

Branding Universitas Riau as an International Education Destination for Foreign Students

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ABSTRACT

The globalization of higher education has intensified competition, compelling universities to develop robust international brands. Universitas Riau (UNRI), despite its strategic location and distinct Malay cultural identity, currently lacks a structured and integrated branding strategy to attract international students. This study addresses the underdevelopment of UNRI's international brand by analyzing the successful recruitment strategies of BINUS University, Universitas Andalas (UNAND), and the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Padangpanjang. The primary novelty of this research lies in its multi-stakeholder approach, specifically the integration of the Malaysian Consulate's perspective to provide an external, diplomatic-centric validation of regional educational appeal. Employing a qualitative multi-case design conducted in October 2025, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and document analysis across the institutions. Findings indicate diverse success drivers: BINUS emphasizes service excellence and exchange programs, UNAND adopts aggressive scholarship schemes, while ISI Padangpanjang leverages its cultural niche. Crucially, the Malaysian Consulate highlights the significant draw of Islamic values and scholarly opportunities. This study concludes that UNRI must adopt an "Integrated Niche-Excellence Branding Model" by synthesizing its unique Malay heritage with competitive scholarships and streamlined administration to position itself as a premier international education destination within ASEAN.

Keywords: *Branding, Universitas Riau, International Education, Foreign Students, Marketing Strategy*

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization has fundamentally transformed the landscape of higher education, creating a global market for students, academics, and research programs. Universities no longer compete solely at the national level but are increasingly engaged in international competition, requiring them to adopt more strategic and globally oriented approaches.

In this context, institutions worldwide, including those in Southeast Asia, are striving to attract international students to enhance campus diversity, strengthen global reputations, and generate alternative revenue streams. The growing mobility of students has intensified competition among universities, making internationalization a key priority.

The Indonesian government has established ambitious targets to increase the number of international students as part of its cultural diplomacy strategy and to elevate the quality of higher education. However, a significant gap persists between this national ambition and the reality faced by regional universities outside Java.

Universities in non-metropolitan regions often encounter greater visibility challenges compared to their counterparts in major urban centers. Limited exposure, weaker international networks, and less aggressive promotion strategies contribute to their difficulty in attracting international applicants.

The urgency of this research lies in the strategic position of the University of Riau (UNRI). Located in the heart of the Malay world and adjacent to Malaysia and Singapore,

UNRI holds unique cultural and geographical advantages that could serve as strong selling points in international recruitment.

Despite this potential, it remains underutilized due to the absence of a focused and aggressive international branding strategy. Current recruitment efforts appear to be ad hoc, which may also lead to adaptation challenges for incoming students, such as culture shock and communication barriers.

A review of existing literature indicates that most Indonesian studies on international students focus primarily on post-arrival adaptation, including student resilience and language learning management. This reveals several research gaps, particularly in branding strategies for non-metropolitan public universities, the lack of integrated strategic models, and the limited involvement of external stakeholders such as diplomatic consulates.

To address these gaps, this study adopts a strategic benchmarking approach by analyzing successful practices from BINUS University, Andalas University (UNAND), and the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Padangpanjang, as well as incorporating perspectives from the Malaysian Consulate. The study ultimately aims to develop a comprehensive and actionable hybrid branding strategy model tailored specifically for the University of Riau, contributing both practically and theoretically to the field of higher education marketing management.

METHOD

This research design uses a qualitative approach with a comparative multi-case study strategy. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore in-depth and contextually the strategies, challenges, and success factors of each institution studied, each of which has unique characteristics yet is relevant to UNRI's learning.

The selection of BINUS University, Andalas University (UNAND), and the Indonesian Institute of the Arts (ISI) Padangpanjang was conducted using a purposive sampling method to support a qualitative comparative multi-case study with a descriptive-analytical approach. BINUS University was selected as a representative of private higher education institutions with a robust international reputation and excellence in digital marketing strategies, serving as a benchmark for private sector success in Jakarta. Andalas University was chosen due to its status as a Legal Entity State University (PTN-BH) in Sumatra, sharing geographical and socio-cultural similarities with Universitas Riau (UNRI) while possessing a more established internationalization roadmap. Furthermore, ISI Padangpanjang provides a unique perspective as a specialized arts institution capable of attracting international students through distinct locally-themed programs.

By focusing on the "how" and "why" of these successful internationalization strategies, this research engaged key informants from the Office of International Affairs (KUI), marketing departments, and faculty leadership at these three institutions, supplemented by insights from officials at the Malaysian Consulate in Pekanbaru. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and strategic document analysis, subsequently processed using comparative thematic analysis. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of the strategies, challenges, and success factors of each institution, ultimately generating contextual strategic recommendations to enhance UNRI's international competitiveness through comprehensive cross-case analysis.

The subject selection technique used purposive sampling. Subjects were selected based on specific criteria: (1) their strategic role in campus internationalization, and (2) their ability to provide rich and in-depth information on the research topic. The primary data collection technique was semi-structured interviews. Interview guidelines were prepared to cover key areas (promotion strategies, scholarships, services, challenges), but the semi-structured format allowed flexibility to explore new themes that emerged during the conversations. The secondary data collection technique was document analysis. The researcher collected and analyzed international promotional materials (brochures, videos), official website content (particularly the international admissions page), and strategic planning documents or

internationalization roadmaps from the universities studied (if available). The research procedure began by contacting potential subjects to request their availability and schedule interviews. Interviews were conducted (both in-person and online), recorded with permission, and then transcribed verbatim. Document data were collected simultaneously for data triangulation.

The data analysis technique used comparative thematic analysis. First, each interview transcript and document from a single case (e.g., BINUS) were analyzed to identify internal themes. Second, after each case was analyzed individually, a cross-case analysis was conducted to compare and contrast strategies, challenges, and outcomes. This analysis focused on identifying lessons learned relevant to UNRI

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research findings demonstrate that while each institution employs a distinct strategic trajectory to enhance international student enrollment, their successes are underpinned by sophisticated applications of branding typologies. These findings are presented on a case by case basis, serving as the foundational framework for formulating a localized strategy for the Universitas Riau (UNRI). BINUS University exemplifies a highly structured Service-Led and Market-Oriented Branding model. Their strategy is anchored by three pillars: promotion, academic collaboration, and student services. A central element is their active student exchange program, designed to transform participants into "brand ambassadors" upon returning to their home countries. BINUS strategically reinforces its reputation through cross-border research collaborations and financially attractive, fee-waived exchange policies. Their promotions specifically target ASEAN markets and international schools. Notably, BINUS maintains an "obsessive focus" on excellent service, operating on the principle that students who are satisfied academically, administratively, and socially serve as the most effective "natural marketing" asset a branding force more potent than traditional paid advertising. This is supported by a clear roadmap for the student lifecycle and the promotion of international accreditations.

In contrast, Universitas Andalas (UNAND) adopts an Investment-Based Branding strategy, viewing internationalization as a long-term capital commitment to achieve world-class status. Their primary mechanism is an aggressive full-scholarship policy, with an annual budget of 13 billion IDR covering tuition, living stipends, airfare, and health insurance. UNAND effectively utilizes digital promotion, specifically dedicated Instagram accounts, which garnered 1,500 applicants and allowed the university to shift its focus from quantity to quality. Despite this success, UNAND faces challenges regarding the high cost of overseas promotion and cultural adaptation for students from conflict-affected regions, which they mitigate through outbound activities and cultural orientation. Furthermore, ISI Padangpanjang demonstrates a Niche and Identity Based Branding approach. By leveraging arts and culture as a "universal language," they utilize the Ministry's Darmasiswa program and collaborate with third-party agents. Their promotional strategy centered on exhibitions and festivals allows them to bypass traditional marketing limitations by offering a unique cultural value proposition. Similarly, the Malaysian Consulate's perspective highlights a specific market opportunity: the strong, moderate, and inclusive "Islamic nuance" of Indonesian campuses is a primary attractor for Malaysian students. The Consulate suggests that universities like UNRI should expand their reach beyond major cities to regions like Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan, and Terengganu, where the potential is vast but information remains scarce. When analyzed through the lens of branding typologies, these strategies reveal a broad spectrum of internationalization. BINUS University represents Service Led Branding, where reputation is built on service excellence.

UNAND utilizes Investment-Based Branding, leveraging financial strength to build market power. Meanwhile, ISI Padangpanjang employs Niche Branding, avoiding general competition by offering unique cultural specializations. Regarding branding orientation, a fundamental distinction exists between market-oriented and identity-based approaches. BINUS is a clear example of market-oriented branding, where every administrative and promotional touchpoint is designed to meet consumer expectations. Conversely, ISI Padangpanjang and the

"Islamic nuance" identified by the Malaysian Consulate align with identity-based branding. In this model, the institution offers its authentic self—cultural arts or religious values as the primary attraction, seeking market segments that share these intrinsic values rather than altering the institutional identity to fit the market. These strategies also align with Destination Branding Theory, which posits that an institution's appeal is inseparable from the image of its location.

The Malaysian Consulate's findings reinforce this, as they view Sumatra as a "destination" offering a specific inclusive Islamic environment. This indicates that international students choose a living environment as much as a study program. UNAND's focus on cultural adaptation and BINUS's creation of "ambassadors" through social satisfaction are practical applications of experience-based branding within a destination. For the University of Riau (UNRI), integrating these three perspectives provides a robust foundation for future strategy. UNRI can adopt the service excellence model of BINUS to ensure brand sustainability, utilize UNAND's digital outreach for promotional efficiency, and maintain its local/regional identity (such as Malay culture) as a primary differentiator in the international market. By targeting strategic regions like Sabah and Sarawak which share geographical and emotional proximity UNRI can position itself not merely as a place of study, but as a "premier educational destination" that offers academic excellence alongside cultural resonance.

CONCLUSIONS

In light of the findings from this comparative multi-case study, the conclusion underscores that internationalization for regional universities such as the University of Riau (UNRI) is no longer a matter of ad hoc recruitment but a sophisticated exercise in strategic branding. This research contributes theoretically by proposing a Hybrid Branding Model tailored for non-metropolitan universities in developing countries, synthesizing three distinct institutional approaches: the service-led excellence of BINUS (market-oriented), the resource-intensive investment model of UNAND (financial-based), and the cultural niche differentiation of ISI Padangpanjang (identity-based). By integrating these approaches with the market perspective of external stakeholders such as the Malaysian Consulate, the study challenges the dominant literature that focuses on post-arrival adaptation and instead offers a proactive framework for institutional image-building. This synthesis provides a new lens through which regional universities can bridge the gap between national diplomatic ambitions and local implementation constraints. Practically, the research outlines a comprehensive strategic roadmap for UNRI to transition from passive recruitment to an intentional destination brand through an experience-based branding strategy that leverages its position in the Malay world. This includes adopting BINUS's strong service orientation to enhance student satisfaction as a marketing asset, implementing UNAND's digital efficiency and targeted scholarship schemes, and capitalizing on niche opportunities in underserved regions such as Sabah, Sarawak, Kelantan, and Terengganu, where cultural and religious compatibility can serve as a key competitive advantage. By addressing the full student lifecycle—from targeted digital promotion to cultural orientation—UNRI can mitigate challenges such as culture shock and communication barriers while ensuring a sustainable influx of international students. Finally, the policy implications highlight the importance of strengthening UNRI's ASEAN positioning within Indonesia's cultural diplomacy agenda, emphasizing the need for decentralized internationalization policies that empower regional universities to function as educational destinations offering both academic excellence and culturally resonant living environments. Through the adoption of a balanced hybrid model that combines market efficiency with identity-based authenticity, UNRI can transform its geographical proximity into a strategic advantage and position itself as a leading educational hub in Southeast Asia, thereby contributing to the global competitiveness and diversity of Indonesian higher education.

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