested by McCarthy (1964) includes product, price, place and promotions. However, the development of marketing strategies, especially for services, has led to the demand for further marketing approaches. Booms and Bitner (1981) came up with 7Ps marketing mix, which includes three additional variables together with traditional 4Ps. They are people, process and physical evidence. The new 7Ps is considered more suitable for services marketing strategies as the extended elements are more relevant with the nature and performance of services (Rafiq et al. 1995, 7). Accordingly, this model has been chosen as the main framework to suggest service improvement strategies for the selected case study. In addition, the strategies in each marketing mix element should aim to answer problems that are listed in the weaknesses and threats of SWOT analysis.

### **Service**

The first factor in a marketing mix is product, which refers mainly to tangible goods. However, in a service marketing mix, product is the actual service provided. Service is described as “any activity or benefit that one party can offer to another that is essentially intangible, and does not result in the ownership of anything” (Kotler 2009, 386).

In this study, the chosen case focuses on providing services on an international scale. Accordingly, it is important to distinguish between international services from domestic ones. Domestic services are only provided inside the country; whereas international services are provided across border and interact with a foreign culture. Due to intangible characteristics, when services are traded internationally they must be accompanied with products, information flows, or people to move from one country to another. In addition, services highly depend on people for their provision and delivery; thus cultural sensitivity should be carefully taken care of. One solution is to put more efforts on staff training and supporting. Last but not least, market needs for service are usually diverse from country to country due to different geographic and cultural backgrounds. In order

to face with these obstacles, the institution is suggested to research the market thoroughly, to identify its target customers, and produce the “right” service for customer needs. (Bradley 2002, 28.)

## **Price**

In simple terms, price is the amount of money you pay to get a product or service. A price can have many names, for example, “*rent*” for equipment leasing, “*fee*” for professional services, “*tuition*” for education, etc. Nevertheless, from the seller’s perspective, price should not be mistaken with cost. Price is what a business charges while cost is what a business pays. (Schindler 2011, 4.) In a marketing mix, price is the only element that produces revenue while all other elements represent costs. The pricing strategy involves setting specific prices and developing the rules that govern these price decisions. Before any pricing decisions are made, these following factors need to be taken into consideration:

- The first factor refers to customers’ expectations to the price you place on your service package. Due to the fact that quality plays an important role in service sector, it is important that you should not set your price too low as customers may think there is something wrong with your service. The too expensive price does not work, either. Therefore, the pricing decisions should be considered carefully depending on how you position your service in terms of quality and target customer group.
- The second one refers to the total costs you need to provide the services. From this basis, you can add more mark-ups that are to pay for wholesalers, retailers, sale forces etc. if your service is not provided directly to clients.
- The last consideration is to identify what your competitors charge for similar services. The price information can be collected from their websites, price lists or price quotation.

(The Chartner Institute of Marketing 2009.)

In addition to the main factors that have been mentioned above, international pricing strategies are also affected by market competitiveness, government policies, transfer price requirements, exchange rate fluctuations, etc. Therefore, a standardized price across many markets is relatively difficult to achieve. Instead, the organization is suggested to adopt a market-based price strategy, which focuses on analyzing the market carefully and develop a wide range of feasible prices for different markets. (Bradley 2002, 366.)

### **Place**

Place refers to where and how the services are made available to the end users. For tangible products, it is useful to develop a structured distribution channel to deliver products effectively. However, for services, the strategy is to find the best place to locate your service performance so that organization can not only save resources (time, cost, labor) but also ensure customer' satisfaction . In addition, the organization should also consider new information and communication technology which can help to transform the distribution channels and improve retail functions. (Kotler et al.1999, 899.)

In an international marketing strategy, there are a number of noticeable differences between domestic and international distribution channels. Compared to domestic distribution channels, international ones are likely to have higher complexity of variables. For example, organizations usually have problems in dealing with several partners from different geographic segments as each market can have different requirements regarding how to get service delivered. In other cases, common elements can still be identified among different distribution networks. Thus, the organization is suggested observe these similarities and create transferable values rather than develop a specific channel for each market. (Bradley 2002, 322.)

In international channels of distribution, there are three main ways of getting products delivered to customers. The first one involves selling to wholesalers who will sell to retail outlets, and finally to customers. The second option is to sell directly to retail outlets. The last one is to sell directly to customers. (The Charter Institute of Marketing 2009.) The detailed description of these channels is provided below.

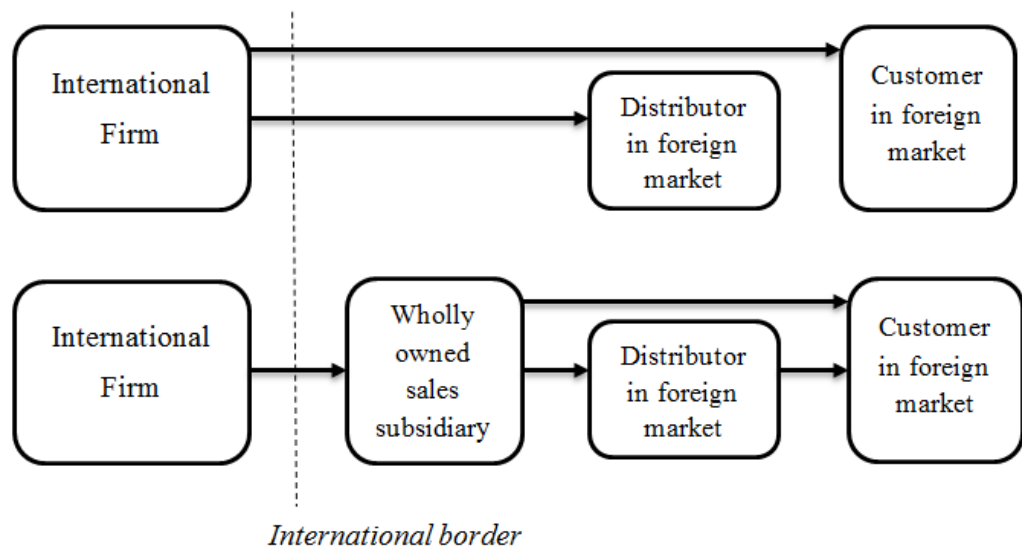


FIGURE 5. Direct and Indirect International Channels of Distribution (Bradley 2002, 322)

The company should consider carefully before determining an international distribution channel for their service delivery as it will affect the pricing and promotion decisions. The more “middleman” you have, the more mark-up costs you have to cover. In addition, if you sell your service to an international business unit, you also need to cover costs of sale forces, and cope with more barriers in terms of language, regulations, geographic conditions, etc. (The Charter Institute of Marketing 2009.)

## Promotion

The purpose of promotion is to find effective ways to sell products or services through informing, persuading and reminding customers. Promotion mix usually consists of five main elements, namely advertising, sales promotion, public relations, direct marketing, and personal selling. Depending on different types of services, a specific blend of these channels should be developed to reach target customers and achieve the biggest promotional effects. The characteristics of the main promotion tools are summarized in the table below (Kotler 2009, 513).

TABLE 4. Summary of Five Main Elements in Promotion Mix (modified from Kotler; Keller 2009)

<b>Promotion Mix</b>	<b>Characteristics</b>	<b>Common Platforms</b>
<b>Advertising</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not require personal presentation</li> <li>• Promote ideas, goods, or services by an identified sponsor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print and broadcast ads</li> <li>• Brochures and booklets</li> <li>• Posters and leaflets</li> <li>• Billboards</li> <li>• Symbols and logos</li> <li>• Video/Audio materials</li> </ul>
<b>Sales Promotion</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide short-term incentives to encourage trial or purchase of a product or service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contests, games, lotteries</li> <li>• Sampling</li> <li>• Fairs and trade shows</li> <li>• Exhibits, demonstrations</li> <li>• Coupons</li> </ul>

<b>Public Relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design a variety of programs to promote a company's image, product, or service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speeches</li> <li>• Seminars</li> <li>• Annual reports, publications</li> <li>• Charitable donations</li> <li>• Company magazine</li> </ul>
<b>Direct and Interactive Marketing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of both online and offline means of communication to engage customers into your product or service</li> <li>• Directly or indirectly raise customers' awareness, improve image, and promote sales</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Direct marketing: catalogues, mailings, telemarketing, fax mail, e-mail, etc.</li> <li>• Interactive marketing: electronic shopping, blogs, web sites, TV shopping, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Personal Selling</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require face-to-face interaction with one or several potential customers</li> <li>• The purpose is to make presentations, answer questions, and motivate customers to make orders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sales presentations</li> <li>• Sales meeting</li> <li>• Incentive programs</li> <li>• Samples</li> <li>• Fairs and trade shows</li> </ul>

Moreover, promotion does not just refer to communication to your customers. It is also fundamental to maintain a good communication channel within internal stakeholders. To take an example, if the employees are well informed of service values and other decision-making processes, they are more likely to perform better and deliver knowledgeable services to customers (The Charter Institute of Marketing 2009, 5.)

## Process

Process refers to the procedures, mechanisms and flow of activities by which the service is acquired. The process of delivering services and the behaviors of involved people are crucial to customer's satisfaction. (Bitner 1981, 148.) Traditionally, many organizations try to build a cost-based process which focuses on cutting cost as much as possible. However, service providers are changing their focus to more customer-oriented approaches. In other word, they aim to make customers happy and satisfied in every step of using the services. Horovitz (2004) suggests the following steps to build an effective customer-oriented service process:

- Firstly, the organization needs to identify key customer benefits that they plan to offer.
- Then, the main steps that customers go through to buy and use the services will be recorded and described in a structured way. It is suggested to work through the whole process, from searching step to after-sales supports.
- In each step, a “process owner” will be appointed. The organization will try to figure out what factors benefit customers, what factors make them unhappy, and try to improve these weaknesses.
- After main improvement needs have been set, the organization needs to decide on criteria and design a suitable approach for each need. First of all, the company can try to add values to process by offering more benefits and creating better solutions to customer activities. In addition, service delivery can be another target for improvement. For instance, negative factors like defects, risks, long waiting time, and unexpected troubles should be minimized or completely eliminated from service process. The last approach is involved in cost reduction. If the customers can receive services with the same quality but at a lower price, they are more likely to become satisfied and loyal to your services.

- Finally, the suggested solutions should be implemented with the coordination of “process owners” to let them fully aware of these positive changes.

(Horovitz 2004, 145.)

## **People**

The human factor refers to people who are involved in the service delivery process. Employees are of great importance because they represent the company and build the firm’s image through their behaviors and attitudes. (Low et al. 1997.) In addition, Bradley (2002) also claims that administration of human resources is a key indicator to increase competitiveness in international service marketing. If the service personnel are cold or rude, they can undermine all your efforts to attract customers. On the other hand, if they are friendly and warm, it is likely help to improve customers’ satisfaction and loyalty. In addition, the “people” factor also includes customers who use and operate in the service environment. For example, the number, type, and behavior of customers can partly determine the success of service performance and require different management approaches. (Mohammed 1995, 8.)

In order to improve the “people” element, customer contact is a critical issue that requires careful management. It is suggested that the service provider should maintain a face-to-face contact with customers to establish a close and long-term relationship. However, the level of personal contact depends on different types of services that are described in the next figure.



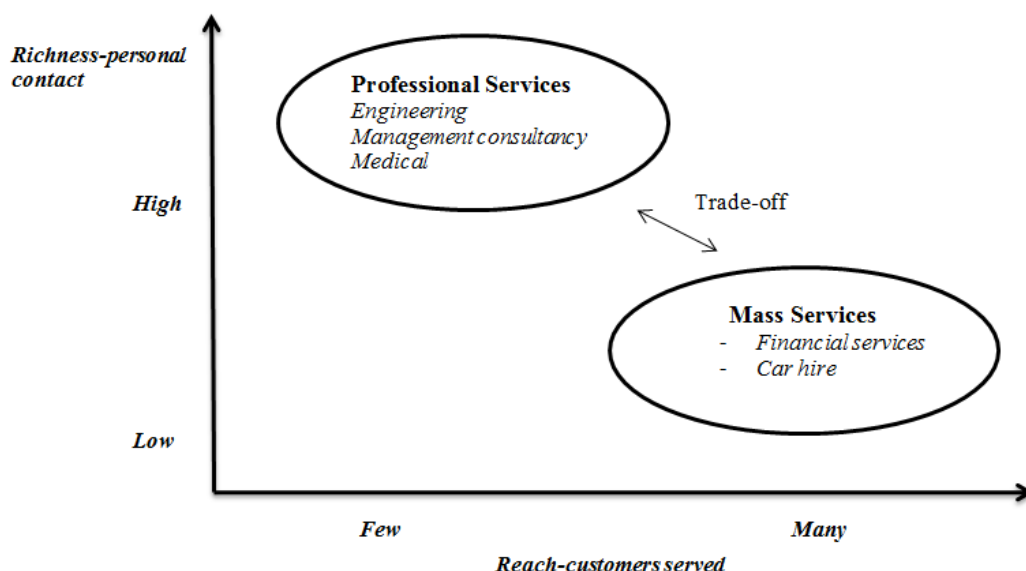


FIGURE 6. The Matrix Between Extent of Customer Contact and Number of Customer Served (Bradley 2002, 235)

As can be seen from the figure, the combination between the extent of personal contact and the number of customers served helps to categorize services into two main groups: professional services and mass services.

Professional services require extensive personal contact in order to ensure a successful delivery of services, and enrich customers' relationships. Some examples are tourism, engineering projects, management consulting and so on. In these projects, the staff receives specific training to be flexible and quickly adapt to different situations. As a result, they can only provide services to a restricted number of customers. For some international service providers, local presence at foreign market is also needed to ensure a customized service approach with high level of contact. On the other hand, mass services require a lower level of personal contact but can serve a larger number of customers. Some examples include equipment leasing, car hire, and construction equipment, etc. These services are generally standardized and not culturally sensitive. Therefore, they do not require local presence in foreign market, and can be supported by technology such as telecommunications network. Furthermore, less personal contact also helps to reduce marketing costs and prevent unexpected troubles when operating abroad. (Bradley 2012, 234-236.)

All in all, the degree of customer contact and the number of customers served have substantial impacts on the organization's international service marketing strategies. For example, the mass services that need little contact tend to be exported and delivered in traditional manners. On the other hand, other organizations, which provide "pure service" and require high contact, prefer to develop a customized approach and have local presence in foreign market.

### **Physical evidence**

By physical evidence, we refer to exterior and interior environment that involve the creation of service (Low 1997, 8). As a result, it can have a great impact on customers' judgments of the service package, and the company in general. Bitner (1981, 57) suggests a framework to illustrate how customers' and employees' behaviors are influenced by physical environment. The three main environmental dimensions are described as follows:

- Ambient conditions (air quality, temperature, noise, smell, etc.) These factors are generally in the background and cannot come to the customers' awareness immediately.
- Spatial and functional features (layout, equipment, furnishings, etc.) They are usually the visually presented, thus can have greater potential in affecting customers' behaviors than ambient conditions.
- Signs, symbols and artefacts (style of decoration, sign instruction). These can be considered aesthetic and cultural factors of physical environment.

All three dimensions are important in designing a perfect environment to facilitate services performance. However, it also depends on types of provided services that each dimension can be manipulated differently. (Berry et al. 1991.)

### 3 CASE: SUMMER SCHOOL AT UNIVERSITY X

#### 3.4 Market Analysis (Porter's Five Forces)

All five competitive forces in Porter's five forces model jointly determine the level of competition on the market. However, each organization has their own strategy, so they may decide which force has the strongest influence. For this institution, Europe is chosen as the target market for this analysis, because the research on a global scale is too big to gather reliable information. Besides, the institution goal is to attract overseas students from other regions of the world; hence the similar summer schools in Europe are regarded as the main competitors.

##### **New entrants**

Threat of new entry is considered not to have great impact on the existing summer school project. On one hand, there seems to be almost no barriers for an institution to enter summer school market. The capital requirement depends on the objectives of each organization to hold a big or a small summer school. In addition, the government policy for education institution is very supportive, especially in terms of internationalization. For example, programs like Erasmus Mundus II, Atlantis, and ICI ECP have provided lots of support on student mobility between Europe and other parts of the world (EU Programs Worldwide 2015). On the other hand, the stiff competition from a saturated market has created an invisible barrier for the new comers. If their summer school cannot stand out with unique ideas or special features, they have to face huge challenges in competing with other long-known brands in the market. Therefore, new entrant is not considered the target group to benchmark.

##### **Rivalry**

The competition level has become increasingly intense due to the saturated market. The competitors can provide their exclusive advantages in terms of low price, academic courses in multiple fields, diversified social events and so on. In general, the competitors can be divided into direct and indirect ones. Direct rivalry comes from summer schools that are organized by similar educational institutions

like university, university of applied sciences, college, etc. On the other hand, indirect rivalries include student agency and associations which focus on providing education services exclusively.

With regard to direct rivalry for the preliminary concept, the combined summer school between Toulouse Business School in France and Faculty of Economics, Ljubljana University in Slovenia is a good example. This summer school includes courses and social events from both institutions in one official program, and gives students free choices to participate in one place or in both destinations (TBS Summer school 2015). However, multi-country summer school has not become popular and still in the experimental process. Therefore, if the preliminary concept of the case institution is implemented early enough and with comprehensive preparation, there are great possibilities to attract international students and gain market share.

In terms of indirect rivalry, two examples are presented. The first case is an online agency, namely Forum-Nexus, which has a long tradition in recruiting international students to study abroad in summer. Their program takes place in eight cities in Europe including Barcelona, Paris, Chamonix, Geneva, Lugano, Milan, Rome, and Rhodes (Forum Nexus 2015). Another case is Campus Tour Network agency with Summer Program - Luxury Management. This program is designed for students in fields of luxury business, art, fashion, etc. to spend two weeks studying in France (Neoma Business School) and field trip possibilities to Switzerland and Italy. (Campus Tour Network 2015.) These indirect rivalries usually invested more resources in conducting professional marketing strategies as their goal is to attract students and gain profit. On the other hand, education institution's goal is to boost international reputation, maintain good relationships with partner universities, and attract more students to normal academic semesters. Therefore, even though the existence of these indirect competitors may have influences on the institution's summer school, the differences in purpose have made the author eliminate the discussion of them in this study.

### **Substitute**

Summer school is one of many international projects which support student mobility and improve partners' cooperative relationship. In order to acquire overseas studying experiences, students can register for a full time degree at any institutions outside their country. Another option is student mobility through academic exchange semesters. These exchange projects allow students to spend their semester abroad at one of the foreign partners from six months to one year. By this way, students can not only participate in an official study program but also have opportunities to live and discover local cultures in the host destination. These values seem to be similar to ones that are offered by summer school. However, the most distinctive dimensions between two projects are time frame and study expenses. For example, some students from Asia may not afford to pursue a full-time degree in higher education for several years in Europe. Therefore, they are more likely to choose a summer school which provides similar foreign experiences but with a cheaper price and shorter time frame. In brief, even though exchange projects still play a significant role in promoting international student mobility, summer school is a good substitute that can provide benefits for specific groups of customers.

### **Customer**

Customers have quite strong bargaining power regarding their flexible choice among the numerous summer schools in the market. For example, if they want to choose a summer school in business, they can choose among several offers from different universities with the variation in locations, program structure, academic content, price, etc. (Summer School in Europe 2015). However, the only problem facing customers is the lack of information. Most of them find summer school through "middleman" like international office. Therefore, students can only have access to a limited number of summer schools in comparison with a real huge number of offers in the market. For this institution, the potential customers mostly come from partner universities as they already know each other and establish a long-term relationship. Besides, the traditional communication channel is to send summer school offers to partners, and hope that they can spread it around to their

students. Therefore, it depends largely on students' own willingness and interests to join a summer school.

### **Supplier**

When the new concept for a multi-country summer school is applied, the cooperating partners can serve as suppliers and have a substantial bargaining power. If all partners work on well with each other, the cooperation relationship can help to run the summer school smoothly and avoid potential conflicts between institutions or different countries. Otherwise, it is likely to take more time and effort to handle unexpected troubles than focusing on the main summer school programs. In the worst scenario, if partners refuse to cooperate, it will put much pressure on the institution to find alternatives in such a short time. Therefore, the institution is suggested to make wise decision in choosing suitable cooperating partners in the first step, and maintain a good relationship with them during the whole summer school process.

In brief, the combined effects from all five forces are summarized in the table below to provide a clear and overall picture of competition in the market.

TABLE 5: Summary of Porter's Five Forces for the Applicable Case

<b>Porter's Five Forces</b>	<b>Description</b>
New entrants	Low impact as stiff competition from partners on a saturated market.
Rivalry	Intense competition among rivalries. Each institution is trying to create their own advantages to distinguish themselves from other competitors. There are two main sources of rivalry, from direct competitors (other education institutions) and indirect competitors (student

	agency, summer school agency, etc.)
Substitute	The substitute forces are considered to have a strong impact but can be replaced. In addition to summer school, students still have other choices to gain overseas study experiences such as exchange semesters or full time degree programs at foreign institutions. However, summer school with shorter time frame and more affordable price are suitable for specific groups of students.
Bargaining power of customers	Medium impact. Potential customers come from partner institutions. Customers have strong bargaining power but they usually lack of necessary information and motivation to register for summer school.
Bargaining power of suppliers	Partner institutions that cooperate in multi-country summer school are regarded as suppliers. Their reactions can have a significant influence over the level of service performance; hence mutual relationship between partners needs to be maintained carefully.

As can be seen from the summary, rivalry is the force which currently has the most powerful impact in the market. Therefore, they are the most suitable to serve as benchmarking partners. The substitutes can also become the target of benchmarking because they have similar experiences in holding multi-country summer school projects. The new entrants should not be neglected as the policy is relatively supportive in education field. Thus, it can create pressure if the number of summer school keeps increasing. The customers and suppliers should be managed properly to improve attendance figures and avoid unexpected troubles in cooperating relationship.

## 4 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The main goal of empirical research is to benchmark summer school at University X against competitors in the market. Therefore, the research design and data collection are described in accordance with the suggested benchmarking process. In addition, a survey was also conducted to identify customer needs and interests, which can have a great influence on the design of preliminary summer school concept.

### 4.1 Determine Benchmarking Objectives



## 4.2 Research Design and Data Collection

The research design section gives an overview of the selected methods and the reasons for that choice. Survey is a popular and common strategy in business and management research. It mostly results in quantitative data that can be analyzed by using descriptive and inferential statistics. Survey strategy can be implemented through many data collection techniques such as structured observation, structured interviews and questionnaires. (Saunders 2009, 138.)

This research design includes two surveys with focus on different targets. The observation survey is designed for competitors benchmarking; whereas the questionnaire is to collect students' opinions regarding preliminary summer school concept. The overview of data collection process is as follows.

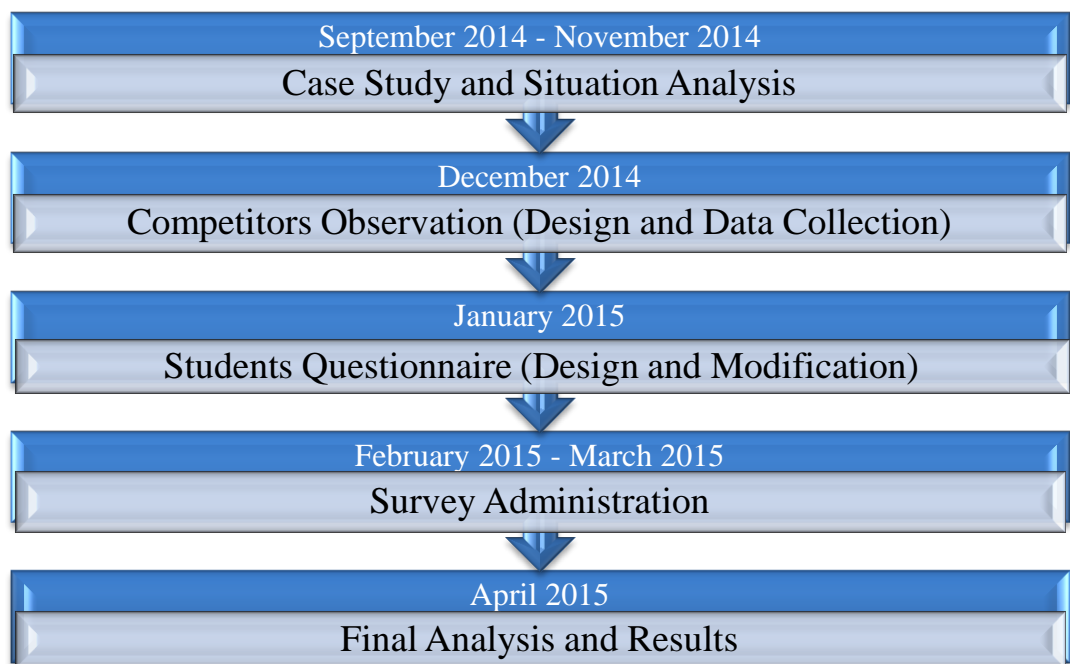


FIGURE 7. Research Design and Data Collection Process

### **Survey's design for competitors**

Observation is a popular technique to record activities, habits or patterns of behaviors (MBA Official 2012). In this study, observation technique is used to gather data from competitors without their awareness to serve for institution's specific purpose. Therefore, this stage also fulfill the tasks of the next steps in benchmarking process, namely "Determine where to collect data" and "How to obtain data". In other words, the benchmarker needs to decide the 'right partners' and the most effective ways to collect their data. From Porter's Five Forces analysis, the 'right partners' are suggested to be institutions in the same education sector. They can include rivalries, substitutes, or new entrants. According to the first interview with the head of international team, it would be useful to select partner universities of the institution as benchmarking partners.

Competitor's information is usually difficult to access. However, this research targets are the features of competitors' summer school which are made openly accessible. Therefore, the information can be acquired and analyzed without any permission. The data about partner institutions were gathered through browsing and studying on around 100 web pages and documents on the internet. Moreover, physical promotional materials (brochures, leaflets, newsletter, etc.) that were sent to the institution by partner institutions were also collected as additional sources. As a result, 80 summer schools from partner institutions worldwide have been investigated. The research population was partly controlled by partner relationship of University X that is mostly concentrated in Europe (58%). The distribution of summer schools that have been collected in this research can be found in the next chart.

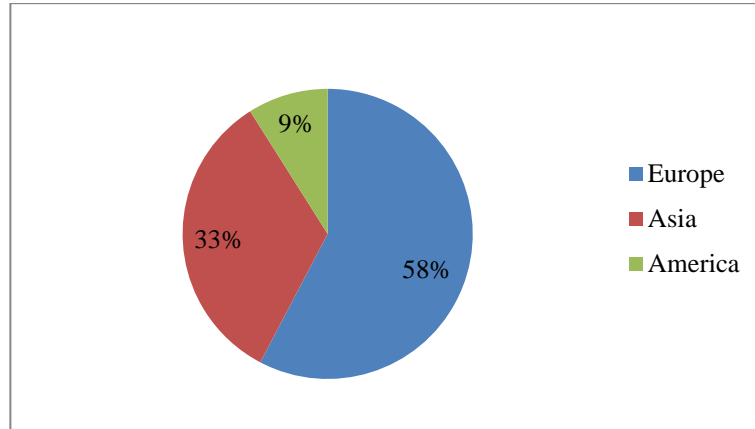


FIGURE 8. Distribution of Competitor Destinations Where Summer Schools Have Been Collected

### Survey design for customers

The second phase was involved in designing a questionnaire to understand customer needs and interests about specific features of a multi-country summer school. To be precise, the questionnaire aimed to answer these following questions. (The full questionnaire form can be found in Appendix 2).

- When is the most suitable time to start summer school?
- How long should it last?
- What are the most attractive destinations for a multi-country summer school?
- What kinds of activities are most appealing to customers?
- Which price package are customers most likely to take?
- What are the most preferred types of accommodation?
- Which communication channels are the most effective to reach overseas customers?

Most of the questions were open-ended questions as the customers needed to consider different choices before deciding their answers. In addition, questions

were also neutrally designed; hence respondents could give fair answers regardless of their nationalities, ages, or sex. Questionnaire data would be analyzed by using correlation, cross-tabulation and other descriptive and statistical techniques (Saunders 2009, 172).

Distributing the questionnaire and collecting information was the most time consuming step in this study. The target customer groups for new summer school project were specifically focused on overseas students from Asia and America. Therefore, more efforts were put to spread the questionnaire to Asian and American education institutions in comparison with European ones. The online questionnaire form was sent by e-mail to partner universities with kind request to forward it to their students. However, it was difficult to estimate the number of responses as it depends on students' free will to participate in the questionnaire. The data collection process lasted about three months from January 2015 to March 2015. The total number of 103 usable questionnaires was collected. In terms of research population, the respondent distribution by continents is described as follows.

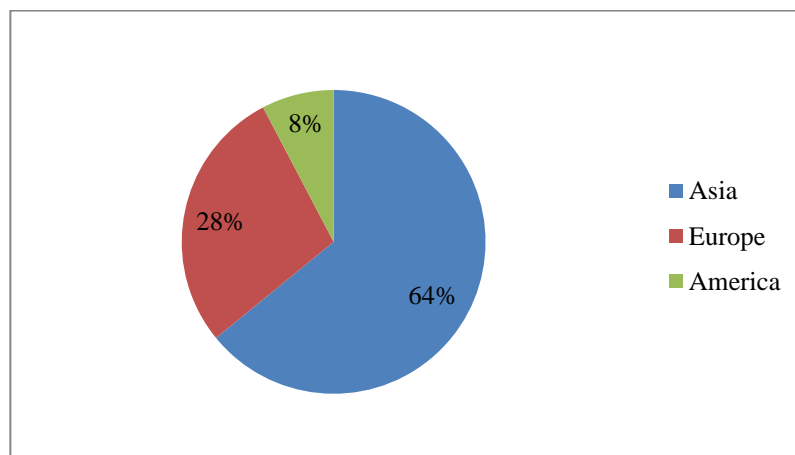


FIGURE 9. Research Population for Customer Survey

As can be seen from the chart, two-thirds of the respondents come from Asia (64%) including China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand, Vietnam and India. European respondents account for 28% while only a small part of them comes from America with 8%. By America, we refer to students' answers from

the United States, Canada, Mexico and Colombia. Even though the respondent population is not distributed equally among different continents, the research target is to collect general opinions from international students regardless of their cultural or geographical background. The independency of the research is shown in the fact that there are no relations between the researcher and the respondents during the whole process. In addition, the participants are not required to provide any personal information; and the research results are bound to be secured within the thesis scope.

### 4.3 Data Analysis

The research analysis is divided into two parts: the first observation survey is involved in benchmarking process against competitor while the latter questionnaire explores customer's opinions on new summer school features.

#### **Competitor Observation**

The competitor analysis also serves as the fourth step in suggested benchmarking process, namely "Collect and Analyze Data". This part provides an insightful look into the best performance of different competitors as well as the most common service trends in the market. The main dimensions of summer school at University X were analyzed in comparison with 80 partners worldwide.

To start with, the preliminary concept of summer school plans for a three-week trip in four different countries in Europe. The concept of multi-country summer school appears to be relatively new and has not been widely applied. Among 80 collected summer schools, there were only seven multi-country summer schools. All of them are based on the cooperating relationship between two education institutions. Therefore, University X can still grab the chance to become pioneer in this niche market.

Regarding the summer school program, the research shows that lectures, language course, social events, company visit and internship are the most preferred activities. The popularity of those activities is presented in the next chart.

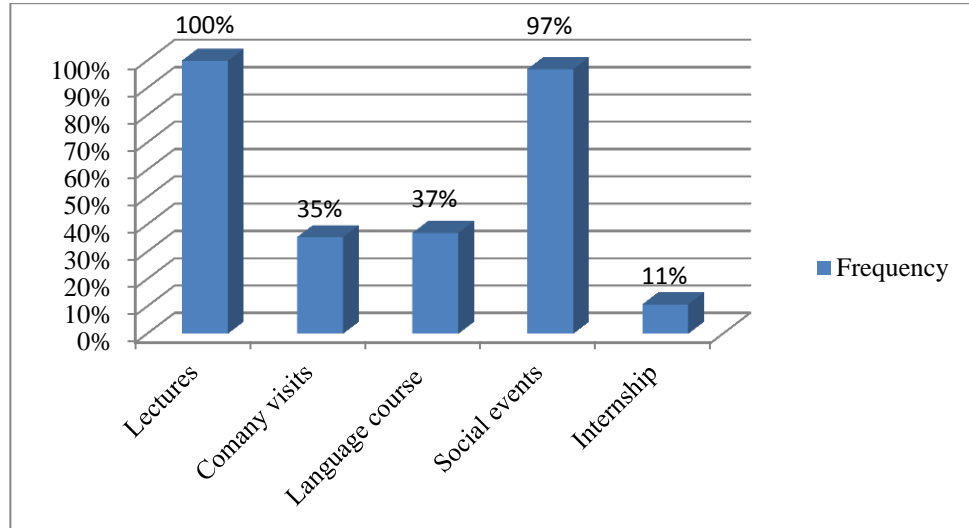


FIGURE 10. The Most Popular Types of Activities in a Summer School

As a matter of fact, lectures are the official activities in every summer school. In addition to the academic content, each summer school usually includes a so-called social program to provide more interesting experiences for students. Therefore, social events follow closely with 97% while language courses and company visits lag far behind with 35% and 37% respectively. Learning a new language helps students to improve communication skills and better adapt to the local culture. Besides, workshops or company visits aim to provide more practical-oriented knowledge and professional skills. Internship plays a minor role with only 11%. The reasons are that it is relatively costly and time-consuming for the host institution to gather enough internship to satisfy huge demand from international students. This practice can only be employed if the institution has its own resources or network with big companies. For example, in China and South Korea, some big universities need more interns in summer for laboratory projects or research plans; thereby they can include it in their summer school offers as well.

Furthermore, all summer schools with similar three-week duration (43 summer schools) had been gathered for evaluating differences in service performance and organizational strategy.

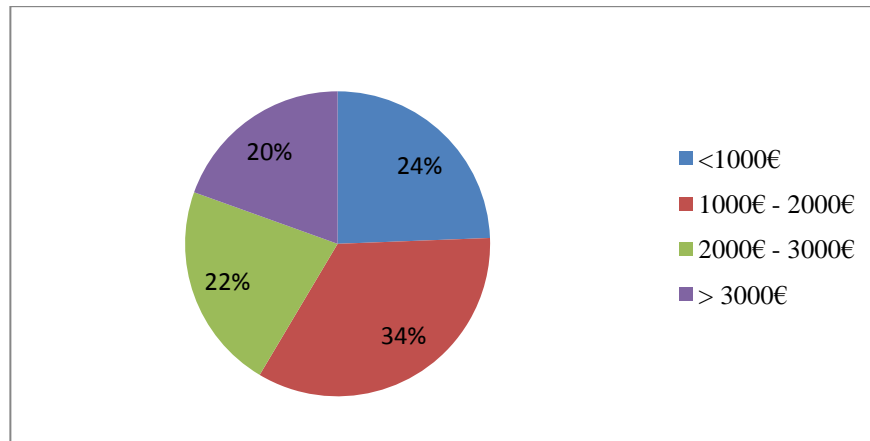


FIGURE 11. Average Price for a Three-week Summer School

From the pie chart, the most common price for a three-week summer school is from 1000€ to 2000€ (34%). However, the chances for more expensive summer school are shared equally among three price groups: less than 1000€, 2000€-3000€, and more than 3000€ (with 24%, 22% and 20% respectively). This result reflects the variation in country economic background, which can have a significant on the price of service package. For example, the standard of living or travelling costs are much cheaper in countries like India, China, Thailand, and East Europe than in developed countries like Denmark, Sweden, UK, etc. Therefore, it is suggested that the institution still be able to set high price to their service package as long as they can create unique and premium values.

## Customer Questionnaire

In addition to competitor benchmarking, this research also includes a questionnaire which was conducted to investigate customers' opinions to develop the preliminary summer school concept at University X. No attempt was made to differentiate between responses of students from different institutions or countries as it was assumed that they would provide fair and general opinions regardless of cultural or geographical background. With the help of 103 usable collected questionnaires, the following aspects of summer school have been examined.

At the beginning, students were asked to determine the most influential factors that motivate them to join a summer school. This is considered the first step in approaching customers and understanding their needs.

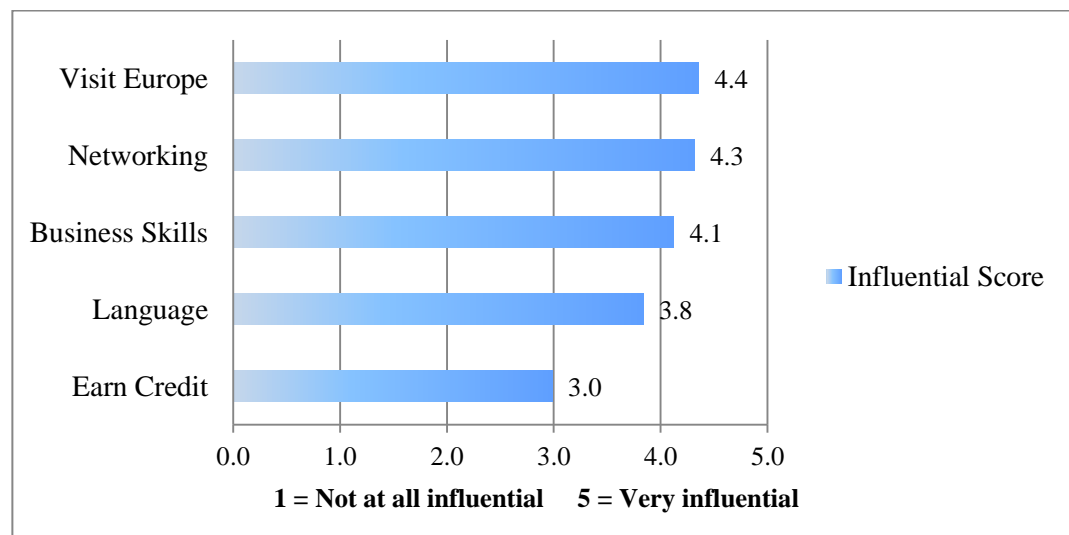


FIGURE 12. Factors Which Have the Most Influences on Students' Choice of Summer School

Among all factors, visiting Europe is the most important motive with the highest score (4.4). Networking follows closely with average score of 4.3 while earning credits has the least impact with only 3.0. This big contrast between these factors suggests that most of potential students participate in a summer school for their personal interests rather than academic background. Therefore, the factors including European visits, networking events, business skills or language study



are of greater importance than earning credits. Based on this conclusion, the institution can realize customers' expectation into specific features of summer school, for instance, by choosing the right destinations or designing more attractive social programs that match students' interests. Moreover, the main goal of summer school is not only to offer academic courses but also to design an attractive social program. Hence, it is useful to have a deeper insight in to what types of activities are in the trend.

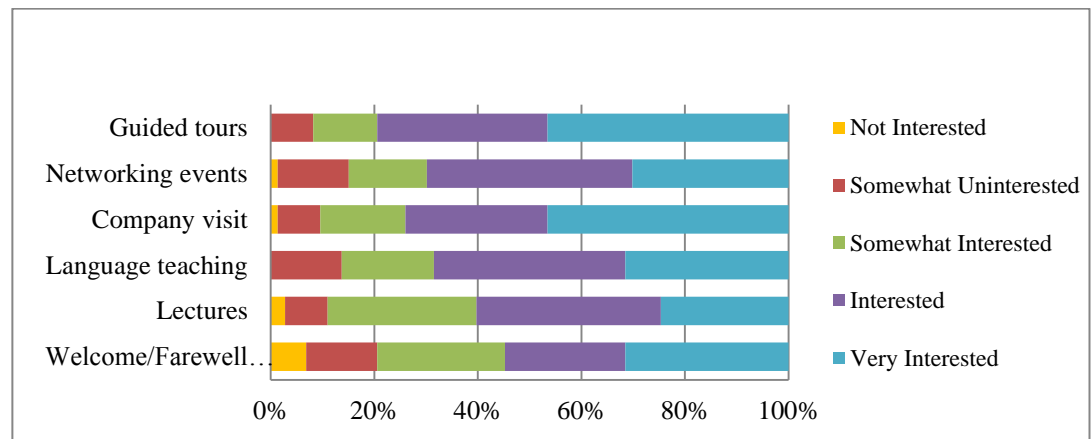


FIGURE 13. Opinions about Preferred Types of Social Events

Guided tours or Sightseeing are the most desired activities with around 80% of students being interested. Company visits, networking events, and language courses also play a significant role as more than half of them want to include them in a summer school. It is surprising to note that lectures end at the fifth position, which come to attention of just around 50% of respondents. These findings provide a good direction for the institution to plan their program, which should be balanced between academic content and entertainment activities. After all, the institution still needs to consider other factors such as private budget, available resources, favorable locations, partner relationship, etc. to design a compatible social program with the whole summer school.

According to customers' opinions, the summer school that takes place in four different countries should last from 3 to 4 weeks.

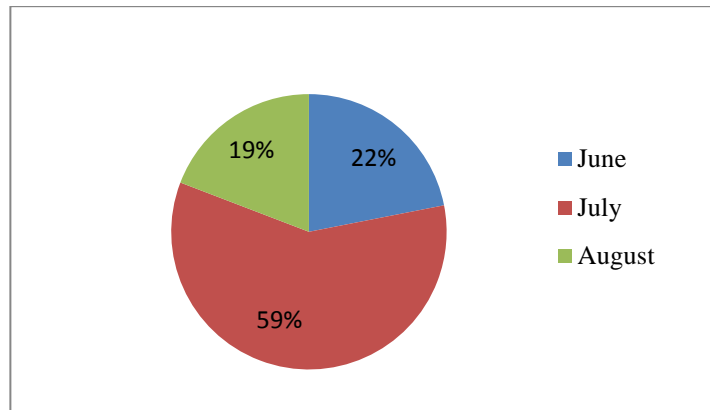


FIGURE 14. Preferred Time to Start a Summer School

From the chart, the most suitable time to start a summer school is July (59%). Other respondents might prefer June or August, with 22% and 19% respectively. The reasons behind this decision highly depend on the personal schedule of potential participants. Moreover, while students from Asian and American countries usually finish their academic semester in June, students in Europe may finish later in August. Therefore, the institution should consider the favored choice for the majority group of students.

In terms of price for a three-week summer school in four different countries, a large proportion of participants are willing to accept a higher price for a premium service package, with almost half of them agreeing to take 2000€-3000€ option. Nevertheless, others still have to think of their budget and only accept price range from 1000€ to 2000€. In this case, if the institution wants to charge a higher price for premium services, their summer school needs to provide unique and distinctive values that can outweigh price issues.

Accommodation also needs to be considered carefully because the whole trip is supposed to involve travelling across different countries in a short period. Thus, housing conditions can have a great impact on students' experiences. Accommodation types are generally decided depending on local culture and economic backgrounds. For example, in South American countries like Mexico or Colombia, homestay is usually provided. In other nations, student residences, youth hostels, guest house, and even hotel are included.

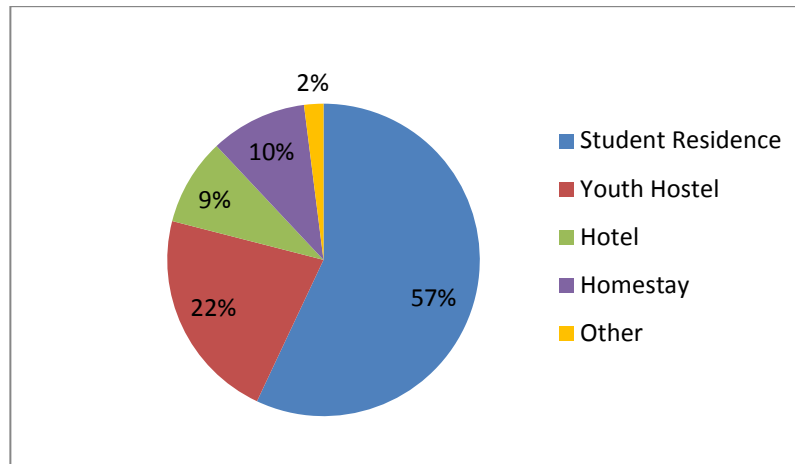


FIGURE 15. Preferred Types of Accommodation

From students' perspective, most of them prefer budgeted choices like student residences or youth hostel (57% and 22% respectively). Hotel and homestay can only be found in special situations depending on specific requirements or local cultures. The total costs of the summer school already include relatively high travelling expenses between different destinations, thus other elements should be modified to create the most cost-effective elements. Moreover, student residence is quite familiar to international students as it can offer wider benefits such as convenient location to campus, favorable meeting place, etc.

Last but not least, the most important question to answer in this survey is to identify which destinations should be part of preliminary multi-country summer school concept. This factor is likely to have a major impact on the success of the preliminary concept as many respondents, especially overseas students, want to include travelling experiences in their trip to Europe. The survey lists 28 countries in Europe; and participants are asked to state their top four favorite destinations for summer school.

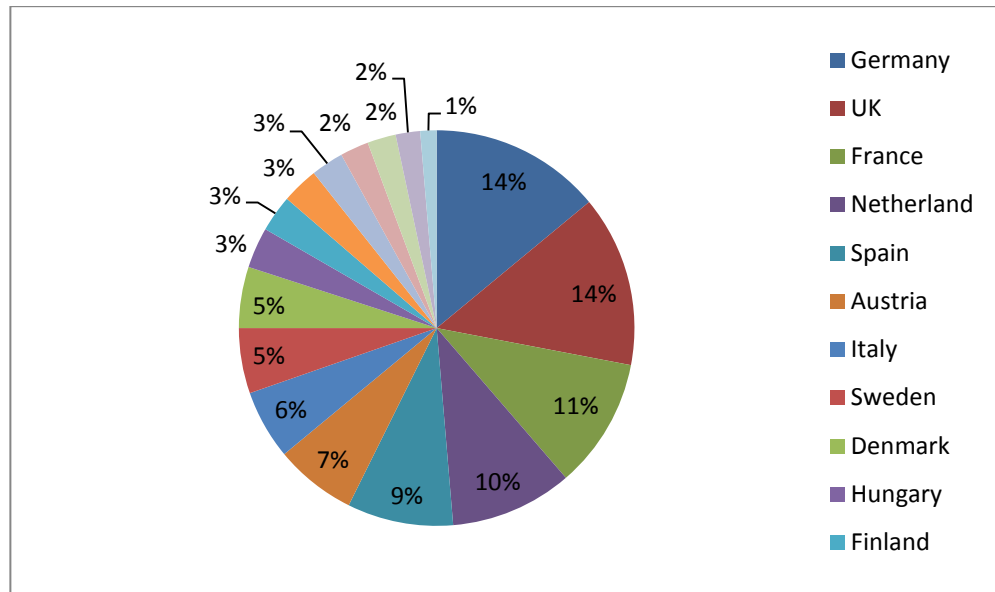


FIGURE 16. The Most Preferred Destinations for Multi-country Summer School in Europe

Based on the collected data, the nine most popular destinations have been figured out; with UK and Germany taking the first positions (both contribute 14%). Other favorite countries include France, the Netherlands, Spain (11%, 10%, and 9% respectively). While many countries from central and southern Europe are mentioned, students also want to explore Northern European destinations such as Sweden and Denmark (both account for 5%). It is beneficial to choose destinations which can satisfy customers' expectation, whereas other aspects of a summer school should not be ignored. The selected destinations also need to include suitable cooperating partners that can match with the institution's program planning, location, resources and so on.

To summarize, the questionnaire provides comprehensive knowledge on customers' expectations regarding summer school's main features such as favorite destinations, duration, courses, social programs, price, accommodation types, etc. However, there are still many challenges in completing the preliminary multi-country summer school concept. The institution not only needs to satisfy customer's interests but also ensure a premium quality program with cost-effective solutions.

In the last step of benchmarking process, the research results were summarized and reported to the institution. A semi-structured interview was sent via email to the head of international team in order to collect feedback for the surveys and ideas for potential solutions. Based on both the head's review and author's own creativeness, several improvement ideas have been drawn from result analysis, and will be presented in the next part.

## 5 IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The conclusion from benchmarking analysis and customers' research was used to suggest proper tactics for the preliminary summer school concepts, adding values to launch it successfully in the near future. The suggestions would be interpreted according to research implication for the preliminary concept and the extended 3Ps in service marketing mix. The first four Ps will not be discussed further in this thesis as it would ultimately depend on the organization's specific requirements to build up service package, delivery channel, and price strategy. Therefore, the extended 3Ps of service marketing mix including Process, Physical Evidence and People would be the main targets for improvement solutions.

### 5.1 Research Implications for the Preliminary Concept

The preliminary concept of multi-country summer school has been formed but the specific details are still in planning stages. Based on both competitor and customer's research, the following dimensions are recommended to fulfill the missing parts.

TABLE 6. Summary of Suggested Features for Multi-country Summer School Concept

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Details</b>
<b>Duration</b>	Three weeks
<b>Time to start</b>	July
<b>Partners selection</b>	<p>Institution is suggested to choose their partners in top four favorite countries that match customer interest. The following countries are recommended based on their popularity level in different European regions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Northern Europe: UK, Denmark</li> <li>• Central Europe: Austria (host institution), Germany</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South Europe: Spain, Italy</li> <li>• West Europe: France, Netherlands</li> </ul> <p>In addition to location, the cooperating partners should also fit in terms of study program, transportation convenience, partner relationship, etc.</p>
<b>Accommodation</b>	<p>Student residence is the most popular and proper choice. The partner institutions can help to provide their dormitory with lower price. However, the trip is involved in travelling across many countries; therefore guest houses or youth hostels can also serve as alternatives in case student residences cannot be found.</p>
<b>Academic courses</b>	<p>The main theme should be business-related topics as this institution has strength in providing business courses. However, the courses should be diversified when cooperating with different programs from various partners. The language course is not targeted because the constant changing of study locations with different native languages gives more room to cross-cultural issues rather than language study.</p>
<b>Social events</b>	<p>The activities that work well in the past like workshop, company visits, welcome and farewell parties should be continued. On the other hand, the institution should take advantage of travelling across many places to create suitable stops for sightseeing activities. In addition, more social events should be organized to integrate the students into cross-cultural environment and help them to develop communication skills and international network.</p>

<p><b>Price</b></p>	<p>The main goal of the institution is not to gain profit, but to improve reputation and international partnership.</p> <p>However, every project needs to cover the cost of investment so that the balanced account will not affect whole organization's operation. The most competitive price ranges from 2000€ to 3000€. As can be learned from some good examples, price package should be broken down in terms of course tuition, accommodation, social programs. In other words, the price package should be made as flexible as possible. For instance, they can choose how many courses to take, which types of accommodation to stay, or which social events to join in order to modify the price and programs as their wishes</p>
<p><b>Distribution and communication channels</b></p>	<p>The most suitable channel to promote summer school to potential students is through partner institutions, for instance, partner international office. They are the main department which supports students who want to go abroad.</p> <p>In addition, other trends like social media, video promotion, and interactive marketing should also be included to develop innovative approaches to attract more students. Besides, the summer school can also be advertised to incoming exchange students, in alumni network events or international education conference, etc.</p>

In a word, even though several suggestions have been gathered to complete the missing dimensions in the preliminary summer school concept, service improvement is regarded as a long process which requires extensive research and more professional experiences. This multi-country summer school project still



needs careful planning because it depends not only on institution own decisions but also on partner's cooperating activities. More detailed of process - how the events are organized, people - employees and customer management, physical evidences – visible elements, will be presented in the next part.

## 5.2 Extended Marketing Mix

A customer cannot see the service but they can see the various tangible elements associated with services such as facilities, equipment, employees, price list and so on. Therefore, process, people, physical evidence would give more implications for service improvement rather than the traditional 4Ps (product, price, place, and promotion).

### 5.2.1 People

People are one of the most important factors which influence the quality of service. Customers are, in general, more loyal to the organization that serves well. Therefore the whole staff of summer school should be targets for improvement. In addition to international office, the summer school involves the following stakeholders.

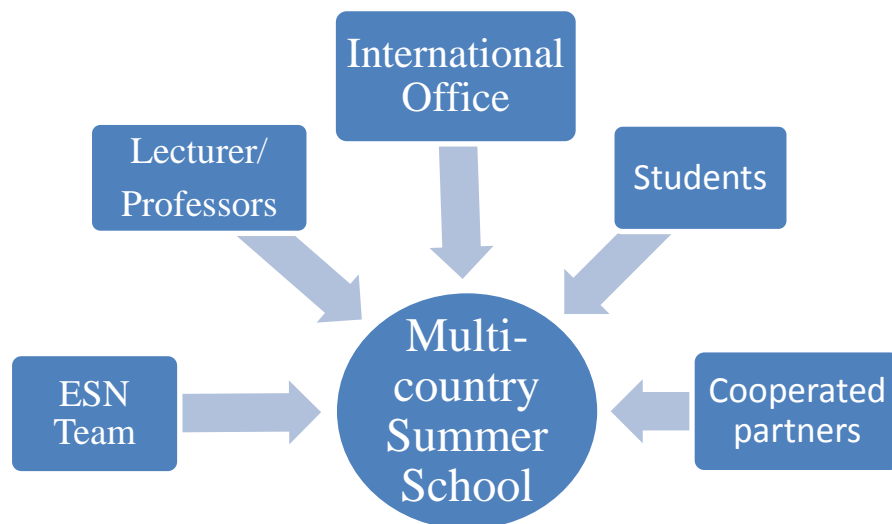


FIGURE 17. Main Stakeholders Involved in a Multi-country Summer School

Firstly, the international office takes the main role in assisting every step of summer school, from registration process, logistics tasks to accounting or billing. In previous summer school, there were only three members in charge of the whole process. Nevertheless, when it comes to a more complicated project that involves travelling across several countries and dealing with different partners, the number of staff should definitely increase. In addition, staff training is necessary because the personnel working in an international project also need to master their cross-cultural communication skills to contribute efficiently to the tasks. Another suggestion is that the institution can also employ more international employees. People from different backgrounds can have different perspectives on one matter; thus they can contribute more effectively to develop the multi-summer school concept. Moreover, it can also promote a good image for this summer school with a young, passionate, flexible, and diversified international team.

The buddy team is established by the student union to support international students to overcome cultural shocks and quickly adapt with the new environment. They are especially helpful in assisting students with matters like airport pick-up, housing issues, social activities and so on. In previous project, this important force was usually ignored or not well informed. Therefore, the international team should encourage them to work more actively in the new project. For example, local students can be motivated to become a buddy by receiving incentives like extra credits, money bonus, certificates, etc. If the buddy team is established and work effectively in supporting international students, the management tasks for international team are likely to decrease.

Furthermore, lecturer or professors are also of great importance in providing necessary courses for students during summer school. Professors can come from both this institution and partner universities. However, the professors should be informed carefully so that they can prepare suitable approach for students from different backgrounds in the class.

Students and partner institution can also have impact on service performance of this summer school. In order to organize a safe and smoothly-run trip across many countries, the institution needs to manage these forces carefully. It is important to

make sure that students should follow the prepared schedule to minimize troubles when they are travelling in a big group. Nevertheless, flexible choices concerning course lists or social events in different destinations should also be provided so that students can also contribute to their trip organization. Regarding partner institutions, a sustainable relationship should be maintained to ensure that the whole flow of activities can run smoothly. In addition, before the summer school starts, necessary negotiation needs to be made in terms of cooperating programs, shared accommodation, social events, etc.

### 5.2.2 Process

Process deals with the question: *How can service provision be standardized?*

Therefore, process description is involved in designing a structured procedure to deliver service. The whole process should be carefully investigated and broken down into main stages. Then, a range of activities will be planned and controlled in each step. Based on the competitors' analysis, each institution can design their own summer school with diversified features in terms of location, academic program, social events, etc. However, the standardized procedure of a summer school is suggested to include the following steps.



FIGURE 18. Standardized Procedure for a Student Who Wants to Join a Multi-Country Summer School

For a multi-country summer school, the searching and contacting steps are quite similar to the normal summer school that the institution used to organize.

However, it is suggested that these first two steps should be innovated to attract more international students. Traditionally, the students collect summer school

information mostly through brochure, newsletter, leaflets or posters. However, they have tendency to depend more on online channels like websites or social network; thus the summer school offer should be made more 'visible' in these new platforms. The webpage of this institution needs to be redesigned to provide information in a more user-friendly and innovative way. For example, online registration can save more time and effort compared with traditional way of sending application documents via post. Moreover, they can also maintain an effective communication channel with students through social network and other digital media. For instance, any questions relating to housing, course lists, or other specific matters posted on social network like Facebook or Twitter can be answered quickly. As a result, students may have better experiences and be more motivated to engage in your service.

Furthermore, as this summer school is involved in several countries, the pre-arrival help is necessary, especially for overseas students who might not have been to Europe before. The support should focus on matters like arranging Visa & other travelling documents, guidelines about program and other issues during a multi-country trip. The last stage of the standardized procedure is known as after-sale service. It involves in taking care of students after they finish summer school and come back to their home country. This stage should last from several months to one year after summer school, and focus on both students and partner institutions. For students, even if they would not join the summer school again they can provide positive feedback and recommend it to other potential students. Besides, it is also important to establish a long-term relationship with partner for further cooperation in the future.

In brief, the standardized procedure is very beneficial in providing customers with the best service experiences and avoiding potential troubles in the future. However, the institution needs to be flexible and creative when building its own projects to match with available resources and conditions.

### 5.2.3 Physical Evidence

Physical evidence is designed in association with other elements of extended service marketing mix. In process, we focus on the smooth flow of activities; whereas in physical evidences, we highlight the “visible” elements to make our process stand out of the competitors and better fulfill customer needs. According to research analysis, students coming to summer school have high expectation about quality of accommodation, learning environment (academic courses), social events and so on.

Before registering for a summer school, students cannot imagine what will happen during their study trip. Therefore, promotional videos can help to visualize abstract service dimensions like study environment, housing conditions, entertainment program, multi-cultural aspects, etc. The videos can be built on former students’ feedback, successful performances, events or experiences, etc.

Furthermore, pre-arrival documents like poster, brochure and timetable are essential evidences that help to provide tangible clues about service performance. For example, if the poster is well designed, they can quickly catch students’ attention and stimulate them to participate in institution’s summer school. In the past, the institution’s paper was traditionally prepared with wordy and unattractive content. Therefore, it is suggested to renovate the paper design with more consideration in terms of layout, color or concept, to adapt to young generation’s interests. The design tasks are usually outsourced to professional agency and experienced experts in this field; hence the author will only present one example of physical evidence improvement concerning event timetable. In comparison with the old version, the new timetable is suggested based on author’s creativeness and lessons learned from best practices in competitor benchmarking.



materials, only needs to provide an overview of the whole program. More detailed information can be provided on web pages. For example, under the event calendar, the link to the web page can be provided. In addition, the new version also focuses on design and aesthetic factors that work more effectively in attracting students' attention in the first stage.

For better communication experiences, online channels like website and social networks should also be frequently updated with latest news and information. During summer school, accommodation condition and study facility should be carefully controlled as they are the factors that have direct impact on students' experiences. Last but not least, art factors such as logo, institution representative color, etc. should be determined properly in accordance with the institution's goal and unique features. To take an example, students can be provided with uniform shirts or bags with distinctive logo. These types of evidences can help convey the institution's brand image more effectively to participants. Besides, in such a long trip across many countries, several types of uniformity should be established to prevent potential conflicts and motivate students to integrate better within a multi-cultural group.

## 6 CONCLUSION

This chapter was written after the improvement plan has been suggested in association with the research results. Therefore, it aims to summarize all the findings and give some recommendations for further research.

### 6.1 Answer for Research Questions

Summer school has become one of the most popular international projects employed by higher education institutions all over the world. This type of project has great potential as it not only can support student mobility but also enhance international relationship between different institutions. With the help of benchmarking framework, the summer school at University X has been analyzed in comparison with other competitors in the market. The improvement plan focuses on developing the preliminary concept of multi-country summer school with better and unique features. The detailed answers for all the questions that have been mentioned in the research objectives can be found in the table below.

TABLE 7. Summary of Answers for Research Questions

Questions	Answers
What is benchmarking? And, what is Public Domain Benchmarking process like?	<p>Benchmarking is a systematic and continuous process for measuring products, services or practices against those of competition in order to gain information to improve performance. In reality, there is no single right method for benchmarking. However, Public Domain Benchmarking has been chosen for this study. With this method, the benchmarker collects data from public resources, analyses it and provides a report.</p> <p>The suggested process includes five steps, namely determining objects of study, determining where data exist, deciding how to obtain data, collecting and analyzing data,</p>



	and developing an improvement plan.
What are the main features of competitors' summer schools that distinguish themselves from others in the market?	The main competitors for this case study are summer school offers from different education institutions worldwide. However, this study only selects 80 institutions as benchmarking partners. Their best performances focus on offering distinguished features of summer school, for instance, in terms of location, price range, social program, communication channels, etc. In addition, each institution can take advantage of their own resources to create exclusive values such as cheap price, diversified cultural values, high-quality academic programs, exciting social events, etc.
What are preliminary summer school concept's strengths and weaknesses in comparison with other competitors?	This institution has many good points compared with other competitors. They have advantageous location in central Europe, provide a high quality academic program, and maintain a good partner relationship with other institutions. In addition, the preliminary concept is new and unique, which is supposed to have great potential in attracting international students. On the other hand, the new concept can also become weakness because the institution does not have necessary experiences in organizing multi-country summer school. Some features of summer school like price, social program appear to be less competitive than competitors. Moreover, the old-fashioned promotion strategy and communication channels are regarded as barriers to implement the new summer school project.
What are the different gaps between the institution's summer school	After the data are collected and analyzed, several conclusions have been drawn out. The most suitable time for start summer school is July. Most of summer schools differ greatly in terms of course list, location, price, and social program. Flexible solutions can be applied in some cases. For

<p>and competitors' ones?</p>	<p>example, in order to generate a reasonable price, social events can become an optional choice and have separate costs from the main program. Even though each institution try to gather their available resources to create own competitive advantages , they still need to review market trends frequently in order to improve service performance and add values to customers' experiences.</p>
<p>What are customers' expectations regarding the preliminary concept of multi-country summer school?</p>	<p>From customers' perspectives, the main motivation to join a summer school is to visit Europe, improve communication and networking skills. It is surprising to note that earning credits via courses are the least influential factor for them to study abroad in summer. Among a diversified range of social events, guided tours, company visits and workshop are the most popular. In addition, students also prefer student residence as a good choice of accommodation, which results in a budgeted price package. Last but not least, the top four countries they want to include in a multi-country summer school are usually destinations that have global reputation for economics or tourism.</p>
<p>What kinds of service improvement solutions should be applied to complete and add values to the preliminary concept?</p>	<p>The improvement plan is interpreted according to the extended 3Ps in service marketing mix. Regarding people element, more efforts should be put on staff training, especially in field of international management. For instance, international employees can serve as supportive forces in dealing with foreign students and handling cross-culture conflicts to some extent.</p> <p>Furthermore, a standardized procedure for the whole summer school should be planned and followed strictly to avoid management risks.</p> <p>Physical evidences are of great importance in fulfilling</p>

	customers' expectation when using services. Therefore, some suggestions for innovating online communication channels, improving pre-arrival documents, and redesigning aesthetic factors have been provided and described in details.
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## 6.2 Validity and Reliability

The validity of the research is shown in the fact that the author investigated literature review carefully before choosing a suitable theoretical model to apply in the empirical case. Theoretical framework was developed based on knowledge from many published sources and academic journals. When the empirical research was finished, the author could find proper answers for all the research questions.

Reliability refers to the consistency between research questions and objectives, research strategy and method of data collection (Saunders 2009, 323). In the beginning, the author conducted interviews directly with the people who are involved in the selected case to identify problems and needs for research. In addition, the author was also part of international team who took the main responsibility for this project. Hence, the interview results were quite reliable; and the interpretation was done correctly under senior staff's supervision.

During the research, two quantitative surveys were conducted in order to collect data from both competitors and potential customers. Regarding the competitors' survey, data were observed and collected from open sources like partner websites, advertising materials and so on. The total number of collected cases was 80 partner institutions, which can ensure reliable result analysis and valid information from referenced sources. Concerning customers' survey, the questionnaire was sent freely to partner institution without any strict requirements to answer. Therefore, the author could not have any control over the response rate; the data were collected on a random basis. However, the questionnaire are neutrally designed and thoroughly revised by the supervisor. 103 usable questionnaires were collected so that the validity requirement could be fulfilled. Finally, the author also made another semi-structured interview with the senior

staff to discuss the questionnaire results, and ensured they were correctly interpreted into comprehensive solutions.

### 6.3 Suggestions for Further Research

First of all, when conducting the research on summer school, the author has realized that this project is part of internationalization trend between higher education institutions worldwide. Therefore, if the institution wants to improve their service performance to attract more foreign students, there are many other topics open for research, for example, student mobility, staff exchanges, international research collaboration, etc.

Secondly, the summer school trend is growing not only in terms of number but also in quality and various features. This thesis only deals with a limited number of summer schools from existing partners with the chosen institution, which are mainly distributed in Europe. Therefore, further research can be conducted on summer schools in other regions of the world. In addition, the specific features including duration, price, academic courses, social events, are also good topics to investigate further and gain in-depth knowledge of each dimension.

Last but not least, this study uses public domain benchmarking to create a data base for many summer schools at the same time. The results, therefore, only provide general implications to develop the preliminary concept. On the other hand, if the researcher tries to apply other benchmarking approaches such as one-to-one benchmarking, review benchmarking, trial benchmarking, the results may vary with more useful conclusions.

## 7 SUMMARY

This thesis aims to help with benchmarking process and develop service improvement tactics for the empirical case of summer school at University X. In the past few years, summer school has become increasingly popular in higher education all over the world. The failure of previous summer school projects has required the University X to review their own service performance in order to identify improvement needs and renovate the concept. As a result, benchmarking framework has been applied to compare the institution's summer school against the best performances from competitors in the market. The results from benchmarking analysis will contribute to the development of the preliminary summer school concept.

This research was conducted according to a deductive approach with the help of both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Chapter 2 presents the literature review for benchmarking process and service improvement in the form of marketing tactics. The theoretical knowledge was collected from many published sources, academic journals, and reliable internet sources. Then, chapter 3 introduces the empirical case, which includes both internal and external analysis for summer school at University X.

In the empirical research, firstly, research design and data collection process are explained. In the beginning, several interviews were made to investigate the institution's concerns and determine benchmarking objectives. Then, two surveys were designed to investigate competitors' best performances (observation survey) and understand customers' needs (questionnaire survey). Lastly, a semi-structured interview was sent to the senior staff to discuss the research results and collect feedback for the improvement plan.

Based on the collected data and research analysis, a comprehensive improvement plan is described in chapter 5. The suggested solutions are interpreted according to implication on the preliminary summer school concept and extended 3Ps in service marketing mix (people, process, and physical evidences). Chapter 6 summarizes all the answers for research questions that have been mentioned in

chapter 1. In addition, validity and reliability of the research are also indicated, followed by some recommendations for further research.

In brief, even though this research still has some limitations, it has successfully identified necessary service improvements for the institution X based on a well-conducted benchmarking process. The summer school concept is likely to have great potential to develop in the future. Therefore, the institution should continue with further research to add value to their own service package and attract more international students.

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## **INTERVIEWS**

## APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. List of Institutions That are Selected in Summer School  
Benchmarking

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Summer School Title</b>
Advent Institute	India	Explore the Other Side of the World
Ajou Univesity	Korea	Ajou International Summer School
Almeria University	Spain	International Program Summer
Antai College, Shanghai Jao Tong University	China	Business and Culture in China
Arhus University	Denmark	Sport Marketing
Bangkok University	Thailand	Entrepreneurship in Asia
BCIT School of Business, Vancouver	Canada	InternationalSummer School
Berkeley University	USA	Berkeley Summer Session
Berlin School of Economics and Law	Germany	European Business and Economics Program
Bucerius Law School, Hamburg	Germany	International Intellectual Property Transactions
NEOMA Business School	France	Study Tour in Europe: Luxury Management
Caucasus University	Georgia	Georgia Summer School for Travellers
CETYS University	Mexico	International Summer Program
Conventry University	UK	International Business Summer School
Kadir Has University	Turkey	Istanbul Summer School
Dokuz Eylul University	Turkey	Sustaining the World

EBS Business School	Germany	EBS Business Summer
Ewha University	South Korea	Ewha International Co-ed Summer College
Ewha University	South Korea	Introductory Korean Studies
German Academy for Renewable Energy and Environment Technology	Germany	Winter school "Wind, Energy and Polar Power"
German-Jordanian University	Jordan	Global Politic Summer School
Glyndŵr University	UK	English Language Summer School
Hong Kong Baptist University	Hong Kong	HKBU Summer school
Hong Kong Polytech	Hong Kong	Silk Road Internatioal Summer School
Huron University College	Canada	Summer Program
Eastern Institute for Integrated Learning and Management	India	International Summer School
International Summer School Vienna	Austria	Advanced Topic in Modern Engineering
ISS New Delhi	India	International Summer School New Delhi
KIMEP University	Kazakhstan	Central Asia and the Silk Road of 21th Century
King's College London	UK	Strategic Management
Korea University	South Korea	International Summer Campus
Lapland University of Applied Sciences	Finland	Summer School on Artic Cooperation
Lahti University of Applied Sciences	Finland	Co-designing Better Urban Living
Linaeus University	Sweden	Summer Academy

Ljubljana University	Slovenia	The Persuasive Change Leader
Ljubljana University	Slovenia	Think and Create
Ljubljana University	Slovenia	Take the Best from East and West
Maastricht University	The Netherlands	The European Union: Peace, Conflict and Human Rights
Montevideo University	Uruguay	Global Supply Network, Culture in Latin American
Munich University of Applied Sciences	Germany	Managing Global Supply Chains the German Way
National Central University	Taiwan	Chinese Language and Cultural Immersion
Nova School of Business and Economics	Portugal	International Finance
NUK Taiwan	Taiwan	Film and Lanscape in southern Taiwan
NUK Taiwan	Taiwan	IELTS Taiwan
Oslo-Akershus University of Applied Sciences	Norway	Summer School
Plekhanov Russian University of Economics	Russia	International Summer School
Plekhanov Russian University of Economics	Russia	Russian as a Foreign Language
Saint Louis University, Institute for European Studies	Belgium	EU Business Law
Salzburg University	China	Modern China Studies
Shanghai University	China	Business in China
Singapore Institute of Management	Singapore	SIM Summer Institute
Skoda Auto University	Czech Republic	Global Management in Automotive Indstry

St.Petersburg State University	Russia	St.Petersburg Summer School
Stockholm Business School	Sweden	Summer Programme
Tampere University & St.Petersburg State University	Russia & Finland	Tampere - St. Petersburg Summer School
Tallinn University	Estonia	English Language and Nordic Culture
Tech de Monterrey, Cuernavaca	Mexico	International Summer School
Tech de Monterrey, Queretaro	Mexico	International Summer School
Tech de Monterrey, Queretaro	Mexico	Spanish for Engineer
The American Business School Paris	France	Discover Paris during summer
The Gorgeo Washington Univesity	USA	Washington in the World
Tongji University	China	Shanghai International Summer School
Toulouse Business School	France	Think and Create
Universidad Panamericana	Mexico	International Management
Universitas Padjadjaran	Indonesia	Economics and Business Summer Program
Universitat Pompeu Fabra	Spain	Barcelona Macroeconomics Summer Sschool
University Blaise Pascal, FLEURA, Clermont	France	French Intensive summer course
University of Amsterdam	Netherlands	Security Government and Conflict Resolution
University of Athens	Greece	Athens: From Ancient Polis
University of Edinburg	Scotland	Edinburg City of Literature
University of Geneva	Switzerland	International Law
University of Helsinki	Finland	Helsinki Summer Sschool

University of Pisa	Italy	The Cradle of the Renaissance
University of Primorska, Koper	Slovenia	Innovation for Sustainable Development
University of Pec	Hungary	Summer School on Regional Cooperation
University of Westminster	UK	Online Entertainment Management
University of Westminster	UK	Leadership of Events
Waterford Institute of Technology	Ireland	International Business and Culture
University of Pec	Hungary	The Blue Economy
Wroclaw University of Economics	Poland	Summer School
Zagreb School of Economics	Croatia	International Summer School

## APPENDIX 2. Customer Questionnaire

### Business Train Europe

1. Where are you from? \*

2. Have you heard of any Summer Business School before?

- Yes  
 No

3. If you plan to join a summer school what are your motivations?

*1-5 is the scale of influence, 1 is not at all influential, 5 is very influential*

	1	2	3	4	5
Earn credits (ECTS)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Visit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>



	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Europe</b>					
Learn a new language	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Gain professional experiences	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Make new friends/networking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. When would be the most suitable time for you to join a Summer School? \*

- June
- July
- August

5. How long do you think the summer school should last?

*(in case the trip takes place in 3-4 countries)*

- 2 weeks
- 3 weeks
- 4 weeks
- 6 weeks
- Other:

6. Please choose TOP 4 countries you want to be included in the multi-country summer school? (select from the list below) \*

*Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK*

7. If you have decided to go for Summer Business School, which channels of communication do you prefer?

- Email
- University International Office

- Student Agency  
 Social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter...)  
 Other:

8. What kinds of activities are you most interested in during the trip? \*

*1-5 is the scale of interest, 1 is not at all interested - 5 is very interested*

	1	2	3	4	5
Welcome/Farewell party	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lectures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Language teaching	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Company visits	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Networking events	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Guided Tours	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Doing an internship	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

9. What kinds of accommodation do you want to stay?

- Hotel  
 Hostels  
 Student Residence  
 Homestay  
 Other:

10. In term of price, which is the maximum package you can accept? \*

*(please note that the cost includes tuition fee, accommodation, meals, transports and additional tourist activities during a 3-week trip in 3-4 countries)*

- 1000 € - 2000 €  
 2000 € - 3000 €  
 3000 € - 4000 €  
 more than 4000 €  
 Other:

11. Now you have gone through our survey, please state how you are interested in the idea?

1    2    3    4    5

not appealing at all      definitely join

12. Please leave your email address if you want to receive more details about our summer school offer. *(optional)*

