

Graduate Marketing Strategy at As-Sunnah Islamic College in Deli Serdang

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the implementation of graduate marketing strategies at the As-Sunnah Islamic Religious College (STAI) Deli Serdang, using descriptive qualitative methods with data collection techniques through interviews, observations, and documentation studies. The results showed that STAI As-Sunnah implemented an inclusive marketing strategy with a direct approach through social media and digital platforms, as well as an indirect approach through alumni networks, service programmes, and social programmes. STAI As-Sunnah graduates have high competitiveness, especially in syar'i science, Arabic language, and memorisation of the Koran, and are supported by strong Islamic values. STAI As-Sunnah's graduate marketing strategy includes recruitment and job placement, adjustments to the college curriculum, partnerships with related institutions, promotion through social media, and support from alumni and universities.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing number of unemployed people in Indonesia, especially among university graduates, has become a serious concern in recent years. Despite having completed higher education, many graduates face difficulties in finding jobs that match their qualifications. (Syarnubi Syarnubi, 2016) Factors such as mismatch between their skills and labour market demand, lack of work experience, and lack of quality job opportunities are some of the reasons behind this phenomenon. (Safitri, Maisyaroh, & Nurabadi, 2021). According to data uploaded by the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), since 2021-2022 unemployment has been dominated by undergraduates, reaching 40%. Data from the National Labour Force Survey (Sakernas) of the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) also noted that the number of unemployed people in Indonesia reached 8.43 million in August 2022, and as many as 7.99% or around 673.49 thousand of the unemployed came from college graduates. (Open Unemployment Rate by Education Level 2020-2022, n.d.).

The Indonesian Minister of Manpower, Ida Fauziyah, also said that around 12% of unemployment in Indonesia is currently dominated by undergraduate and diploma graduates. (Syarnubi Syarnubi, 2022) According to her, the large number of unemployed college graduates is due to the absence of a 'link and match' or a mismatch of skills between universities and the labour market. (Kasih, 2023). In the North Sumatra region, there has been a notable increase in the number of unemployed people, especially among university graduates, with the average percentage reaching 11.97%. In 2023, the number of unemployed reached 75,766 people (Open Unemployment by Education Level, n.d.). This phenomenon shows that despite having completed higher education, many graduates in North Sumatra have difficulty finding jobs that match their qualifications, reflecting the mismatch between their skills and the needs of the local labour market. (Ali & Syarnubi Syarnubi,

2020) As such, there is a need for close collaboration between the government, educational institutions, and the private sector to identify appropriate solutions to address this issue and provide better employment opportunities for graduates in North Sumatra.

One of the strategies used by the government to reduce the unemployment rate among graduates is through the implementation of an internship programme that is tailored to the needs of the labour market. (Malta, Malta, Syarnubi Syarnubi, 2022) Internship is one form of learning as stated in article 14 paragraph 5 letter h, in the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation number 3 of 2020 concerning National Higher Education Standards. By providing opportunities for undergraduates to take part in internships, they will gain relevant skills and experience in the scope of work of interest. (Febriyanti, Ismail, & Syarnubi, 2022) The training provided during the internship can also improve their practical skills, thus increasing their competitiveness and readiness to enter the workforce. (Alimron, Syarnubi, & Maryamah, 2023)

In an increasingly competitive world of education, universities must certainly strive to become providers of superior quality and reliable products. This is because a good image and reputation will attract various institutions and organisations to recruit graduate resources from the college. (Teixeira, Rosa, & Amaral, 2015) Graduates from higher education also play an important role in shaping the direction and progress of a society. (Syarnubi, Fuazi, et al., 2023) They bring not only in-depth knowledge from their field of study, but also essential skills and abilities to face the increasingly complex demands of the world of work. (Braskamp & Ory, 1994) College graduates also tend to have better job opportunities and earn higher incomes in their careers. (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2013)

However, as competition in the world of work increases, universities are required to produce qualified graduates who are able to compete in the world of work. (Fitriyani, Dwi, Mansur, & Syarnubi, 2020) The level of intense competition in the world of work requires universities to produce quality graduates and be able to compete. (Fauzi, Andriani, & Syarnubi, 2023) Competitive universities can build public trust by producing superior educational products. (Mundir, 2015). Like universities in general, STAI As-Sunnah Deli Serdang also produces dozens of graduates every year who are ready to enter the world of work. The high demand for STAI As-Sunnah alumni is one of the advantages of this high school. (Sari, Sukardi, & Syarnubi, 2020) Public trust in this high school is increasing. (Syarnubi, Martina, & Khodijah, 2019) Likewise, the community hopes for STAI As-Sunnah graduates to have an impact on changes in their midst both in the fields of education and da'wah. This is indicated by letters of request for graduates from educational institutions from the island of Sumatra and outside the island of Sumatra. Through the results of document studies, data on the demand for STAI As-Sunnah graduates are obtained as follows. (Sukirman, Baiti, Syarnubi, & Fauzi, 2023)

Based on the data in the graph, the number of requests for STAI As-Sunnah graduates has continued to increase over the past five years. In fact, the number of requests for graduates from various institutions is greater than the number of graduates available. (Syarnubi Syarnubi, 2019) Every year, this demand continues to increase until it exceeds the number of graduates. (Ballanie, Dewi, & Syarnubi Syarnubi, 2023)

The gap between the demand for STAI As-Sunnah graduates and the number of available graduates reflects that STAI As-Sunnah graduates are considered to have the quality and competence desired by the labour market, so the demand for them continues to increase from year to year. (Syarnubi, 2020) STAI As-Sunnah has succeeded in building a strong reputation in the eyes of the community and the labour market. This is also an encouragement for other universities to adopt similar strategies to improve the quality of graduates and reduce unemployment in Indonesia. (Arisca, Karoma, Syarifuddin, & Syarnubi, 2020). According to De Chernatony and Riley, one indicator of the success of an educational institution is through the ability of its graduates to integrate the knowledge gained in the world of work. (Sutarmizi & Syarnubi, 2022) This success will attract the interest of various institutions to recruit graduates owned by these universities. (De Chernatony & Riley, 1998)

In addition, the right strategy is also needed to promote and package graduates to match the demands and needs of the world of work. (Nurrahman, Oviyanti, & Syarnubi, 2021) An effective marketing strategy will help university graduates obtain good job opportunities and gain a competitive place in the increasingly tight labour market. (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006) Bridgstock and

Jackson revealed that graduate marketing strategies can be carried out through various activities, such as recruitment and job placement activities, giving awards that showcase specific achievements or skills possessed by graduates, as well as positive relationships with excellent institutions in the local area. (Bridgstock & Jackson, 2019).

Research conducted by Gault with the title *Effects of business internships on job marketability: The employers' perspective* shows that graduate work placements play an important role in improving graduate marketability and strengthening the connection between academia and the world of work. (Syarnubi Syarnubi, 2023) It can also be a valuable strategy for universities in enhancing their reputation and attracting the attention of institutions seeking top talent. (Gault, Leach, & Duey, 2010)

Therefore, it is important to understand the marketing strategies of college graduates. (Syarnubi, Alimron, & Fauzi, 2022) Although data shows that the unemployment rate is dominated by undergraduates, there are not many studies that specifically address effective marketing strategies for college graduates. (Sukirman, Masnun, & Syarnubi, 2023) Through the study conducted, there are 23 studies that are in line with graduate marketing strategies, four of which emphasise on understanding appropriate marketing strategies for vocational school graduates. (Istiqomah & Setyowati, 2016; Juriah, Subarkah, & Satibi, 2021; Kusworo, 2015; Nurmayunita, 2019). The other four studies discuss marketing strategies in a broader educational context (Af'idah & Kurniawan, 2021; Eko Ariwibowo, 2019; Fradito, Suti'ah, & Mulyadi, 2020; Nurbawani, 2021) While these studies make important contributions to the understanding of educational marketing strategies, there is still an unmet need in understanding how marketing strategies can be optimised for college graduates. (Syarnubi, Alimron, & Sukirman, 2023)

This suggests that research into marketing strategies for higher education graduates is an area worthy of further investigation, especially at STAI As-Sunnah. This College of Islamic Studies has been in the spotlight of higher education for its success in graduate marketing strategy. Compared to the number of graduates available, the demand for graduates from STAI As-Sunnah exceeds expectations, signalling excellence in the school's graduate marketing strategy.

One of the uniqueness that sets STAI As-Sunnah apart is the existence of an Alumni Bureau that is specifically tasked with managing and marketing their graduates. The Alumni Bureau not only serves as a liaison between alumni and the institution, but also as a driving force to expand networking and employment opportunities for graduates. Through carefully designed programmes, such as graduate service programmes and career seminars, the Alumni Bureau ensures that STAI As-Sunnah graduates not only possess superior academic quality, but also the necessary skills and networks to compete in a competitive job market. (Wulandari, Misdar, & Syarnubi, 2021)

STAI As-Sunnah's success in graduate marketing strategies is also reflected in the partnerships they build with various institutions. With a strong reputation and extensive network, STAI As-Sunnah graduates are the first choice for many institutions. This is not only beneficial for the graduates themselves, but also reflects STAI As-Sunnah's positive contribution to community and local economic development. (Yanti, Akmal Hawi, & Syarnubi Syarnubi, 3 C.E.) Therefore, new research exploring graduate marketing strategies at STAI As-Sunnah is crucial. Through this research, a better understanding of how to introduce and market college graduates to the labour market in an effective way can be developed. (Syarnubi, 2019) Thus, it is expected to help reduce the unemployment rate among college graduates and improve their chances of entering the workforce better.

METHODS

This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach. (Misyuraidah, Misyuraidah, & Syarnubi, 2017) To deeply understand the graduate marketing strategy at STAI As-Sunnah with a phenomenological approach. Some relevant data collection techniques to obtain the necessary information are interviews, observations and documentation studies. In qualitative research, Miles and Huberman proposed data analysis involving several steps, namely data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing/verification. In this study, the triangulation technique was used to ensure the validity of the data. (Harto Kasinyo, 2018) Triangulation is a research approach that

involves the use of multiple methods, data sources, theories, or researchers to confirm findings and increase the validity of research results. (Hawi & Syarnubi, 2018)

This research was conducted at the As-Sunnah College of Islamic Religion (STAI As-Sunnah). The object of this research is the marketing strategy implemented at STAI As-Sunnah, especially related to graduates of the institution. Primary data sources are data directly collected by researchers from the original source. In this study, researchers conducted direct interviews with the Chairman of STAI As-Sunnah, Alumni Bureau Staff, and Public Relations Bureau Staff. In addition, researchers also made direct observations in the field and made field notes directly. Secondary data in the form of graduate profile documents, previous research reports, and existing tracer study reports.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Implementation of the Marketing Strategy of the As-Sunnah Deli Serdang Islamic College (STAI).

STAI As-Sunnah's marketing strategy is carried out directly and indirectly. Direct strategies are promotional techniques using electronic media. However, indirect marketing strategies are also often carried out from the past until now. The most effective and unique marketing strategy, as well as one of the marketing strategies that is rarely owned by other campuses is the service programme, this is in accordance with the Head of Public Relations of STAI As-Sunnah, in his interview.

The results of interviews that have been conducted regarding STAI As-Sunnah's marketing strategy are in line with the results of observations in the field. After visiting STAI As-Sunnah and evaluating its website, it was found that the institution implements a direct marketing strategy through social media and digital platforms. They actively use social media to interact with prospective students and the community, and utilise digital platforms to disseminate information regarding study programmes and campus activities. This proves that STAI As-Sunnah has effectively utilised digital technology to increase its visibility and attractiveness.

In addition, field observations and documentation studies show that STAI As-Sunnah also implements indirect marketing strategies. One effective method is through alumni networks and word of mouth. STAI As-Sunnah alumni often share their positive experiences, which helps to attract potential new students. In addition, informative brochures, as well as social programmes such as breaking fast together, qurban activities, and the construction of wells and mosques, also play an important role in strengthening relationships with the community and enhancing the institution's positive image. All these strategies show that STAI As-Sunnah has a comprehensive and diverse marketing approach.

2. Analysis of Graduates of the As-Sunnah Deli Serdang Islamic College (STAI).

In the midst of the diversity of Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia, STAI As-Sunnah stands out as an institution that produces excellent graduates. With a strong foundation in Islamic teachings in line with Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah, this institution has instilled solid Islamic values in every student. This is also in line with what was conveyed by the Chairman of the STAI As-Sunnah Alumni Bureau

STAI As-Sunnah graduates are not only recognised for their academic prowess, but also for their spiritual and moral integrity. Not only skilled in understanding and applying religious knowledge, STAI As-Sunnah graduates also have a humble attitude, social care, and good communication and adaptability skills.

From the many advantages of STAI As-Sunnah graduates, it is very natural that many institutions ask STAI As-Sunnah graduates to be placed in their institutions. STAI As-Sunnah graduates not only benefit from a quality curriculum, but are also supported by a tracer study programme designed to monitor their progress after completing their education. This programme allows STAI As-Sunnah to track the careers and contributions of alumni in society, ensuring that the education provided is in line with the needs and demands of the job market.

The majority of graduate users assess that STAI As-Sunnah graduates have good and even excellent performance in the aspects of ethics, expertise in the field of knowledge (main competencies), Arabic language skills, use of information technology, communication skills,

cooperation, and self-development. However, there are still some graduate users who state that STAI As-Sunnah graduates have good foreign language skills, especially English.

The results of the tracer study also show that STAI As-Sunnah graduates have superior quality and good absorption, as evidenced by 72% of graduates getting jobs in less than 6 months and the majority of graduates (90%) working in fields that are in accordance with their educational background. In addition, the achievements of STAI As-Sunnah graduates are also in accordance with the profile and competence of graduates that have been determined by this Islamic Religious College.

3. Implementation of Graduate Marketing Strategy at the As-Sunnah Islamic College (STAI) Deli Serdang

In implementing a graduate marketing strategy, the As-Sunnah College of Islam has carried out several graduate marketing strategies. One of the graduate marketing strategies at the As-Sunnah College of Islam (STAI) is through recruitment or job placement programmes. This strategy is designed to ensure that every STAI As-Sunnah graduate not only gains theoretical and practical knowledge during the study period, but also gains hands-on experience in the field after graduation.

Another marketing strategy for graduates at the As-Sunnah College of Islamic Religion (STAI) is through the implementation of a superior and integrated college curriculum. From the results of interviews with the Chairman of STAI As-Sunnah, it was revealed that the curriculum applied at this campus not only meets the national standards set by the Directorate General of Higher Education (SN Dikti), but also has additional specific advantages.

These advantages show that STAI As-Sunnah not only equips its students with academic competence in accordance with government standards, but also adds deep Islamic values and comprehensive Arabic language skills. Students from all study programmes are required to be able to speak and understand Arabic well, an advantage that distinguishes them from other university graduates who usually only focus on Arabic language skills in specialised Arabic departments. With this comprehensive curriculum, STAI As-Sunnah has succeeded in producing graduates who are not only ready to compete in the world of work but also have strong religious provisions and qualified language skills.

One of the graduate marketing strategies at the As-Sunnah Islamic Religious College (STAI) is a partnership with various related institutions. This strategy is designed to strengthen networks and open up opportunities for graduates in the world of work. In interviews with STAI As-Sunnah managers and lecturers, it was revealed that this campus has established a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with several institutions.

The existence of this Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is also supported by observations from news shared on STAI As-Sunnah's website and social media. In these various publications, cooperation that has been established with various institutions, both national and international, is often displayed (Appendix 10). This cooperation covers various fields, including education, research, and community service, all of which provide direct benefits for STAI As-Sunnah graduates.

In addition, from the documentation study, it was found that there is a lot of official documentation regarding MoUs that have been agreed with various institutions. These documents record the details of cooperation and the commitment of both parties to support each other and collaborate in various programmes. (Hartati, Achadi, & Mirza Naufa, 2022)

Another strategy implemented by STAI As-Sunnah in marketing graduates is to utilise social media and digital platforms. In today's digital era, social media is a very effective tool for reaching a wider and more diverse audience. STAI As-Sunnah utilises social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and the official website to promote the excellence of its graduates.

The content shared through these social media not only provides information but also builds a positive image and public trust in the quality of education at STAI As-Sunnah. By featuring graduate success stories, academic achievements, and various student activities, STAI As-Sunnah shows prospective students and the world of work that its graduates are ready to compete and contribute significantly.

One of the graduate marketing strategies at STAI As-Sunnah is through alumni and college support. This strategy focuses on utilising the alumni network and the establishment of an Alumni Bureau specifically tasked with supporting the distribution and career development of STAI As-Sunnah graduates. This is in accordance with what the Head of the Alumni Bureau said in the interview.

Another thing that also supports the marketing strategy of STAI As-Sunnah graduates is due to the close ties between STAI As-Sunnah graduates, so that these graduates can provide information related to the world of work to each other.

In addition, STAI As-Sunnah also specifically formed an Alumni Bureau which aims to facilitate job distribution for graduates and monitor their career development. This Alumni Bureau serves as a bridge between graduates and the world of work, assisting alumni in finding job opportunities that match their competencies. It also plays a role in maintaining good relations between alumni and the institution, ensuring that graduates remain connected to the STAI As-Sunnah community.

The challenges in marketing graduates of the As-Sunnah College of Islam (STAI) present various complexities that require special strategies to overcome. Currently, the number of STAI As-Sunnah graduates is still not proportional to the high demand from the job market. Many institutions and companies are looking for graduates with the competencies produced by STAI As-Sunnah, but the number of available graduates is still limited.

In addition, the general public and some work institutions still have a negative view of the Salafy understanding adopted by STAI As-Sunnah. These stereotypes and misconceptions can affect the judgement of graduates, thus reducing their employment opportunities in some sectors. By proactively identifying and addressing these challenges, STAI As-Sunnah can increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of its graduates, and ensure that they are prepared to compete in an increasingly competitive world of work. This strategy will not only strengthen STAI As-Sunnah's position as a quality educational institution, but also build a broader positive reputation in the community.

Research Discussion

1. Implementation of the Marketing Strategy of the As-Sunnah Deli Serdang Islamic College (STAI).

Educational marketing is an activity carried out by educational institutions in marketing and promoting things within the institution (Mundir, 2015) Based on the results of interviews, field observations, and documentation studies conducted, it was found that STAI As-Sunnah has implemented various effective marketing strategies to increase its visibility and attractiveness. These strategies include direct approaches through social media and digital platforms, as well as indirect approaches through alumni networks and social programmes.

The interviews revealed that social media plays a very significant role in the institution's marketing strategy. Facebook and Instagram, are the most influential platforms in attracting new applicants. The use of social media allows STAI As-Sunnah to reach a wider audience, especially young people who are the main target for new student admissions. The objectives of this promotion include informing, persuading, and reminding.

Activities on social media include sharing informative and inspiring content about study programmes, campus activities, student testimonials, and academic and non-academic achievements. In addition to Facebook and Instagram, STAI As-Sunnah has also started to utilise TikTok, although the use of platforms such as Twitter and websites is still relatively low. This demonstrates the institution's adaptation to emerging digital trends, as well as efforts to continuously improve engagement and interaction with prospective students.

In addition to social media, STAI As-Sunnah also leverages the strength of its alumni network and service programmes as indirect marketing strategies. STAI As-Sunnah alumni, who have spread across various regions, play an important role in disseminating information about their alma mater. Through their experiences and successes, these alumni provide positive testimonials that help attract potential new students.

STAI As-Sunnah has a comprehensive and innovative marketing approach, utilising various communication channels to reach out to prospective students and the general public. The use of social media as a direct marketing strategy shows good adaptation to technological developments and digital trends, while indirect marketing strategies through alumni networks and service programmes reflect the uniqueness and strength of the institution in building close relationships with the community.

The implementation of social programmes as part of the marketing strategy also shows that STAI As-Sunnah does not only focus on academic aspects but also on real contributions to society. This approach not only enhances the institution's positive image but also strengthens STAI As-Sunnah's position as an educational institution with integrity.

2. Analysis of Graduates of the College of Islam (STAI) As-Sunnah Deli Serdang

One indicator of the success of an educational institution is through the ability of its graduates to integrate the knowledge gained in the world of work. This success will attract the interest of various institutions to recruit graduates owned by the college. Graduates are also expected to have knowledge and skills that are relevant to the needs of the labour market, and have the ability to adapt to diverse work environments.

The academic excellence of STAI As-Sunnah graduates can be seen from their ability in the field of Islamic studies and Arabic. The academic standards applied at STAI As-Sunnah also exceed national standards (SN Dikti), with an additional target of memorising the Koran for each student of seven juz. This shows that the STAI As-Sunnah curriculum is designed in such a way that graduates not only understand religious knowledge as a whole, but also memorise the Koran and apply it in everyday life.

Good Arabic language skills are also one of the characteristics of STAI As-Sunnah graduates. Arabic is not only taught as a subject, but also used as a medium of instruction in daily activities on campus. This allows students to acquire Arabic language skills naturally and practically and communicate fluently in Arabic. These skills provide great added value in the world of work, especially in educational and religious institutions that require mastery of Arabic. STAI As-Sunnah graduates are also known to have high competitiveness in various fields, especially in shar'i science, Arabic language and memorisation of the Koran.

CONCLUSION

STAI As-Sunnah's marketing strategy includes a direct approach through social media and digital platforms, as well as an indirect approach through alumni networks, service programmes and social programmes. STAI As-Sunnah graduates have high competitiveness, especially in shar'i knowledge, Arabic language, and memorisation of the Quran. Not only academically competent but also have strong Islamic values that include work ethics, social responsibility, and high integrity and morals. In marketing its graduates, STAI As-Sunnah implements several strategies that include: a) recruitment and job placement, b) college curriculum, c) partnerships with related institutions, d) promotion through social media, and e) alumni and college support.

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