

Weak Institutional Image and Unrecognizability: A Literature Review on Growth Barriers in Non-Excellent Campuses

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of stagnation—and in many cases, decline—in student enrollment among non-leading private universities (PTS) in Indonesia has become an increasingly prevalent issue in the dynamics of higher education. This article aims to identify and analyze the growth barriers faced by higher education institutions characterized by weak institutional image, lack of visibility and public exposure, absence of flagship programs, geographically disadvantaged locations and resource and infrastructure limitations. Using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach, this study draws upon a decade's worth of scientific literature, institutional reports, and policy documents. The findings reveal that institutional obscurity, lack of digital presence, and low academic reputation are among the key inhibiting factors to the growth of non-excellent campuses. This study emphasizes the importance of targeted institutional branding, digital visibility optimization, the development of contextually relevant academic programs, and internal management revitalization as critical steps toward enhancing institutional competitiveness. The results of this study are expected to serve as a conceptual foundation for PTS policymakers and administrators in formulating adaptive and context-sensitive growth strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the growth of private higher education institutions (Perguruan Tinggi Swasta, PTS) in Indonesia has shown a stagnant pattern, with some experiencing a decline—particularly those lacking flagship programs, situated in geographically isolated regions, or relatively unknown to the wider public. This challenge is not limited to the shrinking number of incoming students but also reflects deeper structural problems in institutional quality management, strategic planning, and the overall attractiveness of these institutions (Putra & Santosa, 2021). The lack of public recognition and weak institutional image have become major obstacles in building public trust and establishing competitive academic standing in an increasingly reputation-driven higher education landscape.

In the context of higher education marketing, institutional image and academic reputation are key factors influencing prospective students' enrollment decisions. A study by Astin (2021), supported by data from the LLDIKTI Region III survey (2023), highlights that public perception of campus credibility is significantly shaped by the presence of excellent academic programs, scientific publications, alumni networks, and industry engagement. Institutions with distinctive advantages—such as innovative curricula, modern facilities, and strong partnerships—are better positioned to establish a positive image in the public consciousness. In contrast, institutions with a weak and undifferentiated image often become trapped in a cycle of underperformance and reputational decline (Wicaksono & Prasetyo, 2022).

Data from the Association of Indonesian Private Higher Education Institutions (APTISI) reveals that many smaller PTS have experienced a decline in new student enrollment over the past seven years (Djatkiko, 2022). These institutions often lack a strong institutional communication strategy, rarely participate in national academic forums, and have not fully adopted digital transformation in student recruitment and academic services. Research by Wahyudi and Santoso (2022) further emphasizes that brand awareness and institutional visibility are significant predictors of campus growth.

Globally, the “Third Mission” approach and the concept of “engaged universities” have emerged as new standards for the development of higher education institutions outside major urban centers (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011; OECD, 2022). This model emphasizes the importance of social engagement, locally rooted innovation, and co-creation between universities and communities. Universities are now expected to excel not only in teaching and research but also in contributing to regional development (Benneworth & Cunha, 2015). However, this approach has rarely been effectively adopted by non-leading PTS in Indonesia, due to both limited resources and the absence of a national policy framework that structurally supports such transformation (Suharyanto & Kurniawati, 2022).

An additional issue exacerbating the challenges faced by non-leading campuses is the shifting preferences of younger generations regarding higher education. The World Economic Forum (2023) reports that prospective students increasingly favor institutions offering direct links to employment

opportunities, flexible learning models, and international recognition. Nugroho and Arifin (2023) similarly found that students tend to value technology-based learning experiences and easy access to academic resources when choosing a university. Institutions unable to provide clear value-added propositions in these areas are increasingly left behind, particularly in the era of digital disruption and intense global competition.

Previous studies have highlighted the critical role of institutional image, academic reputation, and strategic marketing in attracting student interest and enhancing competitiveness (Astin, 2021; Wicaksono & Prasetyo, 2022). However, most of these studies focus on large or well-established universities with strong national or international reputations. Research focusing on smaller, less prominent institutions—particularly those located in remote areas and lacking broad public recognition—remains limited and sporadic.

Moreover, existing literature tends to promote generic solutions such as accreditation improvements, digital marketing, or industry partnerships, without adequately considering the local context and resource constraints faced by smaller PTS (Putra & Santosa, 2021; Wahyudi & Santoso, 2022). In reality, these institutions require more specific, adaptive, and contextual strategies tailored to their socio-economic environment and market segmentation.

Additionally, there is a noticeable gap in integrating the “Third Mission” framework within the development strategies of non-leading PTS in Indonesia. Although this model has been widely adopted in Europe and other developed countries to empower regional campuses, studies examining its implementation and relevance in the Indonesian context are still rare (Zomer & Benneworth, 2011; Benneworth & Cunha, 2015). Therefore, a comprehensive literature synthesis is needed to explicitly explore the growth barriers faced by lesser-known campuses from the perspective of institutional image and invisibility, while also identifying innovative, affordable, and locally grounded approaches.

In conclusion, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive and systematic literature review to map the challenges encountered by non-leading private universities, and to identify strategic opportunities that can enable these institutions to survive and thrive. This study aims to develop a conceptual understanding of how institutional image and invisibility hinder growth, while also exploring adaptive strategies that PTS can adopt to remain relevant, competitive, and sustainable in the long term (Mulyono & Widodo, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Institutional Image in the Context of Higher Education

Institutional image refers to the collective perceptions held by the public—particularly prospective students, parents, and other stakeholders—toward a higher education institution, shaped by information, experience, and exposure. Kotler and Fox (2017) define institutional image as “the impressions, beliefs, ideas, and perceptions held by the general public about an organization.” In the context of higher education, institutional image encompasses academic reputation, graduate credibility, administrative services,

faculty quality, and the university's social engagement (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001).

The institutional image plays a highly strategic role in determining a university's competitiveness, particularly in attracting new students. Numerous studies indicate that positive perceptions of an institution correlate strongly with student enrollment decisions, alumni loyalty, and the institution's success in establishing external partnerships (Alves & Raposo, 2010). Institutions with a strong public image are more likely to gain trust, receive governmental support, and attract quality resources. Conversely, a weak image often leads to marginalization in an increasingly competitive higher education environment. A literature review conducted by Ivy (2001) highlights that public perceptions of a campus are significantly influenced by its visual symbols (e.g., logos, slogans, and architecture), media coverage, academic service quality, and community engagement. Thus, building a strong institutional image is not solely the responsibility of public relations departments but rather a collaborative effort involving university leadership, faculty, students, and academic policies.

Positioning in Higher Education Marketing Strategy

Positioning in the context of higher education marketing refers to an institution's strategic effort to occupy a distinct place in the minds of the public and differentiate itself from similar institutions. According to Ries and Trout (2001), positioning is "the process of implanting an image or identity in the consumer's mind that differentiates a brand from its competitors." In higher education, positioning can focus on program excellence, geographical advantage, graduate outcomes, international orientation, or industry engagement.

Amidst increasing competition, positioning becomes a critical element in building institutional appeal. Universities that lack a clear positioning strategy often lose their identity in the market, struggle to distinguish themselves, and face difficulties in gaining public trust. In contrast, institutions with consistent and strategic positioning—such as those emphasizing strengths in vocational programs, applied research, or international partnerships—are more likely to reach their target segments effectively (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006).

Effective positioning does not always require academic superiority. In many cases, smaller or non-elite institutions can build meaningful positioning based on local relevance, cultural heritage, personalized learning approaches, or real contributions to regional development (Anholt, 2010). Contextual and authentic positioning is often more acceptable to the public than imitated strategies that do not reflect the institution's actual capabilities.

Institutional image and positioning are mutually reinforcing. Clear and targeted positioning helps strengthen institutional image over time, while a positive image facilitates the execution of subsequent positioning strategies. Therefore, for non-leading private universities facing growth obstacles, developing a specific and realistic positioning strategy can serve as a

foundational step toward building a stronger and more relevant institutional image.

Characteristics of Non-Excellent Campuses

In Indonesia's higher education landscape, non-excellent campuses are generally characterized by a lack of significant competitive advantages compared to their counterparts. Several common features include:

1. Absence of Flagship Programs

Non-leading campuses often lack signature academic programs that serve as primary attractions for prospective students. This absence makes it difficult to compete with institutions that offer nationally or internationally recognized programs. According to Fahmi and Siregar (2021), program differentiation is a key factor in enhancing competitiveness among private universities in Indonesia.

2. Limited Educational Facilities

A shortage of physical and digital infrastructure – such as laboratories, libraries, and IT systems – significantly limits the learning experience and contributes to a negative institutional image. Research by Nasution et al. (2023) indicates that the quality of campus facilities has a major impact on students' perceptions of academic quality.

3. Low Rankings and Accreditation

Rankings and accreditation serve as important benchmarks for assessing institutional quality. Non-leading campuses typically occupy lower tiers in national and international rankings. Data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (2025) show that many private universities are still categorized as “fostered,” indicating the need for comprehensive quality improvements.

4. Unstrategic Geographical Locations

Many non-excellent campuses are located in remote or peripheral areas, which reduces accessibility and limits their exposure to academic and industrial networks. Wahyudi and Santoso (2022) assert that geographical disadvantage can reinforce an institution's marginal position within the national higher education ecosystem.

These limitations collectively have a negative impact on public perception and institutional appeal. Prospective students often associate non-leading campuses with low academic standards and poor career prospects. Over time, this can lead to a vicious cycle: low enrollment results in limited institutional revenue, which in turn hampers efforts to improve educational quality (Alves & Raposo, 2010).

Factors Influencing Campus Growth

The growth of a higher education institution is influenced by a combination of strategic factors, ranging from academic quality to external variables such as location and branding. For non-leading campuses, understanding these determinants is critical for designing effective and contextual development strategies.

1. The Role of Flagship Programs as Differentiators

Flagship academic programs serve as primary instruments for institutional differentiation. The availability of unique and market-relevant programs with strong accreditation can significantly attract students. Research by Setiawan and Nugroho (2021) found that universities offering standout programs experienced up to 40% higher enrollment compared to similar institutions without such programs. Furthermore, flagship programs often open up collaboration opportunities with industry and government sectors, further enhancing academic reputation.

2. Geography and Regional Connectivity as Determinants of Student Choice

Geographical location plays a critical role in influencing students' choice of university—particularly in an archipelagic nation like Indonesia. Factors such as public transportation accessibility, proximity to economic hubs, and digital connectivity significantly affect institutional attractiveness (Wahyudi & Santoso, 2022). Remote campuses with inadequate infrastructure tend to be overlooked, even if they offer competitive programs. Therefore, improving physical and digital infrastructure in these regions is essential for supporting non-excellent campus growth.

3. The Importance of Branding and Digital Presence in Attracting Students

In the digital era, institutional image and online presence are key determinants of public perception. Institutions that build strong branding and actively utilize social media, professional websites, and digital marketing tend to be more successful in attracting new students (Herlambang et al., 2020). Campuses with limited public recognition and low digital engagement are at risk of being overlooked. Weak branding further amplifies the challenge of building public trust in the institution's educational quality.

METHODOLOGY

Type of Study

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. An SLR is a structured method designed to identify, critically evaluate, and synthesize existing research findings on a specific topic through a systematic, transparent, and replicable process (Snyder, 2019). The approach was used to explore the barriers faced by non-excellent (non-leading) campuses, particularly concerning institutional image and obscurity, by analyzing and synthesizing relevant scientific literature.

Data Sources

Data for this study were obtained from a variety of relevant and credible academic sources, including:

1. Peer-reviewed national and international scientific journals
2. Academic reference books

3. Institutional reports from education organizations (e.g., APTISI, BAN-PT, and DIKTI)
4. Policy documents related to higher education management, institutional marketing strategies, and university branding

These sources were collected using academic databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SINTA, DOAJ, and ProQuest. Search keywords included: institutional image, higher education branding, non-elite universities, academic growth barriers, and educational marketing strategy.

Literature Selection Criteria

The literature selected for analysis was screened based on the following criteria:

1. Topical relevance: Focused on issues related to higher education growth, branding strategies, institutional positioning, geographic and programmatic advantages, and competitiveness.
2. Source type: Included peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, official institutiozreports, and educational policy documents.
3. Publication timeframe: Published within the last ten years (2014–2024) to ensure the currency and relevance of the findings.
4. Theoretical and empirical value: Sources that offered robust theoretical frameworks or detailed empirical findings.

Opinion pieces, editorials, and non-peer-reviewed materials were excluded to maintain analytical rigor and quality.

Analysis Technique

The data analysis followed a thematic synthesis approach, which involved:

1. Coding the literature based on core themes;
2. Grouping findings into broader thematic categories such as: institutional image, geographical factors, flagship academic programs, and digital branding strategies;
3. Mapping interconnections among the themes to identify overarching patterns and contextual variations in the barriers to growth faced by non-leading campuses;
4. Identifying research gaps to serve as a foundation for future studies and recommendations.

This method enabled a comprehensive understanding of the subject by not only compiling findings but also systematically organizing and linking various aspects that influence institutional growth in the higher education sector.

RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Growth Barriers in Non-Excellent Campuses

The growth of higher education institutions is not determined solely by academic capacity, but is also significantly influenced by a range of interrelated internal and external factors. Non-leading campuses – particularly those located

in remote or peripheral areas—often encounter complex structural challenges that hinder their development.

Based on the reviewed literature, five major categories of barriers have been identified as significantly limiting the growth of such institutions. These are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Obstacles Growth Non- Excellent Campus Based on the Study Results Literature

No.	Category Obstacle	Description	Source Literature
1	Weak Institutional Image	The low perception public to quality institution consequence lack of publication academic , work The same external , and formal recognition .	Sari & Kusuma (2021) ;
2	Lack of Visibility and Public Exposure	No active in social media , no have a digital communications strategy , and not do promotion institution in a way sustainable .	Widodo & Suryani (2022)
3	Absence of Flagship Academic Programs	All study programs nature generic without uniqueness or specialization that becomes Power pull or mark sell institution .	The Greatest Showman (2019);
4	Geographically Disadvantaged Locations	Located in the area outskirts or remote , far away from center economy , industry and accessibility adequate public .	Mahardika & Lestari (2019) ;
5	Resource and Infrastructure Limitations	Weakness limited human resource capacity facility learning and research , as well as lack of utilization technology information in a way maximum .	Sari & Kusuma (2021); Deem et al. (2017)

The growth of a higher education institution is not solely determined by academic capacity but is also significantly influenced by various interrelated internal and external factors. Non-excellent campuses, particularly those located in peripheral or underdeveloped areas, often face complex structural challenges. Based on the literature, five major categories of barriers have been identified:

1. Weak Institutional Image

One of the primary obstacles is a weak institutional image, which refers to the public's low perception of the university's quality. This weakness is typically the result of limited scientific publications, minimal engagement in external partnerships, and the absence of formal recognition from accreditation bodies or ranking institutions. Sari and Kusuma (2021) found that public perceptions of universities are strongly

shaped by academic visibility and institutional networking. Indrawan and Arifin (2020) further emphasized that without a reinforced image strategy, it is difficult for campuses to attract the attention of prospective students and strategic partners.

2. Lack of Visibility and Public Exposure

Non-leading campuses frequently suffer from obscurity and a lack of public exposure, largely due to the absence of a targeted digital communication strategy. Many institutions still do not utilize social media or maintain active websites, making it difficult for the public to access reliable and engaging information about the campus. Widodo and Suryani (2022) highlighted that in today's digital era, a consistent and strategic online presence is not optional but essential for maintaining institutional visibility.

3. Absence of Flagship Academic Program

Another critical challenge is the lack of flagship academic programs. Many non-excellent universities offer only generic programs without unique features or specializations that could serve as key selling points. This limits their ability to differentiate themselves and diminishes their appeal amidst a wide array of available alternatives for prospective students. Mahardika and Lestari (2019) stressed the importance of creating standout academic programs as differentiating elements, while Nugroho (2022) advocated for the development of innovative curricula rooted in local excellence.

4. Geographically Disadvantaged Locations

Non-strategic geographical locations also pose significant challenges. Institutions located in remote areas or far from economic growth centers often struggle with limited access to academic and industrial networks, inadequate student mobility, and low regional attractiveness. These campuses are frequently perceived as "isolated," a perception that is difficult to change. Mahardika and Lestari (2019) observed that such geographic isolation contributes to persistent negative perceptions. Putri and Suryanto (2020) added that campuses in less favorable locations must exert extra effort to build alternative forms of connectivity and institutional appeal.

5. Resource and Infrastructure Limitations

Finally, structural limitations in terms of human resources and infrastructure represent a major barrier. The lack of qualified teaching staff, inadequate learning facilities (such as laboratories and libraries), and suboptimal use of information technology result in poor academic and administrative service quality. Sari and Kusuma (2021) asserted that without sufficient infrastructure support, universities struggle to innovate and maintain academic standards. Deem et al. (2017) similarly found that institutions with limited infrastructure tend to stagnate in academic program and research development.

These five barriers are systemic and mutually reinforcing. As such, they cannot be addressed through fragmented or isolated interventions. Non-leading

campuses must adopt transformative and integrated strategies that not only target internal improvements but also respond to external factors and the broader dynamics of the higher education ecosystem. Understanding these obstacles is a crucial first step in developing a more realistic and sustainable roadmap for institutional growth.

Relationship Between Image and Growth Institutions

The institutional image of a higher education institution plays a central role in determining the direction and pace of its growth. In the context of global competition and increasingly dynamic public perception, institutional image is no longer merely a complementary factor—it serves as a primary driver in building trust, reputation, and long-term sustainability. Table 2 illustrates how various dimensions of institutional image are directly correlated with the growth of higher education institutions.

Table 2. Relationship Between Institutional Image and Growth College

No.	Institutional Image Aspects	Impact to Growth Institutions	Source Literature
1	Academic Reputation	Increase trust public and power pull candidate student as well as expand opportunity Work The same academic and professional .	Nguyen & LeBlanc (2018); Deem et al. (2017)
2	Digital Presence and Social Media Engagement	Expand range promotion , strengthening interaction with stakeholders interests , and form modern and credible perception .	Hassan & Shiu (2020); Widodo & Suryani (2022)
3	Consistency in Institutional Branding	Build trust term length and identity institution that differentiates from competitors .	Kotler & Fox (2017); Al- Alak & Alnaser (2021)
4	Active Participation in Scientific and Social Forums	Strengthen visibility campus in network national and international , as well as increase legitimacy in the eyes public .	Sari and Kusuma (2021); Putri and Suryanto (2020)
5	Public and Alumni Perceptions of Quality	Push promotion from mouth to word -of- mouth and expand network trust public .	Indrawan & Arifin (2020) ; Mahardika and Lestari (2019)

The institutional image of a university is a dynamic and multidimensional system that significantly influences its ability to grow, compete, and sustain itself over time. Several key aspects of institutional image have been identified as directly correlated with the growth and success of higher education institutions, particularly non-leading campuses. These aspects are detailed below:

1. Academic Reputation

Academic reputation is one of the most critical dimensions influencing public trust in an institution's quality and credibility. Universities with strong academic reputations are more likely to gain the confidence of prospective students, industry partners, and donor agencies. This directly contributes to increased student applications, academic collaborations, and cross-sector partnerships. Nguyen and LeBlanc (2018) assert that academic reputation is a key indicator of perceived educational quality. Similarly, Deem et al. (2017) highlight academic reputation as the foundation of institutional legitimacy in the global higher education landscape.

2. Digital Presence and Social Media Engagement

An institution's digital presence, particularly through active engagement on social media platforms, serves as a powerful tool for extending promotional reach and shaping a modern institutional image. In the digital age, a university's online visibility facilitates open and responsive interaction with prospective students and key stakeholders. Hassan and Shiu (2020) argue that digital media not only functions as a communication channel but also as a strategic medium for image formation. Widodo and Suryani (2022) add that visually engaging and interactive content on social media can revitalize the public image of previously overlooked institutions.

3. Consistency in Institutional Branding

Consistent and coherent institutional branding plays a crucial role in establishing a distinct and recognizable identity. Strong branding fosters long-term trust and helps the public to easily recognize and remember the institution. Kotler and Fox (2017) emphasize that strong branding is a fundamental component of growth-oriented educational marketing strategies. This is supported by Al-Alak and Alnaser (2021), who found that institutions with consistent branding strategies are more likely to penetrate and maintain their market presence in the education sector.

4. Active Participation in Scientific and Social Forums

Engagement in national and international academic and community-based forums enhances institutional legitimacy and visibility. Participation in conferences, symposiums, and social initiatives allows universities to build networks and gain broader recognition. Sari and Kusuma (2021) highlight that such involvement reflects the intellectual vitality of an institution. Putri and Suryanto (2020) further note that cross-sector engagement through social forums opens doors to new collaborative opportunities that reinforce institutional image.

5. Public and Alumni Perceptions of Quality

The perceptions of alumni and the broader community serve as organic reinforcements of institutional image. Alumni who are satisfied with their educational experiences often act as informal ambassadors, generating powerful word-of-mouth promotion. This grassroots form of endorsement often surpasses formal marketing efforts in credibility and influence. Indrawan and Arifin (2020) emphasize that alumni opinions

significantly affect prospective students’ decision-making processes. Mahardika and Lestari (2019) also underline that public perception of institutional quality is largely shaped by genuine testimonials from alumni.

Institutional image is not a static or isolated construct but a dynamic system that is intricately linked with institutional growth strategies. Strengthening each component of the institutional image – academic credibility, digital presence, branding consistency, public engagement, and alumni advocacy – opens new opportunities for enhancing competitiveness, sustainability, and long-term relevance. For non-leading campuses striving to improve their position in the eyes of the public, a focused and integrated approach to institutional image development is essential.

Strategic Responses to Growth Stagnation and Image Weakness

In addressing the stagnation of growth and the deeply rooted image deficiencies often found in non-excellent campuses, it is essential to adopt literacy-based strategic approaches. These strategies emphasize sustainable learning processes, adaptability, and innovation tailored to each institution’s local context and specific challenges.

Table 3 outlines four key strategic approaches derived from the literature, which can be progressively adopted to overcome institutional growth barriers and improve visibility, relevance, and competitiveness.

Table 3. Literary Strategies For Overcome Obstacle Growth Non- Excellent Campus

No.	Literary Strategy	Strategy Description	main purpose	Source Literature
1	Micro-branding	Highlighting uniqueness local, value culture, or potential typical areas and study programs certain although scale small .	Build differentiation and positioning in the middle limitations	Kotler & Fox (2017); Nugroho (2022)
2	Digital visibility	Social media optimization, professional website development, and hosting online activities such as webinars and virtual campuses .	Increase visibility, credibility, and reach public	Hassan & Shiu (2020); Widodo & Suryani (2022)

No.	Literary Strategy	Strategy Description	main purpose	Source Literature
3	External Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement	Interweaving partnership with industry, alumni, government local, as well as community as form support and reinforcement reputation external .	Expand network , improve legitimacy and opportunity Work The same	Princess & Suryanto (2020); Al-Alak & Alnaser (2021)
4	Revitalization management campus	Change leadership to more direction adaptive, improvement human resource capacity, as well as accountable and governance system based on quality .	Increase internal effectiveness and power competition institution	Deem et al. (2017); Sari & Kusuma (2021)

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1. Micro-Branding through Local Identity

The first strategy is micro-branding, which involves identifying and promoting the unique local characteristics of the institution, including regional culture, academic specializations, and community engagement. Although implemented on a smaller scale, this strategy aims to create a distinctive institutional identity and clear market positioning amid intense competition. Kotler and Fox (2017) emphasize that differentiation is the cornerstone of every effective marketing strategy – even within the higher education context. Nugroho (2022) further supports this view by stressing the importance of integrating local identity into institutional branding to foster stronger loyalty among students and surrounding communities.

2. Enhancing Digital Visibility

The second strategy focuses on enhancing digital presence through strategic use of social media platforms, development of professional and interactive websites, and organizing online activities such as webinars, virtual open houses, and digital tours. In the current digital era, visibility in the online sphere is a key driver in shaping public perception. Hassan and Shiu (2020) highlight that institutions with strong digital activity are significantly more likely to attract prospective students. Widodo and

Suryani (2022) also affirm that compelling digital narratives are essential in building and revitalizing an institution's image.

3. External Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

The third strategy involves establishing strategic collaborations with external stakeholders, including industries, alumni networks, local governments, and community organizations. These partnerships not only create opportunities for joint programs and applied learning but also provide external legitimacy and enhance institutional reputation. Putri and Suryanto (2020) emphasize that active involvement of external stakeholders can foster greater public trust. Similarly, Al-Alak and Alnaser (2021) found that synergetic linkages with the industrial sector enhance access to professional experience and expand students' career pathways.

4. Campus Management Revitalization

The fourth strategy is the revitalization of campus governance and internal management systems. This includes promoting more transparent and adaptive leadership, strengthening human resource capacities, and implementing governance structures centered on quality assurance and institutional accountability. Deem et al. (2017) argue that responsive, data-driven management is critical in accelerating institutional transformation. Sari and Kusuma (2021) add that strengthening the competencies of lecturers and administrative staff is fundamental in maintaining the quality of academic and non-academic services.

These four strategies are not quick fixes, but rather long-term initiatives that require institutional commitment, critical reflection, and a willingness to embrace change. When applied consistently and contextually, these literary-informed strategies can serve as a solid foundation for non-leading campuses to grow, become more visible, and gain broader recognition within an increasingly competitive higher education landscape.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This literature review reveals that the growth of non-excellent private higher education institutions (PTS) in Indonesia is hindered by a series of interrelated structural and strategic obstacles. The most prominent barriers include a weak institutional image, lack of public recognition and visibility, absence of flagship academic programs, non-strategic geographical locations, and limited human and infrastructural resources. Collectively, these factors contribute to the low visibility of these institutions in the eyes of prospective students and the broader public.

Among these challenges, institutional obscurity stands out as the most pressing issue, particularly in the context of an increasingly digitalized higher education environment. In an era where public perception is heavily influenced by digital presence and communication, the absence of active and strategic online engagement further undermines these institutions' competitiveness.

Despite these challenges, the literature also highlights strategic opportunities for transformation. Institutional branding efforts—especially micro-branding strategies rooted in local identity—combined with enhanced digital visibility through social media, interactive websites, and virtual engagement platforms, offer promising starting points for institutional revitalization. The success of several institutions operating under resource constraints suggests that, with innovative approaches and adaptive management, non-leading campuses can gradually strengthen their competitiveness and achieve sustainable growth.

Based on the findings and conclusions of this literature study, the following strategic recommendations are proposed to support the transformation and growth of non-excellent private universities (PTS) in Indonesia:

1. Strengthening Institutional Branding and Identity

Non-leading campuses should identify and promote their unique local values or institutional strengths that can be developed into distinctive characteristics. Micro-branding strategies, supported by consistent and targeted communication campaigns, are essential to shaping a more positive public perception.

2. Optimizing Digital Presence

Improving online visibility through responsive websites, high-quality content on social media platforms, and the regular organization of online events—such as webinars and virtual open houses—should be prioritized to broaden institutional reach and attract prospective students from diverse regions.

3. Developing Flagship Academic Programs

While not necessarily on a large scale, institutions should strive to develop at least one flagship academic program that is aligned with local needs or national trends. This program can serve as a strategic entry point for promotional efforts and for building academic reputation.

4. Revitalizing Internal Management Systems

Institutional transformation requires progressive leadership, investment in human resource capacity through professional development, and the establishment of performance evaluation systems based on quality and accountability. These efforts should be implemented gradually to strengthen overall institutional capacity.

5. Expanding External Collaboration Networks

Building strategic partnerships with industry, local government, alumni, and community organizations will enhance institutional legitimacy, open up collaborative opportunities, and generate broader social impact—thereby increasing public trust and institutional relevance.

By implementing these strategic steps, non-excellent campuses can initiate a transition from marginal institutions into competitive and impactful players within the national higher education ecosystem.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

Building upon the conclusions of this literature review, future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach to empirically investigate the effectiveness of integrated micro-branding and digital visibility strategies on institutional reputation and student enrollment trends among non-excellent private universities (PTS) in Indonesia. This research could explore how localized branding narratives—when amplified through strategic use of digital platforms—reshape public perception and enhance competitiveness in resource-constrained environments. Furthermore, a comparative case study of successful and struggling PTS institutions could provide insight into key leadership, policy, and community engagement factors that influence institutional transformation trajectories.

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