

University Degree course name optimisation through keyword analysis

SEO Course Naming, keyword Search Behaviour, and International Recruitment in UK Marketing Programmes

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Abstract

UK universities have become increasingly reliant on international postgraduate recruitment, particularly from South Asian markets such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. At the same time, digital search has emerged as the dominant gateway through which prospective students discover and evaluate marketing degree programmes. This article examines whether changes in course naming introduce a category error that reduces search visibility, student comprehension, and enrolment outcomes. Drawing on marketing science literature on category formation, consumer search behaviour, and signalling theory, the study develops and tests a keyword alignment framework using a mixed methods case study of a London based marketing degree programme. Quantitative keyword modelling using Google Trends, Google Keyword Planner, and SEMrush, alongside survey data from prospective students, indicates that programme titles misaligned with dominant search categories experience substantially lower discoverability and weaker perceived employability. The findings suggest that course naming should be treated as a strategic, search informed marketing decision rather than a purely academic classification exercise, particularly in volatile international recruitment markets.

Keywords

digital marketing, category error, higher education marketing, search behaviour, international students, SEO

Introduction

International student recruitment has become a critical revenue stream for UK higher education institutions, particularly within business, marketing, computing, and enterprise related disciplines. The scale of the UK higher education sector is substantial. In 2023 to 2024, approximately 260 higher education providers reported to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, with total student enrolments approaching 2.9 million across all levels of study (Universities UK, 2024; HESA, 2025). In a sector of this size, and in dense urban markets such as London, early stage discoverability plays a decisive role in shaping programme demand. At postgraduate level, international students represent a significant proportion of enrolments, with South Asian markets playing a particularly prominent role. Home Office data identify India and Pakistan among the largest source countries for UK study visas, with Bangladesh also appearing within the top ten nationalities in recent years (Universities UK, 2024). In the year ending March 2024, study visas were granted to approximately 116,455 Indian nationals, 33,941 Pakistani nationals, and 7,963 Bangladeshi nationals (Home Office, 2024). However, recent indicators suggest volatility rather than sustained growth. Sponsored study visas granted to

main applicants declined in the year ending June 2024 compared with the previous year, with a marked reduction for India alongside an increase for Pakistan (Home Office, 2024).

HESA reporting similarly indicates a decline in non EU entrant enrolments between 2022 to 2023 and 2023 to 2024, signalling a more competitive recruitment environment in which marginal losses of visibility may have amplified effects (HESA, 2025).

Concurrently, the discovery process for degree programmes has shifted decisively towards digital search, with search engines functioning as the primary gateway to institutional awareness and initial consideration (Lecinski, 2011; Jansen and Spink, 2006).

Prospective students increasingly encounter programmes first through generic keyword searches rather than through institutional brand familiarity. In this context, the language used to describe degree programmes becomes strategically important.

Despite this shift, decisions surrounding course naming often remain driven by internal academic rationales such as curriculum coherence or disciplinary positioning. Limited attention is paid to whether programme titles align with the language prospective students actually use when searching for courses.

This paper examines the consequences of that disconnect through a case study of a London based marketing degree programme that was renamed from Digital Marketing to Strategic Marketing and Analytics. Following the renaming, enrolment numbers were impacted, despite minimal changes to curriculum content, suggesting that factors beyond programme substance may have been at play. One plausible explanation is that reduced alignment with dominant search categories introduced a category error that weakened visibility during search mediated discovery.

Literature Review

2.1 Search Behaviour, Categories, and the Zero Moment of Truth

The Zero Moment of Truth describes the point at which consumers seek information online prior to decision making (Lecinski, 2011). In higher education, this moment typically involves generic category level queries such as digital marketing degree UK or marketing course London. Research in information retrieval consistently demonstrates that users rely on familiar, high frequency terminology rather than abstract or institution specific language, particularly in high cost and high uncertainty decisions (Jansen and Spink, 2006).

Marketing science research further suggests that digital markets stabilise around dominant categories that structure attention and evaluation. Once a category becomes established, alternative terminology receives disproportionately lower attention even when describing similar offerings (Kleinberg et al., 2021). In this context, programme titles that deviate from dominant categories may struggle to surface in search results regardless of academic quality.

2.2 Branding, Naming, and Signalling

Programme titles function as market signals that reduce uncertainty and shape expectations (Keller, 2013). Signalling theory suggests that recognisable labels reduce information asymmetry, while unfamiliar or abstract labels increase perceived risk (Spence, 1973). For international students navigating unfamiliar education systems, clarity at the point of discovery is therefore particularly important.

2.3 International Student Search Behaviour

International students rely heavily on online information, peer discourse, and perceived employability outcomes when selecting degree programmes (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2002; Maringe, 2019). In South Asian markets, Digital Marketing has emerged as a widely recognised category associated with applied skills, platform mediated work, and technology enabled income generation. These associations are reinforced through digital platforms such as YouTube, LinkedIn, Reddit, and Quora (Hudders et al., 2021).

2.4 SEO and Higher Education Marketing

While universities increasingly invest in SEO and digital advertising, programme naming decisions frequently remain disconnected from search data. SEO research consistently emphasises that keyword alignment with user intent is a primary determinant of discoverability (Fishkin, 2017).

Prior research has demonstrated the validity of Google Trends data for analysing consumer attention, information seeking behaviour, and market salience, particularly where relative patterns are of interest rather than exact counts (Choi and Varian, 2012; Jun et al., 2018). Google Keyword Planner was used to support interpretation of search intent and to validate the relevance of selected keyword combinations. As an advertising oriented tool, Keyword Planner does not provide precise organic search volumes, but it remains widely used in academic research as a proxy for understanding how users frame queries and cluster search terms around categories (Jansen and Spink, 2006; Fishkin, 2017).

2.5 Theoretical Contribution: Category Error in Search Mediated Higher Education Markets

This study extends the concept of category error into search mediated higher education markets. Course titles operate within two systems of meaning. One is internal and academic, signalling curriculum scope and disciplinary legitimacy. The other is external and market based, where titles function as category labels governing discoverability and trust. A category error arises when a programme title is optimised for academic classification but fails to align with dominant search categories, reducing visibility at the Zero Moment of Truth.

Research Context and Questions

The case institution is a specialist creative university based in London. Its marketing degree programme historically attracted strong international enrolments. Following a curriculum review, the programme was renamed to reflect a broader strategic and analytical emphasis. Despite curriculum continuity, enrolments were impacted following the renaming.

The study addresses three research questions. What keywords do prospective international students use when searching for UK marketing degree programmes. How do search volumes differ across dominant and non dominant category labels in South Asian markets. How do prospective students interpret programme titles in terms of clarity and employability.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods case study design combining secondary keyword analysis with primary survey research, consistent with established marketing science approaches to analysing consumer search behaviour and category formation (Choi and Varian, 2012; Kleinberg et al., 2021).

Keyword data were modelled using Google Trends and Google Keyword Planner, supplemented by SEMrush keyword intelligence. Google Trends provides normalised indices of relative search interest rather than absolute volumes, enabling comparison across regions and time periods (Google, 2024). Keyword Planner was used descriptively to assess search framing and intent. SEMrush was employed to triangulate relative visibility, keyword difficulty, and competitive density. All keyword data were interpreted comparatively rather than absolutely, and findings are reported as indicators of relative category salience rather than direct measures of demand. See appendix B for further detail.

An online survey was administered to 214 prospective students recruited via Reddit, Quora, and related online communities. Respondents entered the first phrase they would use when searching for a UK marketing degree programme, followed by evaluative questions on title clarity and employability. Ethical approval was obtained and no identifiable data were collected.

Results

Across all three countries, Digital Marketing emerged as the dominant search category. In India, the indexed search score for digital marketing degree UK was 100, compared with 14 for strategic marketing degree UK and 9 for marketing strategy and analytics (Google, 2024). Pakistan and Bangladesh exhibited similar patterns. SEMrush modelling corroborated these findings, indicating substantially higher visibility and lower competitive difficulty for Digital Marketing related degree queries (SEMrush, 2024).

Survey responses showed that 74 percent of Indian respondents, 68 percent of Pakistani respondents, and 71 percent of Bangladeshi respondents used Digital Marketing in their first search query. Digital Marketing achieved mean clarity scores above 4.5 across markets, while Strategic Marketing and Analytics scored below 3.2.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that programme naming can introduce category error in search mediated recruitment environments. Under volatile international market conditions, reduced alignment with dominant categories may plausibly contribute to weaker demand by reducing early stage visibility.

Robustness and Limitations

The study relies on relative search indices and exploratory survey data. While this limits causal inference, consistency across methods and markets strengthens confidence in the mechanism identified.

Conclusion

Course naming is a strategic marketing decision with measurable implications for international recruitment. In competitive and volatile markets, alignment with dominant search categories is central to programme discoverability and perceived relevance. Another possibility is box ready keyword courses. Further research, Is a new perspective needed, almost real time off the shelf box fresh courses?

Appendix A

Summary of Search and Survey Results

Table A1: Relative Search Interest and Perceptions by Market

Country

India

Pakistan

Bangladesh

Indexed search interest for Digital Marketing

100

100

100

Indexed search interest for Strategic Marketing and Analytics

14

18

16

Percentage using Digital Marketing in first search query

74 percent

68 percent

71 percent

Mean clarity rating for Digital Marketing

4.6

4.4

4.5

Mean clarity rating for Strategic Marketing and Analytics

2.9

3.2

2.8

Perceived employability advantage of Digital Marketing

High

Moderate to high

High

Appendix B

Methodological Justification for Use of Google Trends and SEMrush Data

This study makes use of Google Trends, Google Keyword Planner, and SEMrush as secondary data sources to model relative search behaviour associated with UK marketing degree programmes in international recruitment markets. The use of these tools reflects established practice within marketing science, information retrieval research, and digital consumer behaviour studies, particularly where the objective is to understand comparative interest, category salience, and discovery mechanisms rather than to estimate absolute demand.

Google Trends provides normalised indices of search interest rather than raw search volumes. Values are scaled from 0 to 100, representing the relative popularity of a search term within a specified geographic and temporal context (Google, 2024). While this limits absolute quantification, it is well suited to comparative analysis of category level interest across markets and time periods. Prior research has demonstrated the validity of Google Trends data for analysing consumer attention, information seeking behaviour, and market salience, particularly where relative patterns are of interest rather than exact counts (Choi and Varian, 2012; Jun et al., 2018).

Google Keyword Planner was used to support interpretation of search intent and to validate the relevance of selected keyword combinations. As an advertising oriented tool, Keyword Planner does not provide precise organic search volumes, but it remains widely used in academic research as a proxy for understanding how users frame queries and cluster search terms around categories (Jansen and Spink, 2006; Fishkin, 2017). In this study, Keyword Planner outputs were used descriptively rather than inferentially, supporting keyword selection and triangulation rather than serving as standalone evidence.

SEMrush was employed as a complementary commercial keyword intelligence tool to triangulate relative visibility, keyword difficulty, and competitive density. While SEMrush relies on proprietary estimation models, its data are widely used in peer reviewed research examining search competition, digital market structure, and online discoverability (Berman and Katona, 2020; Kleinberg et al., 2021). In this study, SEMrush outputs were used to corroborate relative differences in category level visibility rather than to produce definitive volume estimates.

The combination of these tools allows for methodological triangulation. Google Trends captures relative attention over time and across regions. Keyword Planner supports interpretation of

search framing and intent. SEMrush provides insight into competitive visibility within search results pages. Together, these sources enable a robust assessment of category alignment and discoverability at the Zero Moment of Truth, while avoiding overreliance on any single proprietary dataset.

Importantly, the study does not claim causal inference from search data alone, nor does it equate search volume directly with enrolment demand. Instead, search data are treated as indicators of category salience and discovery likelihood within search mediated decision making environments. This approach aligns with prior work in marketing science and higher education research that treats digital trace data as complementary evidence within mixed methods designs (Lecinski, 2011; Jun et al., 2018).

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