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Administrative Sciences

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Suggested Citation: Elareshi, Mokhtar; Ben Romdhane, Samar; Ahmed, Wasim (2024) : Evaluating university attributes and their influence on students' attitudes: The mediating role of social responsibility communication, Administrative Sciences, ISSN 2076-3387, MDPI, Basel, Vol. 14, Iss. 8, pp. 1-20,
<https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14080183>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/320997>

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Article

Evaluating University Attributes and Their Influence on Students' Attitudes: The Mediating Role of Social Responsibility Communication

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Abstract: Understanding the salience of university attributes assists institutions in developing messaging strategies (using social responsibility communication (SRC) initiatives) to meet students' needs. This research examines which university attributes hold the greatest significance and importance for students selecting a higher-education institution (HEI), focusing on the role of SRC as a mediator. An online survey with a sample of 120 university students was conducted. The findings indicate that the cost of education, employment opportunities, physical aspects and resources, and university image are important attributes. The study shows that while university attributes significantly predict SRC (Model 1), neither university attributes nor SRC significantly predicts student attitudes (Models 2 and 3). The mediation analysis confirms that SRC does not mediate the relationship between university attributes and students' attitudes, suggesting that factors other than university attributes and SRC may play a more critical role in shaping students' attitudes.

Keywords: organisational communication; universities; students' attitudes; HEIs; social responsibility communication (SRC)



Citation: Elareshi, Mokhtar, Samar Ben Romdhane, and Wasim Ahmed.

2024. Evaluating University Attributes and Their Influence on Students' Attitudes: The Mediating Role of Social Responsibility Communication. *Administrative Sciences* 14: 183. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14080183>

Received: 3 July 2024

Revised: 13 August 2024

Accepted: 14 August 2024

Published: 19 August 2024



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1. Introduction

Higher-education institutions (HEIs) are dynamic hubs of innovation and knowledge creation and possess a variety of characteristics, qualities and features that influence students' decisions and perceptions (Pinar et al. 2014). Universities, for example, serve as centres for the instillation of values, where alignment with broader social objectives contributes to the development of individuals who are conscious of their impact on the world (Hashim et al. 2022). In a context in which global issues such as climate change and environmental sustainability, diversity and inclusion, and health and wellbeing have taken centre stage, HEIs aim to attract and retain a new generation of students increasingly concerned with pressing social, cultural, environmental, and economic responsibilities through SRC initiatives such as publishing an annual sustainability report, raising community-services awareness through their social media campaigns, and engaging with students through surveys and feedback sessions. SRC refers to the strategies and practices that HEIs use to convey their commitment to social, environmental, and ethical responsibilities to their stakeholders. This communication aims to inform, engage, and build trust with stakeholders by transparently sharing the institution's efforts and achievements in social-responsibility initiatives. The shift in the new generation's choices and priorities (Aledo-Ruiz et al. 2021) has induced a corresponding transformation in the focus and communication strategies of HEIs (Symaco and Tee 2019). While pursuing their academic mission and research obligations, HEIs are increasingly integrating social-responsibility

principles into their core operations (Abrams 2022; Özturgut 2017; Sepetis et al. 2020), as well as into their promotional and marketing strategies.

Both within the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and globally, universities strategically implement several SRC activities to differentiate themselves from competitors and manage their reputation, credibility, and transparency as components of their attributes (Ankit and Tharwat 2020). Note that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is one of the wealthiest countries in the MENA and that since the late 1990s, it has expanded its higher-education system regionally and internationally (Kaba and Said 2014). Commonly pursued by many universities in the UAE, SRC and community engagement are key factors in the licensure-and-accreditation process. According to the Standards for Institutional Licensure and Programme (SILP) 2019, and as part of the accreditation requirement, UAE higher-education institutions are required to demonstrate a commitment to community engagement and social, environmental, and economic responsibilities (El Refae et al. 2021). This commitment is conveyed through different strategies and channels, including the institution's mission statement, stakeholder engagement (collaborating with government bodies and community, directly involving stakeholders in SRC initiatives and encouraging feedback), detailed reporting (annual social responsibility reports and publications), and marketing and PR (leveraging communication channels including social media platforms, dedicated sections on corporate websites, community events and media relations). These attributes collectively contribute to a university's identity and can significantly affect its success and impact. They are also considered by prospective students, faculty, staff, and stakeholders when they are evaluating and comparing universities.

As highlighted by Alcaide-Pulido et al. (2021), the public image of a university has become a strategic asset that demands attention and relies on effectively communicating its unique attributes and features. University attributes are usually defined as the distinctive characteristics and qualities of HEIs that influence perceptions, decision-making, and experiences. They often remain intangible to stakeholders, including students, faculty, staff, and the broader community, so communication efforts are required to bridge the gap between objective reality and perception or expectation, termed the pseudo-environment by Lippmann (1922). Aligning students' expectations and interests with the information should consider the students' needs and an understanding of the cognitive processes that shape student's attitude and decision-making. In doing so, HEIs need to go beyond focusing on their academic mission and consider other factors such as their public image (Duarte et al. 2010; Shami and Ashfaq 2018), their distinctive traits (Alcaide-Pulido et al. 2021; Shami and Ashfaq 2018), employment opportunities (Kaba and Said 2014), satisfaction, and academic experience (Elareshi and Bajnaid 2019; Hajoš 2017).

Furthermore, most universities often need to craft messages with careful consideration of tone, language, and visual elements (Ali-Choudhury et al. 2009), and tailor these messages to specific audience segments to positively influence attitudes and perceptions (see e.g., Bordalo et al. 2012), distinguish themselves from competitors, fortify their reputation, and foster personalised stakeholder relationships (Mogaji et al. 2021; Schlesinger et al. 2021). Understanding the audience's (e.g., students') needs, enhancing their online presence across communication channels, and adapting branding and marketing strategies are essential in the education sector, especially in a context of heightened competition (Schlesinger et al. 2021).

A rather unexplored area of research deals with the varied factors influencing the attitudes of students from diverse backgrounds within the UAE, one of the leading countries in the region in terms of the development of its higher-education sector. The literature demonstrates a clear mismatch among the qualities of university graduates, continually changing labour-market needs (Ashour 2020), and students' expectations (Zhao and Song 2020). However, there is a lack of work addressing students' attitudes towards university attributes.

Drawing upon a marketing and public-relations perspective, our main research question revolves around understanding the extent to which SRC mediates the relationship between university attributes (including education cost, employment opportunities, physi-

cal aspects, facilities and resources, and university image) and students' attitudes. In doing so, this study investigates the relationship between perceived institutional SRC and various aspects of student engagement within the university setting. These types of attributes were selected because of their pre-eminence within higher education and their apparent importance to a university's brand. This exploration will contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted relationships between university attributes and student perceptions.

The paper is structured as follows: after the introduction, the Literature Review section provides a comprehensive examination of existing research on university attributes and SRC, exploring their impact on students' perceptions. This section also introduces the study model. The Research Methodology section outlines the research design, including data-collection methods and analysis procedures, describing the questionnaire used and the factor analysis conducted to ensure construct validity. The results section presents the findings from the data analysis, including the factor-analysis results and the correlations between university attributes and SRC, with a new table showing the correlations matrix at a factor level of analysis. The discussion section interprets the findings within the theoretical framework and existing literature, discussing the implications for HEIs and how they can enhance their SRC to meet stakeholder expectations and regulatory requirements. Finally, the conclusion summarises the key findings and their implications, providing recommendations for HEIs on improving their SRC and suggesting areas for future research.

2. Literature Review and the Theoretical Framework

2.1. UAE Higher Education

For the past two decades or so, the HEIs in the UAE have experienced significant growth and development characterised by rapid expansion, internationalisation, and a strong focus on quality and innovation (Ashour 2020). For example, most HEIs have adopted different SRC and PR initiatives to shape their image, reputation, and engagement with various stakeholders internationally, regionally, and locally. These initiatives are aimed at managing their reputation, enhancing their visibility, and effectively communicating with diverse audiences (Ebrahim and Seo 2019). They leverage their communication practices (e.g., including social media, press releases, events, and partnerships) to engage with students and parents, alumni, and stakeholders (e.g., government bodies, industry partners, and the broader community) (Wilkins 2020). HEIs in the UAE also promote their academic achievements, research breakthroughs, and community initiatives. This SRC-based proactive engagement fosters a positive public image, strengthens relationships, and ensures transparency and accountability (Samuel et al. 2018).

Moreover, UAE's HEIs often emphasise cultural sensitivity, considering the diverse population and the multicultural dynamics within the country (Ebrahim and Seo 2019; Wilkins 2020). Institutions strive to communicate inclusively and respectfully, acknowledging cultural nuances and values in their messaging and interactions. These strategies also aid in attracting international students, academic professionals, and collaborations, positioning UAE HEIs as global academic hubs. By showcasing their academic excellence, innovative programmes, and commitment to cultural diversity, HEIs enhance their international reputation and competitiveness (Blom et al. 2019). For example, the initiatives of the UAE with regard to HEIs are aligned with its 2030 vision for education excellence, innovation, and national development (Ashour 2020). They contribute to highlighting the role of education in advancing the nation's socioeconomic goals and sustainable-development agenda (Volk et al. 2023).

2.2. University Attributes

Scholars have acknowledged that a university's reputation is the tangible outcome of quality communication efforts (Lee et al. 2015). A university's reputation, one of the central dimensions of brand positioning (Panda et al. 2019), refers to the perceptions, beliefs, and opinions held by stakeholders, particularly students, about the institution (Kaushal and Ali 2020; Pinar et al. 2014). Alcaide-Pulido et al. (2021) identify various factors defining

a university attributes, including national and international recognition, economic value, employment opportunities, education cost, university facilities/resources, and external communication and values (Tran et al. 2023). Ali-Choudhury et al. (2009) and Batra et al. (2012) note that a university's attributes, i.e., its brand, include various elements such as values, mission, culture, history, and offerings, which are communicated and perceived in different ways. Pinar et al. (2014) developed a measurement scale for university attributes, i.e., branding, identifying core and supporting value-creation factors. Their study revealed that certain dimensions of brand equity are more crucial in building a strong university image. In order of importance, the core dimensions include the perceived quality of faculty, university reputation, emotional environment, brand loyalty, and brand awareness. Among the supporting dimensions, library services are the most important, followed by student living, career development, and physical facilities.

Other studies have examined and confirmed the importance of educational attributes, such as academic programmes (Alcaide-Pulido et al. 2021; El Alfy and Abukari 2020) and academic performance (El Refae et al. 2021). For example, Erkan et al. (2021) found that quality academics, education, research, and physical conditions were crucial factors that contributed to university attributes, with research quality being the most important driver. Choi and Cha (2021) found that these traditional elements of the university experience, such as the communication methods employed by professors, positively impact students' emotions towards their university, evoking feelings of, e.g., pride and enjoyment.

Additionally, previous research proposed a comprehensive framework to understand the components of university attributes (Ali-Choudhury et al. 2009). The suggested framework classifies these components into three dimensions. The first dimension comprises the promises made by the university to the external world regarding the benefits it offers. These promises include high-calibre faculty, post-graduation job prospects, and socialisation opportunities. Secondly, distinctive features outline the unique characteristics of the university brand. These features include the university's positioning, whether it focuses more on research or teaching, and campus facilities, safety, and security. Lastly, external communications refer to the design of advertisements and the overall communication strategy used by the university to portray itself. This includes elements like the university's name, logo, and advertising slogans, which create a distinctive identity among its audience.

Other studies have demonstrated that demographic characteristics play a significant role in shaping university choice (Lei and Chuang 2010; Shammot 2011), with gender being one factor that can influence the type of university a student chooses. For example, female students are more likely to opt for universities that offer support services and a strong sense of community (Fashami 2020). Furthermore, race and socio-economic status have been shown to impact university choice (McGovern 2021; Patterson et al. 2022), with underrepresented minority and low-income students being more likely to choose universities that offer financial aid and support services (Shiner and Noden 2015). It has been demonstrated that students may also prioritise specific university attributes (e.g., academic reputation) if they seek a high-quality education (Camilleri 2020), while cost and financial aid may be the most important factors for students concerned about the financial burden of attending university (Destin and Svoboda 2018; Kuh 2005). Additionally, students may prioritise a university's location if they prefer to stay closer to their families, while campus culture, as an appeal, may be more attractive for students who value a sense of community and social interaction (Henderson et al. 2018). This study assumes that by leveraging these factors, universities can enhance their appeal and effectively engage with the students they aim to attract.

RQ1: *To what extent university attributes influence students' attitudes towards a selected university?*

2.3. Students' Attitudes

Students' attitudes should reflect their positive/negative assessment of their university experience and significantly influence their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours related to that experience. Scholars have employed various methods to better understand students'

attitudes (Chan and Chen 2023), e.g., focus groups (Alshammari et al. 2017) and interviews (Sari and Oktaviani 2021). These studies have revealed that new generation is driven by a desire for positive change and empowerment (Kinnula and Iivari 2019) and places great importance on emotional and social values (Ashour 2020) such as social justice, sustainability, and equality (Dabija et al. 2019). As result, students exhibit social consciousness that go beyond traditional valuation of brands (Aledo-Ruiz et al. 2021; Turner 2012). Recognising this shift, HEIs are compelled to recognise the importance of engaging with local communities and addressing social concerns, and effectively communicating these values to students through their messages and actions becomes crucial. Furthermore, while the literature acknowledges the importance of values such as commitment to society, ethical behaviour, and social and environmental responsibility within universities, there appears to be a gap in terms of providing a clear and operational definition for these values.

Research assessed students' attitudes by asking them to rate their agreement with different statements (Veciana et al. 2005). This method allows studies to obtain a comprehensive picture of students' attitudes. This body of scholarly research included models developed to measure students' attitudes through their satisfaction, considering various dimensions, including university reputation, expectations, perceived quality, value assessment, and loyalty (Temizer and Turkyilmaz 2012). To understand the importance of these factors, our study examines how university attributes influence students' attitudes through SRC (as a mediator), as illustrated in Figure 1.

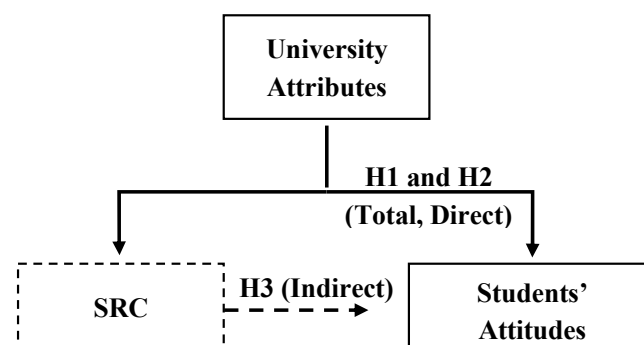


Figure 1. Path diagram for the total, direct, and indirect effects of university attributes on students' attitudes (source: authors' original representation of the research hypotheses).

2.4. The Mediator Role of SRC

The theoretical framework of this study relies on the importance of SRC in relation to HEIs at the UAE and assumes that universities' involvement in SRC initiatives might enable students to draw a connection between their academic pursuits and practical societal benefits, encouraging a sense of purpose and relevance in their studies. Additionally, participation in such activities equips students with crucial skills, including empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and problem-solving abilities, that are essential for addressing real-world issues. Consequently, learners view HEIs' prioritisation of SRC strategies as a platform for both personal advancement and collective societal improvement (Aledo-Ruiz et al. 2021). The influence of SRC initiatives on students' attitudes has been explored in various studies, with a growing focus on the education sector. Studies have shown that telling students about the impact a university is capable of having on society emphasises its positive attributes, enhances its reputation, and engages stakeholders (Cooper et al. 2023; Elareshi and Bajnaid 2019). Expanding on models that examined the relationship between SRC and users' loyalty to the education sector, scholars have demonstrated that universities' social-responsibility communication supports student loyalty and increases students' perceptions of service quality, satisfaction, and trust in their university (Latif et al. 2021).

University stakeholders, who are becoming more involved in the activities of the university, are expressing a growing need for comprehensive information regarding the university's social and cultural impact, particularly focusing on SRC (Aversano et al. 2020).

However, challenges associated with determining an accurate reporting approach for universities' SRC efforts have prompted discussions about the relevance of incorporating SRC into financial reporting. [Carnegie and Wolnizer \(1999\)](#) contend that social or cultural impact should not be part of financial reporting since they are attributes that are not intended for sale. [Pallot \(1990\)](#) suggests keeping this type of attribute separate from other assets but suggests calling them "community assets". Therefore, this paper distinguishes SRC from other university attributes. This approach follows that of [Aversano et al. \(2020\)](#), who argue that categorising SRC efforts as liabilities and maintaining a classification separate from those of other assets would be more fitting.

The relationship between the role of university attributes and SRC in higher education institutions is multifaceted and critical for both institutional success and stakeholder engagement. For example, university attributes usually encompass various elements e.g., cost and employment opportunities, that shape the perception and reputation of an HEI. In such a case, SRC can amplify this effect by using effectively communicating these attributes to the public. By further integrating SRC into a university's communication strategies, they can enhance their public image and reputation, as SRC helps to highlight the university's commitment to broader social objectives, thereby making the institution more attractive to prospective students and other stakeholders.

Hence, this study assumes that the relationship between university attributes (including education cost, employment opportunities, physical aspects, facilities and resources, university image) and students' attitudes (with direct, indirect, and total effects) can be described by three levels/hypotheses, as follows:

H1: *University attributes (X) have a total effect on students' attitudes (Y).*

H2: *University attributes (X) have a direct effect on students' attitudes (Y).*

H3: *SRC mediates (M) the relationship between university attributes (X) and students' attitudes (Y) (indirect effect).*

For H3, to some extent, we assumed that the relationship between X and Y is mediated by specific SRC initiatives (Figure 1). This is because, overall, SRC initiatives might not automatically lead to students' attitudes towards the university attributes. In fact, despite having an overall attitude towards the university's image, students might lack knowledge of the university's brand.

3. Method

3.1. The Sampling

The objective of this research is to investigate students' attitudes towards university attributes. The research specifically focuses on the extent to which SRC plays a mediating role in shaping students' preferences and attitudes. In doing so, the study used an online survey of well-educated students at Ajman University in the Emirate Ajman, UAE; students' education levels ranged from their first year to their final year of study, with a few at the postgraduate level, as presented in Table 1. In 2020–2021, the university had approximately 12,475 students ([Ajman University 2022](#)). A convenience-sampling method was employed to distribute self-designed questionnaires to these participants during the spring 2021 semester. To ensure a high level of participation, the survey direct link was disseminated through the university email system and two email reminders were sent. To ensure ethical practice, prior to the distribution of the survey, the study sought approval from the University Research Ethical Committee (2021-IRG-MC-1). Out of the 170 surveys distributed, a total of 120 responses were collected, for a response rate of 70.59%. We pilot-tested the questionnaire with 20 students, and some changes were made in response to the respondents' feedback and the study's aims.

3.2. Questionnaire and Measures

Based on a careful review of related research on university attributes and students' attitudes (Aledo-Ruiz et al. 2021; Ankit and Tharwat 2020; Sriramesh et al. 2007), the authors designed the study instrument through Google Forms (Appendix A), creating a 21-item questionnaire (Table 2). All variables in the study achieved Cronbach's alpha (α) values above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.7, indicating satisfactory-to-excellent internal consistency across the different dimensions of the questionnaire. Regarding university attributes, the university's brand image (7 items, $\alpha = 0.894$); physical aspects, facilities, and resources (6 items, 0.853); education cost (4 items, $\alpha = 0.866$); and employment opportunities (4 items, $\alpha = 0.870$).

To assess student attitudes (Table 3), the survey comprised four dimensions, as follows: institutional commitment (5 items, $\alpha = 0.812$), degree commitment (3 items, $\alpha = 0.700$), social integration (4 items, $\alpha = 0.884$), and academic integration (4 items, $\alpha = 0.833$). Each dimension captures a specific aspect of the student's attitudes.

To measure SRC, the instrument comprised eight items designed to assess students' perceptions of the university's commitment to social responsibility. The items covered various aspects of social responsibility, including the university's commitment to promoting good health for the community, involvement in cultural and creative activities, support for an environmentally sustainable society, and maintaining a diverse student body.

The reliability of the SRC dimension was confirmed, with $\alpha = 0.873$. Responses to survey questions were measured using a five-point Likert scale. The survey took about 30–40 min to complete. Our empirical strategy was based on two steps. In step one, we ran three-factor analysis to measure the university attributes, while in step two, we estimated path structural models using statistical software AMOS (version 28) to test our research hypotheses.

4. Results

4.1. Respondents' Demographic Profile

The sociodemographic characteristics of the survey participants are given in Table 1. Notably, a greater proportion of the respondents were females (65%) compared to males (35%). This highlights the higher representation of females in HEIs in the UAE.

Table 1. The socio-demographic profile of the sample.

Category	N	%	Category	N	%
Gender			Level of study		
Male	42	35.0	Undergraduate	114	95.0
Female	78	65.0	Postgraduate	6	5.0
Age			Academic Year		
17–20	53	44.2	First Year	40	33
21–24	47	39.2	Second Year	17	14
25–30	14	11.7	Third Year	38	32
31+	6	5.0	Fourth Year	23	19
College			Fifth Year	2	2
Business Administration	65	55.8			
Engineering and Information Technology	29	24.2			
Dentistry	11	9.2			
Architecture Art and Design	7	5.8			
Mass Communication	4	3.3			
Pharmacy and Health Sciences	2	1.7			

Regarding age distribution, respondents were divided into three main age groups: 17–20 years old (44%), 21–24 years old (39%), and 31 years and older (5%). As to their colleges, most were enrolled in the College of Business Administration (54%), closely followed by the College of Engineering and IT (24.2%). Other colleges included Dentistry (9.2%), Architecture Art and Design (5.8%), Mass Communication (3.3%), and Pharmacy and

Health Sciences (1.7%). The educational levels of the participants revealed that undergraduate students constituted the overwhelming majority (95%) compared to postgraduates. Furthermore, the distribution of academic years included respondents in their first year (33%), second year (14%), third year (32%), fourth year (19%), and fifth year (2%). Table 1 provides more details about respondents.

4.2. The University's Attributes

Table 2 provides an overview of the perceptions of respondents with regard to the university attributes through the descriptive and reliability analyses of collected data, including Cronbach's alpha (α) (column 1). In response to RQ1, the factor analysis, using principal component analysis, was run with the following criteria: a factor Eigenvalue ≤ 1 , a minimum primary loading ≤ 0.40 on the factor, and each item having a loading ≤ 0.40 . The analysis extracted four components for the university attributes. These components were named "education cost", "employment opportunities", "physical aspects, facilities and resources", and "university image" and explained 38.7% of the total variance. Note that the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KOM) test indicates that the partial correlations between the items belonging to the construct each have relatively high values (0.840), which is considered acceptable (Brace et al. 2009).

Findings indicated that respondents have high positive perceptions of the university's attributes (Mean ≥ 3.98). For example, the values of all the items were above the threshold of 0.7, with the highest mean score being that for the "cost of education" construct, indicating that AU was the preferred choice when it comes to affordability (education cost). The second highest mean score was that for "employment opportunities", indicating that employment opportunities were a major appeal of AU, followed by "physical aspects, facilities and resources", indicating that the availability of these aspects of AU had a substantial impact on students' perceptions of AU. Finally, the university image was ranked fourth, indicating how the university is perceived by its students.

A detailed analysis shows that "education cost" was the highest-ranked factor ($M = 4.10$). Out of four variables measured under this attribute, the reasonable tuition fee was the most important variable ($FL = 0.854$), followed by the flexibility of payment time, while the flexible-tuition approach and the availability of financial aid were ranked lower. "Employment opportunities" ($M = 4.00$) was a second important factor and consisted of items such as global employability of AU graduates ($FL = 0.818$), followed by recognised positive perception of AU in the market ($FL = 0.807$), rating job prospects for graduates ($FL = 0.724$), and services provided by the job-placement department at AU ($FL = 0.688$).

The third-most-important aspect is "physical aspects, facilities, and resources" ($M = 3.99$), which consisted of six variables. Respondents rated the availability of accommodations ($FL = 0.896$) and the availability of healthcare and canteen facilities ($FL = 0.795$) as the most important variables, followed by campus design ($FL = 0.725$), the university location ($FL = 0.676$), and finally the availability of necessary resources ($FL = 0.649$) and extracurricular activities ($FL = 0.612$). These findings are consistent with those of Dao and Thorpe 2015, who rated facilities and services as the most important factors.

The fourth factor is university image ($M = 3.84$), which consisted of total seven items. The attributes considered most by respondents were, interestingly, countries/institutions of faculty members professional credentials and degrees ($FL = 0.919$), followed by international ranking ($FL = 0.781$) and QS ranking ($FL = 0.728$). Respondents also considered other factors such as the awards granted to the university for research ($FL = 0.651$), national ranking ($FL = 0.621$), the university offering the course the student wanted to study ($FL = 0.551$), and the faculty being well-qualified and experienced ($FL = 0.425$).

Table 2. Factor loading for university attributes.

Construct	Code	Statement	Factor Loading (FL)
Education Cost M * = 4.10, SD = 1.07	EC1	The cost and tuition fee are reasonable	0.863
	EC2	The flexibility of payment time	0.844
	EC3	The availability of financial aid	0.726
	EC4	The flexible tuition approach such as pay per credit hour	0.778
Employment Opportunities M = 4.00, SD = 1.02	EO1	Rate of job prospects for the graduates	0.724
	EO2	Recognised and positive perception of quality in the market	0.807
	EO3	International recognition of quality students and higher rate of employability globally	0.818
	EO4	AU offers employability services (career planning, work experience, placements, graduate jobs, etc.)	0.688
Physical Aspects, Facilities and Resources M = 3.99, SD = 1.03	PA1	Location of the university	0.676
	PA2	The university campus design	0.725
	PA3	Availability of necessary resources (e.g., labs and library, etc.)	0.649
	PA4	Availability of healthcare services, canteen	0.795
	PA5	Availability of accommodation	0.896
	PA6	Availability of extracurricular activities and facilities (sport, recreations, etc.)	0.612
University's Image M = 3.83, SD = 0.979	UI1	International ranking	0.781
	UI2	QS start rating	0.728
	UI3	National ranking	0.620
	UI4	University offers the course I want to study	0.550
	UI5	Faculty members are highly qualified and experienced	0.425
	UI6	Countries/institutions of faculty members professionalism and degrees	0.919
	UI7	Awards the university received in research	0.651

Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalisation (Eigenvalue > 1). KOM test = 0.840. Bartlett's test sphericity: 1513.960, $p < 0.001$. Factor loadings (FL) ranged from -1 to 1 , where a value close to 1 indicates a strong positive correlation between the item and the factor and loadings above 0.4 generally considered significant. * Higher mean scores indicate greater acceptance. The scale ranges from $1 =$ "Strongly disagree" to $5 =$ "Strongly agree".

4.3. Students' Attitudes

Table 3 provides the results of the factor analysis on four constructs related to students' attitudes: institutional commitment, degree commitment, social integration, and academic integration. Each construct is represented by a set of statements, and their relevance or impact is indicated by factor loadings (FL) with mean and standard deviation (SD) values, which help in understanding the overall trends and variations in the responses.

For the "institutional commitment" factor, the items "I am aware of and believe in the AU's goals and values" (FL = 0.920), "I am proud to become a student of AU" (FL = 0.951), and "I promote AU to my friends as a great university to study in" (FL = 0.840) were ranked highest, showing these were the most influential factors with respect to institutional commitment. The item "I am willing to exert efforts on behalf of AU (volunteering, recruitment, testimonials)" (FL = 0.770) and "I would have stopped my education at AU" had very low values (FL = 0.047), suggesting they did not correlate well with the construct of institutional commitment and might not be relevant measures.

For the "degree commitment" factor, while the item "I believe in the value of my degree at AU" (FL = 0.793) had a moderate correlation with this factor, the item "I believe in the value of my degree for my career goals and aspiration at AU" had an extremely low correlation (FL = 0.016), indicating almost no correlation with the construct and suggesting it may not be a good item. The item "I am happy with AU, but I want to withdraw from the programme" (FL = 0.802) had a moderately high value, indicating it is a relevant item for this construct despite the negative sentiment of the statement.

Table 3. Factor loading for students' attitudes.

Construct	Code	Statement	Factor Loading (FL)
Institutional Commitment M = 3.62, SD = 0.95	IC1	I am aware of and believe in the AU's goals and values.	0.920
	IC2	I am proud to become a student of AU.	0.951
	IC3	I am willing to exert efforts on behalf of AU (volunteering, recruitment, testimonials).	0.770
	IC4	I promote AU to my friends as a great university to study in.	0.840
	IC5	I would have stopped my education at AU.	0.047
Degree Commitment M = 3.39, SD = 0.96	DC1	I believe in the value of my degree at AU.	0.793
	DC2	I believe in the value of my degree for my career goals and aspirations at AU.	0.016
	DC3	I am happy with AU, but I want to withdraw from the programme.	0.802
Social Integration M = 3.52, SD = 1.06	SI1	My interpersonal relationships with other students have had a positive influence on my sense of belonging.	0.890
	SI2	Students at AU have values and attitudes similar to mine.	0.918
	SI3	My interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my sense of belonging.	0.821
	SI4	My overall social life experience at AU is satisfying.	0.803
Academic Integration M = 3.62, SD = 0.95	AI1	I am well informed about all aspects of university life, including academics, campus events, and tuition costs.	0.803
	AI2	Since joining AU, I have developed a sense of intellectual growth and interest in new ideas.	0.938
	AI3	The curriculum and instruction contribute to my personal goals.	0.918
	AI4	My current financial situation does not allow me to handle the university cost.	0.584

Extraction method: principal component analysis. Rotation method: varimax (Eigenvalue > 1). Higher mean indicates equal greater acceptance. Scale ranges from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree".

For the "social integration factor", all items ("my interpersonal relationships with other students have had a positive influence on my sense of belonging" (FL = 0.890), "students at AU have values and attitudes similar to mine" (FL = 0.918), "my interactions with faculty have had a positive influence on my sense of belonging" (FL = 0.821), and "my overall social life experience at AU is satisfying" (FL = 0.803)) showed strong correlations, making them key indicators for this factor.

For the "academic integration factor", most items ("I am well informed about all aspects of university life, including academics, campus events, and tuition costs" (FL = 0.803), "I have a sense of intellectual growth and interest in ideas since joining to AU" (FL = 0.938), and "the curriculum and instruction contribute to my personal goals" (FL = 0.918)) showed strong relevance to the construct. However, the item "my current financial situation does not allow me to handle the university cost" had a very low value (FL = 0.584), indicating moderate relevance to academic integration, likely due to its financial nature, as finances may affect academic persistence differently.

4.4. Correlation Analysis

To explore the relationships among various variables, a correlation analysis of the constructs was run employing the Pearson correlation test (Table 4). The analysis demonstrated that SRC exhibited statistically significant, positive relationships with three of the measured variables. One of these was "physical aspects, facilities, and resources" ($r = 0.646$, $p < 0.05$), indicating a strong positive correlation between students' perceptions of the physical aspects and available facilities/resources of the university and their sense of SRC. In simpler terms, students who found the university's physical environment and resources appealing were more likely to feel socially responsible and engaged (Orodho et al. 2013).

Table 4. The correlation matrix.

Items	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. University image	1.0								
2. Social responsibility communication	0.623 **	1.0							
3. Physical aspects, facilities and resources	0.687 **	0.646 **	1.0						
4. Education cost	0.400 **	0.334 **	0.551 **	1.0					
5. Employment opportunities	0.652 **	0.637 **	0.556 **	0.565 **	1.0				
6. Institutional commitment	0.063	0.113	0.032	0.012	0.068	1.0			
7. Degree commitment	0.028	0.086	0.019	0.055	0.050	0.764 **	1.0		
8. Social integration	0.109	0.121	0.128	0.103	0.080	0.817 **	0.695 **	1.0	
9. Academic integration	0.100	0.142	0.107	0.062	0.076	0.799 **	0.674 **	0.791 **	1.0

** > 0.05, a 2-tailed *p*-value.

The correlation matrix provides insight into the relationships among various items related to university experiences, such as university image, SRC, and different aspects of commitment and integration. University image and physical aspects, facilities and resources ($r = 0.687$, $p < 0.05$), and employment opportunities ($r = 0.652$, $p < 0.05$) were strongly positively correlated, suggesting that students who perceive the university's image positively also have a favourable view of its physical aspects, facilities, and resources and of the employment opportunities provide by the university. The university's physical environment and resources and the employability of its alumni significantly contribute to its overall image.

SRC, physical aspects, facilities and resources ($r = 0.646$, $p < 0.05$), and employability of alumni ($r = 0.637$, $p < 0.05$) were also correlated, indicating that effective communication about the university's social responsibility is strongly associated with positive perceptions of its physical facilities and resources and better employability of its alumni. This could mean that students appreciate the alignment between what the university communicates about its social role and the quality of its physical environment (Ashour 2020).

Institutional commitment was correlated with social integration ($r = 0.817$, $p < 0.05$), academic integration ($r = 0.799$, $p < 0.05$), and degree commitment ($r = 0.764$, $p < 0.05$), suggesting that students who feel committed to the institution also feel well integrated socially and academically. Institutional commitment seems to be closely tied to how well students feel they belong and grow within the university environment. Education cost shows moderate correlations with physical aspects, facilities and resources ($r = 0.551$) and employability ($r = 0.565$), suggesting that students might perceive these aspects as being interlinked with the cost of education (Symaco and Tee 2019).

Overall, institutional and degree commitment are strongly linked to social and academic integration, indicating that students who are more integrated into the university's social and academic fabric tend to be more committed. While the university's image is strongly associated with aspects like facilities and employment opportunities, it does not significantly impact students' commitment or integration. Similarly, the cost of education does not play a significant role in shaping commitment or integration, though it relates to perceptions of resources and employment opportunities. Finally, SRC has strong ties with perceptions of physical resources and employment opportunities but has less influence on institutional commitment, suggesting that it is a potential area of opportunity for strengthening the impact of social responsibility on deeper aspects of student experience. In other words, these elements strongly contribute to the overall sense of SRC among surveyed students, highlighting their importance in the decision-making process with regard to higher education (Symaco and Tee 2019).

4.5. Mediation Analysis of the Effect of University Attributes on Students' Attitudes through SRC

This analysis was performed using PROCESS procedure in SPSS Version 4.2, where the effect of mediating variable “social responsibility communication” (SRC) (M) on “university attributes” (X) and “student attitudes” (Y) was observed to elucidate the mechanism or the relationship through which X influences Y via M. The concept of this analysis involves three effects: a direct effect wherein university attributes (X) have an impact on students' attitudes (Y) without considering SRC (M); an indirect effect wherein the effect of X on Y is mediated through M; and a total effect composed of the sum of the direct and indirect effects. We ran this analysis to help us to predict and examine three levels of effects. The results are summarised in Tables 5–8, as follows:

Table 5. Direct effect of university attributes (X) on social responsibility communication (SRC).

Model Summary: Outcome Variable: SRC	Model	R	R ²	MSE	f-Value	df1	df2	p-Value
	Constant	0.6835	0.6835	0.2957	103.4454	1.0000	118.0000	0.0000
Model 1		coeff	se	t-value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	
	Constant	0.6756	0.3112	2.1713	0.0319	0.0594	1.2919	
University attributes		0.7852	0.0772	10.1708	0.0000	0.6323	0.9381	

Table 6. Combined effect of university attributes (X) and SRC on students' attitudes (Y).

Model Summary: Outcome Variable: Students' Attitudes	Model	R	R ²	MSE	f-Value	df1	df2	p-Value
	Constant	0.1292	0.0167	0.7883	0.9926	2.0000	117.0000	0.3737
Model 2		coeff	se	t-value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	
	Constant	3.0107	0.5181	5.8108	0.0000	1.9846	4.0368	
Students' attitudes		−0.0330	0.1727	−0.1911	0.8487	−0.3750	0.3090	
SRC		0.1728	0.1503	1.1497	0.2526	−0.1249	0.4705	

Table 7. Total effect of university attributes (X) on students' attitudes (Y).

Model Summary: Outcome Variable: Students' Attitudes	Model	R	R ²	MSE	f-Value	df1	df2	p-Value
	Constant	0.0747	0.0056	0.7905	0.6617	1.0000	118.0000	0.4176
Model 3		coeff	se	t-value	p-value	LLCI	ULCI	
	Constant	3.1275	0.5088	6.1472	0.0000	2.1200	4.1350	
University attributes		0.1027	0.1262	0.8135	0.4176	−0.1473	0.3526	

Table 8. Total, direct, and indirect effects of university attributes (X) on students' attitudes (Y).

Effect/Relationship	coeff	se	t-Value	p-Value	LLCI	ULCI
Total effect of X on Y	0.1027	0.1262	0.8135	0.4176	−0.1473	0.3526
Direct effect of X on Y	−0.0330	0.1727	−0.1911	0.8487	−0.3750	0.3090
Indirect effect of X on Y => SRC	coeff	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
	0.1357	0.1290	−0.1186	0.4073		

In details, the results of Model 1 (Table 5) demonstrate a significant positive relationship between university attributes and SRC, indicating that higher values university attributes lead to higher values of SRC ($F = 103.45$, $p = 0.000$). The results also indicated that ($R^2 = 0.4671$) 47% of the variation in SRC is explained by the university attributes. This is also confirmed by the LLCI and ULCI (Lower/Upper-Level Confidence Interval), which form the 95% confidence interval for the intercept. This means that we are 95% confident that the true intercept values lie between these values (0.0594 and 1.2919, respectively).

Contrary to Model 1, the results of Model 2 (Table 6) show that the university attributes and SRC have almost no effect on student attitudes ($F = 0.993$, $p = 0.374$). With $R^2 = 0.017$, the model indicates that only 1.67% of the variance in students' attitudes can be explained by SRC, which reflects very low explanatory power to predict students' attitudes. In other words, neither university attributes nor SRC significantly predicts student attitudes.

Finally, Model 3 (Table 7) shows that students' attitudes are not significantly correlated with university attributes ($F = 0.662$, $p = 0.418$). The $R^2 = 0.0056$ value indicates a very weak positive correlation, suggesting the model's predictor explains very little of the variance in students' attitudes. The total effect model for predicting students' attitudes is thus not statistically significant, suggesting that university attributes do not have a significant effect on students' attitudes.

Table 8 describes the total, direct, and indirect effects of university attributes (X) on students' attitudes. It represents the total effect of X on Y, and indicates a slight positive relationship (coeff = 0.1027, $t = 0.8135$), suggesting that as university attributes increase by one unit, students' attitudes increase by 0.1027 units, with a p -value (0.4176) much greater than the alpha value (0.05), confirming the scale of this relationship. The value of the direct effect of X on Y after accounting for the mediator (SRC) indicates a very slight negative relationship (coeff = -0.0330 , $t = -0.1911$), suggesting that as university attributes increase by one unit, students' attitudes decrease by 0.0330 units, with a p -value (0.8487) much greater than the alpha value (0.05) confirming that the direct effect is not statistically significant. Finally, the indirect effect of X on Y through the mediator factor SRC (M) was tested, and the result indicates that the indirect effect contributes positively to students' attitudes (coeff = 0.1357).

These figures indicate that the total effect of university attributes on students' attitudes is slightly positive (0.1027) but not statistically significant ($p = 0.418$), while the direct effect of university attributes on students' attitudes is slightly negative (-0.0330) and not statistically significant ($p = 0.849$). The indirect effect of SRC is positive (0.136), but the confidence interval (-0.1186 to 0.4073) indicates that this effect is not statistically significant. In other words, university attributes do not have a statistically significant total, direct, or indirect effect on students' attitudes based on the provided data.

5. Discussion

The findings show that understanding the salience of certain university attributes (e.g., quality of education, curriculum, transparency, engagement, reporting, marketing and PR, etc.) to student attitudes assists universities in developing messaging strategies to meet and communicate with their stakeholders' perspectives, including students' needs. Such university attributes hold the greatest significance in stakeholders' decision-making when those stakeholders are communicating with or selecting HEIs. This suggests and reflects the importance of adopting different SRC efforts in their communication content (Lo and Liu 2022). These efforts were highlighted through the emergence of several attributes such as "the professional credentials and degrees of faculty members". This finding, in particular, suggests that highlighting the international credentials of faculty members can serve as an effective communication strategy for universities. One potential approach to implementing this strategy could involve producing a series of videos that showcase faculty members telling stories about their academic backgrounds and international experiences.

The availability of accommodations, reasonable tuition fees and costs, and faculty professionalism were also highlighted by the respondents as key attributes and were emphasised as being of high importance in university selection. These findings suggest that both academic quality and professional considerations such as financial flexibility and support services are critical in students' choice of a university. The attribute of "international ranking" was found to be salient (Ashour 2020; Tran et al. 2023). This result highlights the importance of universities communicating their global rankings and reputations. Given this, universities can enhance their image and attract prospective students and faculty.

The findings also suggest that promoting curriculum content and scholarly research concerned with topics of global relevance can positively impact the university's salience in the minds of university students (Hajoš 2017). It implies that universities that prioritise global relevance in their curricula and research may be more attractive to students and may have a stronger brand image (Tahat et al. 2019). This approach can include highlighting globally oriented topics in their corporate communication materials and messaging

strategies. Public relations teams can also work with faculty and students to promote their international research and collaborations. Universities can also incorporate global topics and issues into their content to enhance their image and salience in the minds of students.

The mediation analysis was conducted with the aim of investigating the potential role of social responsibility and engagement in mediating the association between university attributes and students' attitudes through the mediator factor SRC. The results reveal that the mediation process in question does not demonstrate statistical significance. While university attributes significantly predict SRC (Model 1), neither university attributes nor SRC predicts student attitudes (Models 2 and 3). The mediation analysis confirms that SRC does not mediate the relationship between university attributes and students' attitudes. These results suggest that factors other than university attributes and SRC may play a more critical role in shaping students' attitudes.

6. Conclusions

This paper revolves around understanding students' attitudes towards university attributes at Ajman University, UAE, focusing on how SRC mediates these attributes. However, there is a lack of work addressing this matter in the context of higher education in the UAE. The study was conducted via an online survey distributed to a convenience sample ($n = 120$) of undergraduate and postgraduate students during the spring 2021 semester.

The results indicate that the analysis confirmed four primary components of university attributes. These were education cost; employment opportunities; physical aspects, facilities and resources; and university image. Among these attributes, education cost was the most influential factor, followed by employment opportunities. This is consistent with early research highlighting the salience of these factors in students' university selection ([Ashour 2020](#); [Dao and Thorpe 2015](#)).

In terms of perception of attributes, respondents generally held positive perceptions of the university attributes, with high mean scores for each above-mentioned component indicating their satisfaction with aspects such as tuition fees, accommodation, job prospects, and the university's image. These findings also are consistent with findings by [Aledo-Ruiz et al. \(2021\)](#) and [Ankit and Tharwat \(2020\)](#) regarding students' valuation of university attributes.

The results also explored the mediating role of SRC between university attributes and students' attitudes and found that while university attributes significantly predicted SRC, interestingly, neither significantly influenced students' attitudes. This suggests that other factors may have a more critical role in shaping students' attitudes towards the university. These findings highlight the complexity of factors influencing students' attitudes, as suggested by early research ([Hajoš 2017](#); [Tran et al. 2023](#)).

Given these findings, we consider the importance of SRC as an essential aspect of university communication. As such, the findings can inform the communication strategies of universities and offer valuable insights for university administrators and marketing teams aiming to refine their institution's image and appeal to prospective students and faculty, turning, as [Aitchison et al. \(2020\)](#) termed it, from "people development" to "product development".

Moreover, the study highlights the value of highlighting the international credentials of both faculty and students as a pivotal communication element. Creating video content showcasing faculty discussing their academic journeys and global experiences may establish strong connections with prospective students, one of the important stakeholder groups for a university. The physical environment and available resources, the affordability of education, and the perceived employment opportunities play a crucial role in shaping students' attitudes within the university context ([Symaco and Tee 2019](#)).

The relationship between university attributes and SRC in HEIs is synergistic. While university attributes provide the foundational qualities and features that define an institution, SRC serves as the mechanism through which these attributes are communicated, understood, and appreciated by stakeholders. Effective SRC not only helps in meeting

regulatory requirements and organisational objectives but also should align the institution's values with stakeholder expectations, thereby enhancing overall institutional success and impact.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations of this study are directly related to its sampling method, response rate and cross-sectional design, which makes them fixable. However, the geographic and cultural context in which the data were collected (Ajman University in the UAE) may mean these findings are not directly applicable to universities in diverse cultures or geographic settings. We also acknowledge that our current study was conducted with student respondents from a single university. Therefore, while the study included several factors that touch upon various dimensions of SRC, it is possible that other factors/concepts may not have been fully addressed by the items.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.E. and S.B.R.; methodology, W.A.; software, M.E.; validation, W.A.; formal analysis, W.A. and M.E.; investigation, S.B.R.; resources, data curation, M.E., writing—original draft preparation, S.B.R.; writing—review and editing, M.E.; visualization, M.E. supervision, M.E.; project administration, S.B.R., funding acquisition, S.B.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was supported by the interdisciplinary internal Grant 2021-IRG-MC-1, Ajman University.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Obtained formal, prospective, approval from the Research Ethics Committee, Deanship of Graduate studies and research, Ajman University. Approval number: C-F-H-17-Nov.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to research ethics approval guidelines but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A



PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Dear Participant,

We absolutely love having a student like you in our community and value your feedback. We know that the best way to improve our services and image is to hear from awesome students who selected Ajman University (AU) as their favourite higher education institution—students like YOU!

We are a multidisciplinary team looking to learn more about the University's attributes and characteristics that first-year students considered while selecting a university, their current level of satisfaction regarding these attributes as well as their attitude toward the University.

We sincerely appreciate your insight and the valuable information you will share us because it helps us build better image and better student experiences.

Reflect to the time when you were looking for a suitable University for your higher education and please fill out the survey through those eyes. The survey should take 5–10 min to complete.

Please note that your responses will be used for research purposes and will remain unanimous.

If you have any questions about the survey, please email the principal investigator, [name(s) and emails were deleted for double-blind review].

This project untitled University's attributes and their salience in student's agenda: impact on students' retention and supportive attitude, has received AU Funded Research Grant. Demographic and other general details.

1. Which answer describes you?	2. Age
(a) Female	(a) 17–20
(b) Male	(b) 21–24
(c) Prefer to not answer	(c) 25–30
	(d) 31 and above
3. In which college are you currently enrolled in? If you are in a multiple-major, check all that apply.	4. Indicate the situation to which you identify the most:
(a) College of Dentistry	(a) born in UAE from parents born in UAE
(b) College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences	(b) born in UAE and parents were born abroad.
(c) College of Engineering and Information Technology	(c) born abroad but moved to UAE as young children and had my schooling in UAE
(d) College of Architecture Art and Design	(d) born abroad and moved to UAE for university studies
(e) College of Business Administration	(e) Other
(f) College of Law	
(g) College of Mass Communication	
(h) College of Humanities and Sciences	
(i) College of Medicine	
5. Do you have a disability?	6. Level of studies
(a) Yes, I have a disability	(a) Undergraduate
(b) No, I do not have a disability	(b) Postgraduate
7. In which emirates are you living?	
(a) Abu Dhabi	
(b) Dubai	
(c) Sharjah	
(d) Ajman	
(e) Ras Al-Khaimah	
(f) Umm Al-Quwain	
(g) Fujairah	

Part 2

Below are some factors which the students usually consider while selecting a College or University. For each statement, please describe how important were the following characteristics when choosing Ajman university as an institution for your higher study. Then, kindly indicate how satisfied are you with this attribute currently.

Importance: 1 = Not important 2 = Slightly Important 3 = Neutral 4 = Important 5 = Very Important

Satisfaction: 1: not satisfied at all 2: not satisfied 3: neutral 4: satisfied 5: very satisfied

Attributes	Importance				
	1	2	3	4	5
University's Image					
1. International ranking					
2. QS start rating					
3. National ranking					
4. AU offers the course I want to study					
5. Faculties are well qualified and experienced					
6. Countries and Institutions from where faculty members hold their advanced degrees					
7. Awards the university received in research					
Physical aspects, facilities and resources					
1. Location of the institution					
2. The campus design					
3. Necessary resources available Such as (labs and library, etc.)					
4. Availability of health care services, canteen.					
5. Availability of accommodation					
6. Availability of extracurricular activities and facilities (sport, recreations, . . .)					
Cost of education					
1. The cost and tuition fee are reasonable					
2. The flexibility of payment time					
3. The availability of financial aid, etc.					
4. The flexible tuition approach such as pay per credit hour					
Employment opportunities					
1. Rate of job prospects for the graduates					
2. Recognised and positive perception of quality in the market					
3. International recognition of quality students and higher rate of employability globally					
4. AU offers employability services (career planning, work experience, placements, etc.)					

Thank you for your participation in this important research—we appreciate your time and input.

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