

The Effectiveness of Open Days as a Student Recruitment Tool. A Case of Midlands State University

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Abstract

This study examined the effectiveness of open days as student recruitment tools in higher education, focusing on Midlands State University (MSU). Open days are widely regarded as a crucial marketing strategy in higher education, offering prospective students an immersive experience of campus life, academic offerings, and institutional culture. In Zimbabwe where there are many institutions of education, state-owned as well as private-owned competition for students' enrollment is intensifying hence state universities are now capitalising on inviting prospective students to their institutions. The study was informed by the following objectives: to explore how open days' influence prospective students' perceptions of Midlands State University (MSU), to establish the impact of open days on student enrolment rates at Midlands State University and to identify the key components of effective open days that enhance student recruitment at Midlands State University. The study was informed by phenomenological research philosophy and document analysis as a research design. Using a qualitative approach, the study explores the perspectives of prospective students, parents, and university staff. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The findings reveal the strengths and limitations of open days in influencing students' decisions. Conclusions provide actionable recommendations for enhancing their impact. The study aims to bridge the gap in understanding the role of open days in student recruitment, offering insights that can inform university marketing strategies. After data analysis the study recommends that MSU should also invest in virtual open days to attract students.

Keywords: Open days, Student enrollment, Institutions of higher education, student recruitment

Introduction

This study explored the effectiveness of open days as a student recruitment tool, focusing on their impact on the university's recruitment outcomes. By examining the perspectives of key stakeholders, the study aimed to provide insights into the ultimate influence of open days on prospective students' decisions. Open days are widely recognised as a means of showcasing a university's strengths. According to Coady and Duffy (2020), these events help institutions demonstrate their facilities, academic offerings, and extracurricular opportunities in ways that other recruitment tools cannot achieve. Similarly, Jenkins and Zinkhan (2019) argue that open days create a unique opportunity for prospective students to visualise themselves as part of the institution, which can significantly impact their decision-making process. By fostering a sense of connection and belonging, open days help convert prospective students into enrolled students.

Mandy (2019) asserts that a primary promotional task regarding open days was aimed at attracting first-year students in the Cape Peninsula is to understand how students decide on their choice of institution, with the expectation that the institution can facilitate this decision-making process. It is asserted that students engage in a bifurcated decision-making process. The student initially determines the institution to enroll in. For certain non-traditional students, the mere consideration of attending a higher education institution represents a significant milestone. The subsequent step involved selecting a specific institution. Mandy (2019) asserted that an effective communication mix should be achieved at minimal cost. Universities in the Cape Peninsula utilise open days as marketing communication tools to engage with prospective first-year students. According to Bennett and McMahon (2020), open days allow universities to showcase their facilities, interact directly with prospective students, and create a welcoming environment that fosters trust and confidence. Research by Matthews (2021) emphasises that open days positively influence students' perceptions, helping them make informed university selection decisions.

Kirby (2020) underscores the significance of human connections during open days. Prospective students appreciate the chance to interact with current students and lecturers, enabling them to acquire insights into the university's academic and social milieu. Following this, Matthews (2021) discovered that colleges that actively engage their student ambassadors during open days frequently experience increased levels of attendee engagement. This corresponds with Nyoni (2020), who emphasises that parents and guardians play a vital part in the decision-making process. Open days addressing specific problems, such as safety, affordability, and career outcomes, are more likely to cultivate favorable opinions of the institution.

Bennett and McMahon (2020) demonstrate that open days have a positive impact on prospective students' decision-making by enhancing their sense of connection to the institution. The research indicated that the quality of staff interactions, event organisation, and authenticity of the university's representation significantly influence students' perceptions and enrolment likelihood. Matthews (2021) highlighted the necessity of aligning event content with students' expectations. The research indicated that offering comprehensive programme information and engaging current students in events enhances prospective students' trust in the institution.

Despite these contributions, a notable gap persists in the literature concerning the effectiveness of open days within African universities. Numerous studies, including those by Bennett and McMahon (2020) and Matthews (2021), primarily examine Western institutions, where resource availability, student demographics, and cultural dynamics vary considerably from those in Africa. The higher education sector in Zimbabwe encounters distinct challenges, such as economic limitations, inadequate infrastructure, and a diverse student demographic with differing requirements (Chikozho, 2021). With this in mind, Chiweshe (2020) indicated that the effectiveness of open days in Zimbabwean universities is frequently compromised by logistical challenges, variable event quality, and insufficient follow-up strategies. These studies do not offer comprehensive insights into the perspectives of various stakeholders, particularly students, parents, and university staff, concerning open days. The authors fail to provide specific, evidence-based recommendations for enhancing these events within the Zimbabwean context.

Open days, while offering potential advantages, also present certain challenges. Research in Western contexts has identified challenges including inconsistencies in event quality, logistical issues, and the failure to satisfy all attendees' expectations (Pfeiffer, 2021). In African contexts, these challenges are exacerbated by factors including limited resources, socio-economic

disparities, and barriers to accessibility. Chikozho (2021) noted that students in rural Zimbabwe frequently face challenges in accessing information regarding open days, attributed to insufficient communication infrastructure.

The research indicates a deficiency in follow-up strategies subsequent to open days. Bennett and McMahon (2020) contend that although open days successfully generate initial interest, universities that do not sustain communication with attendees may encounter difficulties in converting this interest into enrolment. Matthews (2021) highlighted the necessity for institutions to offer comprehensive information regarding financial aid, scholarships, and career opportunities during and after open days to alleviate the long-term concerns of prospective students and their parents. Chiweshe (2020) identifies distinct challenges faced by Zimbabwean universities, including MSU, in the organisation of open days. Challenges include constrained budgets, the lack of virtual options for students unable to attend in person, and insufficient tailored engagement strategies for diverse stakeholder groups. Nonetheless, the socio-economic landscape in Zimbabwe presents barriers, including high transportation costs and limited access to online resources, which may hinder prospective students from attending open days (Nyoni, 2020).

Although many studies have investigated the influence of open days on student recruitment in Western contexts, there is a lack of research regarding their effectiveness in African universities. Current research in Zimbabwe, including works by Chikozho (2021) and Chiweshe (2020), predominantly addresses logistical challenges and general perceptions. However, these studies do not offer a thorough assessment that encompasses the viewpoints of all essential stakeholders, specifically students, parents, and university staff. Furthermore, there is an absence of specific recommendations that address the distinct socio-economic and cultural contexts of higher education in Zimbabwe.

Considering the challenges faced by tertiary institutions, it is clear that these institutions must adopt a marketing-oriented approach. Higher education institutions must integrate marketing orientation into their strategic planning processes to maintain competitiveness. Open days at Midlands State University play a crucial role in the recruitment process. These events facilitate direct interaction between the institution and prospective students, allowing for the addressing of concerns and the provision of first-hand experiences of university life. Although significant, empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of open days at MSU in translating interest into actual enrolment remains limited. This study aims to assess open days as a recruitment tool and analyse their impact on students' enrolment decisions. These events draw considerable attendance from prospective students, parents, and guardians, with the objective of delivering a thorough understanding of the university's offerings. Anecdotal evidence indicates that open days generate interest; however, they do not consistently result in increased enrolment, prompting inquiries into their overall impact and efficiency. This study aims to offer a detailed analysis of the effectiveness of MSU's open day strategy.

Midlands State University invests significant resources in organising open days as part of its recruitment strategy. Despite their prominence, the extent to which these events influence students' perceptions and enrolment rates remains unclear. Anecdotal evidence indicates that even though open days draw a significant number of participants, the resulting enrolment conversion rate may not warrant the associated investment. The absence of clarity poses a significant challenge for the university, particularly in a context where resource optimisation is essential. This study aims to assess the role and impact of open days at MSU, identify

essential components of successful events, and examine gaps in understanding their influence on prospective students and enrolment rates.

The study was informed by the following objectives:

- To explore how open days' influence prospective students' perceptions of Midlands State University (MSU).
- To establish the impact of open days on student enrolment rates at Midlands State University.
- To establish the key components of effective open days that enhance student recruitment at Midlands State University.

Literature Review

This section of the study focused on understanding different theoretical contributions in the area under study. The study was informed by three theories which are: Marketing Mix Theory, Engagement Theory, and Decision-Making Theory. The theoretical framework provides insights into how open days perform as recruitment techniques. The point of marketing is to attract and retain customers, and this helps to provide a product that stands out from the competition. The way MSU plans and implements open days as part of its recruitment strategy requires a grasp of the Marketing Mix Theory. Under the Marketing mix theory: Product: MSU's academic and cultural offerings are reflected in the programmes, facilities, and ideals that are showcased to potential students during the open day. These play a key role in influencing how students perceive academic institutions. In order to draw in students, open days' work as promotional event by offering customised information and highlighting MSU's advantages. Students' decision-making process is aided by the campus's physical location and atmosphere, which provide them a concrete idea of what living at MSU is like. - People: Faculty, staff, and current students who engage with guests are essential in promoting the university's ideals and fostering a friendly environment. Physical Evidence: The institution's quality is demonstrated by the resources, facilities, and general atmosphere that are visible during the open day.

According to Engagement Theory, decision-making processes are influenced by meaningful experiences, teamwork, and active participation. This assertion is supported by open days, which provide potential students with participatory experiences including campus tours, workshops, and one-on-one conversations. Prospective students get the chance to interact with faculty and other students, which will increase their interest in the institution and sense of belonging. It provides students with immersive experiences that enable them to envision their time at university. This assertion emphasises how prospective students' impressions and enrolment decisions are shaped by their emotional and cognitive engagement during open days (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). In order to promote engagement and learning, the theory emphasises the value of meaningful connections, teamwork, and active participation. According to this notion, participation in open days can have a big impact on how students view MSU and how likely they are to enroll.

According to Social Exchange Theory, reciprocity, the exchange of resources of perceived value, is the foundation of relationships. When it comes to open days, prospective students and their families value the information, advice, and facility access that the institution offers, and they show their appreciation by becoming more interested, applying, and eventually enrolling. Good experience at open days increases the university's commitment and trust with prospective students. This theory emphasises how perceived worth and trust impact recruitment outcomes, highlighting the relational dynamics at work during open days. On the other hand, the Decision-

Making Theory sheds light on how potential students assess and select a college. Three major phases are identified by the theory: During the open day, prospective students gather information about MSU, including academic programmes, campus life, and amenities. Based on their open day experiences, students assess the benefits and drawbacks of attending MSU and contrast it with other universities. Their choice of university may be influenced by their overall impression from the open day. Open days help prospective students make well-informed enrolment decisions by lowering ambiguity.

An open day is when a university extends an invitation to potential students to visit, explore, and ask any questions they may have about the courses they are offering (Anonymous, 2024). They are typically sizable, well-planned gatherings that highlight academic resources, housing, social facets of college life, and more. After meeting instructors, students, and staff, students will be able to determine if studying there is right for them. It has also been discovered that some students find campus visits and open days, when they are encouraged to visit and tour university campuses, to be crucial when choosing which higher education institutions to enroll in. De Jager and Du Plooy (2010) found that institutional visits had a bigger impact on choosing a university than did recommendations from friends and family. In this sense, their university preferences may be significantly influenced by their ability to visit the campus and get a personal feel for the culture and features of the institution. In a study by Van Heerden (2009), thirty percent of South African university students rated campus visits and open days as excellent sources of university information. This suggests that when choosing a university to attend, some students consider the opportunity to visit campus and get a first-hand look at the institution to be a significant consideration. Other potential students, however, might find that campus visits are less helpful than other considerations when choosing a university (Mogaji et al., 2020).

Coady and Duffy (2016) assert that open days are an essential touchpoint for colleges, offering a human connection that marketing collateral cannot match. Students' opinions and choices on which university to attend can be greatly impacted by this involvement (Bennett & McMahon, 2020). The main purpose of open days is to highlight the institution's extracurricular activities, social scene, and academic programmes. According to Matthews (2018), colleges should use open days to showcase their intellectual prowess as well as to foster a friendly and upbeat atmosphere, all of which are essential for drawing in new students. Additionally, in order to reach a larger audience, universities are increasingly combining digital resources with conventional open day forms, such as virtual tours and online talks, as higher education becomes more competitive (Pfeiffer, 2021).

In a study undertaken by Nuseir and Refae (2021) in the United Arab Emirates, a developed country, the findings indicated that various elements, including academic reputation, grants and funding, location and proximity, facilities and services, as well as promotional and marketing channels, influence students' decisions regarding their university studies. Avery and Turner (2012) note that numerous students assert that the criteria for choosing a university or college predominantly revolve around economic factors; this approach alleviates the potential frustration of having to withdraw from their studies due to insufficient resources. In a separate investigation in the United Kingdom, Kizito (2022) noted that the university choice of students was influenced by their closeness to home, ease of transportation, available amenities, inclusivity, variety and quality of support offered to students.

Open days give potential students the chance to speak with academics, staff, and existing students, which helps them make better decisions about their future. Being physically present

at the university allows students to evaluate the resources, facilities, and general atmosphere, all of which are important factors in their choice (Beech & Bryant 2017). Additionally, the experience gives students a chance to voice any concerns and ask questions, which can greatly lessen their fear about making such a big decision.

Jenkins and Zinkhan (2019), assert that open days have an impact that goes beyond disseminating knowledge; they help people feel like they belong. During open days, students are more likely to see the university as a place where they may succeed both academically and socially if they feel appreciated and welcomed. Furthermore, as noted by Kirby (2020), the social component of open days which allows students to connect with classmates who share their academic interests further enhances the hiring process. However, from developed countries, rankings and reputation of institutions are also critical in student enrolment (Welch & Li 2021). US institutions are often evaluated based on criteria including student satisfaction, faculty expertise, research output, and academic reputation. Elevated rankings and a reputable institution name may influence prospective students' perceptions of academic excellence and future employment opportunities. Thus, they play a vital role in the decision-making process. Students frequently consult college rankings when assessing their options. College rankings enable students to finalise their college lists and assess alternative institutions. Selten et al. (2020) assert that international students often utilise rankings to gather information regarding academic opportunities, faculty-student ratios, and research outputs of different universities. Students employ this essential information to evaluate the quality of education offered by different institutions, as these rankings are based on data and analysis. Rankings significantly impact the considerations of prospective students regarding university selectivity and competition.

Although open days' efficacy has been extensively researched in Western settings, little research has been done in the African higher education sector, where unique cultural and economic factors influence recruitment dynamics. Open days are being used more and more by Zimbabwean universities, such as Midlands State University, to draw in students from both urban and rural locations. Nevertheless, obstacles including restricted information availability, inadequate facilities, and budgetary limitations could affect how successful these hiring activities are (Chikozho, 2021). Furthermore, Zimbabwe's socio-political difficulties, potential students may encounter obstacles to attending open days, like transportation problems or a lack of knowledge about the occasion.

There is little data on how successful open days are in Zimbabwean universities. According to Zvinavashe (2019), study on the University of Zimbabwe's recruitment tactics, open days are helpful for drawing in students, but they do not ensure a high enrolment rate unless they are combined with other tactics like financial aid and follow-up correspondence. Chiweshe (2020), argues that open days, although beneficial, are not always sufficient to remove structural obstacles to student registration in Zimbabwean universities.

In a study carried out in Tanzania, a developing country, Shields and Peruta (2019) examined the influence of open days on students' university selection, investigating how prospective students utilise these platforms in their enrolment decision-making process. Their research indicated that a significant number of students utilise open days as a means to acquire information regarding their preferred university. Therefore, the study suggests that practical guidelines for universities should strengthen their open days' initiatives for student recruitment. However, Qasim et al. (2021) elucidated that elements such as outreach programmes implemented by universities do not ensure an increase in student enrolment. The exclusion of

specific factors in the decision-making process may lead to complications for students. For instance, Alt (2015) posited that a factor frequently overlooked is the influence of open days and cultural differences. In order to prevent the exclusion of critical factors and recognising that the choice of a specific university is not solely the burden of the prospective student, Liñán et al. (2011) advocate for the inclusion of parents in this decision-making process, given their greater experience and analytical abilities.

An open days' efficacy is also influenced by the several obstacles institutions have while trying to recruit students. Reconciling the anticipations of prospective students with the curriculum presented during open days constitutes a considerable challenge. Students might experience a sense of discontent and uncertainty regarding their decision if they participate in an open day anticipating comprehensive academic insights, only to be presented with a broad summary (Pfeiffer, 2021). Additionally, disengagement may result from open days that do not sufficiently address students' financial worries or offer assistance with the application process, especially for students from lower-income families.

The role of open days, as a mechanism for student recruitment at tertiary institutions, has not been adequately explored by academic researchers, especially within the framework of Zimbabwean universities. In Zimbabwe, the operations of MSU within a competitive landscape necessitate a thorough examination of how open days inform prospective students' perceptions and impact their decisions regarding enrolment. Contemporary studies frequently overlook the examination of open days as an independent recruitment strategy, even though they play a crucial role in offering direct experiences of the institution. Moreover, prior research such as that conducted by Bennett and Molisani (2020) has concentrated on customer experiences within corporate environments, neglecting the distinct dynamics associated with student recruitment in the realm of higher education. This research, centered on MSU, seeks to remedy the dearth of localised studies within Zimbabwean universities and enhances the overall comprehension of the role open days' play as a strategic instrument for recruitment. The research will yield valuable insights for higher education institutions aiming to refine their recruitment strategies by enhancing the experiences offered during open days.

Research Methodology

The study was informed by a phenomenological research philosophy to investigate how open days affect prospective students' opinions about Midlands State University (MSU) and their choice of university. Phenomenology is perfect for investigating the subtle and complex elements that impact potential students' choices of educational institutions since it concentrates on understanding people's subjective viewpoints (Acar, 2024). This study employed a qualitative research paradigm to gather contextually specific data regarding stakeholder perceptions of the effectiveness of open days at Midlands State University, while also offering in-depth insights into their experiences with the showcasing of the university's facilities. Qualitative research was the preferred approach for this study due to its flexibility in fostering rapport between the investigator and the participants (Mac et. al, 2020). Within the framework of qualitative research, the study uses documents analysis as a research design. Documents analysis is especially significant for investigating contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). This design facilitates a detailed examination of the open day experiences at MSU, gathering a range of viewpoints from participants and situating the findings within the university's recruitment framework.

The target population for the study comprised prospective students who attended MSU open days, University staff, including administrative and academic personnel, involved in the

planning and execution of open days. The population also comprised parents and guardians who accompanied prospective students to gain insights into their influence on students' decisions. The students' respondent groups were specifically targeted because they were affected by MSU's showcasing of its academic programmes, facilities, and extracurricular opportunities. The total target population was 350 respondents comprising 300 high school students, 30 guardians, 10 administrative staff and 10 lecturers. These groups were selected as key stakeholders with first-hand knowledge of the event's effectiveness.

Lakens (2022) asserts that researchers must examine the smallest effect size of interest and the minimal effect size that will achieve statistical significance, contingent upon the selected sample size reason. The point of saturation is the most frequently invoked guarantee of qualitative rigor (Vasileiou et al., 2018). A sample size of 20 respondents is expected to provide profound insights into their experiences with the open days at MSU. The study comprised a total sample size of 25 respondents Creswell (1998). This size was considered sufficient to obtain varied yet manageable qualitative insights, ensuring the research objectives were achieved while preserving methodological rigor.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant data (Patton, 2015). The selection criteria included prospective students who attended MSU open days within the last academic year, University staff actively involved in organising and conducting open days and parents or guardians who participated in open day activities. Semi-structured interviews were performed with all participant cohorts. This approach, as articulated by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), facilitates the examination of participants' distinct viewpoints while ensuring uniformity in fundamental inquiries. The interviews were conducted using a flexible timetable that corresponded with the study objectives. Two focus group discussions were conducted with prospective students, allowing for the capture of collective insights and group dynamics (Krueger & Casey, 2014). This approach was especially effective for comprehending collective experiences and discerning prevalent themes. Bowen (2009) emphasises that document analysis enhances other data gathering methods by offering contextual information and corroborating findings. This encompassed the examination of open day schedules, promotional materials, attendance records, and feedback forms.

The research complied with ethical standards to safeguard participants and uphold research integrity, as advised by the Belmont Report (2019). Ethical considerations were crucial for maintaining the study's validity and integrity during the research process. This necessitated rigorous adherence to informed consent protocols, guaranteeing that each participant was thoroughly informed about the study's aims and structure prior to consenting to participate.

Results and discussion

Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews scheduled were properly conducted and the results obtained were analysed and presented using Thematic analysis. The researcher employed both inductive and deductive strategies to generate themes from the qualitative responses. Four principal themes have been discerned from the findings as informed by objectives. The transcriptions from the audio recordings of the focus group meeting allowed the researcher to categorise them according to the themes of the study questions.

Theme 1: The Effects of open days on the perceptions of potential students

This theme revolves around what prospective students think about MSU when they visit for an open day. There was a substantial impact that the open days had on the decisions that prospective students made. During the open days, prospective students brought up a number of

different elements that influenced their opinions of MSU. These included the chance to investigate the facilities on campus, engage in conversation with the instructors, and get any questions or concerns regarding the academic programmes answered.

Respondent L1

“Upon seeing the facilities, I gained confidence that I am able to study here, the laboratories are all up to date, and the library is stocked with everything that I would require for my degree. I spent a significant amount of time researching universities. Educational opportunities of a very high standard are provided by MSU. The open days truly gave me an insight on the quality of higher education at the institution.”

Respondent L2

“I visited all of the 2023 open days held at MSU to see their facilities, how easy it would be to get to and from, particularly if I had to return home for my kids in an emergency, how much it would cost, what it was like to be a student, and how the personnel and environment made me feel. Although they were all excellent, I ultimately chose MSU because of its proximity to my house, convenience of transportation, facilities, inclusivity, range and quality of support they provided to students. I was concerned that I would be too old and not fit in because I was 47 years old at the time, but I was happy and felt like I belonged, and that was significant to me.”

Respondent L3

“The open day offered me a clear understanding of what living at the institution will be like. Because of the warm welcome and helpful staff, MSU was my top option.”

The responses suggest that the university's open days provide an excellent opportunity for personal engagement and a cordial reception. This aligns with prior studies, reinforcing the significance of early impressions in college and university applications (Idowu-Faith et al., 2023).

Respondent S1

“I was particularly impressed by how passionate the lecturers were when they presented. It showed they care deeply about their programmes.”

Respondent S2

“I didn't know much about MSU before the open day, but the event made the university feel approachable and welcoming. The university gained my trust more than others after the open house because all of my inquiries were answered clearly.”

Respondent S3

“Engaging with current students who recounted their experiences illuminated the extent to which MSU prioritises the student experience. After hearing the inspiring stories of MSU alumni, I am even more pleased to call MSU my college of choice.”

According to the students, the experience of physically visiting the facilities of the university was a significant factor in the formation of their ideas. The fact that the library, laboratories, and student housing facilities met or exceeded the participants' expectations and reaffirmed their interest in MSU was shared by a number of participants.

Theme 2: Open Day Activities and Their Effectiveness

Prospective students were able to have a better understanding of the academic atmosphere by meeting members of the faculties and current students. Several participants noted that the interactions they had with other people made them feel welcome and gave them confidence in their choice. On the other hand, the material that was presented was perceived by some students to be too generic and lacking in-depth information relation to certain programmes.

The university staff members supplied insightful information regarding the design and execution of open days, as well as their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the events in terms of accomplishment of recruitment objectives. The employees emphasised that the organisation of open days needed a great amount of time and resources. They made the observation that it was necessary for diverse departments, such as academics, marketing, and student affairs, to work together and collaborate in order to achieve success.

Direct interactions with potential candidates during open days was regarded as an effective recruitment tactic by the respondents. On the other hand, a few members of the staff voiced their concerns regarding the event's dependency on in-person participation, implying that virtual components may potentially broaden the scope of the communication. The staff admitted that there were no official systems in place to collect input from all the attendees.

Respondent S5 made the following observation: *"In order to enhance the quality of future open days, we ought to have an approach to collecting feedback from both students and parents."*

There were a number of problems that needed to be overcome in order to successfully organise large-scale open days. These challenges included limited resources and budgetary limits. Some of the staff members noted that it was difficult to accommodate all of the guests who were interested, particularly those who came from rural locations. There were obstacles that prevented attendees from rural locations from gaining access to information about the events. Their capacity to plan attendance was hindered as a result of this. The issue of consistency was identified as a recurrent problem, and it was seen that the quality of presentations varied from department to department. A number of participants proposed the incorporation of live-streamed sessions and virtual tours in order to communicate with students who were unable to attend in person. Both the staff and the parents underlined the need of maintaining interest and addressing any questions that may still be present by maintaining follow-up communications after open days.

Theme 3: Role of Open Days in Influencing University Selection Decisions

Open houses were a deciding factor for some attendees when it came to enrollment. They valued the chance to get their questions answered and concerns regarding the programmes and facilities addressed in a straightforward manner. The campus atmosphere, curriculum offerings, and accessibility are some of the factors that influence students' decisions.

Respondent L4 asserted the following:

“The open day gave me a chance to check out all the different programmes and see how they stacked up against other universities. My decision to attend MSU was solidified as a result. I wasn't sure the university was a good fit for me. Meeting the faculty and students, though, solidified my belief that it was.”

Amidst the process of selecting universities in Zimbabwe, students give serious consideration to expenditures such as tuition and living expenses. These students are conscious of the significant financial investment that is required for higher education in the universities. As a result, they give serious consideration to the affordability of their options when they are making their decisions.

“During an open day, you can ask questions about the programme and get answers about the tuition, as well as other expenses like accommodation, food, and other fees,” according to a participant, Open days offer transparency and clarity on tuition fees and all expenses.

In order to alleviate anxiety and foster trust, it is important to be open and honest with students and their families. The same student continued, *“Knowing the exact tuition fees and payment schedules made it easier for my family to plan.”* Another respondent alluded, *“Affordability was another factor that was very essential to me.”* This indicates how financial considerations, such as disparities in regional costs, play a significant role in selecting which institutions students choose to attend.

Parents underlined how important it is to maintain a safe environment. The presentations and guided tours of the campus that were given by security professionals throughout the event provided them with a specific sense of reassurance. A parent expressed his opinion: *“Knowing that the university prioritises safety makes it easier for me to support my child’s decision to study here.”*

Theme 4: Open Houses and Enrolment Rates

The responses below indicated a range of viewpoints regarding the influence of open days on student enrolment rates. The discussions underscored the impact of these events on prospective students' decision-making processes, the significance of interaction and information sharing, and the necessity for strategic enhancements to improve their efficacy as a recruitment tool. Converting open day attendees to actual enrollees seems to draw drastic numbers.

Interview Excerpts	Subthemes	Theme
<i>“The open day provided me with all the information I required regarding the course and the campus facilities, which ultimately persuaded me to enroll.” Respondent L5</i>	Persuasive data	Influence on decision-making
<i>“A significant number of us chose to enroll as it provided the opportunity to engage with the lecturers and gain first-hand insights into the career paths available post-graduation.” Respondent S6</i>	Engagement with faculty and alumni	Career-related assurance

<i>"The open day demonstrated that MSU is efficiently organised and provides high-quality education." That certainly shaped my decision.</i> Respondent S3	Reputation of institutions	University image
<i>I would have liked the open day to provide more opportunities for us to engage with students from the departments we were interested in. It seemed hurried.</i> Respondent S4	Allocation of time for activities	Logistical challenges
<i>"It would be beneficial for more parents to attend the open days, as their presence is crucial in determining our ability to manage the fees."</i> Respondent S5	Engagement of parents	Financial considerations
<i>Open days are beneficial, yet not everyone is able to participate. Perhaps virtual tours or recordings could be beneficial for those of us residing at a distance.</i> Respondent S8	Accessibility	Expanding reach

Source: Researcher data (2024)

Respondents highlighted that the provision of clear, detailed, and relevant information during open days was essential in shaping their enrolment decisions. One participant remarked, *"The well-structured nature of the courses instilled confidence in my choice of university."* Engagement with faculty and alumni offered confirmation regarding the educational quality and potential career opportunities. A potential student stated, *"Alumni testimonials regarding how MSU equipped them for their careers influenced my decision to attend this university."* The perception of MSU as a professional and welcoming institution was improved by effectively organised open day activities. Participants indicated a necessity for improved time management and increased opportunities for interaction within designated departments. One participant remarked, *"The sessions felt rushed, and I didn't have the opportunity to ask as many questions as I desired."*

The significance of parents in enrolment decisions was emphasised, along with recommendations to enhance the inclusivity of financial information sessions for them. Accessibility continues to be a constraint, especially for students residing in remote regions. Virtual participation options may effectively mitigate this gap. The findings indicate that open days significantly influence student enrolment rates by offering information, promoting engagement, and improving MSU's reputation. Addressing logistical challenges, improving parental involvement, and expanding accessibility through virtual options could enhance their effectiveness as a recruitment tool.

Theme 5: Attitudes towards the open days

A great number of parents expressed their gratitude for the comprehensive programme presentations and the chance to interact with the speakers. Because of this connection, they were able to evaluate the level of education offered at MSU. On the other hand, there were some parents who proposed more individualised sessions that addressed their particular concerns, such as the employment opportunities available to graduates. However, there was lack of precise information regarding tuition fees, financial aid possibilities, and extracurricular activities, which was highlighted by a few students, despite the fact that the majority of students had pleasure in the event. A participant expressed his satisfaction: *"I enjoyed the event, but I still left with questions about how I could manage the fees and if there were scholarships available."*

Respondent L1

"I was aware that attending a highly regarded university would strengthen my reputation in the job market in addition to providing me with an excellent education."

Open days are essential for delivering detailed information to prospective students regarding the university. Respondent S2 noted that open days facilitate uniformity among various universities, enabling prospective students to comprehend how MSU's offerings compare to those of other institutions, particularly regarding programme diversity and relevance. They emphasised that open days effectively demonstrate MSU's innovative educational approach, which is crucial for attracting technologically adept and progressive students.

Respondent S2

"Open days offer a notable benefit by allowing prospective students to engage directly with faculty, current students, and alumni, thereby humanising the university experience. This personal engagement aids prospective students in comprehending the experience of life at MSU."

Respondent S4 highlighted this point by stating:

"I believe there are positive aspects to the introduction of programmes, indicating that open days not only convey programme information but also enable students to experience the university's culture and ethos."

Interaction with faculty and peers fosters a sense of belonging, with many respondents indicating that this personal connection significantly influenced their decision to apply. Open days serve as a venue for MSU to address the needs of diverse prospective students, encompassing individuals with particular academic interests as well as those in search of general institutional information. Respondent L1 indicated that the open days at MSU have been essential for conveying curriculum changes and their alignment with broader societal needs, including industrial development and technological advancement. They indicated that "a little conscientisation of stakeholders" is necessary, emphasising that although open days provide information, increased awareness of the new programmes could be advantageous.

Respondent L3

“Open days at MSU are essential to the university's student recruitment strategies. Prospective students are afforded the opportunity to gain insight into MSU's programmes, facilities, and campus life, while engaging in personalised interactions with staff and students. Respondents emphasise that open days offer a crucial opportunity to address concerns, foster trust, and enable students to make informed decisions. There exists potential for enhancement, particularly regarding the identification of skills gaps, the refinement of programme content, and the improvement of communication concerning industry relevance. Utilising feedback from open day events and consistently adjusting to the requirements of students and industry stakeholders will enable MSU to strengthen its status as a premier institution for higher education in Zimbabwe and beyond.”

The executive in the Admissions Department responds during the brainstorming session with members of the Admissions Department:

“...Enrolment was declining, posing a threat to student enrolment rates. Open days function as a significant mechanism for student recruitment at universities, enabling prospective students to engage with the institution's academic programmes, facilities, and campus environment. At MSU, these events are crucial for attracting students and facilitating informed decision-making regarding their education. Open days offer essential insights into MSU's programmes and culture through direct interactions with faculty, staff, and current students.”

The prospective students were unaware of the offerings and benefits of enrolling in the programmes at MSU, resulting in a loss of enrolment to other universities. The resolutions from the brainstorming session indicated that collaboration among various departments, such as academics, marketing, and student affairs, is crucial for success.

The findings are consistent with those of earlier studies that highlighted the significance of open days in terms of their ability to influence the decisions that students make (Beech & Bryant, 2017). MSU's open day strategy is highlighted by the themes that were found, which reflect both its strengths and its limits. An efficient platform for presenting facilities and connecting directly with stakeholders is provided by the event, which helps to increase the confidence of potential students and parents. This lends credence to the contention made by Bennett and McMahon (2020) that open days encourage a sense of connection and belonging among students. The findings of Matthews (2018) regarding the difficulties that universities encounter when attempting to maximise the effectiveness of open day experiences are echoed by the absence of precise information on financial elements and the variations in the quality of presentations. It is possible that addressing these deficiencies will considerably improve the effectiveness of the event. The advice made by Pfeiffer (2021) for a hybrid approach to open days, which includes traditional and digital involvement, is aligned with the incorporation of virtual aspects and formal feedback methods.

Conclusion and recommendations

The results substantiate the assertions made by Beech and Bryant (2017) regarding the significant influence of open days on students' perception of universities. For MSU, open days served as a platform for students to envisage their place within the academic milieu while also promoting engagement with faculty and current students, in accordance with the insights of Hooley et al. (2020). Nonetheless, the impact of socio-economic factors, as highlighted by Nyoni (2020), illustrates those open days are insufficient to overcome all obstacles to university

enrolment. Open days were observed to have a considerable impact on the perceptions of prospective students regarding MSU, especially by highlighting campus life, academic offerings, and the institution's overarching reputation. Nevertheless, certain students expressed that their choices were additionally shaped by external influences, including parental guidance or financial limitations.

The research indicated that open days play a significant role in enhancing enrolment rates by fostering favorable perceptions and addressing the primary concerns of potential students and their parents. This is consistent with the research conducted by Bennett and McMahon (2020), which emphasised the significance of tailored experiences during open days in cultivating a commitment to university applications. Nonetheless, the challenges highlighted, including the difficulty in engaging students from remote regions, mirror the constraints noted by Chikozho (2021). Open days emerged as a significant factor in enhancing student enrolment rates, particularly among those who received comprehensive information regarding programmes and funding opportunities during these events.

The most significant elements comprised of interactive sessions, compelling presentations delivered by faculties, campus tours, and opportunities for individualised consultations with staff. Issues such as logistical limitations and insufficient marketing were identified as domains that necessitate enhancement. Interactive and engaging sessions have proven to be essential components for the success of open days, as supported by Kirby (2020). At MSU, the efficacy of presentations and campus tours was notably appreciated by attendees; however, the absence of adequate follow-up mechanisms curtailed their overall influence. This highlights a deficiency in the recruitment strategy that may be remedied through the incorporation of digital tools, as proposed by Pfeiffer (2021).

While open days do play a role in shaping student decision-making, they are considered significant reservoirs of information. Consequently, higher education institutions ought to persist in employing these marketing communication tools. In light of University of Capetown's (UCT) approach, it is advisable for institutions to consider parents as a significant segment of the audience for open days. This entails organising the event on a day that is suitable for parents, stakeholders, and learners to participate collectively, potentially during a weekend or on a weekday evening. The impact of parents and educators ought to be acknowledged in motivating students to participate in the event. Institutions ought to persist in extending invitations to educational establishments. However, it is essential to extend personalised invitations to the parents of prospective students, as the findings indicate that direct marketing strategies were more effective than mass marketing. This may serve as a substitute or complement to radio and newspaper advertising aimed at parents, contingent upon the availability of financial resources. The information presented during the open day will be tailored to more precisely meet the requirements of A-level students, O-level students, postgraduate students, and their parents. Scholars and learners must acknowledge their positions as representatives and can be educated to address anticipated inquiries while cultivating an image that elicits a positive response. It is advisable for faculties to organise open days or undertake school visits to furnish students with more detailed information regarding specific courses rather than offering broad information at an open day.

The findings indicated that the institutions were failing to fulfil the intended purposes of open days as an instrument of marketing communications. The institutions stated that the objective of open days is to foster awareness of both the institutions and their surrounding environment, to furnish details regarding courses, to alter the perceptions that students hold regarding the

institution and to cultivate connections with potential students. A significant number of students expressed that open days failed to provide them with an adequate introduction to the institution's environment, while some indicated that these events did not facilitate the development of a relationship with the institution. Students, however, perceived that they gained advantages from attending open days, as these events furnished them with valuable information regarding courses.

The research recommended that institutions of higher learning should incorporate virtual open days and digital engagement tools to augment conventional approaches and extend outreach to a wider audience. They should establish mechanisms for sustained communication with participants' post-event, encompassing email newsletters, webinars, or personalised consultations. They should direct resources towards improving logistical frameworks, encompassing transportation arrangements for participants, to ensure smooth event implementation and enhance attendance rates. They should also facilitate dedicated sessions for parents and guardians to articulate their concerns and underscore their significance in the decision-making framework.

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