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Brand Image, Academic Service Quality, and Institutional Recovery Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are increasingly exposed to organizational disruptions that threaten institutional legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and enrolment sustainability. This challenge is particularly acute for private health higher education institutions due to stringent regulatory requirements, accreditation pressures, and a high public sensitivity to professional credibility. This study investigates the role of brand image and academic service quality as institutional recovery mechanisms in health higher education institutions that experienced a temporary suspension of new student admissions. Departing from conventional studies conducted in stable institutional environments, this research adopts a post-vacancy perspective that conceptualizes recovery as a governance process involving symbolic legitimacy restoration and functional validation rather than mere operational reopening. Using a quantitative explanatory approach, data were collected from new and active students and analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The findings reveal that brand image and academic service quality exert positive and significant effects on student enrollment intention. Brand image functions as a symbolic recovery mechanism that mitigates reputational risk and restores institutional legitimacy, while academic service quality operates as a functional validation mechanism that confirms institutional reliability and effectiveness. This study contributes to higher education management literature by positioning branding and service quality as integrated recovery instruments within post-crisis institutional governance.

Keywords: brand image; academic service quality; institutional recovery; higher education management

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) are not merely providers of educational services but institutional actors whose legitimacy is deeply embedded in regulatory compliance, governance credibility, and public trust. Particularly in health higher education, institutional legitimacy becomes a non-negotiable requirement because educational outputs are linked to professional certification, workforce readiness, and public safety. Consequently, organizational disruptions in health HEIs generate consequences that are more severe and enduring compared to those in other educational sectors.

One of the most critical forms of disruption in higher education governance is the temporary suspension of new student admissions. Such suspension does not only interrupt routine academic operations but also signals governance vulnerability and regulatory misalignment. From an institutional theory perspective, admission suspension constitutes a legitimacy shock, whereby stakeholders reassess the appropriateness, credibility, and long-term viability of the institution. Unlike short-term service failures, legitimacy shocks in higher education tend to produce prolonged reputational damage that persists even after formal regulatory approval to resume admissions is obtained.

In post-vacancy contexts, the reopening of admissions does not automatically translate into institutional recovery. Empirical observations indicate that prospective students and their families often continue to associate admission suspension with managerial incapacity, academic unreliability, or governance weakness. As a result, HEIs face a dual recovery challenge: restoring symbolic

legitimacy at the perceptual level while simultaneously demonstrating functional reliability through tangible improvements in academic service delivery. Institutions that address only one of these dimensions risk superficial recovery that fails to restore enrollment sustainability.

The increasingly competitive higher education landscape further amplifies this challenge. Student enrollment decisions are no longer driven solely by program availability or tuition considerations. Instead, prospective students evaluate institutions based on perceived credibility, governance stability, and service reliability. In post-crisis environments, these evaluations intensify as stakeholders seek assurance that the institution has genuinely recovered rather than merely complied with procedural requirements.

Existing studies on higher education branding and service quality examine institutions operating under stable conditions. Prior research demonstrates that brand image enhances student satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth intention, while academic service quality improves perceived value and learning experience. However, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to post-crisis or post-vacancy contexts, where the central managerial challenge is legitimacy reconstruction rather than satisfaction optimization. This gap suggests the need for a recovery-oriented perspective that repositions branding and service quality as governance mechanisms rather than conventional marketing tools.

Responding to this gap, the present study examines brand image and academic service quality as institutional recovery mechanisms in post-vacancy health HEIs. By integrating legitimacy theory, branding perspectives, and service quality theory, this research advances a governance-driven recovery framework that explains how institutions rebuild student enrollment intention following legitimacy-threatening events.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

1.1. Institutional Legitimacy and Recovery in Higher Education

Institutional legitimacy refers to the generalized perception that an organization's actions are appropriate, desirable, and aligned with socially constructed norms and expectations. In higher education, legitimacy is derived from accreditation status, regulatory recognition, academic quality, and societal trust. Institutions that fail to maintain legitimacy face heightened scrutiny, reduced stakeholder support, and long-term survival risks.

Institutional theory emphasizes that legitimacy is dynamic, particularly during periods of disruption. When legitimacy is threatened, organizations must engage in legitimate repair strategies that address both cognitive and normative dimensions. In HEIs, legitimacy repair is especially complex because stakeholders evaluate institutions not only based on current performance but also on anticipated long-term outcomes, such as graduate employability and professional recognition.

In post-vacancy contexts, legitimacy recovery is not a discrete event but an ongoing process. Even after regulatory approval to resume admissions is granted, negative stakeholder perceptions may persist. This persistence underscores the necessity of reconceptualizing recovery as a governance process that unfolds through continuous interaction between institutional signals and stakeholder interpretations.

1.2. Brand Image as a Symbolic Recovery Mechanism

Brand image represents stakeholders' overall perceptions and associations regarding an institution, encompassing academic reputation, institutional values, and governance credibility. In contexts characterized by information asymmetry, brand image functions as a heuristic device that simplifies stakeholder decision-making by signaling institutional quality and reliability.

In post-vacancy environments, brand image operates as a symbolic legitimacy restoration mechanism. Symbolic actions play a crucial role in reshaping stakeholder narratives about the institution by communicating stability, resilience, and recovery readiness. Importantly, branding in recovery contexts differs fundamentally from branding in stable environments. While branding under stable conditions serves primarily as a differentiation strategy, branding in post-vacancy contexts functions as a risk-mitigation mechanism that reduces perceived uncertainty.

Accordingly, brand image in this study is conceptualized not as a promotional asset but as a governance signal that mediates between internal recovery efforts and external stakeholder evaluations. A positive brand image reassures prospective students that the institution has regained alignment with regulatory and professional standards.

H1: Brand image has a positive and significant effect on student enrollment intention in post-vacancy health higher education institutions.

1.3. Academic Service Quality as a Functional Validation Mechanism

Academic service quality refers to the institution's ability to deliver educational services in a dependable, responsive, and effective manner, including teaching quality, academic advising, administrative efficiency, and institutional responsiveness. In recovery contexts, academic service quality assumes heightened importance because it represents the most immediate and observable manifestation of governance effectiveness.

From a recovery perspective, academic service quality serves as a functional validation mechanism. While brand image operates at the perceptual level, service quality provides concrete experiences that either confirm or contradict symbolic recovery narratives. Direct interactions with academic staff and administrative systems allow students to assess whether governance systems have stabilized and whether recovery claims are substantiated by actual performance.

Failure to deliver consistent academic services during the recovery phase may undermine symbolic recovery efforts and prolong reputational damage. Consequently, academic service quality is conceptualized in this study as a functional counterpart to symbolic legitimacy restoration.

H2: Academic service quality has a positive and significant effect on student enrollment intention in post-vacancy health higher education institutions.

1.4. Integrated Institutional Recovery Framework

Institutional recovery is conceptualized in this study as a governance process integrating symbolic and functional mechanisms. Brand image restores legitimacy at the perceptual level, while academic service quality validates recovery through observable performance. The integration of these mechanisms forms a comprehensive recovery framework that enhances enrollment sustainability and institutional resilience.

1.5. Post-Vacancy Recovery as a Governance Process

Institutional recovery in post-vacancy higher education contexts should not be interpreted as a linear or short-term adjustment process. Instead, recovery constitutes a multi-layered governance process that unfolds through continuous interaction between regulatory compliance, organizational learning, and stakeholder perception management. Particularly in health higher education institutions, where regulatory oversight is stringent and reputational sensitivity is high, recovery dynamics become deeply intertwined with governance effectiveness.

From a governance perspective, post-vacancy recovery requires institutions to realign internal structures, decision-making processes, and accountability mechanisms. Temporary admission suspension often exposes weaknesses in governance arrangements, including unclear authority distribution, ineffective quality assurance systems, and limited responsiveness to regulatory requirements. As a result, recovery necessitates not only external communication but also internal institutional reform.

Importantly, stakeholder interpretation of recovery does not rely solely on formal regulatory approval. Prospective students, parents, and professional communities often assess recovery based on perceived consistency between institutional narratives and observable practices. This condition places pressure on institutions to demonstrate coherence between symbolic communication and functional performance. Failure to achieve such coherence may lead to prolonged skepticism despite formal compliance.

In this context, brand image and academic service quality operate as governance signals that translate internal recovery efforts into externally observable indicators. Brand image communicates institutional intent, identity reconstruction, and recovery orientation, while academic service quality reflects the institution's capacity to operationalize governance reform. Together, these mechanisms shape stakeholder judgments regarding whether recovery is substantive or merely procedural.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quantitative explanatory research design to examine causal relationships between brand image, academic service quality, and student enrollment intention. The research was conducted at a private health higher education institution that experienced a temporary suspension of new student admissions prior to resuming operations.

1.6. Population and Sample

The population comprised students enrolled after admissions were reopened, including both new and active students. A purposive sampling technique was used to ensure respondents possessed adequate awareness of the institution's post-recovery conditions. A total of sixty valid responses were obtained, satisfying minimum requirements for PLS-SEM analysis.

1.7. Measurement Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale. Brand image indicators captured institutional reputation, credibility, and professionalism. Academic service quality indicators reflected responsiveness, reliability, academic support, and administrative effectiveness. Enrollment intention was measured through willingness to enroll and recommend the institution.

1.8. Data Analysis Technique

PLS-SEM was employed due to its suitability for explanatory research with small sample sizes and complex models. The analysis involved evaluation of the measurement model (outer model) and the structural model (inner model).

1.9. Justification for the Use of PLS-SEM

The selection of Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) as the primary analytical technique is theoretically and methodologically justified by the exploratory and recovery-oriented nature of the study. PLS-SEM is particularly suitable for research contexts characterized by complex constructs, limited sample sizes, and theory development objectives. In post-vacancy higher education research, these conditions are commonly present due to restricted access to respondents and institutional sensitivity.

Unlike covariance-based SEM, PLS-SEM emphasizes variance explanation and prediction, making it appropriate for examining recovery mechanisms rather than model fit optimization. The objective of this study is not to confirm an established theoretical model, but to explore how symbolic and functional mechanisms interact to influence enrollment intention under recovery conditions. Therefore, PLS-SEM offers methodological flexibility aligned with the study's governance-oriented framework.

Additionally, PLS-SEM allows simultaneous assessment of measurement and structural models, enabling comprehensive evaluation of construct validity and hypothesized relationships. This capability is essential in recovery studies where construct operationalization may differ from stable institutional contexts. Consequently, the use of PLS-SEM strengthens the analytical rigor and contextual relevance of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1.10. Measurement Model Evaluation

All indicators demonstrated satisfactory convergent validity, with outer loadings exceeding recommended thresholds. Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha values confirmed strong internal consistency. These results indicate that the measurement instruments reliably captured the theoretical constructs.

Table 1. Discriminant Validity – Fornell–Larcker Criterion

Construct	Brand Image	Academic Service Quality	Enrollment Intention
Brand Image	0.818		
Academic Service Quality	0.612	0.843	
Enrollment Intention	0.659	0.634	0.831

Narrative & Interpretation

The square root of the AVE (in bold) for each construct is higher than the correlation between the other constructs. This indicates that each construct has good discriminatory power, thus meeting the criteria for discriminant validity. Thus, each construct in the model can be distinguished empirically and conceptually.

Table 2. Discriminant Validity – HTMT Ratio

Construct Relationships	HTMT
Brand Image ↔ Academic Service Quality	0.71
Brand Image ↔ Enrollment Intention	0.74
Academic Service Quality ↔ Enrollment Intention	0.69

Narrative & Interpretation

All HTMT values were below the 0.85 threshold, indicating strong discriminant validity. This finding confirms that there are no latent multicollinearity issues between constructs in the research model.

1.11. Structural Model Results

The structural model revealed that brand image positively and significantly influences student enrollment intention ($\beta = 0.41$; $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Academic service quality also demonstrated a positive and significant effect ($\beta = 0.36$; $p < 0.01$), supporting H2. The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.52$) indicates substantial explanatory power.

Table 3. Predictive Relevance (Q^2 Stone–Geisser)

Variable Endogen	Q^2
Enrollment Intention	0.34

Narrative & Interpretation

A Q^2 value of 0.34 (>0) indicates that the model has good predictive relevance. This means that the combination of brand image and academic service quality not only statistically explains variation in enrollment intention but also has adequate predictive power in the context of post-vacancy recovery of higher education institutions.

Table 4. Goodness of Fit (GoF)

Average AVE	Average R^2	GoF
0.69	0.52	0.60

Narrative & Interpretation

A Q^2 value of 0.34 (>0) indicates that the model has good predictive relevance. This means that the combination of brand image and academic service quality not only statistically explains variations in enrollment intention but also has adequate predictive power in the context of post-vacancy recovery of higher education institutions.

Table 5. PLS-SEM Model Evaluation Summary

Evaluation Aspect	Criteria	Results
Convergent Validity	Loading > 0.70	Fulfilled
Discriminant Validity	Fornell–Larcker & HTMT	Fulfilled
Reliability	CR & Alpha > 0.70	Fulfilled
Structural Relationship	β, t, p significant	Fulfilled
Explanatory Power	R^2 moderate–strong	Fulfilled
Predictive Relevance	$Q^2 > 0$	Fulfilled

Narrative & Interpretation

Overall, the evaluation results indicate that the PLS-SEM model meets all outer and inner model testing criteria. This indicates that the research model is valid, dependable, and suitable for explaining the recovery mechanisms of higher education institutions after the hiatus.

1.12. Discussion

Beyond statistical significance, the findings provide meaningful insights into how students interpret institutional recovery. The stronger effect of brand image suggests that symbolic legitimacy restoration plays a dominant role in shaping initial enrollment decisions in post-vacancy contexts. However, the significant contribution of academic service quality confirms that symbolic recovery

alone is insufficient; students actively validate recovery claims through direct service experiences. This interaction underscores the multidimensional nature of institutes.

1.13. Strategic Interpretation of Recovery Mechanisms

The empirical results should be interpreted not only as statistical confirmation of hypothesized relationships but also as strategic indicators of institutional recovery dynamics. The stronger influence of brand image suggests that symbolic legitimacy restoration plays a pivotal role during the initial phase of recovery. This implies that stakeholders prioritize perceptual cues regarding institutional credibility before engaging in deeper evaluation of service performance.

However, the significant effect of academic service quality indicates that symbolic recovery must be substantiated by consistent functional performance to sustain enrollment intention. In practical terms, institutions may succeed in attracting initial interest through branding efforts, but failure to deliver reliable academic services may erode trust and undermine long-term recovery outcomes.

This interaction highlights the sequential yet interdependent nature of recovery mechanisms. Symbolic recovery facilitates entry into stakeholder consideration sets, while functional validation determines continuity and commitment. Such dynamics underscore the importance of aligning communication strategies with governance reform and service quality enhancement.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

1.1. Conclusion

This study examines the role of brand image and academic service quality as institutional recovery mechanisms in post-vacancy health higher education institutions. Drawing on legitimacy theory and governance perspectives, the study conceptualizes institutional recovery not as a purely administrative or operational event, but as a complex governance-driven process that requires the restoration of stakeholder trust and institutional credibility.

The empirical findings demonstrate that both brand image and academic service quality exert positive and significant effects on student enrollment intention. The significance of brand image indicates that symbolic legitimacy restoration plays a critical role in shaping stakeholder perceptions following institutional disruption. In post-vacancy contexts, stakeholders rely heavily on reputational cues to assess whether an institution has regained alignment with regulatory standards and professional expectations.

At the same time, the major influence of academic service quality confirms that symbolic recovery alone is insufficient to sustain enrollment intention. Functional validation through reliable academic services is essential to substantiate recovery claims and prevent reputational relapses. These findings underscore that institutional recovery in higher education requires the simultaneous activation of symbolic and functional mechanisms.

Overall, the study concludes that recovery effectiveness in post-vacancy health higher education institutions depends on governance coherence. Institutions that align perception management with tangible service quality improvements are more likely to restore legitimacy and achieve sustainable enrollment recovery.

1.2. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to higher education management literature by extending institutional legitimacy theory into post-crisis recovery contexts. While prior studies have primarily examined legitimacy maintenance under stable conditions, this research demonstrates that legitimacy restoration operates through distinct yet interrelated mechanisms during recovery phases.

First, the study advances theory by reconceptualizing brand image as a symbolic recovery mechanism rather than a conventional marketing construct. In post-vacancy contexts, brand image functions to reduce perceived risk and reframe stakeholder narratives about institutional credibility. This reframing expands the theoretical role of branding within governance and institutional theory.

Second, the study positions academic service quality as a functional validation mechanism that operationalizes governance recovery. By demonstrating that service quality confirms or contradicts symbolic recovery signals, the findings highlight the interactive nature of symbolic and functional

legitimacy restoration. This interaction provides a more nuanced theoretical explanation of how recovery unfolds in regulated service organizations such as higher education institutions.

Finally, the integration of symbolic and functional mechanisms into a unified recovery framework contributes to a novel governance-oriented perspective. This framework enriches higher education recovery studies by moving beyond fragmented analyses of reputation or service quality and offering a holistic explanation of post-crisis institutional resilience.

1.3. Practical and Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, the findings emphasize that institutional recovery should be approached as a governance reconstruction agenda rather than a short-term promotional effort. Higher education leaders must recognize that branding initiatives without corresponding improvements in academic service delivery risk producing superficial recovery outcomes that are unsustainable.

Institutional leaders should prioritize alignment between strategic communication, quality assurance systems, and academic service processes during recovery phases. Transparent governance practices, responsive administrative systems, and consistent academic service delivery are critical for restoring stakeholder trust. In health higher education institutions, where regulatory compliance and professional credibility are paramount, governance coherence becomes a decisive factor in recovery success.

Moreover, the findings suggest that enrollment intention can serve as an early indicator of legitimacy restoration. Managers should continuously monitor enrollment trends and stakeholder feedback to assess the effectiveness of recovery strategies. Such monitoring enables institutions to adjust governance practices dynamically and prevent prolonged reputational damage.

1.4. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that offer avenues for future research. First, the study employs a cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to capture the dynamic and temporal nature of institutional recovery. Future studies may adopt longitudinal approaches to examine how recovery mechanisms evolve over time.

Second, the sample size is limited and focused on a single institutional context. While this approach enhances contextual depth, future research may expand the sample across multiple institutions or regions to improve generalizability.

Finally, future studies may incorporate additional governance-related variables, such as leadership effectiveness, organizational learning, or regulatory responsiveness, to further enrich understanding of institutional recovery processes in higher education.

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