Enhancing Enrolment and Financial Viability of a Business School - An Action Research Intervention

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by

Chandrasekharan Krishna Kumar

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Declaration

No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for degree or qualification of this or any other University or institution of learning.

Signature: Chandrasekharan Krishna Kumar

Abstract

India opened its doors to globalization in the 1990's. When multinational companies expanded their operations in India, they realized that there was dearth of trained manpower in the country. The government encouraged the private sector to start business schools that could provide adequate number of managers to the industry. A large number of business schools started operations to offer postgraduate programmes in management. Today, these schools have a capacity to enrol over 560,000 students every year. The state of Kerala in India too approved over 100 institutions to offer postgraduate programmes in management. Unfortunately, there are only about 6000 applicants, on an average, each year for the 9000 seats offered by various business schools in Kerala.

Asian School of Business (ASB) in Trivandrum, Kerala, is one such school that struggled for over ten years to get adequate enrolments. The researcher joined this institution as a member of the faculty five years ago. Along with teaching assignments, the responsibility to increase the enrolment numbers was given to the researcher.

The researcher and his colleagues created an action research team to understand the problems, to help the institution to get the required number of students and to improve the delivery of the programme. This thesis is a description of the journey of this team over five years, where they analyzed activities, implemented them, observed the results, reflected individually and in groups and made modifications to the plans.

As a team, the research group had to build the brand, ASB and get students interested in the management programme. To achieve this result, the team looked at the situation from the customer's perspective based on the 4 A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2019). To get a deeper insight into the decision-making process of the customers, forty interviews were conducted with students, parents and other stakeholders. The transcripts of these interviews were analyzed for its content that generated over 500 codes. The codes were grouped to categories and to themes. During the analysis, most of these themes could be mapped to the elements of the 4 A's framework.

Over the five action research cycles, the team improved each A of the framework. Finally, ASB and its programme scored well on all 4 A's in the fourth year. During that year ASB managed to get the desired enrolment of 60 students for the first time in the history of ASB. The performance was repeated the next year that helped ASB to generate cash profits, again for the first time.

The modified and expanded 4 A's framework helped the research team to build and market the brand ASB to the satisfaction of customers. This is definitely new knowledge in the context of Kerala since no literature exists about MBA choices of students and brand building of business schools in Kerala. As there are a very large number of business schools in the state that suffer from poor enrolments, this framework may also support them in identifying the areas that need improvement and help them to move towards success.

Dedication

In fond memory of my mother

who inspired me to enter the world of academics

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I wish to express my sincere gratitude to my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Susan Greener for her continuous support, guidance and encouragement which made me complete this thesis. She helped me to bridge the areas of practice and academics in order to bring in scholarly insights into the business issues faced by me in my organization.

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Abbreviations:

AICTE – All India Council for Technical Education

AIMA – All India Management Association

ASB – Asian School of Business

ASC – Admissions Supervisory Committee

CAT – Common Admission Test

CET – College of Engineering Trivandrum

CMAT – Common Management Admission Test

CUSAT – Cochin University of Science and Technology

FPM – Fellow Programme in Management

GSK – GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare

IIM – Indian Institute of Management

IQAC – Internal Quality Assessment Cell

ISB – Indian School of Business

KMAT – Kerala Management Aptitude Test

MAT – Management Admission Test

MBA – Master of Business Administration

NIRF – National Institute Ranking Framework

PAR – Participatory Action Research

PGDM – Post Graduate Diploma in Management

RCBS – Rajagiri Centre for Business Studies

SCMS – School of Communication and Management Studies

UIM – University Institute of Management

XLRI – Xavier Labour Relations Institute

Chapter – 1

Introduction to the research project

1.1. The context of the research setting:

The Asian School of Business (ASB) is a standalone business school situated in the state of Kerala in India, that offers a two-year postgraduate programme in management. ASB had completed 10 years of operation in 2015 but was not performing well financially due to low number of enrolments.

The chairman of Asian Business School Society appointed a new director to head the institution in 2014. He was responsible for building one of the premium B-Schools in South India and getting it into the top 25 league of business schools in India. From a student strength of around 50, he managed to increase enrolments there to 400 students selected from over 3000 applicants, within a period of 10 years. With his extremely strong academic and institution-building credentials, the management of ASB expected the new director to change the fortunes of ASB.

The new director believed that it was highly qualified faculty and a well-delivered programme that build a great educational institution. As the first step, he recruited six members with industry experience to join the faculty team. He also contacted visiting faculty from academia and the industry to deliver specialized courses in their areas of expertise.

I had returned from Angola to India during this period. I had completed around twenty-eight years in the corporate world in various roles in India, the Middle East and Africa. I was looking for opportunities in India in the academic field where I could share the experiences of my stint in the industry with youngsters who were interested in management studies. The new director interviewed me, made me deliver a lecture on international business and offered me the position of Associate Professor in ASB. I too became part of the new faculty team created by the new director. As I had extensive experience in sales and marketing, the director gave me the responsibility of admissions from the next academic year. I was coming back to India to work after a period of twenty years. I needed to understand the education industry in India, and more specifically in the state of Kerala, so that strategies for admissions could be formulated for ASB in an effective manner.

1.2. Development of management education in India:

In India, senior members of the business communities educated the junior members in an informal manner. The Xavier Labour Relations Institute (XLRI), one of the oldest business schools in India, started offering business education in a formal setting in 1949 (Mahajan, 2015). The liberalization policies of the nineties brought global players to India. The requirement for trained workforce went up drastically and created a major demand for institutes of management (Aghion, et al., 2006; Ajith, 2012). The exponential growth in management schools has resulted in over 5500 schools offering about 520,000 MBA seats in India (Chakrabarty, 2016; FirstPost, 2016).

Business schools in India offer a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree if the institution is affiliated to any university. In addition to such colleges, there are many autonomous institutions that offer a Postgraduate Diploma in Management (PGDM) that is considered to be equivalent to an MBA degree (AIMA, 2015). Both the programmes are approved by the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), an apex, statutory authority set up by the government of India for the formulation and maintenance of norms and standards in the management of technical education in the country. MBA curriculum focuses on the theoretical aspects of management while PGDM courses are industry-oriented. The PGDM programmes also focus on development of soft-skills of the students (Das, 2013). Most of the top ranked business schools in the country offered PGDM rather than MBA programmes.

Colleges across the world are competing to get students enrolled into their programmes (Oplatka & Hemsley-Brown, 2010). Higher education in India is also going through a process of marketization. Kerala, a state in the South of India, had less than 5 colleges offering an MBA or PGDM programme in 1985. In the year 2019, this number increased to 81 colleges offering postgraduate programmes in management, with an approved capacity of 7210 seats (AICTE, 2019a). The government universities in Kerala run their departments of management studies, where MBA programmes in full-time as well as part-time are offered. These departments do not come under the purview of the AICTE. There are 17 locations across the state where university departments offer such MBA programmes. 1025 seats are offered by all the departments put together. Two private universities, Amrita Viswa Vidyapeetham and Amity University have their campuses at three locations in Kerala. These private universities offer an additional 240 seats for their MBA programmes. In addition to these colleges, there is the Indian Institute of

Management, Kozhikode, an 'Institution of National Importance', that offers 480 seats for its management programme (IIM-Kozhikode, 2019).

Out of the 102 institutions in Kerala that offer postgraduate programmes in management, only 5 institutions offered PGDM programmes during the academic year 2018-19. All the other institutions offered MBA programmes.

1.3. Evolution of the Asian School of Business:

Asian School of Business (ASB) was established in 2005 in a rented building in Technopark, Trivandrum. Technopark is a technological park established by the government of Kerala to promote and develop industries in the field of information technology. Senior industry experts and bureaucrats were involved in the launch of ASB.

ASB offered a two-year postgraduate diploma programme in management. The programme was not approved by the AICTE, the apex body that approves and regulates all technical and management programmes in the country. A few educational institutions were operating without AICTE approval during that period, the Indian School of Business (ISB), Hyderabad, being the most notable amongst them. ISB was founded with the support of a large number of industrial houses. The one-year Postgraduate Diploma Programme of ISB soon became one of the most expensive and sought-after management programmes in India. Financial Times rated the programme of ISB as the top 26th MBA programme in the world in 2019 (Financial Times, 2019).

ASB had plans to follow a similar strategy. The first batch had about 30 students. However, after a few years the numbers started dwindling. The management decided to get AICTE approval and change it to a PGDM programme. AICTE approval for PGDM programmes mandates that the institution should own the campus and should have adequate infrastructure and facilities. As a result, a new 6-acre campus was built near Technocity, with very high-quality infrastructure and facilities not seen in any other business school in South Kerala.

The AICTE approved PGDM too did not have many takers. The numbers stayed below the 30 mark and went as low as 6 in certain years. The admissions team informed the management that the preference of students and parents was for an MBA programme. The governing board decided to seek approval for an MBA programme affiliated to the University of Kerala in the year 2014.

The new director who was brought in to head the institute believed that the rigour of a PGDM programme was far superior to that of a university affiliated MBA programme. When he heard about the plan to change the PGDM to an MBA programme he threatened to quit. The chairman of the ASB society, hence, decided to keep the application for approval to start an MBA programme on the backburner.

During the 2015 admissions season, a press campaign was launched to announce the appointment of the new director and to invite applications for new admissions. Full page advertisements in major English and vernacular publications were released. Smaller, follow-up advertisements were also released. The admission team participated in fairs, collected student data from MBA entrance examination centres, conducted a few seminars in four colleges of the city and contacted prospective students over phone to apply for admission. All these activities, however, resulted only in 20 admissions.

The new faculty members who were recruited by the new director joined ASB before the start of the 2015-2016 academic session. After the faculty was on board, the director conducted a workshop to develop the curriculum for the new batch. All the members of the faculty team and the visiting faculty discussed the current course plans, compared those to the syllabus of top business schools, deliberated for over two days, and created the new curriculum.

It is the common practice of many business schools in Kerala to assign subjects to faculty to teach, without considering their interests or specialization. It was assumed that anyone with an MBA qualification would be able to teach any subject in the curriculum. The director did not accept this system as it would hamper the delivery of a high-quality programme. He created different domains and assigned faculty to these domains based on their expertise. Faculty was given instruction to teach subjects within the domain.

The new curriculum, pedagogy and the new faculty helped ASB to deliver a quality programme. A system for collecting anonymous student feedback on each subject was put in place. The feedback indicated that students were happy about the content and delivery except in one subject where the delivery was considered to be below expectations. The postgraduate programme coordinator made arrangements to make necessary changes to the delivery of courses wherever the student feedback indicated dissatisfaction.

1.4. Justification of the research:

For the 2016 admissions season, the director asked me to take over the responsibility of admissions. I was asked to handle admissions as an additional activity along with regular teaching. The former head of admissions was moved to teaching. The admissions officer was asked to assist me in the admissions related activities. I had experience in sales and marketing of consumer durables and electronic products. Marketing educational services, however, was a new experience.

It takes a business school about a decade to establish a reputation (Sharma, Rao & Popli, 2013). ASB, despite its existence for over a decade, struggled to enrol its approved capacity of 90 students each year. The school has excellent infrastructure, qualified faculty with academic and industry experience, and is located in a picturesque locality in the capital city, Trivandrum, of the state of Kerala. Despite these attractions, the intake never crossed the 32 mark. Many experienced professors and marketing specialists had tried and failed in this assignment.

As a DBA student, I realized that this was an ideal subject for my research. An inquiry at ASB could possibly help me understand how an institution of higher education is marketed in Kerala and what makes students interested in the institution and programme. With this understanding, I might be able to help ASB enrol the required number of students and make it financially viable.

In the case of undergraduate programmes and postgraduate programmes in science, arts and commerce, the number of seats available are far fewer than the number of applicants. The seats are therefore allotted to students with the highest marks in the qualifying examinations. MBA programmes offered by various institutions in Kerala have close to 9000 seats on offer. Against this number, the AICTE statistics show that only about 6000 students join the programme. Most of the students are able to pick and choose the college they wish to study. Hence, it was important to understand their process of decision-making, so that appropriate strategies and communication could be devised to attract them to our institution.

The new team had faculty members coming from different backgrounds. There were some with rich experience in MBA colleges and others who had years of corporate experience in managing big businesses.

I decided to create a team that was termed as a task force to improve the enrolment numbers and financial performance of the institution.

Increasing the number of admissions was critical to all the members of the faculty and the admissions officer as the very survival of the institution was at stake. Every member showed interest in being a part of the task force that would study the situation and come with an action plan.

Participatory action research (PAR) appeared to be the logical approach to tackle the problems faced at ASB. The members of the task force could carry out research within the organization as co-researchers as well as subjects of the research (Argyris & Schon, 1989). The term action research group was avoided and substituted with the name task force since some members, especially those with no formal research experience, could be uncomfortable with the usage. The members of the team were actively involved in the process of inquiry from the stage of problem identification to the implementation of the strategies that evolve through the study. Since all of us were colleagues with equal status, there were no issues of hierarchy or distorted power equations (Cassell & Johnson, 2006). I, as the researcher, acted more as a facilitator to help in implementing the plans of action and in the analysis of results. Members of the team brought with them expertise from their own lives and experience (Elvemo et al., 1997).

As a DBA student, I took lead in the research process. All of us were ready to spend time on analysis and reflection. Four members of the new faculty team had worked in other business schools within Kerala and outside Kerala. They were aware of the admissions activities carried out by those institutions. The others who came from the corporate world had good experience in sales and marketing. We decided to pool together the expertise from our own lives and work experience. This was hence, an ideal setting for an action research inquiry.

There was a possibility to bring in some expert consultant from outside to help us in the admissions process. However, we felt that the internal team was capable of handling the issue. The basis of PAR is that people are aware and knowledgeable about themselves and the situations they are in. They have the capability to analyze the situation and help in implementation of action plans to improve the situation and to generate new knowledge. As social problems are complex, insiders or members within an organization are likely to be more knowledgeable about the situations or issues within the organization than any outside researcher. The external researcher can bring in the research methods to the system, but the solutions are best generated by the insiders who have intimate ideas about the situation within. When the inquiry is carried out in a

participatory manner with the collaboration and involvement of the members keeping their interests in mind, the research becomes legitimate (Elvemo et al., 1997).

Organizations need to develop new capabilities and competencies to face the challenges and opportunities in the environment. The process of developing new capabilities is costly and uncertain. Insider action research carried out with the required academic rigour can reduce the level of uncertainty as well as produce useful and applicable knowledge (Roth, Shani & Leary, 2007). The new team at ASB had to develop the required competencies in order to take corrective actions and bring up the admission numbers.

Action researchers define the subject of research themselves based on the problems they see within their organizations. However, they should follow two guidelines: there should be a process of learning in the area chosen for inquiry and the phenomenon under research should be within the sphere of influence of the researcher (Sagor, 1992). The problem definitely was well within our sphere of influence. If we could understand the student choices and the process of decision-making of students and apply it in our strategies to enrol the required number of students and make the institution profitable, then that would be learning for all of us.

Action research teams can get demotivated and fail to complete their work. Teams with focus and clarity in what they are attempting to find out are likely to complete the collaborative work successfully without losing interest mid-way (Sagor, 1992). In our case the motivation was the challenge to make the institution stand on its own after many years of failure.

To gain clarity and have focus, a research team should identify the problem and prepare a problem statement. This statement should answer a set of questions (Sagor, 1992).The list of questions and the answers to the problem in the context of ASB are given below:

a) Who are affected by the low numbers of admission at the Asian Business School?

The chairman of the Asian School of Business Society has been funding the institute and making up the losses incurred every year from the inception. No business person can absorb losses every year with no sign of a recovery.

Students who seek admission to ASB do not get the full value of a management programme as learning from the other students during class discussions and case discussions become less effective. Companies that offer placement are also reluctant to come to an institute that has few students.

Faculty find the job less challenging. As ASB did not make profits, higher salaries and incentives could not be offered, which too impacted the interest of faculty.

b) What could be the cause of the problem?

ASB offered a PGDM programme instead of an MBA programme. Only 5 institutions out of over 100 offering management education at the postgraduate level in Kerala offered a PGDM programme. As most of the other institutions were not offering this programme the question arose whether the product offered by ASB was acceptable to its target customers.

Students and parents need to be aware about the programme and ASB. During the admissions season, ASB releases a few newspaper advertisements, participates in educational fairs and conducts seminars at few undergraduate colleges in the neighbourhood. We were not sure whether these activities were creating the required awareness. In addition to creating awareness, the communication also requires credibility in order to make consumers interested in the offering.

Reputation and brand image could be important factors in the consideration of an institution for higher education. Discussions with alumni and heads of institutions that offer coaching for entrance examinations for MBA/PGDM programmes indicated that their impression was that ASB was not running a rigorous programme.

c) What type of a problem can this be defined as? Is it connected to skills, goals, resources, or time available?

The chairman of ASB wants to be known as an educator who founded institutions that offer very high quality education, in the state of Kerala. He started the Trivandrum International School, which is the first and only IB World School in the state of Kerala, authorized by the International Baccalaureate Organization to implement the IB Diploma Programme. He started ASB with a vision to offer management programmes of a very high quality that was different from those offered

by the other regular colleges in the state. The vision and goal are still there, but not yet achieved.

Resources for running the programme and undertake any activity that could increase admissions and enhance the quality of the programme were always available.

Skills of the faculty to offer a good programme are presently there. One cannot make any judgement about the people who handled the programme in the past as very limited personal interactions have been there with members of the earlier teams.

The market awareness of the present team was limited as very few had handled admissions for any business school so far. The team needed to understand student choices and activities and business models of successful business schools in Kerala and implement them at ASB.

d) What is the goal for improvement?

ASB had taken approval from the AICTE to run the PGDM programme with 120 students in two batches of 60 each. AICTE insists that there should be one permanent faculty for every 20 students approved in terms of capacity. Due to low admissions, ASB requested AICTE to reduce the approved number of seats to 90. The admissions over the years never crossed the figure of 32 students per year.

The immediate goal was to get a batch of 60 students so that one full division could be run. The next goal was to increase the number to 90 and later on to 120. The quality of the programme and the campus placements was to be maintained at high levels even when the number of students went up.

e) What do we propose to do about it?

Lewin's (1946) action research follows a spiral of steps. The first step in the spiral evaluates the action taken. The evaluation process checks whether the results achieved are according to the set expectations. The evaluation gives the researcher an opportunity to learn and garner new insights. The fact-finding step helps the researcher to plan the next action correctly. These steps finally help the researcher to modify the overall research study. We decided to understand the actions taken by the earlier teams to see whether the activity or the implementation could be improved. It was also important to discuss the student choices with important stakeholders that included students studying at ASB,

prospective students and their parents, and people associated with coaching centres that prepare students for the entrance examinations for admissions to MBA/PGDM programmes.

Action research is usually carried out in real-time. However, one should realize that employees who have experienced something special or different in the organization carry a wealth of information in their minds. Thus, even retrospective action research would yield valuable organizational insights (Gummesson, 2003). Many members of our new faculty team had rich experience in different management institutes. The admissions officer had been in the ASB system for three years from 2013. Detailed discussions took place with all these members about their understanding of student choices.

1.5. The research problem:

After considering the answers to the questions raised in the previous section, the research problem can be stated as:

"To understand student choices regarding selection of institution for an MBA programme, to find out ways to build a higher education brand, get insights into the process of communication of the reputation and features of the institute and its programme to prospective students and parents, and with this understanding, to develop appropriate strategies to improve admissions and profitability of ASB."

1.6. The research process:

The actions in such an inquiry take place in cycles. In Kerala, the academic sessions run from June to March and admissions activity takes place only once every year. So the effect of any type of intervention would be known only after a year. Based on the experience and ideas of the various members, many activities were carried out in cycles.

To understand student choices, I carried out in-depth interviews with students, prospective students, parents of students, coaching centre heads who also act as career counsellors, teachers of other institutions, faculty of our institution and the admissions officer. A qualitative content analysis of the transcripts helped me in identifying themes that emerged often in the conversations. The activities carried out by the team attempted to address all the important themes that emerged in the analysis. These activities evolved over the research cycles as more and more insights were available to the team.

Arrival of an academic partner and a new director brought in new challenges to the process. In the final cycle, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the entire country and disrupted lives. Every change threw new challenges at the team but we managed to overcome these challenges successfully.

Finally, after four cycles of operation, the first objective of getting a batch of 60 students was achieved. During the next admission season, 74 students were enrolled, confirming that the processes were stable and sustainable.

1.7. Expected contribution to practice and practitioner knowledge:

Literature search revealed that many studies about student choices related to higher education are available in the North American and European contexts. However, I could not identify any study that has looked at choices and the decision-making process of students in Kerala. This inquiry would help us to understand whether the choices of students in Kerala match the frameworks posited by researchers in the West or whether one can identify characteristics that are unique to Kerala.

In general, there are two types of knowledge that are available in a system. Tacit knowledge is that knowledge which resides in the minds of people while explicit knowledge refers to the knowledge that is more structured, codified and shared. Creation of explicit knowledge helps organizations to come out with innovations, which Du Plessis (2007) defines as facilitation of new business outcomes and improvement of business processes. Through dialogues and contradictions, tacit knowledge of different individuals of the group can be synthesized into explicit knowledge (Nonaka & Toyama, 2003). The inquiry at ASB was also an attempt to develop explicit knowledge from the tacit knowledge available with the different stakeholders through social interactions (Pei, 2008).

The task force that carried out the process of inquiry at ASB were inside researchers (Evered & Louis, 1981) with their own lived experiences with rich and complex knowledge. We followed the process suggested by Lewin (1946) that had cycles of analysis, fact-finding, conceptualization, planning, and evaluation in order to solve our organizational problems and to generate new knowledge. Our task force was involved in multiple cycles of action research that took action and aimed at creating knowledge as well as theory through reflections about the action (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The immersion in the local situation helped us to generate contextually embedded knowledge that emerged from our

experiences over the five year period (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). The inquiry generated in-depth, actionable knowledge that served our needs as practitioners (Evered & Louis, 1981; Ingelgard, Shani & Styhre, 2002).

Action researchers are able to create new knowledge when they take what is already known and apply it in conditions that are different. This adds to the sum total of knowing. It is possible that the findings may not be generalizable and are 'local practitioner knowledge' (Cherry, 2002). I realized that the knowledge developed through action research may not be generalizable. However, the findings were likely to be more appropriate for my professional needs. Group verification and consensus could make such knowledge more objective (Perry & Zuber-Skerritt, 1994).

The scholar-practitioner who catalyzes solutions to organizational problems generates actionable knowledge (Pedler & Trehan, 2008).The action research at ASB was expected to generate actionable knowledge that connects practice and theory and is practically usable. There is intellectual rigour in such actionable knowledge (UOL, 2019).

According to Zuber-Skerritt & Perry (2002), an action research project for a doctoral thesis needs to progress through at least two or three major cycles to make a distinctive contribution to knowledge. Each cycle of our action research took a year to complete according to the admission cycle in Kerala that has only one intake every year. We achieved our objectives after five such cycles, thereby fulfilling the requirement of the number of cycles to contribute to knowledge.

Admissions numbers in over 60% of business schools in Kerala are below 80% of the capacity approved by the AICTE (AICTE, 2019a). Hence, the results of this study could help most of the colleges in Kerala to understand how students decide the institution for their higher education programme in management and to modify their programmes and its delivery to suit their needs and improve the rates of enrolment to such programmes.

Even if the results are not generalizable beyond the context of ASB, the knowledge generated through this inquiry could be considered new as we found new concepts that were not explicitly known before the start of the inquiry. As the final cycle of the inquiry indicated that the new processes and practices helped the institute to reach a level of sustainability, the new practical knowledge generated can also considered to be actionable.

1.8. Conclusion:

The director of ASB handed over the responsibility of increasing admissions to the postgraduate programme to me. Despite over a decade of existence the previous teams that handled admissions of the programme had failed to take the numbers beyond 32 students in a batch.

The new task force analyzed activities of the past and tried to make changes to attract more students to ASB. Each cycle of admission took a year to complete. The team planned actions, implemented them, observed the impact and reviewed and reflected upon the results. The reflections made the team suggest modifications that were implemented in the next cycle.

It was important to understand how institutions of higher education built their brands. We also needed to understand our customer requirements and the process of their decision-making. Hence, I started to search for relevant literature on these subjects to get a deeper insight into my research areas. Many researchers suggest that it is better to allow the data to determine the direction of the inquiry instead of letting the literature determine the direction of the research (Dadds & Hart, 2001). Literature should not become a straightjacket instead of being a support in developing insights (Cherry, 2002). In research settings as in the case of ASB, areas of investigation arose from the research data collected. Permitting literature to select the focus of the work could have restricted the findings, as many issues that did not feature in any literature emerged during the process of inquiry at ASB (Costello, 2003). Hence, I kept an open mind while carrying out the research activities so that insights in the context of higher education in Kerala could be explored from different perspectives.

The next chapter discusses the findings from my literature review.

Chapter – 2

Literature review

2.1. Introduction:

"The production of new knowledge is fundamentally dependent on past knowledge. Knowledge builds, and it is virtually impossible for researchers to add to a body of literature, if they are not conversant with it" (O'Leary, 2004:66). Literature review is the process of systematically exploring theories, ideas and thoughts of others on the subject of the inquiry, that has been written down. Such exploration can assist in the generation of new knowledge. The knowledge available in a particular context can be validated in another setting, creating new knowledge. The action researcher may also be able to create new knowledge and practice as he or she tries to make a practical difference or solve an issue at the workplace (Cherry, 2002).

2.2. The marketing concept-understanding our customers

Marketers today focus more on the customers and try to offer products or services that satisfy their needs. Kotler et al. (2014) discuss how a customer-centred, sense-and-respond philosophy emerged that replaced the strategy to sell what one produced. Lauterborn (1990) even changed the 4 P's of the marketing mix to 4 C's - customer, cost, convenience and communication - to make the mix customer-centric. Sheth & Sisodia (2013) came with their 4 A's framework to see the activities performed by the customers from their perspective.

In the case of ASB too I realized that very little was done to understand our primary customers, the students. We tried to find out the factors that made them to look at a postgraduate programme in management. We explored how they went through the process of selecting a programme and an institution, the prominent factors that they considered for making choices, the influencers in this decision-making process and so on. Once we developed an understanding about our customers and their requirements, it became possible to modify the processes, the programme and its delivery to match their expectations.

2.3. Process of literature review:

I started the process by analyzing the situation at ASB to get a first-hand feel of the situation at the ground level. Literature review was started in order to understand the factors that influence student choices across different regions. The review was not carried out as a one-time exercise.

As suggested by Cherry (2002), I read a little, used that reading to inform our actions and reflections, and then analysed the usefulness of that literature. Such a process has been extremely useful in this inquiry.

As I approached the final stages of my inquiry, I realized that an extended version of the 4 A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2013) appeared to fit the situation at ASB quite well. Therefore, the later sections of this literature review have been arranged in a manner to match the different elements of the extended 4 A's framework so as to make this review better organized and structured.

2.4. Different models of student choice:

44 years ago, Punj & Staelin (1978) stated that not much was known about the behaviour of students in the selection process of colleges. They presented a choice model that considered factors like tuition fees, scholarships, proximity of the institution and quality. The model helped to understand the probability of students selecting an MBA programme between two or more options available to them.

Over the years, many researchers have discussed models of student choices. Vrontis, Thrassou & Melanthiou (2007) discuss a model of student choices for the developed countries. A study by Ivy (2008) in South Africa brings out new elements of the marketing mix that becomes relevant in student choices. Kusumawati, Yanamandram & Perera (2010) try to identify student choices in Indonesia. Nyaribo, Prakash & Edward (2012) attempt to compare the similarity of motivators in choosing a management course between students in Kenya and India.

A large collection of literature about student choices in the Western world is available today. However, very limited studies are available about student choices in India. Agarwala (2008) studied career choices of management students and found collectivist tendencies in Indian students that supported the findings of Hofstede (1980). These tendencies become evident from the involvement of the parents and families in the process of higher education choices. This would indicate that there could be some difference between the choice models of the Western world where people are more individualistic. Hence, one may not be able to make an assumption that student choice models of the West would explain choices of Indian students.

India is a large country with about 1.3 billion people spread across 28 states. The states were created on linguistic basis after India gained her independence in 1947. One finds a large number of cultural differences

between the states of the country. No literature could be identified in my searches that discussed higher education choices of students in Kerala. Hence, an attempt was made to understand the choices discussed in the global scenario and understand whether the factors had the same level of applicability and importance in the context of Kerala.

The background of the researchers and assumptions reflect in their student choice models. The economic approach, the sociological approach or a combined approach have been used extensively in the modelling of student choices (Obermeit, 2012).

Economic models of student choice assume that students compare the costs and benefits of a set of institutions and select the one that provides the maximum value. They keep their preferences and tastes in mind while carrying out such evaluation (Vrontis, Thrassou & Melanthiou, 2007). Many studies indicate that variables like tuition costs, scholarships, living costs, parental income, foregone earnings, and the ability of the student are used to evaluate the programme (Fuller, Manski & Wise, 1982; Kim & Gasman, 2011).

Paulsen (1990) argues that while economists view college choice as an investment decision, sociologists view it as a status attainment process. According to Perna (2006), changes are taking place in the conceptual frameworks and recent studies extend the framework to include perspectives like social and cultural capital.

As India has a collectivist culture, an understanding of social capital in the family (Coleman, 1988) would be useful in this inquiry. Enrolment and academic achievement can be influenced by the family background of the student. Human capital, social capital and financial capital are the components of family background. Financial capital, measured by the wealth of the family, provides the resources for education. Human capital is a reflection of the educational qualification of the members of the family. A high level of human capital has the ability to create a cognitive environment for the student. Social capital indicates the relationship between the members of a family. It may even extend beyond the family. The relationship between the student and parents, between parents and the teachers and between parents and the parents of the friends of the students, can promote higher levels of enrolment (Perna, 2006).

Economic models and sociological models can be combined to give models that have more explanatory power. Simoes & Soares (2010) maintain that the models proposed by Jackson (1982), Litten (1982) and

Chapman (1986) are the most representative combined models on student choices. These models are more than 35 years old. Still the basic concepts and the factors mentioned are relevant as more modern models too present very similar ideas.

There are five steps in the selection of a college in the Hanson and Litten model of college choice (Litten, 1982). In the first step, the student aspires to acquire higher education. A decision to start the activities for admission follows. The student gathers information about the various colleges and courses, submits the applications and enrols to the college of choice. A large number of variables influence the choice process, like the background of the student in terms of income and education of parents, academic ability, economic conditions, influences of counsellors, peers and college officials, admission related activities of the college, and the price, scholarships and type of programmes offered.

Jackson (1982) proposes a three-stage model of student choice. The initial stage, termed as the preference stage is where the student starts to aspire for higher education. Aspirations and academic achievements of students usually exhibit a high level of correlation. In the exclusion stage, the students exclude colleges that are too expensive or ill-matched to their requirements. In the final stage, termed evaluation, the students rate the colleges on costs, job benefits and location and make the final decision.

The student choice model proposed by Chapman (1986) starts with a pre-search behaviour followed by search behaviour, where extensive acquisition of information regarding various possibilities of higher education are gathered. Students frequently consult "knowledgeable others" that include teachers, counsellors, friends and college alumni, for advice. They send requests to college for brochures related to programmes and admissions. Students also receive unsolicited mail from many institutions. The search behaviour ends when the student starts the process of application to different colleges of interest to them and where they are likely to be offered admission. At the choice decision phase, based on the relevant college attributes, they make a choice. Financial aid could be an important factor in the final decision. As the choice is exercised much before the start of the programme, the cycle gets completed only when the student starts attending classes, the phase Chapman terms as the matriculation decision.

There are multiple stages in the models discussed above but they can be grouped to three stages. In the first stage, an interest in acquiring higher education is formed in the student. This is followed by search for options

that fits his/her requirements. The options are evaluated to decide the best fit. A similar structure can be seen in the models that emerged more recently.

There are more recent models of student choices. A simple process of college choice can have predisposition, information search and choice of institution as the three stages. The student takes a decision to go for higher education at the *predisposition stage.* The student then explores various institutions, the phase that is termed as *information search.* During the last phase, the *choice stage*, the student selects the preferred institution (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; McManus, Haddock-Fraser & Rands, 2017).

A few more studies carried out in Asia were also reviewed. I wanted to see whether the factors that emerge in these areas have more similarity to the ones arising in the context of Kerala.

A study by Fernandez (2010) in a top Malaysian university indicates that over 70% students in the study believe that higher education is required to secure a good job and they chose the university since they believed it had good links with the job markets. Campus placements, thus became a very important factor there. Students also chose the university for its reputation and broad range of programmes offered.

Tin et al. (2012) carried out a study in Malaysia to understand higher institution choice factors and came out with three dimensions – personal factors, socialization, and campus, program and cost. Personal factors include reputation, faculty and infrastructure. Socialization factors include flexible learning environment, job opportunities and a multi-cultural environment. Campus factors include sports programmes, location of the university and tuition fees.

In Bangladesh, students looked at the education quality and reputation of the institution. Students also preferred to avoid universities that had unhealthy levels of campus politics (Al Jamil, et al., 2012).

Another study by Munisamy, et al. (2014) in Malaysia found that the reasons for pursuing higher education are to enhance their career prospects and for their personal development. The most important factors in the choice of their institution for higher education were job opportunities and the reputation of the university. The study also identified the influence of significant others. Lower fee structure also emerged as a pertinent factor.

2.5. Inadequacy of the models in explaining the situation at ASB:

As I reviewed the different models of student choices it emerged that the models covered certain issues that came out during my inquiry into the higher education choices of students in Kerala. However, none of the models that were reviewed explained the choice factors of students in Kerala comprehensively. The models of student choices also did not indicate the relative importance of the various factors in the final decisions and whether the factors were compensatory in nature. It is possible that a shortfall in some of the criteria may not be compensated by high ratings in other criteria.

The collectivist tendencies in Indian students (Agarwala, 2008) were observed in the case of students of Kerala too. Parents are actively involved in the choice of higher education institutions. The suggestions of relatives and friends too play an important role in the selection of a programme and the institution.

The economic models of student choices (Fuller, Manski & Wise, 1982; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Vrontis, Thrassou & Melanthiou, 2007) indicate the importance of tuition costs and foregone income. In the case of students of Kerala, costs are not seriously considered at the initial stages. Once they receive an offer of admission, they approach their parents for the fees. The parents then decide whether they can afford it or whether they are willing to take an educational loan. As most of the students who apply for MBA programmes are still in their final year of the undergraduate programmes, the impact of foregone earnings does not figure in the decision process.

The sociological view expressed by Paulsen (1990) that an MBA adds status to the student could be relevant in the case of Kerala. Kerala is the only state in India that has a literacy level over 96%. Education is valued here. MBA degrees also makes the student more employable. Hence, such a degree is likely to add to the status of the students and their families.

The models proposed by Chapman (1986), Jackson (1982) and Litten (1982) discuss the start of the choice process with an aspiration for higher education and a search for programmes and institutions. The stages are similar in the case of students of Kerala too. However, the process is quite different now. Instead of writing to colleges for brochures, the students search the internet and refer to career guidance sites for MBA education like shiksha.com or collegedunia.com.

Financial aid is seen as an important factor in student choices in the West but in Kerala, very few institutions offer such aid to students.

As indicated in studies in Malaysia by Fernandez (2010) Munisamy, et al. (2014) and Tin et al. (2012), improving career prospects is a very important reason for doing an MBA programme. A similar feeling has been expressed by almost all the students and parents who have come to ASB to attend the admission interviews.

As I progressed further into the inquiry, I realized that a model different from all the ones reviewed so far would have to be identified in order to explain why we were not successful in attracting large number of applicants despite having excellent infrastructure, a good curriculum and experienced faculty. The finer aspects of the selection processes and its relevance, especially in the context of ASB, emerged when the 4 A's model of Sheth & Sisodia (2013) was reviewed in detail.

2.6. The relevance of the 4 A's framework:

The 4 A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2013, 2019) helps the manager to view the business from the customer's perspective. It assists the manager to understand the factors and values that matter most to customers. This value-based perspective is based on the four different roles played by the consumers in their purchase process. As a *seeker*, the customer tries to gather information about the product or service. Donning the role of a *selector*, they select and acquire the product. As a *buyer*, the customer pays for it. The payment includes time, effort and money expended by the customer. Finally, as a *user*, the customer uses or consumes it. A customer might play one or all of these roles or may combine with other individuals and perform all the four roles. A sale gets consummated only if each of the four roles are carried out to the satisfaction of the customer.

Acceptability is one of the A's of the toolbox. Functional acceptability relates to the quality and reliability of the product or service, and psychological acceptability is an indicator of reputation, social value, emotional value and the perceived risk. The parents and students of Kerala exhibited a distinct preference for an MBA programme over the PGDM offered so far at ASB.

Affordability, the next "A", indicates the extent to which target customers are willing to pay for the product or service. Compared to MBA programmes in government colleges and private colleges in and around

the city of Trivandrum, ASB charges the highest fees for the two-year programme. Students may accept higher fees if they feel that they are getting value for the money paid.

The third "A" indicates *accessibility*. This includes availability and convenience. Since demand has been lesser than supply, getting admission to the programme at ASB is quite easy. ASB is well-located in the capital city of Trivandrum, making it convenient for a large number of students. The city is well-connected by road, rail and air networks to the rest of the country.

The final A in the toolbox denotes *awareness*. The consumer needs to be made aware of the product characteristics and persuaded to purchase it. In the case of ASB, final year undergraduate students, parents, coaching centre personnel who train students to write the MBA entrance examinations, and teachers of undergraduate courses should be made aware of the programme, the infrastructure, placement history, and faculty profile. It was observed that the awareness of ASB was quite low among the community of students and parents even in the city of Trivandrum where the institution is located. This was an issue that urgently needed to be addressed.

2.6.1. The dimensions of acceptability:

Acceptability is split into *functional acceptability* and *psychological acceptability*. The *user* role is associated with the acceptability of the offering. The quality and reliability of the product or service, its ease of use, reliability and core attributes are factors that indicate functional acceptability. Psychological acceptability, on the other hand, depends on reputation and positioning of the offering, its social and emotional value and the risks that may be associated with the purchase of the product or service (Sheth & Sisodia, 2019).

2.6.1.1. Functional acceptability:

The customer, as a user, evaluates the quality and reliability of the product or service. Chapman (1979) posits that quality and price of the programme are the most important factors in the student-choice decision.

2.6.1.1.1. Assessing quality of a service:

Quality assessment of services differ from that of manufactured products due to the nature of its characteristics (Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). Education can be considered as a service since it is a performance or act, essentially intangible, offered by one party to the other, without resulting in the ownership of the factors of production (Lovelock &

Wright, 1999). The distinguishing characteristics of services can be seen in the education sector. It is intangible, cannot be stored or displayed, nor results in the ownership of any of the factors production (Gabbott & Hogg, 1994). Education also has the characteristic of being inseparable. The buyer and the seller, in this case, the student and the teacher/institution, needs to be at the same place at the same time for the service to occur, even though online education has now made it possible for the teacher and students to be in different locations. Education cannot be stored or inventoried. If the number of students admitted in an academic session is lower than the capacity or approved strength, the unfilled seats perish as they cannot be carried forward. The quality and standardization of teaching cannot be the same among all the teachers. Even for a specific person it can vary from day to day, displaying` the characteristic of heterogeneity (Gilmore, 2003; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985).

Evaluation of the quality of service is more difficult than that of a product and could depend more on the opinions and expectations of customers and potential customers. The importance of word-of mouth publicity emerges in such contexts. In many cases, services may have to be experienced to assess the quality (Gilmore, 2003; Khanna, Jacob & Yadav, 2014). In certain situations, such information can be acquired through observation, or a trial before purchase. If these are not possible, then the customer may have to rely upon the experiences of others who have consumed the service (Locander & Hermann 1979). In case of education, pre-purchase trials and observation may not be possible. The opinions of senior students of the institution, thus, become an important factor in the decision-making process.

The definition of quality can also become complex as each stakeholder may have different perceptions and definitions of quality (Mahajan et al., 2014). Quality may be defined differently by the faculty, employers, investors, students, consultants, career counsellors and alumni. The way in which influencers convey quality to the prospective student can make a substantial difference in decision-making.

Institutions, in their marketing communication, highlight **infrastructure and facilities**. Physical facilities, ability to deliver, responsiveness to student needs, personalized attention and security are factors that can be considered when assessing quality of higher education (Madeline & Juan, 2012). Equipment, facilities and infrastructure can be grouped under the dimension of “tangibles”. The other dimensions of quality include “competence”, **theoretical and practical knowledge, expertise and**

qualifications of the faculty. “Attitude” is the dimension where student needs are identified and a willingness to help is displayed. Completeness and relevance of the curriculum come under the dimension of “content.” “Delivery” indicates effective presentations, proper sequencing and fair evaluation. The final dimension, “reliability” is related to honouring promises, delivering goals and resolving issues effectively (Owlia & Aspinwall, 1996). There could be additional dimensions of quality like examination results, and employment prospects of graduating students (Haseena, 2014). It should be kept in mind that in case of education, the consumer has only temporary access to the facilities and infrastructure. They only own the benefit of the services like the library, classrooms, teaching staff, computer systems and so on (Gabbott & Hogg, 1994). The benefits derived, in most cases, could be directly corelated to the efforts put in by the students.

It may be possible for a student to evaluate the quality of higher education on these dimensions after the completion of studies. Students, however, may have difficulty assessing the quality of service before consumption and the assessment can frequently be price-based (Kandampully, 2007). Due to the complexities in assessing quality of higher education, a good source of information would be **senior students and alumni of the institution** who have experienced the programme. A pilot study at ASB indicated that more than 30% of the students who joined the programme had some sort of interaction with senior students to understand more about the programme, delivery and job prospects at ASB. Thus, facilitating interaction between senior students and potential students would be an effective way to help them assess the quality of the programme (Kallio, 1995).

At the end of the programme students are not likely to look only at the certificate awarded or the job they managed to secure on graduation. They are likely to reflect upon the **total experience** and **value addition** during the period they attended the institution. The delivery of the programme, the commitment and enthusiasm of the faculty, different styles of teaching or pedagogy, experiencing practical and real-life instances from the faculty, a rigorous but fair assessment system and a feeling of being valued and respected are factors that can create satisfaction in students at the end of the programme (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009).

Students would prefer to enrol in colleges that have the best quality, but at the lowest price. Colleges, hence, needed to convince students that their programmes are of the highest quality and at the same time that

students are **getting real value for the money** spent on the programme (Chapman, 1979).

2.6.1.1.2. Pedagogy:

Students and faculty may have differing views about the definition of good teaching. An institution may adopt a consumer-oriented approach and try to understand the factors that students understand as good pedagogy. The new models advocate an active and personal approach between the faculty and students (Desai, Damewood & Jones, 2001).

Good faculty is essential to deliver a good programme. However, during the admissions process, more than the faculty, the administrative staff plays a major role. They need to be trained to answer queries, guide the students and simplify the admissions process in order to give a positive feel to the prospective candidates (Enache, 2011).

2.6.1.1.3. Customer-orientation:

Institutions need to become consumer-responsive if they have to compete effectively in the competitive landscape witnessed today. In order to be responsive there should be systems available to register complaints, surveys of satisfaction, surveys of needs, and customer-oriented personnel (Kotler & Fox, 1985).

Students expect higher education institutions to be customer-oriented. A college where the professors are student-oriented can attract and retain students much better than a college where the professors are cold and aloof (Kotler & Fox, 1985). Studies by Koris et al. (2015) indicate that a student-oriented institution would collect and act upon student feedback, design the courses to be practical and employ teaching methods that are interactive and entertaining.

2.6.1.2. Psychological acceptability:

An institute of higher education is likely to be psychologically acceptable to the user if it has a **good reputation**. A decision to join a programme like an MBA has risks associated with it. Once a student decides to join an institution, the process becomes almost irreversible. According to AICTE regulations (AICTE, 2019b), the institution can charge the annual fees at the beginning of the session. If a student completes one term, the fees need not be refunded. Thus, the student is forced to continue the programme even if he/she finds it below expectations. The negative consequences of an incorrect decision can be quite damaging in this case (Moogan, Baron & Harris, 1999). Understanding the quality of the

programme and selecting the right institution before the final decision, hence, becomes quite critical.

2.6.1.2.1. Nomenclature of the programme:

A study in the Delhi region in North India indicates that students there are more satisfied with PGDM programmes than MBA programmes (Latwal, 2014). Another study in Uttar Pradesh, a state in North India too showed a preference of students for PGDM programmes. Students cited better placement opportunities, faculty and academic environment as the reasons for such preference. However, discussions with parents and students who were contacted by the admissions team of ASB indicated that they **preferred MBA programmes to PGDM programmes**. Literature was not available regarding such preferences of customers in Kerala. As more than 90% of the institutions in Kerala offer MBA programmes rather than PGDM, this preference could be known to the institutions through their own experience.

2.6.1.2.2. Social and family influence:

A decision to enrol into a postgraduate programme may also involve social and emotional values. A study by Ray, Bala & Dasgupta (2020) in India found that societal status, parental pressure and societal pressure were among the most important factors that influenced student career choices. As India is a patriarchal society, fathers have an important influence in the career decisions of Indian students (Agarwala, 2008).

Getting daughters married off is considered to be an important responsibility of parents, as unmarried daughters are considered to be a cultural and economic liability in South Asia (Rao, 1993). In India, a large proportion of marriages are still arranged by families rather than decided by the boy and girl (Nanda, et al., 2014; Yadav, Singh & Vishwakarma, 2017). Mumbai (earlier known as Bombay) is considered to be one of the most developed cities in India. In Mumbai, 71 percent of the adults have arranged marriages, where parents are involved in the selection of the bride or groom (Uzquiano, 2011).

In many communities the culture of dowry still exists (Munshi, 2012). The government of India has come out with an anti-dowry legislation, but this has failed to halt the practice of demanding dowry in most parts of the country. Dowry is still considered essential if the bride's family wants to get her married to a groom of high status (Bradley & Pallikadavath, 2013).

In the case of female students, when there is a shortage of economic resources, parents have to make a choice between dowry and educational expenses (Chanana, 2000). Initial discussions with parents of female students indicated that the quantum of money given by the girl's family to the boy's family could come down if the girl has a well-paying job. Rajaraman (1983) argues that the calculation of the quantum of dowry was carried out by considering the present discounted value of the girl's lifetime earnings, her contribution to child-rearing and other household activities and the cost of maintaining her. Since the probability of getting a good job becomes more with higher education, many parents make their daughters study further, thereby increasing the value of their lifetime earnings.

The AMBA application and enrolment report 2020 mentions that the male: female split for MBA education in India is 81%:19% (AMBA, 2020). The AICTE does not publish this ratio for institutions running MBA/PGDM programmes in Kerala. In the case of ASB, it has been seen that the gender ratio was maintained at an approximately 50:50 level over the last few years. All the female students who joined ASB mentioned that they joined the programme to become independent by getting a job or by becoming an entrepreneur. High level of **campus placements** at ASB made it an attractive choice.

Social value is the perceived utility derived from its association with a social group (Sheth, Gardner & Garett, 1988). In the Kerala context, this could be relevant in the case of MBA programmes as the graduates become part of a more employable group.

2.6.1.2.3. Prominence/reputation of the institution:

Prominence of the institution is another factor that can influence student choices (Ivy, 2008; Munisamy, Jaafar & Nagaraj, 2014). Prominence includes reputation and qualification of the academic staff and ranking and positive ratings of the institute in the newspapers and magazines. Only the Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode in the state of Kerala is listed in the top 100 management schools of India according the 2019 report of the National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF) of the ministry of human resource development, government of India (NIRF, 2019). **Recommendation of teachers, counsellors, friends and senior students create reputation** for other institutions.

2.6.1.2.4. Influence of significant persons in risk mitigation:

A prospective student lacks the experience to evaluate the offering of an MBA college. It is a once in a lifetime purchase that involves a significant amount of investment. The purchase also involves commitment of two years of time from the buyer. The perceived risk is high as it involves the career of the customer and significant life consequences (Pitt, et al., 2006).

Under such circumstances, students look up to advice and support from trusted people. Parents, siblings, friends and teachers offer their advice and influence the decision of students to participate in higher education (Chapman, 1981; McManus, Haddock-Fraser & Rands, 2017). Students can also be influenced to pursue higher education if they get access to career information and guidance at critical stages of their education (Foskett & Johnston, 2010). Students who come from social backgrounds without any tradition of the family being exposed to higher education, need career guidance to modify their existing perceptions and attitudes. Experts with reliable knowledge about career possibilities can shape student perceptions better than career guidance officers of the institution (Foskett, Dyke & Maringe, 2008).

Kallio (1995) comments that spouses influence student choices rather than parents in the case of graduate students as they are in a different stage of life. In the top business schools in India like the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore and the Xavier Labour Relations Institute, Jamshedpur, this could be partially true as the institutes give weightage to candidates with work experience in their admission criteria (IIM Ahmedabad, 2018; IIM Bangalore, 2019; XLRI, 2019). As a result, the average age of graduate students go up. In the case of Kerala colleges, the majority of students join the MBA programme fresh from their undergraduate programmes, without getting any work experience. As they are not old enough to reach marriageable ages (Yadav, Singh & Viswakarma, 2017), **parental influence** is likely to be more pertinent here, unlike in the West.

2.6.1.2.5. Placements/career prospects after higher education:

Students with higher qualifications are likely to get higher salaries, have better career mobility and enjoy a better quality of life (Vrontis, Thrassou & Melanthiou, 2007). Career opportunities have the strongest influence among male as well as female students in their choice for higher studies (Maringe, 2006). An institute that offers good campus placements is likely to attract prospective students (Munisamy, Jaafar & Nagaraj, 2014). Only the top institutes in India publish the details of campus

placements and average salaries on their websites. As a result, prospective students who try to get admission to the institutions with lower or no rating try to extract such details from the alumni or senior students of the institution who could give them first-hand information on such issues. Since ASB could place over 90% of the students during the past few years, the details of the students and their organizations are featured prominently on the ASB website.

Institutions can consider the student as the product that is offered to organizations for employment (Enache, 2011). In such a case, the institution needs to look at the organization's needs and equip the students in terms of knowledge and capability to fit the requirements of the employers. A well-placed student would be quite satisfied with the institution since her expectations would be met, if not exceeded. This would help substantially in marketing the institution to prospective students.

2.6.2. The dimensions of affordability:

Affordability can be divided into *economic affordability* and *psychological affordability*. The payer role is associated with the affordability of the product or service. For a product or service to be economically affordable, the customer should have sufficient income in order to be able to pay for it, or should have access to financing options. The price should also fit the customer's budget. He/she should also be able to spare the time and effort required to purchase it.

Psychological affordability relates to the willingness to pay for the product or service. The price should be considered fair, the price should be comparable to those of similar alternatives and should give value for the amount spent (Sheth & Sisodia, 2019).

I could locate literature that explores various elements of affordability. The salient points are discussed below:

2.6.2.1. Economic affordability:

2.6.2.1.1. Influence of cost of education:

Students indicated that cost was one of the most important factors that influenced the choice of the college, after the major and location in a study in North America. In the same study, parents rated cost as the most important factor (Lillis & Tian, 2008). A study in Indonesia revealed that cost of the programme, reputation of the institution and proximity to home town evolved as the key drivers of college choice (Kusumawati, Yanamandram & Perera, 2010). Costs of education has a correlation with

proximity of the institution to the home town. A student from a far-away city needs to spend additional amounts on stay and travel (Moogan, Baron & Harris, 1999).

Costs associated with college education can be grouped into direct costs and opportunity costs. Direct costs are the costs of tuition and financial aid. Opportunity costs are related to the income that students attending college forego. Opportunity costs increase during economic expansions and decrease during recessions (Paulsen, 1990).

The experience of Latino families also throw some light on college choices that could be relevant in the Indian context. Brown, Santiago & Lopez (2003) discuss how Latino parents with low literacy levels are unable guide their children through college decisions. Many families are not aware of the actual cost of a college education or about the mechanisms to finance such college education. In Kerala too, many parents are not aware of the cost of an MBA programme as it is very different from that of other postgraduate programmes. The tuition fees for a postgraduate programme in science, arts or commerce in a government college in Kerala could be around Rs. 1100 (US$16) per year, while the tuition fees for an MBA programme in a government college can cost Rs. 50,000 (US$ 714) per year. (University College, 2019; University of Kerala, 2019). In private business schools in Kerala, the fees vary from Rs. 250,000 to Rs. 700,000.

Certain institutions adopted new strategies to manage enrolment. They set aside a certain percentage of tuition revenues to offer need-based aid. This was done since findings of studies in North America indicated that students were more sensitive to financial aid than to tuition fees (Paulsen, 1990). As financial aid is not available to students enrolling in privately run business schools in Kerala, such strategies could be considered to attract students from financially weaker sections of the society.

2.6.2.1.2. Financial issues in higher education choices:

In India, most of the institutes of higher education were supported by government funds. This resulted in very low costs of education. This system has undergone rapid changes. A large number of private institutions have started operations in the country. Institutions that were funded by the government also started to increase the tuition fees in order to depend less on governmental support. As the cost of education goes up, students too evaluate the programme based on the costs and likely returns after acquiring the degree.

Dr. (Col.) P.S. James was the director of ASB during 2018-19. He has over a decade of experience in top business schools in India. According to Dr. James, students and their parents look at the average salaries graduates of the business school manage to get. If 18 months' salary can cover the cost of education, it is considered to be fair value for the money spent (James, P.S., 2019, personal communication, 8 January 2019).

An MBA or PGDM programme in India can cost as low as Rs. 21,000 (approx. US$ 300) for a non-residential programme in the Faculty of Management Studies, University of Delhi (FMS, 2019) to Rs. 3,700,000 (approx. US$ 53,000) for a residential programme in a top school like the Indian School of Business, Hyderabad (ISB, 2019). Students who enrol to schools with low ranks risk uncertainty in the delivery of the programme and uncertainty of getting placed in good companies.

The largest bank in India, State Bank of India, offers educational loans to students who have received admission to programmes approved by the AICTE, University Grants Commission, governments or the Indian Medical Council. The bank offers educational loans for regular courses for amounts up to Rs. 750,000 without tangible collateral security and only parent or guardian as co-borrower. For premium institutes the loan amount can go up to Rs. 2,000,000. In case of the top 11 business schools, the loan amount can be as high as Rs. 4,000,000. Once the course is completed, the student gets a moratorium period of 12 months. The loan can then be repaid within a period of 15 years (SBI, 2008).

Students who enrol for management programmes may not know their own capability to absorb the knowledge imparted. Due to large number of graduating students and limited number of jobs, employment at the end of the programme is uncertain. Even if a student gets employed, surplus income to repay the loan too is uncertain. These could become deterrents for students from lower economic levels in taking loans to complete their higher education (Rani, 2011). ASB has seen almost all its graduates getting placed at salaries between Rs. 350,000 and Rs 650,000 per year. As the course fee is only Rs. 480,000 for the two-year programme, most of the students are able to cover the educational loan with just about a year's salary (ASB, 2019).

2.6.2.2. Psychological affordability:

2.6.2.2.1. Programme cost and value of the offering:

Compared to MBA programmes in government colleges and private colleges in and around the city of Trivandrum, ASB charges the highest

fees for the two-year programme. Students may accept higher fees if they feel that they are getting value for the money paid.

A study commissioned by the Office for Students to understand what value for money means from a student perspective throws some light on this issue. The comments of students who showed dissatisfaction had three themes. The themes were employment prospects, inputs received and quality of the contact (Students Union, 2018). The higher fees charged by ASB may become acceptable if the institution can place majority of the graduates in good organizations, provide a rigorous programme, and give quality contact time with the faculty. It would also be important to make students aware of such facts so that they understand the value of the offering.

The **payer** role is associated with the affordability of the product or service.

2.6.3. The dimensions of accessibility:

Convenience and *availability* are the two components of the next A, *accessibility.* The role of the buyer is primarily associated with the accessibility of the offering. Convenience can be evaluated by the time and effort required to acquire the product or service. The product should be available across different locations and should be available in different pack sizes. A product or service can score high on availability if there is adequate supply as compared to the demand and stocked at appropriate levels (Sheth & Sisodia, 2019).

2.6.3.1. Convenience:

2.6.3.1.1. Proximity of the institution to home town:

In a study by Simoes & Soares (2010) in Portugal, geographical proximity emerged as the most important aspect in the selection process of the higher education institution. A study in Indonesia too revealed proximity to home town as one the top five factors that influenced the selection of the university for higher education. Students from families where no one had ever attended the university and female students reported proximity as the most important factor. The emotional security of being close to the family could be the reason (Kusumvati, Yanamandram & Perera, 2010).

In India, proximity issues are more prominent in the case of female students. Gautam (2015) conducted a study in New Delhi, India to understand student choices in higher education. She found that parents preferred to send their daughters to colleges nearby. Middle-class families

who could afford to send their daughters to nearby cities for higher studies preferred to send them to colleges that admitted only female students. “Social safety” concerns were high in the minds of parents who send the daughters away for higher education. In Kerala, there are no MBA colleges that offer programmes exclusively to female students. One needed to understand how parents handle such issues here in Kerala.

2.6.3.1.2. Availability – demand vs. supply

Since demand has been lesser than supply, getting admission to the programme at ASB is quite easy. ASB is well-located in the capital city of Trivandrum, making it convenient for a large number of students. The city is well-connected by road, rail and air networks to the rest of the country.

The role of the **buyer** is primarily associated with the availability of the offering. Availability also refers to all the necessary accompanying services such as pre-purchase advice and post-purchase advice and assistance in maintaining the product’s usability (Sheth & Sisodia, 2019). In the context of a higher education institution this would include the **initial interaction with the admissions team** and the **interview and joining process**. At ASB, when the prospective student comes to enrol, he/she is taken through the process in a smooth manner, the documents required to apply for educational loans are handed over on time and the paperwork is handled in a smooth manner. The admissions officer explains the facilities offered by the institution, discusses the qualifications and experiences of the faculty, and provides details of the campus placement record of the previous years. In many institutions after enrolment, the students face indifferent treatment from the administrative department. This can leave unpleasant memories in the minds of students that could adversely impact positive word-of-mouth publicity at a later stage.

2.6.4. The dimension of awareness:

The dimension of *awareness* in the 4 A’s framework include *brand awareness* and *product knowledge*. Brand awareness is indicated by perceived brand characteristics, brand attraction, brand recall and brand associations. Product knowledge is indicated by the interest the customer shows in the offering. The customer should understand the product and get a feeling of involvement in it. He/she should also feel its relevance. The role of the seeker is primarily associated with the awareness of the offering (Sheth & Sisodia, 2019).

2.6.4.1. Marketing higher education:

Higher education institutions are operating in an environment of intense competition globally (Koris & Nokelainen, 2015; Koris et al., 2015) and also in Kerala. Less than 60% of the seats available in AICTE approved institutions in Kerala are filled by students (AICTE, 2019c). Marketing is now playing an important role in student recruitment (Ivy, 2008). As enrolments decline, institutions have to become more customer conscious and be aware of the needs and wants of prospective students (Bingham, 1993).

During every admission season in the past, ASB spent very large amounts on advertisement and publicity. The management released press advertisements in the most circulated English and local language newspapers. The members of the admissions team admitted that the advertisements generated very few enquiries for admission. It became critical to understand marketing strategies adopted by higher education institutions so as to identify the most relevant strategies that could yield results at the lowest cost.

Marketing theories developed for businesses can be used even in educational institutions (Stewart, 1991). The four P's of marketing: product, price, place and promotion (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012) can be applied to programmes offered by institutes of higher education. Institutions have to see students as customers and meet these needs as per their expectations. Unless such activities are carried out, one cannot expect new students to come in even if improvements are made in promoting and marketing the programme.

The four P's of marketing may become inadequate when services are involved. People, process and physical evidence get added to the traditional 4 P's when the product offering becomes more of services and less of goods (Mudie & Pirrie, 2006). In case of an educational institution like ASB, *people* would primarily mean the faculty who deliver the two-year programme. The admissions team that interfaces with the students in the initial phases also play an important role in creating first impressions that could be long-lasting in nature. Pedagogy followed by the institution would become the most important *process* for the students.

Infrastructure of the institution in terms of classrooms, library, hostel and so on, that provides a congenial ambience for studies would form part of the *physical evidence* that students encounter during their stay in the college.

A study in South Africa indicated that the traditional marketing mix may be inappropriate to approach marketing of higher education institutions. Ivy (2008) came out with a modified set of marketing elements, namely, price, promotion, people, premium, prominence, programme and prospectus. Price, promotion and people are part of the traditional 7 P's, but Ivy discusses slightly different aspects of these elements. The price element considers the flexibility offered by the institution in paying the tuition fees for the programme. Promotions are split into the traditional media and direct mail. Prospectus and brochures are grouped under direct mail promotions. Ivy describes people in the marketing mix with the phrases "providing face-to-face tuition where I live" and "personal contact with MBA graduates".

Marketing of an educational institution cannot be done on an ad hoc basis. It is a process that involves analysis, planning, implementation of the planned activities followed by monitoring and control. Programmes need to be formulated carefully to bring about exchange of values (Kotler & Fox, 1985). An institution like ASB needs to offer a strong academic programme and provide **value-added courses** and training to make the students ready and capable of taking up corporate assignments (Paulsen, 1990). The institution would also have to liaise with potential recruiters and invite them to the campus for recruitment and placements of students. An institution like ASB cannot attempt to be a business school for all. It would need to decide its target segment in order to carry out marketing activities effectively. ASB needs to understand the desires and needs of its target market so that it can carry out the activities with a customer-orientation instead of a sales focus (Kotler & Fox, 1985).

Administrators in charge of admissions may do nothing or some may go to the other extreme of using novel methods of promotion. A college in USA went to the extent of offering promotional frisbees on a beach. Another college offered a "money-back guarantee" on tuition fees if the graduate could not get a job offer within 120 days of graduation (Kotler & Fox, 1985). Aggressive promotions may bring down the value of the brand in the case of higher education institutions. In India, the top-rated Indian Institutes of Management do not release any advertisement or carry out promotions to solicit admissions. They only release an advertisement to announce the Common Admission Test (CAT) and the eligibility criteria for admission. A student who came for interview at ASB mentioned that he did not join a particular institute that offered him admission since he saw too many advertisements released by them for admissions. He felt that the strong media presence showed a desperation to get more students. A balanced approach may be required in the case of

ASB where we announce the essential details of the programme and placement history of graduates without appearing to solicit admissions in a desperate manner.

All institutions may not be responsive to the needs of their customers. They may be product-oriented instead of marketing-oriented. As a result, courses and majors that they deem fit may be offered without considering the requirements and aspirations of the stakeholders (Kotler & Fox, 1985). In the case of MBA programmes, the recruiter, who offers employment to the graduate is a very important stakeholder. Institutions need to understand what the recruiters expect from the graduates in order to perform efficiently in their organizations.

2.6.4.2. Role of significant persons in creating awareness

The consumer needs to be made aware of the product characteristics and persuaded to purchase it. In the case of ASB, final year undergraduate students, parents, coaching centre personnel who train students to write the MBA entrance examinations, and teachers of undergraduate courses should be made aware of the programme, the infrastructure, placement history, and faculty profile. It was observed that the awareness of ASB was quite low among the community of students and parents even in the city of Trivandrum where the institution is located. This was an issue that urgently needed to be addressed.

Communication from a marketer reaches and influences a small set of people in the first stage. This set of people can be called as opinion leaders. The information thus communicated reaches the masses from the opinion leaders in the next stage (Katz & Lazarsfeld, cited in Sheth, 1969). In case of educational institutions in the context of Kerala, undergraduate programme teachers and heads of entrance test coaching institutions could be classified as opinion leaders. It was important to understand the importance given to communication from such leaders by prospective students.

2.6.4.3. Segmentation and differentiation:

As in the case of regular products and services, segmentation of marketing activities would yield good returns even in the case of higher education (Litten, 1982). Different groups are likely to approach the process in different manners that make segmented marketing more effective. In the case of ASB, one may need to look at the possible segments to direct marketing efforts more effectively. The segmentation discussed in Litten (1982) like race, sex, parental education, personal

ability and geographic location could be explored except for replacing race with religion in the Indian context.

Educational institutions need to have strategic plans like regular corporate entities. In the initial phase, the institution should identify its basic mission. All strategic and marketing activities would emerge from the mission (Michael, 1990). The mission should be focused on the end product. It should have clarity and should be communicated with ease. Mission statements should not be very specific so that it does not get outdated soon (Conway, Mackay & Yorke, 1994) A clear mission will help in formulating the guiding principles like a focus on research, type of instruction, type of programmes and so on.

The target segment would be defined during the next stage. This would decide the profile of students in terms of their needs and demographics. The institute would then be able to decide the programmes to be offered and the geographic area to be focused. The programmes need to be designed in such a way to create a distinct competitive edge over others (Shirley, 1983). It is not possible for any institution to be excellent in everything. It is also not possible to cater to the needs of consumers in every segment. It would be important to identify certain areas that could be valued by the students and build on it to create a distinct positioning for the institution (Maringe, 2006).

An organization, in order to sustain in the long run, needs to develop and maintain its assets and skills. In case of an educational institution, the asset could be its name and location. The way the institution delivers its programme could be termed as its skills (Aaker, 1991). Educational institutions require brand-building in order to attract students, mobilize alumni donations and be known among the general populace. Positioning the college effectively to all the constituents can be a tough proposition. Since students and parents are likely to be the most important target segment, communication may have to focus on them, primarily (Clayton, Cavanagh & Hettche, 2012). ASB has gone through a re-structuring exercise that started in 2015. Today, the institute has a large number of teachers who have many years of corporate experience. During the discussions with students who are presently studying and those who graduated in the past four years, they expressed their feeling that the industry-orientation and exposure they got were excellent and considered to be the greatest differentiator of ASB. This feature could become the unique selling proposition (Reeves,1970) for the institution.

2.6.4.4. Media for publicity:

Most of the business schools in Kerala communicate through the medium of newspapers. Other media like TV, radio or outdoor are used very rarely. Since Kerala has near total literacy (Mukundan & Bray, 2004) newspapers are quite popular among the parents. However, the current generation does not have the habit of reading newspapers. To gain their attention, other methods may have to be employed by institutes of higher education.

2.6.4.5. Social media marketing:

Social media marketing has opened a new line of communication between marketers and consumers. Such communication can be highly interactive and can take place around-the-clock. Many companies have profiles on Facebook and Twitter. However, the marketing objectives can be achieved only if these profiles are effectively managed (Chamorro-Mera, et al., 2014). The current generation of students are regular users of the internet and social networking sites. The more familiar they are with a medium due to their frequent use of it, the more favourably they feel toward that medium (Cha, 2009). Hence, for the prospective students of management programmes, a major share of communication could take place through such social media sites.

Taylor, et al. (2011) found in a study that college-age social networking site users were interested in social network advertising that was informative. An educational institution that targets undergraduates as prospects would find this insight interesting since advertising the programme details on social networking sites would offer a cost-effective way to reach these prospective consumers.

2.6.4.6. Word-of-mouth advertising:

Word-of-mouth (WOM) is an informal way of communication between people. In such communication, people exchange information regarding products or services. They share their likes, dislikes and experiences with products and brands (Das, 2013). WOM is considered to be a very powerful and impactful form of communication due to its relevance and credibility. Many studies have indicated that friends and relatives are considered to be the most trusted source of product information (Keller, 2013). The present generation is internet savvy. A substantial percentage of their interactions with their peers and friends take place over the internet. WOM that is communicated over social networks can be referred to as electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) (Smith, 2012).

Keller (2013) also comments that if consumers are delivered products or services that offer them superior benefits, they are likely to talk and write about them. This will help in amplifying the effects of the marketing activities carried out by the marketer. The messages about a product or brand become more effective when they appear to originate from an independent source and not from the brand.

Silvermann (2011) clarifies the differences between the terms, word-of-mouth marketing and advertising. WOM is communication that is independent and unbiased. The person communicating such information does not have any vested interest. Advertising is not the same. There are vested interests in advertising and it comes from the person or organization that promotes the product or service advertised. So it is proper to use the phrase, word-of-mouth marketing instead of word-of-mouth advertising.

WOM also works in a way that can be detrimental to the brand. A consumer who finds a product or service below his/her expectations, and realizes that it is not easy to communicate the dissatisfaction to the marketer may disparage the brand to others.

A college in our neighbourhood recently understood how WOM marketing can adversely impact the brand. The college used to state the fees for the programme at the time of admission. Later, during the course of the year, students were asked to pay additional amounts on some pretext or the other. They also levied heavy fines for minor issues. Students got upset and wrote about the practices of the college and circulated it on WhatsApp. The post became viral and caused embarrassment to the institution. The college authorities were forced to change these unfair practices.

2.6.4.7. Digital media and the millennials:

Millennials are profound users of the internet and digital media. Our prospective students belong to the still younger, generation Z (Dimock, 2019) who are even more comfortable transacting over the net. Digital marketing is considered to be the most appropriate medium to reach these generations (Smith, 2012).

Millennials are going online for shopping, sourcing of news, entertainment, and social networking. Due to their profuse usage of digital media, digital marketing is an effective manner for communicating with millennials and considered to be the most promising medium for reaching this generation (Okazaki et al., 2007).

A new trend that has emerged over the four-year period of this action research is the increasing use of digital platforms in the search and the choice stages of the decision-making process and for social networking. Students increasingly talk of searching for senior students and alumni on social media and getting information about the institution and the programme through such contacts.

A reason for such a change could be the disruption brought to the telecom and the internet business in India by Reliance Jio Infocomm (Jio). Jio launched its services on 5 September 2016. Within three years, it became the second-largest telecom operator in India with over 340 million subscribers. Jio offered unlimited voice calls across the country and 1.5GB of mobile internet data per day for a price of less than $2 a month, making internet access available to a large number of Indians, especially from the younger generation (Jio.com, 2019; Kurup, 2019). According to Ericsson's Mobility Report released in June 2019, India today has the world's highest data usage per smartphone at an average of 9.8 GB per month (Ericsson.com, 2019).

2.6.4.8. Primacy and recency effect in education:

During the search process, students come across a set of institutions. At this stage of the search, the student is likely to form certain lasting views about the institutions. Creating a positive impression in the passive minds of applicants at this early stage should be considered seriously (Maringe, 2006). In the case of an educational institution, word-of-mouth publicity can be very critical in attracting new students. The primacy and recency effects are likely to be exhibited in the case of students evaluating institutions (Crano, 1977; Farr & York, 1975; Mayo & Crockett, 1964). Hence, it may be prudent to create a highly memorable induction programme for fresh students and ensure that the final activities, including the convocation are carried out to leave positive and happy memories in the minds of students.

2.6.4.9. Branding and brand choices:

Aaker (1991) defines brand as a distinguishing name and/or symbol that identifies the services or goods of a seller and helps in differentiating the offering from those of competitors. Brands can use product or service performance to create competitive advantages, or differentiate it through intangible image associations (Keller, Parameswaran & Jacob, 2016). Well-branded institutions are also likely to attract more and better students and better faculty (Sevier, 2007).

Marketing an educational institution is a tough proposition and results cannot be expected to happen quickly (Grabowski, 1981). Various studies indicate that it is not easy to create major differentiations in academic products. In a study, leaders of UK universities suggested that the barrier to building a brand was the lack of real differentiation in the sector (Chapleo, 2004). This is more so in the context of Kerala where over 95% of the MBA colleges are affiliated to one of the government universities. The universities prescribe the syllabus and conduct the examinations. The weightage of the university examination in calculating the final grades is 60% and only 40% of the grades are decided by internal evaluations of the individual institutes. The final MBA degree is also awarded by the university. This can create a feeling in the minds of students and parents that the programmes offered by different colleges in the state cannot be very different from each other.

Aggarwal (2004) discusses that consumers form personal relationships with brands in a way similar to forming relationships with other people in social contexts. It was interesting to know whether students of our institution have formed such a relationship with the brand Asian School of Business (ASB). Many Apple Mac owners and owners of brands like the Volkswagen Beetle have deep affection and feeling towards these brands. This results in very positive word-of mouth communication that helps to bring other consumers to the fold. If students of ASB develop such a feeling, then that would help in bringing new students to the institution.

2.6.4.10. Product knowledge:

The brand choice decision has three distinct elements. The first element is a set of motives that reflect the consumer's underlying needs. The second element would be the different courses of action or selection open to the buyer. In the case of higher studies, the alternative courses of action would include various types of postgraduate programmes including MBA. Within the choice of MBA, different institutions offering such programmes would also be considered as options. All these alternatives could satisfy the motives of the buyer. The set of courses or institutions that get seriously considered by the student could be called his or her evoked set or consideration set (Kapferer, 2008). The third element would be a set of decision mediators. These mediators match the alternatives with the motives of the buyer. Decision mediators can also be seen as the mental rules or heuristics for assessing purchase alternatives (Sheth, 1969). In a traditional market in Kerala, when a customer selects a coconut she weighs it in her hand and shakes it. If the feel of water swirling inside the coconut can be heard, it is selected. If no sound is

heard, that indicates the coconut is not yet ripe or it is too old. This is a simple heuristic used by the customer to select the right product from a basket full of coconuts.

In cases where the buyer is trying to purchase a new product class like enrolling into a postgraduate programme, he or she does not have the required experience. As a result, the decision mediators would be missing in this case. The consumer would have to develop the decision mediators and would actively seek information from various sources (Kapferer, 2008). Discussions with students and prospective students revealed that most of them **use the internet** to find about various higher education programmes including MBA.

Students also check popular **career guidance or advisory websites** like shiksha.com, collegedunia.com, and career360.com to get details about various institutions that offer programmes of interest to them. According to data analytics reports from similarweb.com, each of these sites get over 15 to 20 million visits from students every month, which is an indication of the popularity of such sites amongst the student community (similarweb, 2021). A quick review of some of the career guidance sites indicate that **MBA is portrayed as the most popular course** for individuals who look for managerial jobs across domains. An MBA programme offers a plethora of opportunities and also helps the candidate in his or her entrepreneurial journey (Pop, 2021; Sethi, 2021; Shrivastava, 2021;Team Careers360, 2021). Once institutions are shortlisted, most of the students visit the **institution websites** to check about their infrastructure, facilities, faculty profile, and placement details. Institution websites, career guidance/advisory websites and social media are considered by students as authentic sources of information (Zadpe & Pande, 2018).

Initial studies indicated that the recognition of the name, Asian School of Business, was quite low among the students who were looking for MBA programmes within the state of Kerala. This fact was evident during discussions with hundreds of students who came to attend various educational fairs held by different agencies across the state. Sant (2006) discusses the concept of the recognition heuristic where consumers, given a choice, choose a brand they have heard of over one that they have not. As mainline newspaper advertisements are very expensive in Kerala, we had to look at cheaper options like billboards and social media marketing to create better awareness about ASB among the target groups in Kerala.

The role of the **seeker** is primarily associated with the awareness.

2.7. Conclusion:

A fundamental difference can be observed between the various models of student choice and the 4 A's model. All the models of student choice list a set of factors that influence student decisions. The 4 A's model too lists four different factors but posits that the factors are not compensatory in nature. The four different factors that influence a purchase decision do not compensate or substitute for each other. A shortcoming in one of the elements cannot be compensated by performing exceedingly well on the other elements. For example, if a product has no acceptability, then it has no chance of doing well even if customers are aware of it, and the product is available and affordable (Sheth & Sisodia, 2019). An organization that aims to succeed should ensure that they score high on each of the 4 A's.

ASB offered a PGDM programme during the early years of this inquiry. Over the years, ASB managed to score well on three of the areas but did not do well on acceptability. Once the programme was converted to an MBA programme, it became acceptable to the students and parents of Kerala. As all the four factors started to click, ASB started to do well and within two years managed to get the required number of enrolments and returned a positive operating profit for the first time in its existence.

The methodology adopted for the inquiry that helped me map the findings from my interviews to the various factors and its sub-elements of the 4 A's framework is described in the following chapter.

Chapter – 3

Methodology followed in this inquiry

3.1. The research setting:

I was interviewed by the new director of ASB in February 2015. As new academic sessions in Kerala start from June, I was requested to join ASB on 1st June 2015 along with a few other new recruits. As soon as the new team joined ASB, the director arranged a workshop to review and discuss the curriculum. Many of us who attended the workshop had decades of working experience in the corporate world. The director was interested to create a curriculum that blended theories of the academic world with the demand for practical knowledge from the industry. Such a programme was designed to help students to fit well in corporate jobs.

During the previous years, the programme at ASB was conducted with less rigour. There were only four professors on the rolls on permanent basis. Visiting faculty from the industry handled the other classes. Teachers from the industry could come to teach only when they were free from their office schedules. As a result, courses were not planned properly. Even examinations were held when the visiting faculty was free to set and evaluate the papers. The new director was clear that this was not the way to build an institution. He argued that good teachers and a rigorous curriculum would help build ASB as an institution of choice. By the time the academic session started in 2015 June, new teachers were taken on board, thereby reducing the dependence on external faculty. The academic calendar for the whole year was prepared and kept ready in June itself. The calendar included the start and end dates of each trimester, examination dates for each trimester, scheduled holidays and vacation period and major events planned for the year. The programme was planned in a systematic and rigorous fashion. The director declared that the next batch of 2016 admissions would have 120 students as they would understand and appreciate the positive changes at ASB.

3.2. Restructuring of the admissions team:

The director asked the senior faculty who looked after the admissions activity to return to teaching. I was asked to take the responsibility of admissions as a responsibility in addition to my teaching activities. The admissions officer was asked to report to me. The director told me that he was expecting me to bring in 120 students during the next admissions season as structural changes had been put in place by him to deliver a good programme.

3.3. Emergence of research possibilities:

I started my DBA studies while working in Angola as the head of operations of a large consumer electronics distributor. I was in search of a new topic for my DBA research as I had relocated to India a few months before joining ASB. I realized that admission numbers were a real problem for the institution. As the DBA research area had to be in one's own organization, I decided to take this topic as the subject of my inquiry. I had no experience in the field of education as a faculty member or as an administrator. I knew that positive actions could emerge only with the cooperation and support of the other members at ASB. Hence, for my inquiry and actions related to the admissions process, I decided to adopt action research as the methodology.

3.4. Ontological and epistemological positions:

Researchers have a set of assumptions and beliefs, also called paradigms that help them define how to conduct the inquiry (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Guba & Lincoln (1994) argue that the researcher needs to identify the paradigm that is relevant to the research. Paradigms or world views are based on the ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions of the holder.

Ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and our assumptions about the way in which the world operates. An ontological position of relativism was considered appropriate for this study. According to relativism, there are many truths, depending on the point of view of the observer (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012). In this study, there were diverse participants like students, parents, consultants and teachers who have different characteristics that yielded multiple perspectives about the issue (Mouton & Marais, 1990). As a researcher, I needed to report the multiple realities that arose out of these differing perspectives (Creswell, 2013).

Epistemology is the study of human knowledge (Mouton & Marais, 1990), about how knowledge is known (Creswell, 2013). In my study, there was a need to understand the feelings and attitudes of students and the influencers in the decision-making process for selecting a management programme. Hence, the constructivist approach, an interpretive method that focuses on people individually or collectively to study their feelings and thinking (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2012) was adopted as my epistemological position.

I am part of the academic community that interacts closely with various constituents like students, parents and educational consultants. Instead of being an outsider, doing my study from the inside helped me create contextually embedded knowledge (Brannick & Coghlan 2007), that was practical as well as theoretical (Evered & Louis 1981). Researchers who become insiders get close to the research participants in order to understand them better and "know what they know," and glean subjective evidence from the participants (Creswell, 2013).

All the activities related to my inquiry were carried out keeping in mind my ontological and epistemological positions.

3.5. Methodology adopted:

The aim of a DBA thesis is to report one's own experience in a project or intervention that tries to solve an issue identified in an organization. The intervention should bring about an organizational change and generate new, actionable knowledge. The new knowledge thus created should be acknowledged as significant by the stakeholders as well as by scholars (UOL, 2019).

The researcher interprets the evidence using appropriate literature. He plans actions and reflect on its impact to develop knowledge that is actionable. The researcher should ideally be able to implement this actionable knowledge in the organization (UOL, 2019).

In the context of my organization, action research was considered to be the most appropriate methodology. Action research integrates knowledge from behavioral science with organizational knowledge in order to find solutions to real problems that organizations face in their operations (Coghlan, 2011). It is an ideal methodology for research students who are on full-time employment. Action research helps them to investigate a significant workplace issue in a collaborative manner with a spirit of co-inquiry as the inquiry takes place with the employees in the organization (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002). Such research helps to bring about positive changes in the organization. The inquiry also improves the self-help competencies in the members who participate in the process and also adds to scientific knowledge that is actionable (Coghlan, 2011). The fieldwork and findings of the study can also be used for the research thesis (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002).

3.5.1. The action research team:

I managed to create an action research team that was called a "task force" to carry out activities to improve enrolments. The team had four members that included three members of the faculty team and the admissions officer. Two of us had experience in the industry and the third member of the faculty team had worked in other business schools.

3.5.2. Cycles of action research:

Admissions take place only once a year in India for the academic session starting in June. Hence, we realized that each action research cycle would take a year to complete. We also realized that within each major cycle, there would be a set of independent actions that could be taken and evaluated.

The first cycle started in June 2015 and lasted till June 2016. The team took many actions that yielded only partial results.

During the second cycle that took place during the period, July 2016 to June 2017, an external academic partner was brought in, who was expected to increase the admission numbers to the required level. The ASB team was given a marginal responsibility. Even the attempts made by the academic partner did not lead to the numbers that could lead to at least a break-even point for ASB.

The third year (July 2017 to June 2018) had a new complexity in terms of a new director who did not have the capability, skill or moral standards to be a leader. The complete responsibility of the admissions activity was given back to the task force quite late in the season. Despite the odds, the ASB team with the academic partner managed to get 30 students on board.

During this period, I started interviewing different members from the stakeholder group to get deeper insights into the student decision process. Interviews were carried out with existing students, prospective students, parents, career counsellors and members of the faculty team. By conducting research on different types of stakeholders, I could get access to multiple sources of evidence rather than depending on a single source (Yin, 2011). In-depth interviews helped me as a researcher to see the world from the respondent's point of view and enabled me to gain an empathic appreciation of his or her world (Marvasti, 2004).

The fourth cycle started in 2018 July after the new batch started their programme. We could implement some of the earlier findings by

changing the programme from PGDM to MBA. A number of activities that were carried out earlier continued during this cycle also, but with changes made as a result of our analysis and reflection. The fourth cycle ended in June 2019. By this time, the team of ASB managed to get 42 enrolments and our academic partner managed 24 enrolments on behalf of ASB, taking the total to 66 students. We managed to exceed the target of getting 60 enrolments.

The fifth cycle started on time but the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe affected us too. The close of admissions got delayed from June to October. Due to restrictions of movement we conducted our interviews online using the Zoom video conferencing platform. We managed to get 74 students during this period. ASB had managed to enrol 70 students and our academic partner only 4 students. The institution also managed to create a positive figure in its balance sheet for the first time in its history.

3.6. The interview process:

We were trying to sell our programme without trying to understand customer requirements. We realized our mistake and started the system of interviewing different stakeholders to get a deeper insight into the requirements and to understand the decision-making process of students when they choose a business school for their higher education.

I managed to interview students who were studying at ASB, students who wanted to join the programme, students who did not join ASB, parents of prospective students, career counsellors and heads of coaching centres who prepare students for entrance examinations, members of the faculty team and the admissions officer. The length of the interview varied from 30 minutes to over an hour. Forty such interviews could be conducted over the last three cycles of the action research.

The interviews were recorded on a voice recorder, copied to my laptop, password protected to prevent any tampering, and then transcribed.

The recordings of the interviews which were copied from the voice recorder and stored on the computer hard discs were transcribed verbatim by me. In some cases, the interview was conducted in the local language, Malayalam. As I am a native speaker of the language, these interviews were translated by me to ensure that the meanings within the contexts were not altered.

The next step after completing the transcription was to read the transcripts many times. This helped in gaining an understanding about what the interviewees were expressing (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). In my research, despite talking about the same subject to multiple people over many months, it was important to read the transcripts again and again to see whether all the meaning could be understood. In some cases, the respondent drifted away from the core topic. Such deviations were left uncoded. Such off-topic material, also termed as dross, was excluded from the analysis (Burnard, 1991).

3.7. Ethical considerations:

I am a member of the faculty team and teach both the junior and senior students in our institution. I was cognizant of the fact that in case of studies where the researcher is in a position of power, any misuse of such power in the course of the study should be strictly avoided. All the participants were informed about the study and their consent taken. Participants were not forced, exploited or used during the process of research. They were free to leave the interviews or leave questions unanswered if they so wished (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

At ASB, we also have a system of periodic feedback where students can air their opinions and grievances without divulging their identities. As a result, any undue or unfair pressure on students could be reported.

In the process of interviews no sensitive question was asked. Hence, students were eager to participate in the study and I had more volunteers than the number I could interview.

I also contacted our alumni. They were also interested to take part in this inquiry. As I had no formal control over any of them, no issue of coercion arose. Interviews with students and other persons not connected with the Asian School of Business also did not involve any coercion issue. They were free to stop the interview at any point in time if there was any feeling of discomfort. When parents of prospective students were contacted, they were quite willing to express their opinions. They readily gave me the letters of consent.

3.8. Content analysis:

Content analysis is a research technique where a specific text is analyzed objectively and systematically in order to make inferences (Neuendorf, 2017). Content analysis can be carried out quantitatively as well as qualitatively. Quantitative content analysis has its roots in media and journalism, where it was used primarily to analyze documents, by

counting words and phrases using manual coding or computer coding (Cavanagh, 1997; Sjøvaag & Stavelin, 2012).

In quantitative content analysis the number of times a particular word, phrase or idea is repeated is counted. The analysis ends with the question, "how often does it occur?" On the other hand, in a qualitative analysis, explanatory answers to the questions, "Why?" and "How?" are required (Cavanagh, 1997).

"Content analysis is more than a counting game; it is concerned with meanings, intentions, consequences, and context. To describe the occurrences of words, phrases, or sentences without consideration of the contextual environment of the data is inappropriate and inadequate" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992).

3.8.1. Qualitative content analysis:

Instead of quantitative content analysis, qualitative content analysis was carried out in this inquiry. In qualitative content analysis, codes are generated from the data, which are then categorized using categories that are generated inductively or known from prior knowledge (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Forman & Damschroder, 2008). The categories are later grouped to form themes. At this stage, the researcher tries to offer explanations to the themes that have emerged. Theory may emerge at this stage from the analyzed text (Burnard, 1996).

3.8.2. Units of sampling:

The units of sampling in this content analysis were the persons I could interview. There were forty such units in this study.

3.8.3. Units of data collection:

The units of data collection were the statements made by the interviewees that had any relevance to the topic of study Neuendorf (2017). Across all the interviews, 552 units of data were collected.

3.8.4. Population:

The population or realm of inquiry (Neuendorf, 2017) for my action research study included all the students in Kerala who were looking forward to a higher education in management. However, practical considerations tempered the sample to students who were interviewed by our team for admissions and the students who study/studied in our institution.

3.8.5. Sampling:

In social sciences, probability sampling is ideal as this would help in generalizations from the sample to the population. However, social scientists turn to non-probability samples when constrained by time, money or availability. They may resort to purposive or judgment sampling where decisions to select appropriate samples are taken by the researcher. In an interpretive research the context is investigated in a holistic manner. Hence, it is not practical to study a very large number of whole situations in order to get a representation of the population Neuendorf (2017).

3.8.6. Nature of research question:

Fink & Gatz (1996) argues that the nature of the research question can fall into one of three types. A social scientific study is about measurable tendencies. A question that tries to understand contextual meanings of people indicates an interpretive study. Judgmental questions about the hegemony of values points to a critical study. My study can be classified as an interpretive study since I was trying to understand the contextual meanings of the decision-making process in a higher education choice situation.

3.8.7. Coding data:

There are two approaches to coding data- emergent coding and a priori coding.

When the approach is emergent coding, the data goes through a preliminary examination and certain categories are established based on the examination. When a priori coding is followed, the categories are established prior to the analysis based on some theory. Revisions are made as and when required to maximize mutual exclusivity and exhaustiveness of the codes (Stemler, 2000).

Burnard, P. et al. (2008) terms these approaches as deductive and inductive approaches. In a deductive approach, a predetermined framework is considered during the analysis of data. This approach suits researchers who have an idea of the probable responses of participants. However, such an approach has certain drawbacks. It is not flexible and can limit the development of theory as the researcher may not go beyond the framework. In the inductive approach, there would be no predetermined framework and the data derives the structure. This approach consumes a lot of time of the researcher and would be ideal when very little is known about the phenomena under study.

In my inquiry I had some idea about the possible responses from the participants. However, I decided not to have pre-conceived notions and tried to identify the variety of responses and perspectives that appeared to emerge from the transcripts. However, over a period of analysis, I tried to see whether the categories could be mapped to the 4 A's framework and it became evident that the categories were fitting quite well into the lower-level elements of the 4A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2019). There were certain themes that did not fit the framework perfectly and have been shown as a modification to the framework in our context.

Literature discusses variables that are pertinent in the context of student decisions in higher education, in general. There could be nuances in description based on the cultural context of Kerala. Researchers need to immerse themselves into the world of the message pool to generate variables from it. A researcher who is well-grounded in the reality of the messages would find that variables inductively emerge from the pool Neuendorf (2017). As a researcher and as a key member of the admissions team, I have been interacting with prospective students and interviewing them for admissions for five years. So, I consider myself fairly immersed in the pool of messages collected by me for analysis.

3.8.8. The process of qualitative content analysis:

Qualitative content analysis starts with the transcription of the interviews. The large amount of textual data from verbatim transcripts are then systematically transformed into a summary of key results (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

In qualitative analysis it is important to maintain an awareness of one's pre-understanding to ensure that it does not influence the results of the analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). This was kept in mind while carrying out my analysis.

The transcripts initially went through a process of condensation. Condensation is a process of shortening the text while still preserving the core meaning. It was seen that the condensed version conveyed the message of the original text. The next step was to create codes for the condensed meaning units. These were descriptive labels for the units that describe the meaning in a concise form.

From codes, I moved on to create categories. Codes get organized into a category when they describe different aspects of the text's content that belong together. These aspects could be similarities as well as differences. The categories get abstracted to a higher level to themes that

express an underlying meaning or latent content that is visible in two or more categories (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

As mentioned earlier, the 40 interviewees or units of sampling yielded 552 units of data or statements. These statements were condensed and codes were created. From the codes, categories were created to group the codes. Ultimately these were mapped to the themes or the 4 A's of Sheth & Sisodia's (2013) toolbox.

Out of the 552 units of data, 297 units could be mapped to the first "A" awareness, 188 units were mapped to acceptability, 21 units were mapped to affordability and 46 units were mapped to the final "A" accessibility. The process of identifying categories and themes from the codes generated from the transcripts are demonstrated in Annexures – 1A, B, C & D. A sample set of transcripts for each "A" of the framework are listed down and the formation of codes, categories and themes are described in these annexures. The evolution of the themes are also described in detail in the findings and analysis chapter.

3.8.9. Validity:

There are debates whether the analyses should be validated by a third party. It is possible to get a peer review independently done. However, if each researcher interprets parts of data differently, then how would one chose which is the stronger interpretation? (Burnard et al., 2008).

In my case, the members of the task force have been interacting together for many years now. I ran my interpretations through them to see whether distinctly different perspectives were emerging. Minor differences of opinions arose that were discussed in detail in the group and we arrived at a consensus that was acceptable to all. An illustration of this process is given below.

Proximity of the institution to home town came as an important factor in the decision-making process. However, a couple of students had mentioned that they wanted to be away from their home town. These contradicting statements were discussed within our team and the interview transcripts were revisited. We finally came to the conclusion that the students who wanted to be away from home wanted to gain confidence by being on their own. If the institution could help their development, then they were ready to compromise the comfort and support provided by the family. The statements were then mapped to value-addition and ultimately to acceptability of the programme/ institution.

3.9. The 4 A's framework:

Once the themes emerged from the content analysis it was seen that they could be mapped to the elements of the 4 A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2019). This framework is considered to be an improvement of the traditional 4 P's of marketing as it tries to consider each element from the customer's perspective and from the customer's role as a seeker, buyer, payer and user.

The mapping of the themes helped me to create a modified and expanded 4 A's framework that reflects all the aspects of student choices and the decision-making process in the context of the selection of a business school in Kerala. As my review revealed a dearth of literature regarding such student choices in Kerala or even in India, the revised framework can be considered as new knowledge that is actionable.

Once we realized the relevance of the framework for our institution, we looked at the 4 A's-awareness, acceptability, affordability and availability from the customer's point of view about ASB and our programme. Sheth and Sisodia warn marketers that the organization needs to score well on each of the 4A's as they are not compensatory in nature. The analysis revealed that we scored poorly on many A's during the initial cycles of admissions. As the team was able to improve the performance on each A, admission numbers started to go up and reached a level of stability in the fifth year.

3.10. Flow of narration:

The chapters that follow narrate the process followed by our task force during the action research cycles by questioning issues, reflecting and investigating, developing action plans, and implementing and refining the plans (McIntyre, 2008). Since one cycle of admission takes a year to complete, each year has been covered in a separate chapter.

How the findings of the qualitative content analysis helped our team to understand the student choices and supported the marketing activities of ASB are described in the final chapters.

Chapter – 4

Action research - Cycle -1
(Period 2015 June to 2016 June)

4.1. Introduction:

The account of my action research journey is a narration of my lived experience in this inquiry. My colleagues and I were given a very difficult task to manage. We planned, implemented the plans, observed the results and reflected on the results to see what changes are required to achieve our objectives. After five long cycles of activity, we reached success, both in terms of enrolment numbers and profitability.

A research inquiry is a failure if it does not generate any new knowledge. In my case, this objective too was kept in mind while carrying out different activities and while interviewing various stakeholders and analyzing their statements. Finally, a framework emerged from the themes of the interviews that reflects the reality for ASB. I hope that this framework applies equally well in case of other colleges in Kerala. I wish that other practitioners in the business of higher education in Kerala look at these results and check it's applicability in their own institutions (Koshy, 2005).

Even if the framework is applicable only to ASB, it is still new knowledge and our team has added our bit to the ocean of knowledge.

A chronological narrative is followed to take the readers through the actions, reflections and experiences of the team over this period. The writing project too was an action research project as I went through cycles of drafting, reflecting, getting feedback from the supervisors, revising, and finally formulating the conclusions (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005).

4.2. Admissions for the academic year 2014-15:

Action research is usually carried out in real time. However, one should realize that employees who have experienced something special or different in the organization carry a wealth of information in their minds. Hence, even retrospective action research would yield valuable organizational insights (Gummesson, 2003). I decided to look at the activities carried out by the admission team during the previous six months to get insights into the admissions process at ASB.

The admissions team at ASB started their activities from the second half of 2014 itself. The team was headed by a senior member of the faculty team. An admissions officer and two executives assisted him. A host of activities were undertaken by the team during the admission season. The team had participated in educational fairs, carried out seminars in four different colleges of the city, collected student data from centres where students wrote the entrance examinations for admission to MBA/PGDM programmes, contacted students using the database and arranged interviews to select the students for admission. Newspaper advertisements were released in the English language newspapers, "The Hindu" and "The Times of India" and in the two most popular Malayalam language newspapers, "Malayala Manorama" and "Mathrubhoomi." A full-page advertisement was released in The Times of India with the picture of the new director to announce that he had joined ASB and was at the helm of affairs.

The 2015 enrolment numbers went up from 15 in the earlier batch to 20. As a large amount of money was spent by the admissions team, this was a huge disappointment to all.

4.3. Creation of the action research group:

In an action research process, people who encounter critical organizational issues act in a creative manner to find solutions on their own by adopting a set of practices. Collaborative relationships between members of the organization create spaces for communication where learning is shared (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). The poor intake of 2015 made all of us realize that the task ahead was not easy despite hearing statements from the director that numbers would come as a result of the changes carried out by him.

I decided to create a group to help in the process of managing the admissions activities. In addition to the admissions officer, two colleagues agreed to support me. They were ready to support the research as they realized that positive changes in enrolment numbers and financial viability would be of advantage to them too (Roth, Shani & Leary, 2007).

Certain organizations term inquiries as organizational change programmes as the term research project may sound overwhelming to some of the employees (Roth, Shani & Leary, 2007). A similar change in semantics was applied at ASB by calling the team a *task force* to improve admissions. "It is not important what a group is called; the acid test is whether the people concerned are helping each other to take action on their pressing concerns and learning from this work" (Pedler, 2008).

The members of our task team had varied experience. Two of us had come from the industry with marketing and administration experience. The admissions officer had worked in ASB for over three years. The fourth person in the team had worked in another institution that offered MBA programmes. We expected our collaborative experience and idea generation to be effective. Team learning is more effective than individual learning and each member brings in his or her expertise into the inquiry and the whole adds up to more than the sum of the individual parts (Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002).

4.4. Commencement of action research:

Action research processes are carried out consciously and deliberately. The cycle starts with planning and followed by execution of the plan. After execution, the results of the action are evaluated. Evaluation helps in planning the next step and even in modifying the plan if that is warranted. The iterative cycles continue till the desired results are achieved (Coghlan & Brannick, 2005; Lewin, 1948).

Preparatory work for the admissions process at ASB starts in September. Most of the entrance examinations for MBA admissions take place during the period, January to March. Students are called for interviews during the period March to June. Classes for the new batch starts during the second week of June. Unlike Western universities that have two distinct intakes, fall and winter, universities and colleges in India have only one intake in June. Hence, in an institution like ASB, the cycle of admission related activities would take a year to complete.

The task force decided to meet every week during the initial months to review possibilities of action and work towards implementing them. A new admissions brochure was one of the first requirements. According to the admissions officer, all management schools in Kerala come out with an admissions brochure at beginning of every admission season. ASB also used to bring out a new brochure every year. In the brochure for the new admissions season, we decided to include details about our new director and the faculty team. The vast industry and academic experience of the faculty was highlighted as very few institutions in the state had teachers with similar corporate experience. As we did not have the capability to design the brochure in-house, an advertisement agency was hired to carry out the work.

The admissions officer had more than three years of experience at ASB. He informed us that participation in the educational fairs gives us student

data that could be used for marketing the programme. Fairs are usually conducted at eight major cities across the state of Kerala.

ISE is a group that organizes fairs only for MBA and PGDM aspirants. Management schools from Kerala, and from cities like Coimbatore and Bangalore in the neighbouring states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka take part in such fairs. On an average, 150 to 200 students visit the fairs at each centre. Many students are accompanied by parents when they come to visit the exhibition booths of various institutions. ISE organized the fair in 4 cities of Kerala, and we took part at all the locations.

Microtek, the biggest fair organizer, offers their stalls to institutes offering undergraduate as well as postgraduate programmes in various fields. They make arrangements with colleges in the cities and organize buses to bring students to the fair. As large numbers come together it is not possible to collect student details from all the visitors. On an average, each city provides about 300 contacts from the Microtek fairs. We participated in all the 8 cities in Kerala where Microtek organized the fairs.

"Aspire" educational fair is organized by Mathrubhoomi, a leading Malayalam daily newspaper. The fair attracts students who look for under-graduate programmes in different streams. After taking part in the fair at Trivandrum we realized that less than five enquiries came for MBA/PGDM programmes.

The admissions officer and I personally attended the fairs in various cities. We collected student data that included their name, number, email address and stream of education. This data was used to contact them later and check their interest in our programme. We also had short discussions with over 50 students at each location of the ISE and Microtek fairs. After returning to ASB, the task force sat down to review and reflect the information collected at the fairs.

Planning action:
Admissions brochure was commissioned with inputs from the members of the team about its content.
Decision was taken to take part in all the educational fairs.
Execution:
Brochure was designed and printed.
Team participated in educational fairs, distributed copies of the admissions brochure and collected student data.

4.4.1. Degree versus diploma:

ASB offered a postgraduate diploma in management. Out of the 102 institutions offering postgraduate management programmes in Kerala during the academic year, 97 offered MBA and 5 institutes offered PGDM programmes (AICTE, 2019d).

At the educational fairs we met over 600 students, and in many cases, their parents. Over 95 percent of the students and parents who came to the fairs did not know about PGDM programmes. We asked them to name the top-rated management schools in the country. Most of them had heard about the IIMs. The next question was to name the degree or diploma awarded by the IIMs on completion of their two-year management programme. Almost all of them replied that it was an MBA degree. When we informed them that the IIMs were offering PGDM and not MBA, most of them were surprised. Even after realizing that the IIMs offered a postgraduate diploma, they indicated that they would still prefer a postgraduate degree over a postgraduate diploma.

Evaluation/reflection:
Team was briefed about feedback from students and parents about the ASB programme.
Team reflected on the comments to understand its implication.

The bias about the term diploma could have evolved from engineering education in Kerala. Kerala has close to 160 engineering colleges (KTU, 2021) that offer four-year engineering degrees (Bachelor of Technology). Students need to complete their 12th grade and clear a common entrance examination to be eligible for admission to the engineering programmes. Kerala also has more than 50 polytechnics that offer a three-year engineering diploma programme. A student who has completed the 10th grade can seek admission to the diploma programme. After completing their engineering diplomas, students can gain lateral entry to the second year of the engineering degree programmes. This gives the perception that an engineering diploma is only as good as one year of study in an engineering degree programme. It was very difficult for parents and students to comprehend that a postgraduate diploma programme could be superior to a postgraduate degree programme. The level of awareness about the programme was low also because very few colleges in Kerala were offering PGDM programmes.

4.4.2. Application of the 4 A's toolbox:

Marketing fails to deliver in many cases since the focus is selling-oriented and the aim is only to make customers buy the product or service. Sheth & Sisodia (2019) realized this fact and studied over 400 marketing successes and failures to create the 4 A's framework to make managers view the business from the customer's perspective.

When we discussed and reflected about these important aspects about our programme, it was clear that there was very little *awareness* and even when awareness was created, there was not much of *acceptability* (Sheth & Sisodia, 2019) as our target segment had the feeling that a degree is far superior to a diploma.

Reflection Team reflected based on the elements of awareness and acceptability of the 4A's framework Feedback from student and parent interactions at educational fairs were used as inputs for reflection

Compared to the MBA programmes offered by the government colleges, the ASB PGDM was priced more than 4 times higher. However, the competition of ASB was more with the 80 privately managed schools. Private institutions charged tuition fees that ranged from Rs. 250,000 to Rs. 700,000. The fees of ASB at Rs. 480,000 was the 10th highest in the state according to an official of the Admission Supervisory Committee, a government body that regulates activities related to admissions to professional colleges in the state of Kerala. As the infrastructure and faculty quality were of a superior nature, the management did not want to lower the fees. In terms of *affordability*, ASB's PGDM programme was comparatively less affordable.

ASB is located in Trivandrum, the capital city of the state of Kerala. Trivandrum is well-connected by air, rail and road networks and hence quite *accessible* to any student who desired to join the institution.

It was not physically possible to meet all the students and have detailed discussions with them during the educational fairs. Hence, we decided to call the students using the contact details collected at the fairs and inform them in detail about our programme, quality of faculty and infrastructure.

4.4.3. Review of the output from the fairs:

Participation in educational fairs is an expensive activity. It was important to analyze the utility of taking part in these fairs. A presentation was made to the task force about the details of the fair and the data collected at different cities.

We managed to get a large number of student data from the fairs organized by Microtek. Details of more than 300 students could be gathered from each city. However, the level of interest shown in knowing about ASB and the programme was minimal. The fair organizers had made arrangements with colleges to bring students to the fair. It was more like a day out for them, away from classes. When the students were contacted later by telephone, the responses were lukewarm.

Aspire was another fair that yielded poor results. More than 90 percent of the visitors were interested only in the undergraduate courses. Just five visitors came to our booth to gather information.

Visitors to the ISE fair were more focused. They were looking for information about the various MBA programmes on offer. All of them were in the final year of their undergraduate programmes. Each city gave us more than 50 visitors who spent time with us trying to understand the details of the PGDM programme. Since there were more than twenty exhibitors, the same set of people were also meeting officials of other MBA institutions. The level of interest shown by the students when contacted by phone later by our team was better and one student finally joined the programme.

We decided not to take part anymore in the Microtek and Aspire fairs in future.

Reflection/evaluation
Utility of participation in educational fairs was reviewed

Modification/reframing of action:
Decision taken not to participate in Microtek and Aspire fairs in future

4.5. Admissions through consultants:

The Northeast part of India has many small states. The availability of quality education in that region is limited. Many students come to

Bangalore in South India to pursue their higher education as the city has a large number of engineering colleges and business schools.

A few years ago, our director tried to get students from the Northeast to bring in more diversity to the institute that he headed at that time. Many students joined that institution from the Northeast as a result of this admissions drive.

The director informed us to explore the possibility of getting students from the Northeast. We heard about a fair for educational consultants being organized at Ranchi in the Eastern region, Guwahati in the Northeast and Jammu in the North of India. Three of us decided to explore this possibility and decided to participate in the fair. The organizers brought about 20 institutions from different regions of India. They also invited educational consultants from various regions as visitors to the fair. During the day, the institutions could have discussions with at least 20 different consultants, exchange details and carry out networking activities that could be useful in the future.

Planning followed by action:
Action initiated based on past experience of director. Team members considered this as an opportunity to gain first-hand experience.

In India, a large number of educational consultants operate in big as well as small cities. They act as career counsellors and also as agents of educational institutions. For each student that comes to the institution through the reference of the consultant, a fee is charged.

Discussions with the consultants gave us the indication that the rates per student varied from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 100,000. In addition, they also wanted us to release a few newspaper advertisements locally and take up some billboards in their city to inform the local people about ASB as a management school from the South.

A few consultants were open and honest. They told us that there were many colleges in the North, especially in New Delhi and Punjab that were closer home. Many of them charged lower tuition fees. So there was no hope of getting anyone to come all the way down South to Kerala to join an institution that was not known in the North.

Consultants in the Northeast also gave the feedback that Bangalore was seen as a good destination because it was a metropolitan city with great job opportunities. Other places in South India did not have the same attraction.

After attending the fairs the task force had a review meeting. All of us felt that activities in such regions were not likely to produce any positive result. We decided not to pursue it any further.

> **Reflection by the task force:**
> Team shared their experiences gathered from the three different regions.
> **Modification/reframing of action:**
> A decision was taken not to visit the Northeast locations in the near future as the prospect of attracting students from the region was not bright.

4.6. Seminars at undergraduate colleges:

Many business schools in Kerala send their admissions teams to conduct admission seminars in undergraduate colleges. It is possible that students may view such seminars as sales pitches (Andersen, 1999). As Andersen suggests, such activities may help in building key contacts with teachers. A positive impression about the quality of the seminars can indirectly create a similar positive feeling about faculty and the institution.

Our task force also decided to try this out in a few colleges. We selected four colleges in Trivandrum district and two colleges in North Kerala. We realized that many students had no idea about PGDM programmes. Our presentations focused on the superiority of PGDM over the MBA programmes in Kerala. The following points were given importance in the presentation:

- More than 90% of the top 50 business schools in India offer PGDM programmes and not MBA.
- University MBA programmes in Kerala, especially the MBA programme under the Kerala university gets over only by September, while ASB awards its PGDM diplomas during March of the second year of the programme. Kerala university students may miss placements as many companies expect the fresh graduates to join them between May and July.
- The faculty of most of the MBA colleges are from the academic field, while ASB has faculty with good academic as well as corporate experience.
- ASB has one of the best infrastructure and facilities among business schools in Kerala.

Planning followed by action:
Seminars were planned based on past experience of ASB and individual experiences of task force members.
Team conducted seminars in undergraduate colleges to educate students and faculty about the PGDM programme of ASB.

4.6.1. Review of impact of seminars:

Different members of the task force had gone to conduct the seminars. The team met to discuss the initial feel from the student community. Students of engineering colleges did not show any interest in the presentations. Later discussions with the placement coordinators of the colleges revealed that many final year students fail to clear the examinations. As many engineering students are not even certain that they would qualify for higher education, the level of interest in a higher education seminar was low. A later report published by the Kerala Technological University confirmed this feeling. According to the report, only 36.41 percentage of the final year engineering students in Kerala managed to pass the examinations in 2019 (KTU, 2019).

Students from the arts and commerce streams had interaction with the presenters and asked questions to find out more about the programme. The team felt that more focus should be given to arts and commerce streams during future seminars.

Reflection by the task force:
Team shared experience at different locations in different types of colleges.

Modification/reframing of action:
A decision was taken to focus only on arts and commerce streams in future.

4.7. Data collection at examination venues:

There are many entrance examinations for getting admission to business schools in India. The tests that were accepted for admission for MBA and PGDM programmes in Kerala included the Common Admissions Test (CAT), Common Management Admissions Test (CMAT), Kerala Management Aptitude Test (KMAT) and Management Admission Test (MAT).

4.7.1. Common admission test (CAT):

The common admission test (CAT) conducted once annually by the IIMs to select students for their postgraduate programmes is considered to be one of the toughest tests in the world. Between 200,000 to 260,000 students appear for this test every year. To get admission to a top IIM, the student needs to qualify in the top 1 or 2 percentiles. Since the test is quite difficult, focused students start preparation by enrolling in coaching centres that prepare them for such tests.

4.7.2. Other admission tests:

Common management admission test (CMAT) is conducted by AICTE once every year. Except the top ranked institutes, other business schools accept CMAT scores for their admissions process. The test is conducted at over 75 cities across India.

Kerala Management Aptitude Test (KMAT) is conducted by the universities in Kerala twice every year. Every business school in Kerala offering AICTE approved programmes accepts the KMAT test scores for admission to their MBA and PGDM programmes.

The Management Aptitude Test (MAT) is conducted by the All-India Management Association (AIMA) four times every year. The ministry of human resource development of the government of India approved MAT as a national level test in 2003. Over 600 business schools across India accept MAT for their admissions process (AIMA, 2019).

4.7.3. Data collection:

Students reach the examination centres at least an hour before the start of the examination. At the gates of the centres, data collection agents of various colleges approach the students and offer them a copy of their admission leaflet. They request the students to provide their name, mobile number and email ID. After receiving a copy of the leaflet most of the students provide the details to the data collection agents. The data is fed into the computer system to be used by the tele-calling team at a later date. Close to 2000 names and numbers were collected by data collection agents appointed by us from various entrance examination centres across the state.

Planning followed by action: Data collection planned and executed based on past experience of ASB

4.8. Newspaper advertisements:

Newspaper circulation and readership in Kerala is one of the highest in the country. The leading regional newspaper, "Malayala Manorama," has almost 50% circulation share in the state. Upmarket readers who prefer English newspapers subscribe to "The Hindu," the popular English newspaper.

We decided to use Malayala Manorama and The Hindu for releasing our advertisements. As awareness creation was quite critical to the success of the admissions drive, the press advertisements were considered essential.

PUBLICATION	CIRCULATION (copies)
Malayala Manorama	2,370,033
Mathrubhumi	1,339,072
Deshabhimani	625,799
Mangalam	245,602
Kerala Kaumudi	226,360
Madhyamam	197,945
Rashtra Deepika	125,390
The Hindu - Kerala	145,454
Times of India – Kerala	94,993
New Indian Express - Kerala	48,977
TOTAL	**5,419,625**

Table-4.1. Circulation figures of newspapers in Kerala 2018

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation report June-December 2018

Planning followed by action:
Press advertisements released based on past experience of ASB

4.8.1. Review of the impact of press advertisements:

Newspaper advertisements are very expensive in Kerala since the readership and circulation are high for the major dailies. We had given the mobile telephone number of the admissions officer in the advertisement. He was asked to track all incoming calls and check whether the call was made after seeing the newspaper advertisements. We came to realize that individual advertisements generated a maximum of five enquiries and in a few cases, none.

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
Figures of incoming calls after releasing advertisements were analyzed by the taskforce.
Modification/reframing of action:
A decision was taken not to spend large amounts of money on press advertisements.

4.9. Publicity posters:

Our advertising agency was asked to design a poster announcing that admissions were open for our PGDM programme. The admissions officer went to about 20 colleges in the city and handed over our poster for display on the student notice boards. We also sent by courier about 150 posters to most of the colleges in Kerala that offered undergraduate programmes. A letter was addressed to the principal of the college giving an introduction about ASB and the new team. A request to display the poster on the student notice-board was also added. This activity was expected to create some level of awareness among our target group.

Planning and action:
Printing and dispatching posters about the ASB PGDM programme carried out based on planning to reach large numbers from the target segment at a lower cost than press advertisements.
Reflection/analysis by the task force:
Concrete figures on utility of posters could not be found out.
Modification/reframing of action:
A decision was taken to continue poster distribution next year also, as costs were very low and at least some students would become aware of the brand name, ASB

4.10. The intercollege quiz competition- BizKwiz:

Admission activities start in the month of January for most of the business schools in Kerala. By mid-January, the team met to review the initial response to telephone calls to students in our database. The number of interviews that could be scheduled was very low. The consensus was that we needed to bring more students to our campus. ASB had excellent infrastructure and facilities. We assumed that students who see that would be keen to join the programme. The issue at this stage was the method to bring some undergraduate students to ASB. As awareness creation using the traditional methods was not producing results, we needed to try out methods that were not conventional.

We decided to conduct a business quiz contest for undergraduate students studying in colleges in Kerala and the neighbouring states. Usual campus

quiz contests offer prize monies ranging from Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 15,000. To make our contest more exciting, we decided to offer prize money of Rs. 100,000 to the winners.

Posters were made to announce the quiz contest, which was named BizKwiz. A team of students and faculty went to colleges in the district. Posters were sent by post to all other colleges in the state of Kerala and a few outside the state. A couple of advertisements were also released in the newspapers about the quiz contest.

Planning and action:
The team considered various possibilities to bring in students to ASB. The quiz programme was considered by the team as the best possible option.

The quiz was attended by 50 teams from colleges within Trivandrum and also from colleges in Cochin in central Kerala and Kannur and Kozhikode in North Kerala. There was also a team from a college in Tamil Nadu, an adjoining state.

4.10.1. Review of the impact of BizKwiz on admissions:

The task force met again to discuss whether the quiz created any impact on the admissions drive. The activity gave us some publicity that also included reports about the quiz with pictures of the winners. We came to realize that there are serious quizzing teams in many colleges that attend all the quizzes in the state. As we could not bring in large numbers of spectators from the colleges, the programme was considered a failure from the point of view of admissions.

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
Number of students that came to ASB for BizKwiz were below expecations. Students who came did not show interest in the ASB programme.
The timing of the quiz close to the final term examinations too was inappropriate
Modification/reframing of action:
A decision was taken to consider a management festival for undergraduate students in the October – December period with multiple events, as a single event would attract only limited number of participants.

4.11. Placement activities:

The responsibility of placing the senior batch was given to one of the professors. A placement brochure was created and sent to many organizations. No major activity was planned to prepare the students for the interview process.

Internal discussions did not reveal the importance of campus placements as a major driver for admissions.

Planning and action:
The team did not consider placements to drive admissions.
Great focus was not given as a result.

4.12. Spirals within the action research spiral:

Action research is a cycle of activities that follows a spiral path. Planning is the first step in this research process. Planning is followed by action, observation and reflection. Reflection helps the researcher and the participants to understand whether the actions resulted in any improvement. The cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection continues along the spiral path until the desired results are visible (Koshy, 2005).

The spiral model of action research is given in Figure-4.1.

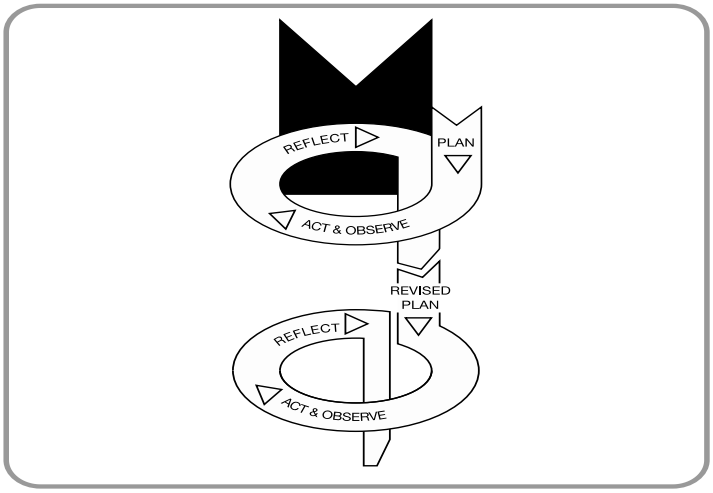


Figure-4.1. The spiral model of action research of Kemmis & Mc Taggart

Source: Koshy, V. (2005) *Action research for improving practice-a practical guide*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.

In practice, the four steps in the process may overlap and shift back and forth. In complex projects multiple spirals may form as topics and sub-topics evolve during the inquiry (Kember, 2005).

Each cycle of action research at ASB would take a full year to complete as admissions and enrolments happen once every year. Many interrelated and independent activities are carried out during this cycle. We realized that each activity needed planning, action, observation and reflection in a mini spiral within the overall spiral of the admissions process.

Each activity had its own impact on the process in terms of cost, manpower and effectiveness. Thus, it was required to make every activity productive so that the overall objectives could be achieved.

4.13. Student feedback mechanism:

Quality in higher education is indicated by the satisfaction expressed by the student, the primary consumer of the service. One of the methods of quality assurance in teaching is the use of student feedback on the perceived quality of the programme delivery by the faculty (Leckey & Neill, 2001).

The director was clear that students should provide feedback to the programme coordinator about the quality of classes. Mid-term feedback and end-term feedback were taken for every course. Students did not have to reveal their names. Ratings were given on various parameters that included the state of preparedness of faculty, delivery methods, timely feedback to students, approachability to clear doubts and so on. They could also add qualitative comments.

The feedback system started putting pressure on faculty who were not well-prepared.

We believed that the quality of ASB faculty was very superior in terms of their qualifications and experience. This had to be demonstrated in terms of the quality of classes.

One of the marketing electives was handled by a senior professional who had years of top-management experience in marketing and advertising companies in India and abroad. We had requested his services as a visiting professor. After the term, he was given another marketing elective for the next term. The students approached the coordinator and protested. They said that they did not understand what was taught in the earlier term. They did not want the same to happen during the next term too.

Our team sat to discuss this issue. We realized that the student feedback was not a report that had to be collected and filed. We were expected to act on it. As we promised a programme superior to that offered by other college around us, we could not leave the students dissatisfied. As marketing was also my area of specialization, I volunteered to teach the elective all over again and to handle the elective during the next term. The students enjoyed the class and gave a very good feedback. We used this opportunity to tell them that this was the difference at ASB. No institute would have taught a course all over again because of a poor feedback about a faculty. The students accepted this argument. We could sense that their satisfaction about the programme was going up.

Planning and action:
The feedback system was implemented seriously.
Reflection/analysis by the task force:
Discussions were held on the feedback by director and programme coordinator with each member of the faculty team.
Modification/reframing of action:
Changes were made in pedagogy
A complete course was delivered once again in one case to ensure student satisfaction and to justify our claim that we offer a far superior programme as compared to that offered by other institutions in the region.

4.14. Admission numbers in 2016:

ASB started to offer a serious and rigorous programme in a highly disciplined atmosphere. The faculty team felt that we were offering a very good programme. We needed to understand whether the students too felt the same. In addition to the individual course feedback from students, we had open sessions and individual sessions with the senior batch. We asked them for their suggestions for improvement and changes they wished to see at ASB. Students had very few negative comments. Almost all of them expressed their happiness and mentioned that the course added a lot of value to them and created positive changes.

However, despite all the activities carried out by the team, the number of students who joined ASB during the 2016 period was only 14.

The director wanted me to release a few more newspaper advertisements as I had spent only Rs. 6.5 million against the approved budget of Rs. 10 million. I told him that the faculty team was of the opinion that money

spent on press advertisements was not generating adequate responses that justified the spend. We decided not to release any more advertisements.

Reflection/analysis by the task force: The team reviewed response rates to press advertisements. **Modification/reframing of action:** A decision was taken not to release more advertisements as they were not likely to increase the number of admissions.

4.15. Action learning vs action research:

Action learning and action research are grounded in tackling issues that impact organizations or societies (Rigg & Coghlan, 2016). Both emphasize action. The scope of action is not only in the present and the future, even actions in the past need to be considered to increase our insights and knowledge. Action learning as well as action research involve active inquiry, learning and problem-solving (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). In action learning inquiries, the focus is on learning for the participants who are involved in the study. The learning may not go beyond those involved to a larger audience (Rigg & Coghlan, 2016). Action research inquiry may be more rigorous and systematic and the findings are always made available to the public (Zuber-Skerritt, 2001). As a result of the similarities between both these streams of inquiries an integrated approach using action learning and action research under the acronym ALAR has emerged over the past few years (Coghlan & Coughlan, 2008).

In our inquiry at ASB, some learnings emerged that could not be published but only kept as new knowledge within the participants. Certain institutions in our region resorted to unethical means to increase their admission numbers. It was not possible to publish such information in a thesis without proof. Hence, the inquiry at ASB may have some features of action learning within the overall action research inquiry. Kember (2005) argues that due to the very close relationship between action research and action learning, one may slip loosely between both terminologies.

4.16. Conclusion:

A new director, an experienced faculty team and a revised industry-oriented curriculum helped ASB deliver a very good postgraduate programme. However, a large number of students and parents could not be made aware of the advantages of PGDM over MBA. We had interviewed and made offers to about 40 students. Many did not accept

the offer. On further inquiry it came out that most of them preferred to join an MBA programme rather than a PGDM programme.

We were not aware of any business school carrying out activities very different from what we did. It was important for us to reflect and see whether we could have done any of the activities differently or done different activities. The team started 2017 with a determination to look at more options and review our past activities to come out with a better strategy for the admission season. However, circumstances were taking an unexpected turn that changed most of our plans. The next chapter describes how the next cycle of action research evolved at ASB.

Chapter – 5

Action research cycle -2
(Period 2016 July to 2017 June)

5.1. Induction of Rajagiri Centre for Business Studies (RCBS) as an academic partner:

Insider action research can be a slow process. There is a risk that the research initiatives are replaced by initiatives brought from outside the organization that may be faster to implement (Roth, Shani & Leary, 2007). The first cycle of actions at ASB did not yield the required results. The chairman of ASB who had waited for almost 12 years for a positive change decided to intervene. He arranged to get the support of a partner institution that knew the higher education market in Kerala well and was successful in running MBA and PGDM programmes. He managed to sign an academic partnership agreement with the Rajagiri Centre for Business Studies (RCBS), one of the well-known business schools in the state of Kerala. The chairman expected that the RCBS brand image and support would help in filling up the seats for admission at ASB and reverse its fortunes.

Rajagiri group of institutions is a large educational network run by Carmelites of Mary Immaculate, a religious congregation founded in Kerala, India. The group manages a school, an undergraduate college offering programmes in arts and science streams, an engineering college and business schools offering both PGDM and MBA programmes.

'India Today', the magazine with the highest readership in India (Media Research Users Council, 2019), conducts an independent rating of business schools in India. According to the report of 2019, RCBS is ranked as the 23rd best private business school in India and the 41st best on an overall basis. The only other business school from Kerala in the top 50 school list is the Indian Institute of Management, an 'Institution of National Importance', ranked 8th overall (Deka, 2018).

RCBS started offering MBA degrees affiliated to the Mahatma Gandhi University in 1995. Later they added the PGDM programme in 2008 to offer a more industry-oriented programme. During the academic year 2016-17, RCBS offered admissions to 120 students in the PGDM programme and 120 students in the MBA programme. In addition, a specialized management programme with focus on human resources management, Master of Human Resources Management, admits 40

students each year. Over 3000 students apply for these 280 seats. Selection is based on various factors that include academic performance, test scores of entrance examinations for management programmes, performance in the group discussion, and personal interview (RCBS, 2019).

With the arrival of RCBS as an academic partner, the power structure changed. An Internal Quality Assessment Cell (IQAC) was set up with the executive director of RCBS, principal of RCBS, the director of ASB and a few senior members of the faculty team of RCBS as members. The IQAC became responsible for all approvals and strategic decisions. The director of ASB did not accept this new structure and left ASB. A senior faculty from RCBS was brought in as the new director on a temporary basis.

The faculty team at ASB decided to follow the curriculum of the RCBS PGDM programme. RCBS had offered to support the teaching process by deputing senior professors to ASB to handle specific courses. Since the curriculum was the same, visiting faculty found it easy to manage the courses taught at ASB.

RCBS gets a large number of recruiters for campus placements. In 2017, 135 recruiters offered jobs to students of RCBS (RCBS, 2019). RCBS promised to provide opportunities to the students of ASB in pooled placement drives that take place at RCBS. Students of ASB welcomed the partnership as they were getting associated with one of best business school brands in Kerala.

5.2. Change in the task force:

The new partnership and the resignation of the director created certain changes in the faculty team. Five faculty members left ASB and two new members joined the team. One of the members who left ASB was also part of the task force. Fortunately, one of the new faculty members showed full support for our admissions drive and became part of the task force.

5.3. Activities planned for the 2017 admissions season:

The task force had completed a full cycle of the admission process. During the process, we had initiated actions and reviewed its impact on the admissions. After every set of student interviews the team met to share thoughts on insights gained from the interaction with prospective students.

One of the students who joined ASB had accepted the offer of admission since he had met the ASB team during a seminar at his undergraduate college. This made us decide to conduct seminars in about six colleges in Kerala. The number of colleges were decided keeping in mind the time available beyond teaching hours for such activities. We decided to select colleges from which students had come to join ASB. The three-hit theory of advertisement exposure (Schiffman, Wisenbilt & Kumar, 2016) was possibly relevant for activities like seminars too. The team decided to conduct at least three seminars in each college that was selected for this activity. At least during one of the visits we planned to take an alumnus of the institution who was presently doing his/her PGDM at ASB. The experience of the student at ASB could be shared with the students of the college. We knew that the impact created by the experience shared by the alumnus would be far more powerful than the presentations made by the faculty of ASB. Three visits to the same institution would help in making the students *aware* of ASB, understand the *relevance* of the programme and get *reminded* of its advantages.

We also decided to participate in the educational fairs conducted by ISE for MBA aspirants and collect student data from examination centres that conduct entrance examinations for admission to MBA/PGDM programmes.

After collecting student data we planned to create a team of tele-callers to contact the students and market the programme.

5.4. Action plan proposed by RCBS for ASB:

RCBS was fairly confident that they could get enough admissions for ASB. Hence, they did not want the ASB team to carry out activities parallelly. We were told to hold back all activities till they told us to proceed.

The RCBS philosophy was to offer a very good programme and conduct activities that would make students happy. They believed that happy students would talk about the institute positively and generate enquiries for the programme from prospective students.

During the admissions season of 2017, a banner was displayed at RCBS to inform students that such a partner institution existed in Trivandrum. As RCBS gets more applications than the number of seats available for admissions, a large number of students were there on the waitlist who were still searching for MBA admissions. Offers for admission to ASB were made by RCBS to such students.

5.5. Activities carried out by the ASB team for 2017 admissions:

The task force asked RCBS whether they could participate at least in the ISE fair for MBA aspirants and collect data from examination centres. This was approved and over 2000 student data was collected from the fairs and the examination centres.

A tele-calling team was organized to call the students and pitch the programme to them.

Planning:
Planning for this cycle was carried out taking into account the activities that worked well as well as those that did not work well.
Action:
The confidence of RCBS in getting adequate number of students using their system made them halt most of the activities of the ASB team.
Commitment from the top (Pedler, 2008) was coming down in the case of the ASB task force.
Reflection:
Without giving up, the team looked at possible areas where contributions could be made.
We learn best when we are committed (Weinstein, 1999). Our task force was committed to the cause of ASB and wished to contribute whatever possible to its success.

5.5.1. Result of admissions activities in 2017:

Expectations of large numbers of students from the process at RCBS did not materialize. RCBS managed to get 16 students, but two of them did not complete their first year of studies. The admissions team at ASB managed to get 15 admissions. The total went up to 29 students.

The financial controller of the group informed us that it would require about 50 to 55 students in every batch in order to operate without cash losses. The number 29 was well below the requirements of the chairman and the management of ASB.

5.6. Other activities:

Once students join ASB, it was important to deliver an excellent programme so that the students feel a positive change in them and spread word-of mouth publicity that could be beneficial to ASB and bring in more students in future.

RCBS philosophy also matched our thoughts. The team sat together to chart out activities that could make the students happy and help in delivering an effective programme.

5.6.1. Induction and the bridge programme:

Students who join the programme come from different academic backgrounds. ASB gets engineering graduates as well as graduates from different streams like arts, science, commerce, business administration and nursing. In the first year of the MBA programme, they had to learn accounting and quantitative techniques.

RCBS has a formal three-week bridge programme that introduces the concept of accounting and quantitative techniques to students. They also have an English professor for communication who has a very innovative and interesting pedagogy. We decided to run a similar programme at ASB. Our faculty planned to teach accounting and quantitative techniques. We requested RCBS to send us the faculty to handle the communication module.

5.6.2. "Deeksharambham"- the inauguration of the new batch:

RCBS has a process of starting each batch with a formal ceremony. They told us that such ceremonies create a good feeling in the minds of the students and make them feel that the programme is very special and different from all the courses they have attended so far. "Deeksharambham" is a Sanskrit word that signifies the beginning or initiation of a new learning experience.

After the bridge programme, we arranged a formal ceremony for the new batch. The IQAC team from RCBS was invited for the programme. The faculty team held lit traditional lamps in their hands and the students came in one by one to light lamps held in their hands from the lamps held by the faculty team. The ceremony was intended to signify transfer of knowledge from the teacher to the student. Parents of the students were also invited to witness this ceremony.

5.6.3. Outbound training:

Learning communities are formed when new students work together on common assignments and projects. Such communities promote student engagement. Positive experiences develop when the students find that they are accepted, included and encouraged by their friends and teachers. These experiences create a sense of belonging that helps the process of engagement (Korhonen, et al., 2019).

We heard that students of RCBS were sent for an outbound training during the first term. We too found a team in Trivandrum that conducted similar activities. The new batch of students were sent to the training camp located in the hills in the bordering state of Tamil Nadu. Two members of the faculty team accompanied the students.

The training was conducted in a picturesque locale by expert trainers. Students were put up in tents to experience the outdoor life. A number of team-building activities were conducted. The programme also included a trek to the top of a hill and a campfire. The students gave us a positive feedback about the training programme. They commented that the training created a better sense of camaraderie in them.

5.6.4. Pedagogy and curriculum delivery:

The PGDM programme gives a lot of flexibility to the institution to offer courses that makes the student fit for a corporate job. Special programmes to improve communication, training on advanced excel, training to operate statistical packages like SPSS and so on were added to the regular courses.

The course-wise feedback from students indicated that they found the courses interesting and adding value to them.

5.6.5. Placement drive:

In one of the review meetings of the task force, an idea came up to check the factors considered by the top MBA career guidance portals while rating and recommending business schools to MBA aspirants. The main factors considered in these reviews included fees, placements, average salaries earned by the graduates, infrastructure and faculty profile (Careers360, 2017; Indiaeducation, 2017; MBAUniverse.com, 2017). We decided to focus on placements since that single factor could make students and parents talk positively about ASB.

One member of the faculty team was made responsible for the placements drive. Using her corporate and personal contacts she contacted companies to present the graduating batch of ASB.

Preparing the students for the interviews was another activity. Literature on preparation for interviews was shared with all the students. A book containing a hundred possible interview questions was also given to them. Each student was asked to select fifty difficult questions from the book and prepare answers from their experience and perspective. They

were also asked to make summary notes of the core subjects so that the fundamental areas in subjects like marketing, finance, organizational behavior and operations could be refreshed quickly before the interviews.

The task force conducted mock interviews and arranged group discussions to make the students familiar with the process of selection.

We understood that many organizations conducted aptitude tests to shortlist candidates for the interviews. We realized that such training required specialized knowledge that was not available within the faculty team. External experts were hired for this training programme.

After every interview the students were asked to report back to the faculty in charge of placements. The process of selection and the questions asked during the interview were shared. This information was passed on to the rest of the class to help them prepare for future interviews.

The placement drive was very effective. Out of the batch of twenty students, three had opted out of placement activities as they had plans of going abroad or joining their family businesses. All seventeen students who wanted placements were placed in good organizations with an average salary on a cost-to-company basis of Rs. 494,000 (ASB, 2019).

Planning and action:
The RCBS association gave us a lot of ideas.
The bridge programme, Deeksharambham, out-bound training, and placements were planned and initiated.
ASB pedagogy was fine. The RCBS association gave us access to very senior and experienced faculty of RCBS.
We invited them to handle some of the courses.

Reflection:
Feedback was taken from the new batch.
The formal inauguration gave an impression of seriousness.
Outbound and bridge programmes were appreciated by the students.
Near 100% placement became a very good talking point for admissions.
Reframing of action:
All the actions that received appreciation were to continue
It was also decided to give higher importance to placements.
Decided to make the training for placements more elaborate.

5.7. Conclusion:

We understood that just because of an academic partnership with a bigger brand, large number of students were not likely to join ASB. A number of activities were required to be done by the ASB team to increase the number of student admissions. We assumed that RCBS would give ASB more responsibility and role in the admission process as they could provide only 14 admissions during the 2017 admissions season.

We also realized that the programme was our core product and the student experience should be extremely satisfactory in order for them to go out and speak positively about it. The new activities had created a positive impact on the students and they expressed these feelings during many formal and informal feedback sessions. I started to record these comments since positive impressions of students were coming out as a major factor that would result in positive word-of-mouth publicity. The task force started to feel that the programme had reached a level that was acceptable to all, including the recruiters, which was evident from the campus placement figures. The team now needed to look at additional activities to bring the number of admissions to a more respectable level.

Chapter – 6

Action research cycle -3
(Period 2017 July to 2018 June)

6.1. Review of 2017 admissions:

The partnership of ASB with RCBS was done with the expectation that a big brand would bring in the required number of admissions. RCBS gets applications from over 3000 students. They had only 280 seats for their PGDM and MBA programmes. As a result, a large number of students are rejected during the selection process. RCBS gave such students an offer to pursue their PGDM at their partner institution, ASB.

Students who applied to RCBS knew about the PGDM programme. A large number of the RCBS PGDM students received campus placements at salary levels that are considered high by the standards of business schools in Kerala.

However, as only 29 students had finally joined ASB despite efforts from RCBS and to some degree ASB, there was a need to reflect on the reasons for such a performance. There was now a need to understand how students choose an institution for their higher education in management. Without a deep understanding of the choice factors, ASB would not be able to attract the required number of students.

6.2. Change of personnel:

The admissions officer who was there at ASB for over 5 years received a job offer at a considerably higher salary and left the institution. The director who had come to ASB on deputation from RCBS went back to RCBS as he was more interested in academics than in administration. ASB managed to carry on for a few months before these positions could be filled. As the positions were more administrative in nature, delivery of the curriculum did not get affected.

The admissions officer had worked for about 5 years at ASB. He worked with me for two years. He shared all the data he had with me during these two years. I was also familiar with the activities of the department by then. An office assistant was trained to take over all the recording-keeping and documentation activities of the department. Since he left after the admissions season of the previous year it did not cause us much of a problem.

The Internal Quality Assessment Cell (IQAC) of RCBS was controlling the administration and approvals of ASB. The movement of the director did not make a big change to the system. The coordinator of the PGDM programme was appointed as the point person who would interact with the IQAC team and manage the programme. It was not a very effective system, but the organization could operate without any major issue.

6.3. New director and change in admissions strategy:

According to the rules of AICTE, business schools should have full-time directors to manage the institution. RCBS appointed a new director for ASB in December 2017. We were told that the director had excellent contacts with educational consultants and would be able to get us the required number of students without difficulty. The new director also brought with him a new admissions officer.

The director and the faculty team had many interactions in December and January. He stated that he had vast experience as an international marketing manager in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Since I had worked in that region for over 15 years, I asked him the details just out of curiosity. The details turned out to be firms that never existed during that time period. This made us probe further and it came out that he had no connections with any educational consultant. He had claimed that he managed to get 1500 students enrolled for the PGDM programme in a business school in Bangalore where he worked as the director. We checked the AICTE statistics page and found that the institute had wound up its PGDM programme.

The faculty team took up these issues with RCBS and told the IQAC team that admissions and the future of ASB would be in jeopardy if such a person continued at the helm of affairs. RCBS agreed to remove the director on the condition that the responsibility of admissions would be accepted by the faculty. We accepted the challenge. As the responsibility was handed over only by the first week of March, the IQAC told us that any number over the 2017 admissions would be acceptable.

6.3.1. Educational fairs:

We decided to take part in the ISE educational fairs focused on MBA aspirants. The tele-calling team contacted the students who had shared their contact details at the fair venue. The calls resulted in three students coming to ASB to attend the admission interview. Two students out of the three finally joined ASB.

6.3.2. Data collection from entrance examination centres:

We arranged teams to collect student data from examination centres that conduct entrance tests for MBA/PGDM programmes. Before collecting student details, a mini brochure was given to each participant. The brochure presented highlights of the programme and the eligibility criteria for admission.

6.3.3. Modifications to the tele-calling strategy:

The task force met the tele-calling team for a strategy meeting. As ASB did not have any customer relationship management software, it was decided that we would create a format in excel to help us monitor and control the tele-calling activity. As the first step, all student data collected from the educational fair and the centres for entrance examinations was entered into a master file. The task force met the tele-calling team every morning to get the review about the previous day's activities. Targets for the day were set during the review meeting. Calls that yielded positive results were passed on to the admissions officer in order to schedule interviews.

The examination centre data helped us to arrange 6 interviews with prospective candidates. One student from this list finally joined ASB.

Planning and action:
Data collection at examination centres were planned and actions taken.
As per our earlier decisions, we participated only in the MBA-focused ISE fair
Planning carried out to improve quality of calls.
Daily review and targets set for tele-callers.
Reflection:
Meetings were arranged every week with the task force to review status of admissions and make course corrections.

The admission team also received walk-in enquiries and telephonic inward enquiries. The admissions officer personally attended to these enquiries and scheduled interviews wherever possible. 10 such candidates had come for the interviews and 6 of them joined ASB.

6.3.4. Website enquiries:

During the earlier admission seasons the responsibility of managing the website was given to a member of the faculty team who was considered to be a specialist in information technology. During this period no website enquiry had come to us. The faculty who handled the website

resigned and left for another institution. The job of managing the website was shifted to a member of the task force.

We started analyzing the web traffic. The site had seen a few hundred visits during the year. On further analysis we realized that the enquiries on the site were not getting directed to any mailbox in ASB. A change was immediately made to redirect all the mails to the admissions officer. From the very next day we started receiving enquiries about our programme at the rate of 15 to 20 every week. As students had taken the trouble to visit our website, enter their names, email addresses and contact numbers, it was clear that they were serious about the query. I asked the admissions officer to call the students and answer all the web enquiries within 24 hours of receipt of the enquiry.

Planning and action:
Website activities were reviewed
Reflection:
Analysis found that system was not configured correctly.
Reframing:
Mail system created to direct enquiries to admissions team.
Resulted in 3 admissions.

The website enquiries resulted in 11 interviews. 3 students who attended the interviews finally joined ASB.

6.3.5. Digital marketing activities:

A digital marketing agency was hired to carry out targeted advertising to youngsters in the age group of 21 to 25 years through Facebook. The agency created small advertisements about ASB and its PGDM programme. These were released as mini campaigns on Google and Facebook. Students who saw these advertisements could click on them and be diverted to a landing page. More information was provided to them after they entered their contact details. 161 enquiries came to us as a result of the digital campaign. Two enquiries were converted to admission interviews and finally to admissions.

Digital marketing turned out to be a cost effective medium. The agency charged a monthly retainer. Amounts spent on Google and Facebook were based on number of clicks our advertisements received. Since we had to make payments only when someone took the trouble to click our

advertisement, it was considered more effective than other media like newspapers and magazines where the viewership was uncertain. We could track print media response through telephone calls received on the number mentioned in the press advertisement. Our earlier experience was that the responses were less than 5 calls for any advertisement that cost hundreds of thousands of rupees for each advertisement.

Planning and action:
Planning for cost-effective methods to create awareness as press advertising was rejected due to cost and lack of effectiveness.
Digital marketing agency appointed
Reflection:
Meetings to review impact of digital marketing in terms of numbers and quality of enquiries.
Reframing/Modification:
Amounts allocated for different media were adjusted based on the effectiveness that evolved during our analysis.

6.3.6. Referrals and word-of-mouth publicity:

Word-of-mouth consists of information and communication that customers who experience a product or service convey to others in their circle (Schiffman, Wisenblit & Kumar, 2016). Such information can be positive as well as negative depending on the quality of experience. The credibility of word-of-mouth is high as customers realize that there is no personal gain for the person who communicates his/her experience.

In a study in non-metropolitan cities in North India by Arya (2010) found that word-of-mouth publicity brought in significantly positive difference in the number of admissions in educational institutes. It has also been observed that the performance of higher education institutions can be greatly influenced by word-of-mouth since positive publicity can facilitate the process of future admissions in a very big way (Smith & Ennew, 2001).

The task force decided to offer a gift to students who referred their relatives or friends to the PGDM programme of ASB. This was publicly announced. We also added that they should do so only if they were convinced that the period they spent at ASB made a substantial, positive change in them. References of ASB students gave us two admissions. Search for literature on this subject of impact of such rewards for student

referrals on admissions did not yield any result. However, I knew that universities like the University of Liverpool also offer a token incentive (compared to the tuition fees charged) to students who refer prospective students to join any programme.

One member of the task force had taught for a couple of years in a college offering undergraduate programmes. He was considered to be a good teacher there. Six students of that college came to ASB for interviews hearing that the faculty was now teaching at ASB. Two of them finally took admission. There were a few more references from the alumni network. The final tally of students that came through references and word-of-mouth publicity was 16. Out of these, 9 finally joined ASB.

The task force decided to extended the gift for referrals to the alumni also from the next admissions season. It was decided that they need to be informed about the scheme well before the start of the season.

Planning and action:
Planned strategies to convert student satisfaction into more effective word-of-mouth publicity
Scheme for referrals announced.
Gift and public appreciation offered as reward
Reflection:
Effective as a very large percentage joined ASB as a result of referrals.
Gave the team an indication of the power of referrals
Reframing/Modification:
Decided to continue the scheme next year too and announce the scheme well in advance
Decided to bring in alumni into the scheme.

6.4. Areas that needed further investigation:

Experiences of the members of the team in different organizations and educational institutions were used to create the plans of action at ASB. We came to realize that practical knowledge needs to differentiated for specific situations since what is effective in one setting need not work in a different one. No two situations are likely to be identical. Hence, we needed to reflect and reason and understand the changes needed as we moved from one situation to another (Coghlan, 2011).

Awareness about ASB and PGDM was found to be low during our interactions with parents and students at different forums. During the

second cycle one of the best business school brands was there to support us. They also offered a popular PGDM programme. RCBS with its brand image and large pool of applicants could only give us 16 admissions.

Brand awareness has an important role in consumer decisions (Sheth & Sisodia, 2013). Without awareness the brand does not even enter the consideration set (Nedungadi, 1990) of the consumer. ASB, in the earlier years, had released advertisements in the main English and Malayalam newspapers of Kerala. These involved substantial costs but generated single digit enquiries for admission. The task force decided not to advertise in newspapers. However, it was critical to find out the methods to create awareness about the institute and the programme among prospective candidates.

The prospective students of ASB can be considered to be millennials or from generation Z since most of them would have been born in the late nineties. Studies indicate that this generation depends a lot on the internet for shopping, news, entertainment and socializing. As they use digital media profusely, marketing communication is also likely to be effective through the digital media (Smith, 2012). They also rely a lot on peer reviews, internet searches and websites for finding product or service information (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). The type of media prospective students use to find about higher education opportunities was an area that needed investigation.

The team knew the impact of educational fairs. General fairs did not result in any admission enquiry. Specialized MBA fairs got us at least one to two admissions.

Teachers and counsellors have significant influence in educational choices of students (Chapman, 1981; Maramba, et al., 2018). During the admission interviews, a few students indicated that they came to ASB since their teachers commented that the institute had qualified faculty and delivered a good programme. Influence of such teachers and career counsellors on student choices was an area worth exploring.

It was also necessary to understand the importance of accessibility of the institution in terms of distance from the home town of students, acceptability of the programme among the student community and parents and affordability of the programme since it was priced at the highest level among all the postgraduate management programmes in the city.

These issues were addressed during the interviews with prospective students and present students of ASB and other stakeholders.

Reflection/analysis: Need to understand the important factors in the choice of institutions for higher education. **Action:** Interviews planned with stakeholders of ASB

6.5. Inquiry through interviews with stakeholders:

It was important to get further insights into the factors affecting student choices. Formal interviews were scheduled with prospective students, present students and likely influencers in the decision-making process related to higher education choices. Qualitative interviewing, as Gaskell (2000) points out, is a widely used methodology in data collection that helps in discovering that there are perspectives that are different from those of the interviewer.

Instead of looking at very large samples, I looked at more appropriate participants who were aware of the topic being researched and best represented it. Such deliberate choice of informants, known as purposive or judgment sampling, sets to find participants who are able and willing to give information (Tongco, 2007). Sufficiency of the size of the samples is measured more by its depth rather than by numbers (Morse, et al., 2002; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013).

One-to-one interaction is critical in generating qualitative data, hence, access to participants is essential to carry out qualitative studies. In my study, I was in a position to access participants and invest a fair amount of time and resources that was required to carry out such activities, which generated a wealth of rich information. (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

6.6. The interview process:

I informed the students about my inquiry and requested those who were interested to be part of the study to come for an interview. Almost all the students were ready to volunteer. They came to my office when they did not have classes and were free. With their permission, the interviews were recorded on a voice recorder.

A list of questions was prepared for the interview. Attempts were made to ask most of the questions. Since I wanted the students to feel relaxed and

come out with all the thoughts and reflections, the format was only loosely followed.

6.7. Ethical considerations:

I am a member of the faculty team and teach both the junior and senior students in our institution. I was cognizant of the fact that in case of studies where the researcher is in a position of power, any misuse of such power in the course of the study should be strictly avoided. All the participants were informed about the study and their consent taken. Participants were not forced, exploited or used during the process of research. They were free to leave the interviews or leave questions unanswered if they so wished (Bell & Bryman, 2007; Creswell, 2013).

At ASB, we also have a system of periodic feedback where students can air their opinions and grievances without divulging their identities. As a result, any undue or unfair pressure on students could be reported.

Interviews with students and other persons not connected with the Asian School of Business did not involve any ethical issue. They were free to stop the interview at any point in time if there was any feeling of discomfort. When parents of prospective students were contacted, they were eager to express their opinions.

6.8. Conclusion:

Most of the management schools start their activities for fresh admissions at least by January, if not earlier. Our task force was given the responsibility to get admissions for ASB at a much later date. During the previous year, RCBS had managed to get 16 admissions for ASB and our team managed to get 15 admissions, taking the total to 31 students. Two students who came from RCBS left after a few months. After the first term, we had 29 students on board, 14 from RCBS and 15 from ASB.

During the 2018 admissions, the number from RCBS dropped to 7. The ASB team despite starting late, managed to get 23 admissions taking the total to 30. This achievement was appreciated by the management.

The task force met to review the admissions. The website revamping and focused digital marketing activities were new initiatives. These activities generated 5 admissions. References gave us another 9 admissions. It was also important for us to know how the word-of-mouth publicity and references could be made more effective.

During the study, I managed to interview eighteen subjects in detail that included students, prospective students and possible influencers of student choices. Over the next few cycles of action research this number increased to 40. The details of the transcriptions, coding, analysis and findings are discussed in detail in Chapter -9.

Still far away from our objectives, we entered the next cycle of admissions with much apprehension.

Chapter – 7

Action research cycle-4
(Period 2018 July to 2019 June)

7.1. Review of 2018 admissions:

The ASB team managed to get 23 admissions despite starting the work only by the first week of March. We had offered admissions to 25 more students who did not accept the offer. A question that emerged in the task force review meetings was about the choices exercised by these students. We wanted to know where they joined instead of ASB. I decided to take up the job of calling up each student to see whether some information could be collected about their final choices.

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
A query came up during one of the review meetings. This was to find out why some students did not accept the ASB offer of admission.
Action:
Decision was taken to contact students to understand their decision process and choices.

7.1.1. Feedback from students who rejected the ASB offer:

The task force was now very clear about the importance of student feedback on admissions. The information collected from students who joined ASB was helping us to understand the positive features of ASB and its programme. It was equally important to find similar facts from students who decided not to join. The factors that made them decide against joining ASB would help us to identify the areas that needed improvement.

I personally called all the 25 students who did not accept the offer of admission to ASB despite attending the interviews. A set of standard questions were asked to all the students.

Questions asked to students who did not accept the ASB offer of admission.

1. You had attended the interview at ASB and received an offer of admission, but you did not join. Did you join any other college for your higher studies?
2. Which college did you join?
3. Which programme are you doing there?
4. Why do you consider that programme superior to the ASB PGDM? (for students who joined a PGDM programme)
5. Did anyone advise you to join an MBA programme instead of PGDM? If so, who gave you that advice? (for students who joined an MBA programme)
6. If fee was the issue, what do you think is an affordable fee for a good MBA programme? (for students who said that the ASB fee was not affordable)
7. What were the reasons for you to choose a college outside the state of Kerala for your MBA programme? (for students who joined colleges outside Kerala)
8. What made you decide against joining a management programme? (for the student who decided to do his master's degree in commerce)

3 students out of the 25 mentioned that they joined the PGDM programme of the School of Communication and Management Studies (SCMS) in Cochin. They chose SCMS since it was considered to be a better brand than ASB. 'India Today', one of the leading English weeklies in India and 'Careers360', a career guidance site both publish their own lists of the best management schools every year. Other than IIM, Kozhikode, two other institutes feature in these lists - RCBS and SCMS (Careers360, 2019; Deka, 2018).

Sixteen students joined various other colleges that offered MBA programmes instead of PGDM. The only reason stated for choosing the colleges was that the programme was MBA. Many of them mentioned that the decision was influenced more by the advice received from parents or other senior members in their families.

Three students stated that the fees charged by ASB was not affordable. They were not very clear about the quantum of an affordable fee for MBA.

Two students joined colleges in Bangalore and Tamil Nadu since many of their friends joined those institutes and they preferred to be together.

One student went to UK for his studies. Another decided to join a regular college to do his postgraduate degree in commerce as he was expecting to get selected to the Kerala state cricket team and could not manage a heavy academic load along with his cricket practice.

7.2. Plan to change programme from PGDM to MBA:

We have been constantly receiving feedback from parents and students that they preferred an MBA programme to the PGDM programme. Such feedback was shared with us when we met each other at the educational fairs, and during the formal interviews that was undertaken as a part of this process of inquiry.

RCBS also shared this view. A consultant hired by the chairman of ASB started to work for getting approval for an MBA programme. We approached the University of Kerala in Trivandrum and the Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) in Cochin and submitted our applications for the approval to start a new MBA programme. The applications were not approved as the government of Kerala had put a ban on approvals for new MBA colleges.

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
Team became certain about the importance of offering a programme that was demanded by and acceptable to customers.
Action:
Application for starting an MBA programme submitted.

The number of MBA colleges and the seats on offer in the state of Kerala had grown at a fast pace during the first decade of the century. During the period 2013-14 to 2015-16, the actual enrolment fell below 60%. The government of Kerala decided not to give approval to any new MBA college in the state as there was already an oversupply of MBA seats.

YEAR	Number of MBA/PGDM colleges (under AICTE)	Availability of MBA seats (Under AICTE approval)	Actual enrolment	% of enrolment to availability
2012-13	77	6920	4917	71%
2013-14	81	7890	4457	56%
2014-15	81	8010	4735	59%
2015-16	83	7980	4891	61%
2016-17	84	7848	3805	48%
2017-18	84	7710	4163	54%
2018-19	81	7210	4109	57%
2019-20	82	7242	4139	57%

Table. 7.1. Enrolment details of students to MBA/PGDM programmes in Kerala

Source: AICTE (2019) Enrolment statistics [Online] Available from: http://www.facilities.aicte-india.org/dashboard/pages/angulardashboard.php#!/approved (Accessed: 14 June 2019).

7.2.1. The IIM Bill-2017:

The government of India established Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) at Calcutta and Ahmedabad in 1961. These institutions were established outside the university system as specialized institutions so as to give them a higher level of autonomy and flexibility. In order to promote high quality management education and training, more IIMs were set up in different states of the country. The 20th IIM at Jammu started its academic activities from the year 2016-17. IIMs are institutes registered under the Societies Act. As a result, the students of the two-year postgraduate programme in management were offered a Postgraduate Diploma in Management (PGDM). The doctoral programme of these institutions was called the Fellow Programme in Management (FPM) and the students were awarded the title, Fellow of the Indian Institute of Management. Only universities or institutions that were given the special status of "Institution of National Importance" by the government of India were permitted to use the nomenclature of Master of Business Administration (MBA) and Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees.

The PDGM programme found industry acceptance and did not pose a problem for the students. The FPM programme was finding it difficult to attract more students as the degree did not have global acceptance. Those who had completed the degree found it difficult to convince institutions and organizations outside the country that it was equivalent to or better than a PhD degree offered by a university in India.

The government of India, hence, decided to declare the IIMs as Institutes of National Importance. This declaration enabled the institutes to change the nomenclatures of PGDM to MBA and FPM to PhD. The parliament passed the Indian Institutes of Management Act -2017 in the parliament that changed the status of all the IIMs to Institutes of National Importance. After deliberations, IIM Bangalore started awarding MBA and PhD degrees from the 2019 convocation; IIM Ahmedabad, IIM Calcutta and some of the newer IIMs followed this practice (MBAUniverse, 2019). The other IIMs also changed the nomenclature of the degrees awarded from 2020 onwards.

Most of the institutes that offer PDGM programmes, used to state that the programmes were far superior to the university MBA programmes. The superiority of PGDM was justified by saying that all the IIMs and majority of the other institutes in the Top 25 list of business schools offered PGDM programmes. The IIM bill and the move by the IIMs to award MBA and PhD instead of PGDM and FPM created quite a bit of consternation among the institutions that offer PGDM programmes. More than 500 private B-schools grouped under the Education Promotion Society of India and made representations to the human resource development ministry of the government of India. The B-schools argued that the level playing field would be lost when the IIMs shift to MBA instead of PGDM. They made a request to the ministry to create a national management university, which could then recognize these institutions and permit them to convert the PGDM to MBA degrees (Kohli, 2017). No action has been taken so far to start such a national management university.

7.2.2. Change in policy of the All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) 2018-19:

Every technical programme offered in India requires the approval of the AICTE even if they are sanctioned by and affiliated to central and state universities. Only programmes run by the departments of state universities or institutions of national importance are outside the purview of the AICTE. Once a course or institution gets approved, they need to extend the approval every year. The IIM Bill and its impact on the PGDM programme resulted in a policy change by the AICTE. In the approval process handbook of academic year 2019-20, AICTE added a new clause- a permission to convert an existing PGDM programme to an MBA programme (AICTE, 2019b).

7.2.3. Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT) approval for ASB MBA:

The consultant presented the IIM bill to the higher education department of the government of Kerala as a reason to request the change of the PGDM programme to an MBA programme. He argued that the move of the top institutes like IIMs from PGDM to MBA would make it difficult for the lower-ranked institutes to attract students for their PGDM programmes. The change in policy of AICTE for the conversion of PGDM to MBA was also cited.

The higher education department of the government of Kerala accepted the argument presented by ASB. As more seats were not being added to the PGDM programme and only a change in nomenclature was taking place, ASB was permitted to apply for the approval for the conversion of the PGDM programme to an MBA programme. CUSAT accepted our application, placed it before the university senate and received their approval. An inspection team from the university came to ASB. They found that the infrastructure and facilities were acceptable as per the university norms. A formal letter of recognition soon followed. Finally, ASB received permission to offer an MBA programme where the degree would be awarded by CUSAT. The university permitted ASB to offer the new MBA programme from the academic year 2019-20.

7.3. Activities for admissions 2019:

The chairman was hopeful of getting the approval for the MBA programme for the new academic year. However, he instructed us not to start the admissions process till a clarity about the programme emerged. We could not mention that we were offering an MBA programme till the written approval was available. Mentioning PGDM and then changing it to an MBA could also get us into unnecessary issues. The uncertainty, however, resulted in loss of productive time during the peak period of the admission season.

The team decided to start some activities even before the approval. The details of the activities carried out during the period are given below.

7.3.1. Educational fairs:

The ISE educational fairs took place in January and February. As we had seen in the past that serious MBA aspirants visit the fair, we decided to take part in it. We told the students that the PGDM may get converted to an MBA. The fairs gave us the opportunity to collect the contact details of the students. The tele-callers used this data later during the admissions period.

7.3.2. Data collection at entrance test venues:

KMAT is the entrance examination considered by all the management institutes in Kerala for their MBA programmes. The test venues gave us a large number of student contacts as in the past.

7.3.3. MAT examination at ASB:

The All India Management Association (AIMA) conducted their February 2019 edition of the Management Admissions Test (MAT) for the Trivandrum region at ASB. Over 100 students came to ASB to write the test. A help desk was arranged to assist students who wanted to know about the programme at ASB. A large banner displaying the pictures of the students of the 2017-19 batch who received good campus placement offers was placed in the lobby near the help desk. The names of the recruiters and their annual compensations were also mentioned in the banner. Many parents approached the help desk to enquire about the campus placement situation at ASB.

More than 20 percent of the students who came to write the MAT examination at ASB in February 2019 were not aware that MAT scores could not be considered for admission to MBA programmes in Kerala according to the new regulations stipulated by the Admissions Supervisory Committee. The staff at the help desk at ASB during the MAT examination advised students who were interested to study in Kerala to write the KMAT examination in June 2019. This incident gave us an insight into the low level of awareness of students about higher education programmes and their admission requirements.

7.3.3.1. Admission Supervisory Committee for professional colleges:

In 2006, the government of Kerala set up a committee, called the Admission Supervisory Committee (ASC) headed by a retired judge of the high court or the supreme court. ASC supervises the process of admission of students to professional colleges and institutions.

Other than the IIMs, PDGM programmes are offered by autonomous institutes in the private sector. IIMs use only their Common Admissions Test (CAT) for their selection process. A Supreme Court of India order of 2013 permitted PDGM institutes across the country to use MAT as an entrance test (AIMA, 2019).

The ASC ordered that from May 2016, professional colleges offering admission to MBA programmes could accept only CAT, CMAT or KMAT. Tests conducted by non-governmental bodies, like the Xavier

Aptitude Test and MAT, could not be used for the selection process. This order was challenged in the High Court of Kerala, but the petition was dismissed, and the ASC order was ratified by the court (India Today, 2017).

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
To find activities that could be carried out to get admissions even without getting clarity about the MBA approval
Action:
Participation in fairs
Data collection from entrance examination venues

7.3.4. Billboards:

The chairman of ASB reiterated that he did not want to spend money on newspaper advertisements as the shelf life was just a few hours and the costs extremely high. The task force tried to look at other alternatives to announce at least to people in Trivandrum that ASB was offering an MBA programme with the degree offered by CUSAT. Billboards emerged as a possibility. The team contacted a few agents who had billboards available on short-term leases for one to two months. We went around with the agents to select the appropriate sites.

We chose three sites with excellent visibility. These were located on the three main highways that lead to Trivandrum city. As the billboards were placed near highways, the travelers get only a few seconds to read the message. Hence, it was important to keep it simple and short. A single image on a simple background is also recommended by experts (Hardenbrook, 2013) and this was followed in the design of the ASB billboard. The fonts used for the message were large and readable from a long distance (Dizon, 2017).

Fig-7.1. ASB billboard on the Main Central State Highway leading to Trivandrum.

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
During our interactions with students and the general public we understood that the awareness about ASB was low. Discussions for low-cost options resulted in the idea for billboards.
Action:
The team visited over 50 sites and selected 3 that had excellent visibility from a long distance.

7.3.5. Digital marketing activities:

The agency that carried out the digital marketing activities during the 2018 admissions were asked to do a similar campaign during 2019 too. They released *push* advertisements to targeted audience on Facebook. Search engine optimization activities on Google were also done to bring ASB as an early listing when students search for good MBA colleges in Trivandrum or Kerala. Additionally, a chat box was added on the website that would share programme details and admission requirements after collecting student data. The chat details were automatically sent to the admissions officer as an email, who responded by calling the person within 24 hours.

7.3.6. Referrals:

My interviews with the students of ASB revealed that all of them considered ASB as one of the best management schools in Kerala. More than 90% of the students also mentioned that they would recommend ASB to any friend or relative if asked for advice. The power of referrals was known to us by now. We announced the student referral scheme to

both the junior and senior batches. We also informed about the referral scheme to the batches that graduated in 2017 and 2018. Students of these batches also experienced the new curriculum and had expressed their satisfaction about the programme and pedagogy, and the change it brought to them.

7.3.7. Tele-calling activities:

As in the previous year, a three-member team was constituted to make calls and report the status to the admissions officer. The task force had daily reviews with the team. A control sheet was created and updated after every call. Hot prospects were passed on to the admissions officer to schedule interviews. If any student needed further advice or clarification, the details were passed on to me so that I could call and speak to such students personally.

Admissions is a sales job. It is the sales of a service, called education. An effective admissions officer needs to be an effective sales person. Students and parents are the primary customers of educational institutions and they see the world from their vantage point. The sales person needs to step into their shoes to understand their perspective (Fisher, Ury & Patton, 2011). Some of the prospective students mentioned about the tall promises made by various institutions regarding the programme and job placements at the end of the programme. One of the rules for success told by Joe Girard, rated as the greatest salesman in the world by the Guinness Book of World Records, is to tell the truth (Girard, 2013). We gave training to all members of our team not to make any false promises. In the case of campus placements, we told the prospective students that we provide training and support for placements. Performance in the selection process was totally up to the student, so no guarantee was offered on placements. We believed in the philosophy of under promise and over delivery.

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
Our senior students of the earlier two batches had commented that ASB never made a promise that could not be fulfilled. When we reflected on this comment, we came to certain conclusions.
Action:
All the members of the faculty and staff were advised not to make any claim that could not be delivered. The philosophy of under promise and over delivery was formed for ASB.

7.3.8. Change in the interview process:

During the previous years, interviews were scheduled as and when a student showed interest in our programme. A panel of two or three members from the faculty team interviewed the prospective student and announced the result within 48 hours.

This year we decided to conduct the selection process only on Saturdays. Every Saturday we managed to bring a set of students (numbers varied from 4 to 9) to ASB. A presentation was made about ASB, the profile of the faculty, campus placement details of the previous batch, pedagogy, and finally, details about the CUSAT MBA. The new director and I managed these presentations. Most of the students came for the interview with their parents. The parents were also requested to attend the presentations.

The students went through three rounds of the selection process. They started with a group discussion, which was followed by a personal interview. After the interview, the students wrote a short essay to demonstrate their skills in written communication.

Students found the process at ASB quite rigorous that made them feel that the institution was quite serious about the programme.

Planning:
Plans made to create an impression of seriousness and rigour in the process of selection of students.
Action:
New process of selection was implemented, starting with a presentation about ASB, followed by a group discussion, personal interview and written assignment.

7.3.8.1. Demonstration of the power of word-of-mouth:

On 29th April 2019, eight prospective students were called for an interview. The brother of one of the prospective students had completed the ASB PGDM programme in March 2019. This student had joined ASB in 2017. As he had some minor learning disorder, his parents had no certainty that he would successfully complete the programme. He not only graduated, but also managed to get a job as a manager in a large corporation. During his first month in the organization, he managed to outperform every other colleague in his branch.

His guardian had accompanied his sister as she came for the interview on the 29th April. During the interaction with other parents, he discussed the positive transformation that ASB brought about in his ward. The remarks of this guardian had a great impact. Six students interviewed that day joined the programme. The other two also wanted to join but could not do so due only because of financial constraints.

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
The impact of the talk by the guardian was discussed. Also realized that involvement of parents in the decision is very high.
Action:
A decision was taken to publish testimonials from the parents about their satisfaction about the programme delivered by ASB and its impact on their wards.

7.4. Results of the activities for admissions:

The admissions activity started late in the 2019 admissions season as we were told to wait for the confirmation about the formal approval for the CUSAT MBA programme. However, the response from the prospective students was very good and the ASB admissions team managed to arrange interviews for 76 prospective students.

The task force had meetings during the admissions season. Discussions with the prospective students indicated that quality of teaching and excellent placements were factors that made them approach ASB for admissions. We realized that to achieve good placements we also needed good students who had the capability and willingness to absorb the training and perform well. The faculty team rejected 7 applicants since they did not have the correct attitude and the aptitude for the programme. 4 students failed to secure the minimum marks specified by CUSAT and the ASC.

Offers of admission were made to 65 students. 42 out of them accepted the offer and joined the new MBA programme. RCBS managed to bring in 24 students. The total intake went up to 66, that was beyond the most optimistic projection made by all of us at the beginning of the season. The IQAC and our chairman met us and decided not to go beyond this number. We wanted to run the new MBA programme as effectively as we had run the PGDM. After getting that confidence, we could look at bigger numbers.

The task force once again met to discuss the reasons for achieving the numbers. We also wanted to find why the 23 students who were offered admissions refused to join ASB.

7.4.1. Main factors for joining ASB:

During the admissions interviews with each prospective candidate, we checked how they came to know about ASB and what factors made then decide ASB as one of the choices for their higher education.

The biggest contributor to the admissions of 2019 were referrals. Out of the 76 students who came to ASB for interviews, 30 students came as a result of referrals. Former students of ASB referred 11 students. Teachers who managed training or coaching centres for undergraduate students sent us 7 students. People who knew ASB and its programme fairly intimately, referred 5 students.

Students who came to ASB for admissions had good interaction with the faculty team and saw the facilities and infrastructure. They also were aware of the campus placement records of ASB. Some of these students referred ASB to their classmates and friends. 7 students approached us for interviews as a result of such referrals. The summary is given in Table-7.2.

Source of information/reference	No. of students
Students and alumni of ASB	11
Training/coaching centre tutors	7
People connected with ASB (former teachers/ other associates)	5
Reference of new students	7
TOTAL	**30**

Table. 7.2. Summary of source of referrals-2019 admissions
Source: Admissions database ASB

Persons who referred ASB to the prospective students highlighted the quality of the faculty and the programme, the specialized training given to perform well in job interviews and the high percentage of students placed at fairly high salaries in organizations of repute.

7.4.2. Other sources of admission:

The website and chat enquiries resulted in 14 interviews and 9 enrolments. Inward calls and enquiries contributed to the scheduling of 19 interviews that resulted in 8 enrolments. The digital marketing activities, billboard advertisements and word-of-mouth promotions could

all have contributed to this relatively larger number of enquiries when compared to numbers of earlier years.

The ISE fair participation resulted in 2 interviews and 1 enrolment. At the fair we were not in a position to announce the CUSAT MBA. That could be the reason for this low number.

Data collected from the KMAT examination centres resulted in bring in 6 students for the interview process. Only 1 student from this lot finally joined ASB.

ASB was the venue for the MAT examination. As mentioned earlier, many students were not aware that the MAT scores were not considered for admission to MBA programmes in Kerala. The ASB admissions team help desk guided such students to write the KMAT examination. We had collected over 2000 student data from KMAT examination venues. As compared to that number, only about 100 students had come to write the MAT examination at ASB. They had experienced the facilities and seen the infrastructure of ASB. When contacted by the admissions team, the responses were relatively more positive. 5 students out of the 100 came for the interviews and 3 of them finally joined.

Source of students other than referrals	**No. of students who attended the interview**	**No. of students who joined ASB**
Website and chat enquiries	14	9
Inward calls	19	8
ISE Fair	2	1
Data from KMAT examination centres	6	1
Data from MAT examination venue at ASB	5	3
TOTAL	**46**	**22**

Table. 7.3. Summary of source of student other than from referrals-2019 admissions

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
Understanding the reasons for students to select ASB.
Action:
Decision was taken to work on all the positive factors in order to make it even better for the next admission season.

7.4.3. Reasons for not accepting the ASB offer:

The ASC has given the colleges offering MBA programmes in Kerala some flexibility in charging fees. The variation in fees is quite high in the MBA programme as compared to other postgraduate streams of study. The seven University Institutes of Management (UIM) run by the University of Kerala charge only Rs. 100,000 as fees for their MBA programmes (University of Kerala, 2019). Most of the private colleges charge fees between Rs. 250,000 and Rs. 300,000 per year according to details published on their websites. SCMS Kochi charges the highest tuition fee of Rs. 700,000 for their MBA programme (SCMS, 2019). The officer in charge of MBA programmes at the ASC informed me that the Rs. 480,000 charged as fees for the two-year programme at ASB was the 10th highest fee for MBA programmes in Kerala.

Many students write the entrance examination for admissions to the MBA programme. Most of them do not have an idea about the cost of the programme. Parents and students assume that the fees would be similar to the other postgraduate programmes in Kerala.

Tuition fees for undergraduate and postgraduate education in Kerala in streams like arts, commerce and business administration are quite low when compared to many countries across the world. University College in Trivandrum is a 150-year old institution run by the government. The NIRF rating ranks the University College as the 23rd best college in India. The annual tuition fee for an undergraduate programme is as low as Rs. 660 ($9) and for a postgraduate programme it is Rs. 1100 ($15) (University College, 2019). Mar Ivanios college is a college classified as an aided college by the government of Kerala. The government pays the salaries of the faculty and staff of such aided institutions. The fees are slightly higher in such colleges. Mar Ivanios college charges Rs.1705 ($23) per year as tuition fees for undergraduate programmes in English literature, economics and commerce and Rs. 2510 ($34) per year for postgraduate programmes in similar streams (Mar Ivanios, 2019). A privately-run college like the Christ Nagar College in Trivandrum charges up to Rs. 29,000 ($387) per year as tuition fees for an undergraduate programme in commerce and business administration.

Once the letters offering admission to the programme reach students and parents asking them to pay the first-year fees and confirm their intent to join the programme, many have second thoughts. This was apparent in the case of students who did not accept the admission offer to ASB. 11 out of the 22 students cited financial issues as the reason for not accepting the offer.

Two students decided to pursue their undergraduate streams, one in fisheries science and the other in philosophy. Three students cited proximity to home town as the issue. They did not want to stay in the hostel away from home. They preferred colleges near their homes. All the three were female students. Two female students who were from Trivandrum did not join as ASB did not provide transportation to and from the institution. Most of the schools and colleges in the city offer the services of school buses and college buses. Many students did not want to travel to college using the public transportation system. The parent of an engineering student told us that she was not keen to send her daughter for an MBA programme as it was very different from what she had studied during her undergraduate programme. Four students did not respond to our enquiries.

The reasons for not accepting the offer of admission from ASB are tabulated below:

Reason for non-acceptance	**No. of students**
Fees are not affordable	11
Pursuing streams other than MBA for higher education	3
Proximity issues	3
Transportation not provided by ASB	2
TOTAL	**19**
Note: Three students could not be contacted	

Table 7.4. Reason for non-acceptance of ASB offer of admission
Source: Admissions database ASB

Reflection/analysis by the task force:
The team reflected to understand the reasons for students to select ASB as well as the reasons for not joining ASB.
Action:
The actionable area was only that of tuition fees.
Team realized that it was difficult to bring down fees.
Team decided to highlight the value the student and parents get from ASB to justify the fees.

7.5. Was MBA the only reason for better admissions?

After crossing the target set for the task force during the 2019 admissions season, the team sat again for a discussion to check whether the change from PGDM to MBA was the sole reason for the success.

If MBA was the only reason for the increased number in admissions, then other colleges in Trivandrum and nearby towns and cities should also have shown very high enrolment numbers in their MBA programmes. An analysis revealed that this was not the case. The MBA programme of the College of Engineering, Trivandrum (CET) was the only exception. CET is a government college that is rated among the top 100 engineering colleges in India. As it is a government college, the fees charged for their MBA programme is only about 1/3rd of the fees of ASB.

Most of the institutes offering MBA programmes could not fill their approved capacity. Colleges in Trivandrum district could only get 48% of their approved capacity as their intake.

COLLEGE NAME	UNIVERSITY	APPROVED SEATS	INTAKE 2015-16	INTAKE 2016-17	INTAKE 2017-18	INTAKE 2018-19	AVERAGE INTAKE 2015-16 TO 2017-18	INCREASE IN INTAKE OF 2018-19 OVER AVERAGE	ADMIISIONS TO APPROVED STRENGTH % 2018-19
ALLAMA IQBAL INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT	Kerala	60	17	1	21	12	13	(1)	20%
C H MOHD. KOYA MEM. COLLEGE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES	Kerala	60	37	16	55	20	36	(16)	60%
CARDINAL CLEEMIS SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES	CUSAT	60	0	8	0	0	3	(3)	0%
COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING TRIVANDRUM	KTU	120	120	106	146	109	124	(15)	91%
CONSPI ACADEMY OF MANAGEMENT STUDIES	CUSAT	60	58	53	49	58	53	5	97%
DC SCHOOL OF MGT AND TECHNOLOGY	Kerala	120	37	32	45	31	38	(7)	26%
G. K. M. CO-OPERATIVE COLLEGE OF MGT	Kerala	60	33	26	13	8	24	(16)	13%
KERALA INSTITUE OF CO-OPERATIVE MGT	Kerala	60	55	33	47	60	45	15	100%
KERALA INSTITUTE OF TOURISM AND TRAVEL STUDIES	Kerala	60	48	20	50	40	39	1	67%
LOURDES MATHA COLLEGE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY	KTU	60	53	16	40	23	36	(13)	38%
RAJADHANI INSTITUTE OF ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY	KTU	120	120	99	67	55	95	(40)	46%
TRIVANDRUM TOTAL		**930**	**599**	**424**	**562**	**446**	**507**	**(91)**	**48%**
TOTAL		**5160**	**3342**	**2560**	**3160**	**2776**	**2978**	**(262)**	**(262)**

Table 7.5. Approval and intake data of MBA students in business schools in Trivandrum district

Source: AICTE (2019) List of AICTE approved Institutes in `Management``PG` for the state Kerala for the academic year: 2018-2019. [Online] Available from: http://www.facilities.aicte-india.org/dashboard/pages/angulardashboard.php#!/approved (Accessed: 20 June 2019).

The earlier discussions with students and parents indicated that PGDM was not acceptable to many as an alternative to a postgraduate degree. Many students and parents had rejected our offer of admission because of this factor. They were, however, happy with the faculty profile, infrastructure, pedagogy and placements.

The changeover to the MBA degree made the programme acceptable to most of the students and their parents. In comparison to other colleges in the district, we managed to get the required number of students with much lesser effort as compared to the earlier years. As a large number of prospective students had come to us by the medium of word-of-mouth information, we realized that the good work carried out by the team at ASB was being appreciated, discussed and spread among the student community in the region.

RCBS could also manage 24 admissions against 7 of the previous year. It is possible that the change from PGDM to MBA made this happen.

7.6. Conclusion:

The task force realized that students experience great value addition when a good programme is delivered rigorously by a team of dedicated teachers. A well-prepared and well-trained student also finds it relatively easy to get a place in a good organization. When these happen, the positive word-of-mouth goes around and tempts prospective students to consider ASB seriously.

Fees are important as a good number of students went to look for cheaper options after getting admission in ASB. We needed to talk to them and convince them that if a well-paying job can be managed from campus, then the fee becomes money intelligently invested.

Brochures would still need to be distributed at examination centres. Digital marketing can be strengthened as it drives students to the ASB website. Students consider the website as an important source of information.

After four years of struggle, planning, action, reflection, and review, the task force finally managed to achieve and exceed the targets set by the chairman of ASB.

There were some comments that we had achieved our numbers more by chance than by good work. During the next cycle, we needed to achieve

and exceed these numbers to prove that our achievement was not a chance event and that it could be sustained over the future.

The final cycle of this action research journey is narrated in the next chapter.

Chapter – 8

Action research cycle-5
(Period 2019 July to 2020 September)

8.1. Admissions activities for the new academic year:

The team was clearer about the activities that needed to be carried out for admissions for the year. Agents were sent to the KMAT test venues to collect student data and distribute the ASB brochures. The digital marketing agency was asked to start their activities. We took part in the ISE educational fair at three locations in the state.

8.2. Student placements:

We were fortunate to get good offers of placement from reputed organizations this year too. By March, almost 95% of the senior batch was placed. We planned to use this fact in our admissions activities.

8.3. Digital marketing activities:

The digital marketing agency mentioned that Instagram was more popular among the student community and suggested that we needed to post pictures and videos on this medium. We arranged to get a series of one-minute videos prepared for this campaign. The videos had students talking about their experience at ASB. Parents discussed the change it brought to their children. Faculty gave tips on career choices and the KMAT examination.

Posters were created about life at ASB. Senior students who received placement offers from different organizations were also shown in some of the posters.

Data from the agency showed that some of the posters and videos were getting up to a thousand views. That gave us the confidence that our campaign was reaching a fairly wide audience.

8.4. Billboards:

We had rented 3 billboards the previous year. This year we decided to take one prominent billboard in the heart of the city. As it was located in a very crowded area with slow-moving traffic and pedestrian movement, we assumed that the billboard would increase the awareness about our MBA programme and placements.

8.5. Educational fair:

Our experience during the early years made us realize that the ISE educational fair focused on MBA education was the only fair that brought us serious enquiries. This year since we had an MBA programme of CUSAT, we assumed that the responses would be better. We took part in the fair at three locations across the state.

The fair ultimately resulted in giving us two admissions.

8.6. College visits:

As in the past, we decided to visit undergraduate colleges this year too. During the earlier visits, a leaflet describing ASB and our programme was given to each student after the seminar. This year we decided to give something more useful that would be retained with them for a longer period.

A booklet titled, "Graduated-What Next?" was created by our team. The first section described various career options open to students after completion of their undergraduate programme. The booklet started with the requirements to pass the examinations conducted by the Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS). Many students after their graduation try to clear this examination to get placed in public sector banks of India. The book also gave a brief idea about the requirements to clear the civil services examination. The guide also contained details of higher education programmes that could be considered after graduation like the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) UK, Certified Management Accountant (CMA) USA, Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA), Certified Financial Planner (CFP), Cost & Management Accountant (CMA) India, Company Secretary (CS) India and MBA.

The next section listed five hundred words and their meanings. These words were used in the verbal section of earlier KMAT tests. Another section covered basic tips to solve arithmetic problems. The last section had a compilation of general knowledge questions from earlier KMAT tests. The last two pages and the back cover gave details about ASB and the new MBA programme.

Since the booklet did not look like advertisement material of ASB, the colleges readily permitted us to distribute the booklets to the students of the final year.

8.7. COVID-19 invades Kerala and the rest of India:

The first case of COVID-19 in India was reported in Kerala. A medical student studying in Wuhan, China had returned to her home town after the outbreak of the virus in China. Tests found that she carried the virus from China. This was reported on 27 January 2020 (Andrews, et al., 2020).

The virus spread fast and on 24 March 2020 a nationwide lockdown was imposed (Singh, 2020). In Kerala, schools, colleges, offices and shops were closed down. Public transport stopped functioning. Only essential commodities and medicines were available. People could leave their homes only to buy essential commodities.

Final semester examinations of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes were postponed indefinitely.

8.8. Impact of the lockdown on admissions:

We had conducted 50 interviews before lockdown. 19 students had paid the initial deposit to confirm their admissions. Lockdown was a shock to everyone. It brought in a huge feeling of anxiety to students and their parents. Many students who received the offer of admission from us refused to take a decision. They wanted more time to see whether colleges would reopen soon. Many wanted to take a call only after completing their final semester examinations, which were postponed indefinitely.

All activities related to admissions came to a standstill. None of us were going to the ASB campus. College seminars and the booklet distribution could not be continued as no colleges were open and functioning. We checked with the IQAC team at RCBS. They too had stopped their admissions and told us to hold back all activities.

8.9. Online interviews:

Our admissions team waited till the third week of April. We realized that the lockdown was not going to be lifted soon. By this time, activities on online platforms started becoming popular. We decided to hold interviews on the Zoom video-conferencing platform. Holding an effective group discussion online was difficult, so we decided to restrict the selection process to a personal, in-depth interview followed by an essay writing assignment to check the writing skills of the candidate.

Candidates were ready to attend the online interview as they did not have to leave their homes. Responses to online interview calls were quite

positive. Even candidates who were not very serious about an MBA programme attended the interview. We took it as an opportunity to tell the prospective candidates about ASB and our MBA programme.

By end June, we had conducted 60 interviews online which took the total number of interviews to around 110. The number of candidates who accepted the offer and paid the first instalment of fees went up to 35.

Reflection:
All activities related to admissions came to a standstill.
There was a need to look at options urgently.
Since physical interaction was missing, we needed to engage with our students and the newly enrolled batch through the online mode.
Planning and action:
Online interviews were planned and initiated.
Student engagement activities online, were also planned.

8.10. Online activities for students:

Classes for most of the subjects for the first-year students were over when the lockdown was announced. A few remedials were taken using an online platform. The final examinations scheduled in April were indefinitely postponed.

The placement team contacted various organizations that had started operations online. They were ready to give internships to the students that could be done from home. This was very important since the students could spend their lockdown time effectively and even earn some income. The students appreciated these efforts from the placement team.

The students have a big role in the admissions activity by spreading positive word-of-mouth publicity. We also planned other activities online to make them feel that their interaction with ASB was still at a high level.

8.10.1. International day of yoga:

The international day of yoga is celebrated every year on 21 June.

Every year, on the international day of yoga, a qualified instructor was brought to the ASB campus to give a talk about yoga and offer basic training on a few yoga exercises. No such activity was possible on campus this year.

We decided to use this occasion to once again engage the present students and the new entrants and to make them part of the ASB community. A short video was circulated to show them some simple yoga postures. The students were asked to follow the instructions, shoot a video on their mobiles and post it in the group. The best three exercises were given cash prizes. We had active participation from many students on the day of yoga.

8.10.2. Onam celebrations:

Onam is one of the major festivals of Kerala. It is a harvest festival that falls during the period August-September and is observed according to the Malayalam calendar. In the past, staff and students of ASB used to celebrate Onam by creating a floral carpet, conducting cultural programmes, organizing games and taking part in a traditional feast at the campus.

Due to COVID, we could not meet at ASB to celebrate Onam. We decided to have Onam celebrations virtually. Students were quite enthusiastic. They recorded songs and dances from different locations and put them together as single videos. Quiz contests and games were arranged online and we gave Amazon gift vouchers to all the winners.

The programme helped the juniors and seniors to come together, interact, have fun and feel that they were part of a special community.

8.11. Activities to engage the new students:

The government decided to hold examinations for final year undergraduate students from 2 June 2020 (The New Indian Express, 2020). The students were asked to report to their respective colleges and follow the stipulated COVID protocol for examinations.

The examinations got over within two weeks. The students were now free, and in a mindset to look at various options for higher studies. We realized that even students who accepted our offer would be getting offers from other institutions in the region. We came to know that a college in Trivandrum was offering a fee discount by terming it as a scholarship to all applicants.

The task force discussed this issue over a Zoom meeting and decided to do some activity to engage the students who had attended our interviews. We created a Google group of all these students and started sending then

emails on a daily basis. These emails were short articles on issues that would be of interest to students.

The articles covered a variety of topics. One article discussed how a college lecturer started a business by making drinking straws from fallen coconut leaves. Another article was about Levi's wasteless jeans that contained 8 plastic bottles in recycled form. Each article had a set of images to make them look more appealing. Samples of three such articles are attached as annexures 2-A, 2-B & 2-C.

The activity of sending such articles went on for 50 days till the mid of August. We received regular feedback from students that the articles were quite interesting.

Reflection:
Student engagement activities were reviewed to check its effectiveness.
Yoga day celebrations and Onam celebrations were appreciated by all.
Articles were sent regularly to the new students.
Planning:
Discussions took place to explore further activities of engagement.

8.12. Online classes:

COVID-19 was not showing any signs of abating. On 1 June 2020, the government of Kerala asked universities to start classes using online video-conferencing platforms (George, 2020).

We had completed classes for our senior students so we did not have any classes. CUSAT decided to hold the 3rd semester MBA examination through the online Moodle platform. The examinations started on 22 July and was concluded within ten days.

We decided to start classes for the seniors from 6 August. After evaluating various online platforms, we decided to use MS Teams. As the bandwidth required for Teams was lower than other similar platforms, even students with less powerful internet connections could attend the class.

We also decided to start the bridge sessions for the new batch of students from 12th August. We ran classes only in the forenoon session so that they could settle in with ease.

Students who started attending the online classes started discussing about it with their friends. This led to more enquiries. By mid-September we had 76 students on our rolls including the students who came through RCBS. The RCBS team managed to get us only 4 students as against 24 during the previous year.

One student from North Kerala left after a few weeks since she got admission in a college closer home. Another student failed to clear his undergraduate examination and did not qualify. The class finally settled at the number 74.

8.13. Leaderspeak series:

The online mode of conducting classes helped us go ahead with teaching the curriculum. However, these classes were not as impactful as the regular classroom sessions. The quality of our programme was the main factor that brought in more students to ASB. We did not want this advantage to get diluted.

The task force tried to review the situation and sought avenues to enrich the classes. This led to the start of a lecture series that was named the "ASB Leaderspeak series". We invited known persons from the field of business to address the class every Tuesday afternoon. Since these lectures were held online, we could invite many senior executives who spoke on a variety of subjects. We managed to get many speakers from overseas destinations too. Students enjoyed these interactions and actively participated in the Q & A sessions at the end of each talk.

The team decided to make this a regular feature of our MBA programme.

It was also decided to create a collage in the ASB lobby where the pictures of all the speakers could be displayed. This would give visitors and prospective students a feel that ASB is a place where they would get a chance to interact with titans from the industry and learn many things beyond textbooks.

Action:
Leaderspeak series launched to enrich the learning experience of students.

Reflection:
Task force realized the impact of such lectures and decided to make it a regular programme throughout the year.

8.14. Financial performance:

From its inception ASB had been showing substantial losses that was made up by infusion of extra funds by the chairman. The accounts team was asked to project the year end financials. They did their calculations and announced that ASB would be making a substantial operating profit, for the first time in its existence, during the financial year 2020-21. This was great news for the task force. We had finally achieved both our objectives. We ensured the required number of admissions two years in a row and managed to bring the institute to a level of operating without losses.

8.15. Analysis of admission numbers:

During the previous academic year there was a feeling at the management level that the shift to an MBA programme and the support of RCBS were the main reasons for the 66 admissions. The shift to MBA was definitely a reason since all our analysis showed that students and parents preferred a postgraduate degree to a postgraduate diploma. We had finally accepted the marketing concept instead of the selling concept (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012) and were offering the consumer what he or she wanted instead of forcing them to accept what we wanted to offer.

ASB on its own had managed to enrol 70 students out of the 74 who joined. Since RCBS contribution to the total was only 4, it was clear that the admissions team had performed well. This was acknowledged and appreciated by the chairman.

8.15.1. Importance of student referral:

After the start of classes, we had individual discussions with each student to understand their decision process.

Almost all the students had referred to the internet to find out good MBA colleges and found us there. This indicated that our digital marketing and search engine optimization activities were effective.

36 students out of 72 had interacted with students or alumni of ASB. They decided to join the institution based on the positive feedback received.

8.15.2. Referral from undergraduate teachers:

This year six students mentioned that they joined ASB because of strong referrals from their undergraduate teachers. All these teachers were from different institutions. Our team had met three of the teachers while we went for our seminars. The other three were not known to us. All of them

told the students that the faculty were very experienced at ASB and the campus placements were very good.

This gave us an indication that the reputation of ASB was gradually spreading in the region.

8.15.3. Factors for joining ASB:

We asked the students to share the most important factors that made them select ASB among other institutions. More than fifty percent gave three factors as most important. The first factor was experienced faculty and pedagogy. The second factor was the placement records of ASB that was close to 100% during the past three years. The third factor was the infrastructure of ASB. A smaller number mentioned proximity and the CUSAT affiliation as important factors.

8.16. Reasons for not joining ASB:

Many students did not accept our offer since they did not want to go away from their homes. The COVID pandemic created a major scare in the country and made people avoid travel as far as possible. It was natural for students and parents to select colleges next to their homes rather than travel long distances during the pandemic period.

Students also cited fees as a factor that prevented them from joining ASB. When I spoke to a student, she said that she wanted to join ASB but her parents could not afford the fees. The student joined another college in the city where the fees are just about Rs. 200,000 for the programme. She also mentioned that she told her friend to join ASB since she was financially well off.

8.17. Review of activities carried out for admissions:

8.17.1. Educational fair:

We had participated in the ISE educational fair for MBA colleges this year too as we did in the previous years. The fair gave us two admissions. However, a lot of effort needs to be put in to participate in three different cities. The cost of participation is also very high. So, the team decided to drop out from the fair from the next season onwards.

8.17.2. Billboards:

We had taken three billboards during the previous year but decided to take only one billboard in the centre of the city this year. However, the impact of the billboard was negligible as the country went into a lockdown and there was hardly any traffic on the roads. As we could not

find any great advantage arising out of the billboard, we decided not to take any more billboards in future.

8.17.3. Search engine optimization activities:

All the students mentioned about searching college details on the internet. The search engine optimization activities were apparently working as students mentioned that they saw ASB coming up in their searches. The task force decided to continue the search engine optimization activities by the digital marketing agency.

8.17.4. Activities on Instagram:

The official Instagram page of ASB was given to the digital marketing agency to maintain. They created posters and videos on a regular basis that got many views and likes. The student community had many activities that could not be posted on the official page. So, we suggested that they should create a page for their activities. The students started a page with the name ASB_UNICONN that stood for university connect. They started posting their club activities, blood donation camp details, social service activities, creative efforts and so on that could be shared to their friends and juniors. We expect these posts to improve the brand awareness of ASB.

Review & reflection:
Admission related activities were reviewed to see effectiveness of each of them.

Planning & action:
Decision was taken not to hire any more billboards.
Decision was taken not to participate in any more educational fairs.
Decision was taken to continue search engine optimization activities by the digital marketing agency.
Decision was taken to go ahead with Instagram related activities by the digital marketing agency.
Students were advised to start an additional Instagram page to highlight student activities at ASB and increase the reach of this medium among prospective students.

8.18. The way forward:

The task force was now confident that getting 60 enrolments was not going to be a major problem for ASB. We started looking at the next milestone of 90 admissions for the next academic year. The task force decided to get together and chart out action plans for our next cycle of operations.

8.19. Findings and analysis:

During the different cycles of action research, I managed to interview forty stakeholders that included students, alumni, prospective students, faculty, the former admissions officer and a career consultant. The transcripts and its analysis had helped us to refine our activities over these admission cycles.

The analysis of the transcripts is described in detail in the following chapter. The recommendations for future that emerged from the analysis form the concluding chapter of this thesis.

Chapter – 9

Findings and analysis

9.1. Background:

The task force started the research activities five years ago when we were told to get the required number of students for ASB. After the first two cycles I realized that my understanding of the factors that made students decide on the college for their MBA education were still not very clear. I started to interview various stakeholders to understand the factors that they considered important in the selection of a college to pursue an MBA programme.

Student choices are quite different for undergraduate programmes in Kerala. Once the student completes grade 12th, he or she decides the stream to pursue during the undergraduate programme. The students are not permitted to approach the colleges directly for admission to undergraduate programmes. All the applications are submitted to the university admissions portal. Only a few colleges under each university may have ranks of eminence awarded by the central government. Other colleges get applications based on their reputation. Good results in the final examinations and the number of university rank holders from the college are criteria that build the reputation of colleges in Kerala. The students are permitted to give their choice of colleges in the application form. Allotments are made by the university based on the 12th grade marks of students. If the marks are low, the student may have to settle for a college away from home and lower down in the reputation list.

When students complete their undergraduate programme and decide to do an MBA, they find a large number of options. At this stage, they start exercising their options and decide on a college of their choice. Our attempt was to get a deeper understanding into these thought processes so that we could position our programme in a manner that would make it desirable to the students.

9.2. Interviewing process:

I carried out interviews with students of various batches of ASB. Interviews with the students of ASB were important since they joined the programme and we needed to know the process they went through before admissions and the factors they considered positive about the programme and the institution.

When prospective candidates came for the interviews, I checked with them whether they had any objection in me recording the interview. There were no objections of any kind as nothing very personal was discussed. I arranged additional interviews with students who did not join the programme. This was to understand the factors that made them reject the offer.

Interviews of parents were taken when they had come to visit the campus along with their wards. I met the career counsellors and the faculty member in their offices. The duration of interviews varied from thirty minutes to an hour and a half.

The interviews were recorded on a voice-recorder and transferred to my computer. A backup was taken on a portable hard disc. All folders were password protected to prevent anyone from tampering with the data.

9.3. Qualitative content analysis:

Content analysis is a research technique where a specific text is analyzed objectively and systematically in order to make inferences (Neuendorf, 2017).

My qualitative content analysis started with the transcription of the interviews. The transcripts were read multiple times before starting any form of analysis. Since I had personally spoken to each interviewee, the reading helped me go back to the interviews and refresh my memory so that the intended meanings were not missed out.

The text was condensed to short phrases that preserved the core meaning of the sentences in the transcript. Coding was carried out after condensing the text. Codes are descriptive labels that described the meaning of the condensed phrases in a concise form.

The codes that were generated from the transcripts were organized into categories. When classified into categories, words and phrases share the same meaning (Cavanagh, 1997). In some cases, the underlying categories were not apparent and I had to review the data from different perspectives and be reflective to identify the appropriate ones (Vaismoradi, et al., 2013)

The categories were then abstracted to a higher level to themes that expressed an underlying meaning or latent content that is visible in two or more categories (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017).

9.4. ASB and the 4 A's framework:

In my action research journey attempting to improve the admissions and financial performance of ASB, I found the 4 A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2013, 2019) appropriate to look at our actions through the eyes of our customers. This framework is organized around the four factors that matter most to customers, viz. *Acceptability, Affordability, Accessibility* and *Awareness*. The framework looks at the different roles a customer plays in a buying process - as a seeker, selector, payer and user. If a business has to be successful, it needs to score high on all the four A's.

(Please note that this framework is referred to during the rest of this chapter and the final chapter and not referenced repeatedly within paragraphs)

ASB, during the initial years, offered a PGDM programme. The product/service that was offered was not based on the requirements of the customers in Kerala. If the earlier team had checked customer preferences and requirements, they would have realized that a PDGM programme was not appreciated and considered relevant by most of the parents and students in Kerala. The postgraduate diploma programme thus had poor *acceptability*. This lack of marketing orientation and customer focus made ASB perform at levels well below its potential. The programme also scored very poorly on *awareness* as many people even in and around Trivandrum were not aware of the existence of such an institution. The fees charged were higher than the fees of other MBA colleges in the district that made the score low even on *affordability*. Instead of scoring well on all the 4 A's, ASB was scoring poorly on 3 of the 4 A's, which made success a very remote possibility.

However, over the years with more and more insights from the stakeholders, the team at ASB managed to improve many aspects of ASB and its management programme.

My interviews with different stakeholders revealed many categories. I tried to match these categories with the themes of the 4 A's framework. As there was a more than reasonable fit, it helped me to go ahead with marketing and non-marketing activities according to the framework and bring in the required enrolment numbers at ASB and improve its financial performance to the required levels.

9.4.1. The four roles played by the customers:

In all buying transactions, customers start their role as a seeker and try to get information about the product or service. Once the required information is available, the customer dons the role of a selector who selects between the options available to him/her. The role changes to that of a payer when time, effort and money are expended by them to purchase the product. Finally, as a user, the consumer experiences the service or uses the product.

An individual customer can play all the four roles or combine with other individuals to perform the roles. In case of a student who wants to join an MBA programme he or she would start the role as a seeker. In the context of Kerala, parents are also likely to don this role by checking with their friends and relatives to find good programmes. In the selection phase the students and the parents are likely to be involved. The student may look at the quality of the programme, infrastructure, placements and so on, while the parent is likely to be more concerned with the quantum of fees and the possibility of the student getting placed at the end of the programme. The user would definitely be the student as no other individual gets to experience the service provided by the institution. A sale is likely to be consummated when the enactor of each role experiences satisfaction.

Sheth & Sisodia (2019) have described the connection of each role with the 4A's in the figure below:

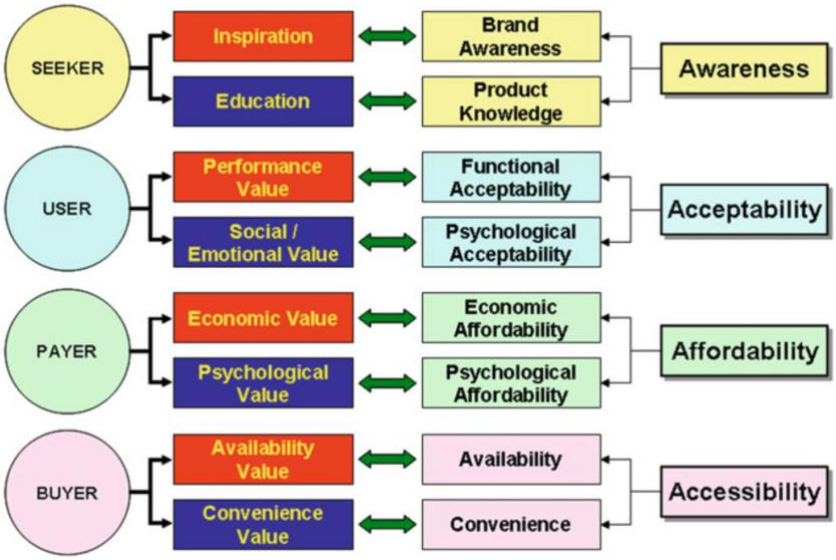


Figure: 9.1 The 4 A's and customer roles

Source: The 4 A's of Marketing: Creating Value for Customer, Company & Society (Routledge 2011)

9.5. Linking categories to the themes of the 4 A's:

9.5.1. Categories related to awareness:

Awareness has two dimensions or themes - **product knowledge** and **brand awareness**. Product knowledge is indicated by the *interest* of the customers, their *understanding* about the product or service, their *involvement* in the purchase decision and its *relevance* to them.

Statements like,

"I checked details about different colleges on Google,"

"I looked at websites of different colleges",

"I checked details about ASB on Wikipedia,"

were given codes like "*Google/ internet search," "Website exploration,"* and "*Search on Wikipedia*".

These codes were converted to the category, "*Internet search for MBA colleges*". When I tried to link this theme to the 4A's framework, it matched with the *understanding* and *involvement* themes of product knowledge.

Statements such as,

"I joined the MBA programme since I want to be an entrepreneur in future."

"After an MBA, my career growth will be faster."

"I want to do an MBA from a good college and get a good job in a good company."

were given codes like "*MBA to be an entrepreneur," "MBA for career growth,"* and "*MBA for job prospects,"* respectively.

The category in this context was named, "*Relevance of an MBA."* This category matched with the theme, *relevance* of *product knowledge.*

Students also checked out the features and advantages of an MBA programme with their teachers and friends. Another popular method of

acquiring product knowledge was by referring to career websites like Collegedunia.com or MBAuniverse.com.

All these categories were mapped to the *product knowledge* dimension of *awareness*.

The second dimension of awareness is *brand awareness* that is indicated by recall, characteristics or attraction. Seekers look for more information. Instead of passively receiving information as in a television commercial, newspaper advertisement or billboard, they wish to be active participants in the process.

Once the student understands the advantages of doing an MBA programme, he or she starts to search for the best college to join.

The role of undergraduate teachers came out in statements like:

"My UG teacher influenced my MBA college choice."

"My undergraduate teacher told me that I would learn something new and add value if I joined ASB for my MBA."

"My undergraduate teacher told me that ASB is a good college."

"I got advice about my college choices from my teachers."

These were coded as – "*undergraduate teacher's influence in college selection," "undergraduate teacher's advice," "recommendation of ASB by undergraduate teacher," "advice from undergraduate teachers on college choices."*

All these codes were then merged to form the category, *"referrals of undergraduate teachers."*

Almost all students mentioned that the popular methods of searching for colleges are through Google and career websites. Suggestions of parents and friends were also considered.

"*Referrals of students and alumni*" came out as an important category. Many statements supported this theme. A few are given below:

"For higher education choices we take feedback from students of the colleges."

"My senior in school studied at ASB and told me that ASB will transform me."

"My cousin's colleagues studied at ASB. They recommended ASB."

"An ASB student told me that the MBA at ASB is good."

I took the framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2019) and tried to expand the framework to show the themes that emerged out of this inquiry. The expanded framework is shown for each "A" and the completely expanded framework will be presented at the end of this chapter.

The expanded framework for *awareness* is given below:

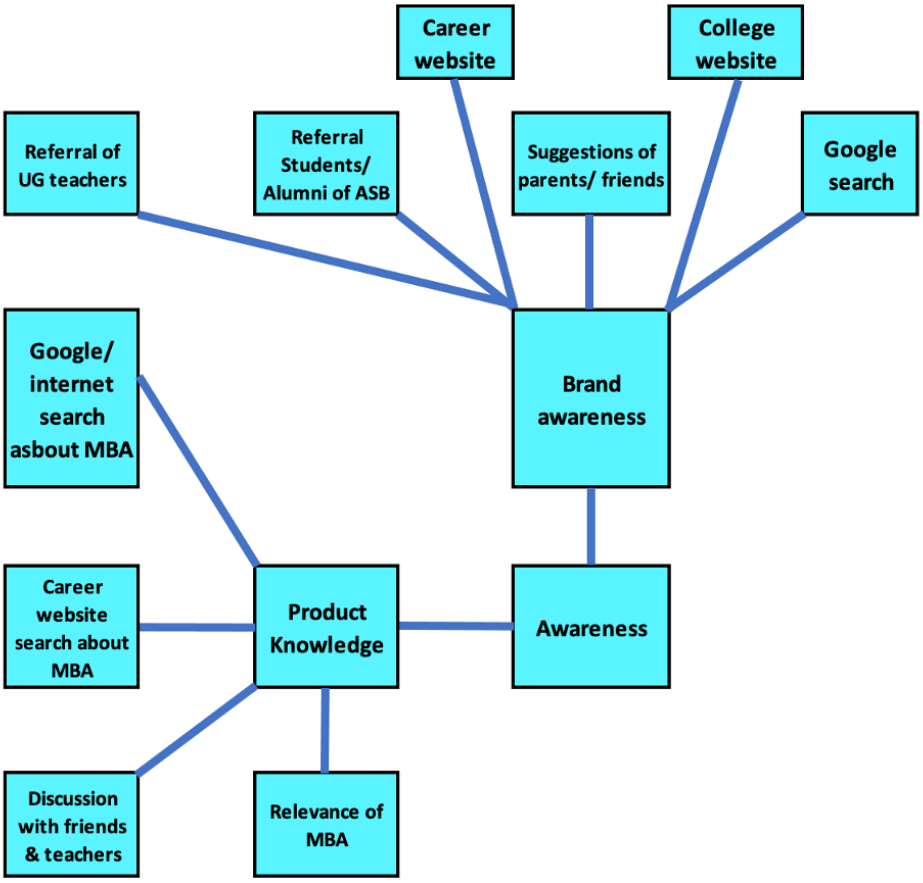


Fig. 9.2. Expanded framework of Awareness in the revised 4 A's Framework

9.5.2. Categories related to acceptability:

Acceptability, in the context of ASB, is the extent to which the two-year postgraduate programme meets and exceeds the needs and expectations of students and their parents in Kerala.

Acceptability has two dimensions- *functional acceptability* and *psychological acceptability*. Factors such as capability, quality and reliability indicate functional acceptability. Psychological acceptability is indicated by brand image and reputation, social value, and associated risk.

9.5.2.1. Functional acceptability:

The transcripts of the interview included statements like,

"Very few industry practitioners in the faculty reduced the utility of the programme" and

"Quality of faculty was decided by the institution where they did their graduation,"

These statements could be coded as "faculty with corporate experience", and "qualifications of faculty," respectively.

The category that emerged from these codes was "quality of faculty."

When I mapped this category to the 4 A's framework, it fitted the functional acceptability dimension of acceptability that includes factors such as capability and quality. Students and parents are likely to prefer a college with well-qualified faculty who have adequate experience in the corporate world so that the students get more practical knowledge about the business world.

Many other categories that came out in the discussions could also be mapped to the dimension of functional acceptability. *Quality of infrastructure, pedagogy* and *value addition* were three more categories that could be grouped under functional acceptability.

There were twenty statements in the transcripts that discussed infrastructure. Some examples are given below:

"Infrastructure of a college also is an important factor in a college choice."

"I want my college to have a good campus and infrastructure."

"ASB has very good infrastructure that is different from that of other colleges."

"The infrastructure of ASB attracted me and made me decide to join ASB."

These statements were coded as *influence of infrastructure in college choice*, *good infrastructure* and *attractive infrastructure*, respectively.

Since it was the superior quality of the construction and layout that influenced students, these codes were combined to a category, "*Quality of infrastructure*."

Students indicated that they wished to study in institutions that had good *infrastructure*. Theatre-styled air-conditioned classrooms, seminar halls, large library, and canteen were all grouped under the term infrastructure.

Students who stayed in hostels during their undergraduate programmes were quite particular about the hostel facilities. Many of them stayed four or five to a room with limited privacy. The single occupancy rooms at ASB that also has an attached bathroom were well-appreciated. Prospective students evaluate infrastructure by visiting the college, by checking details on the website, or by talking to students and alumni of ASB to find out details about the infrastructure.

For a postgraduate student the quality of *pedagogy* came out as an important category. This was evident from many statements from prospective students such as:

"CET is a government college so classes may not be held properly."

"Cousin studying at ASB told me that the pedagogy is good."

"When I choose a college for higher education the pedagogy should be good there."

"Teaching quality of an institution can be found from those who study there."

Comments from ASB alumnus and students were as follows:

"I found that the classes at ASB are more oriented towards industry-practices than those in SCMS (a competitor institution) after comparing notes with a student from that institute."

"One of the reasons for selecting ASB is good coaching."

These were coded as "*regularity of classes", "good pedagogy", "teaching quality", "practically oriented teaching*" and "*good coaching*", respectively. All these codes could be collapsed to the category, "*pedagogy*."

We understood that prospective students discussed the quality of teachers and teaching with our students or alumni before deciding to join the institution.

Value addition from the programme was discussed by many students and parents. The students have certain expectations when they join a business school. These expectations came out from many students and parents in their interviews. The expectations can be seen in the following statements:

"A good college should develop your communication skills."

"A good college should develop your leadership skills."

"I like strict colleges since they will make me study."

"A student of ASB told me that an MBA at ASB will develop my personality."

The codes for these statements were: "development of communication skills," "development of leadership skills," "induce learning," "personality development," respectively.

Similar statements came from students and alumni of ASB. When the statements come from this group, that indicates that they came with such expectations and ASB could fulfil their expectations.

The statements that indicate the value addition at ASB are given below:

"ASB improved my communication skills."

"ASB helped me improve my presentation skills."

"ASB improved my confidence."

"My friends studying MBA in Pondicherry said that unlike us, they do not get any value-added courses like advanced Excel, SPSS etc."

"My friends studying MBA in Pondicherry said that unlike us, they do not get any special training to face job interviews."

The codes for these statements can be, *"improve communication skills," "improve presentation skills," "improve confidence," "value-added courses",* and *"specialized interview training*."

When one considers all these codes, they can be grouped to a category – value addition at the institute.

9.5.2.2. Psychological acceptability:

Psychological acceptability of a product or service can be indicated by its brand image or reputation, social and emotional value, and associated risk.

The biggest block in psychological acceptability for ASB was its programme. In Kerala, the word diploma is generally used in the case of polytechnic diploma programme, where a student does a three-year course after completing the 10th grade. Engineering students, on the other hand, complete their 12th grade and appear for an entrance examination to gain eligibility to enter the first year of a four-year engineering degree programmme. Diploma holders are given lateral entry to the second year of the engineering programme.

Parents and students did not understand the value of the PGDM programme and looked out only for an MBA degree. The trend has not changed even today. A new educational institution was set up last year in North Kerala. The owners spent Rs. 500 million in creating great infrastructure. They offered two hundred and forty PGDM seats in four different specializations. One of my former colleagues joined the

institution as dean-academics. After the admission season was over, he said that they failed to attract even one student.

Almost all students who attended the admissions interview stated that they wished to do an MBA programme since that would help them get a good job in a reputed organization. Quality of campus placements, therefore, came out as an important factor in the selection of a business school.

Some of the statements regarding placements were,

"I did not consider their (*competitor college*) MBA programme since placements are very low."

"My friend told me that ASB has good placements. So, I got attracted."

"To build a brand in higher education, placements would become a major factor."

These were coded to "reluctance to enrol in institutions with low placements," "importance of placements in selection of a college" and "importance of placements in building HE brand." The category was named as "*placements.*"

Parents as well as students understand that getting a good job is not very easy in Kerala after graduation or even postgraduation. Hence, getting a good placement even before completing postgraduation has a great social as well as emotional value for both the students and their parents. Thus, the category can be mapped to the dimension or theme of **psychological acceptability**. An institution that trains students well for placements and gives opportunities for a large percentage of students to get a job on campus becomes a psychologically acceptable option.

Placements are also connected to risk taken by the customer. Many parents fund the MBA education of the students by availing educational loans from the banks. If the student does not get a good job upon graduation, then the loan repayment becomes a big burden for the parents. An institution that offers good campus placements becomes a psychologically acceptable choice for them.

According to the university system of MBA education in Kerala, after the students complete their first-year courses a break of two months is given before the start of the second year. The students are expected to do an internship in any organization and submit a report. In many colleges, finding a suitable internship is the responsibility of the students. Instead of receiving a stipend, the students may have to pay some money to the organization for permitting them to do the internship.

ASB has always managed to find *internship* opportunities for the students in good organizations where they get good exposure to the life and work in the corporate world. Many of them get paid for the work and a few do it only for the experience. Hardly any student had to pay any money to the organization for getting the opportunity. This factor also helped in building the brand image of ASB. Students realized that only institutions with a fair amount of reputation and brand image managed to get internships as in the case of ASB.

The *brand image* or institute *reputation* is connected to psychological acceptability. Customers are likely to choose institutions that have a better image than any other. Customers mentioned that advertisements of colleges are not trustworthy. They prefer to get information about the pedagogy and placement from persons known to them who have some idea about the institution. This indicates that brand-building, at least in Kerala, should be primarily carried out through the medium of word-of-mouth.

The transcripts had statements such as:

"Don't know whether to believe what the colleges say in their advertisements."

"Placement records would make credibility in the claims of a higher education institution."

"An institute should also have a good name."

"Word-of-mouth would be key in building a higher education brand."

I developed codes like, "lack of trust in college advertisements," "placements increase reputation," "good brand image important," and "word-of-mouth key medium for brand building."

The category that can include all these codes is "brand image/ reputation."

The framework for acceptability was also expanded by adding the categories that emerged in the interviews. The expanded framework is given below:

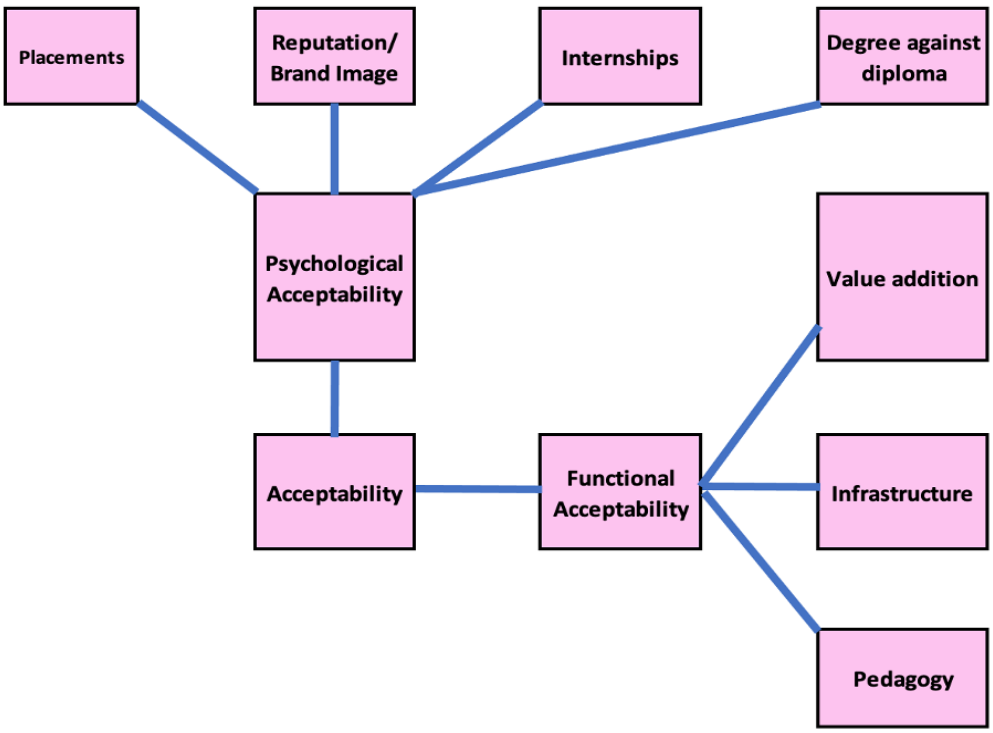


Fig. 9.3. Expanded framework of Acceptability in the revised 4 A's Framework

9.5.3. Categories related to accessibility:

Accessibility, as mentioned earlier, has two dimensions – convenience and availability.

9.5.3.1. Proximity:

Proximity to home is a great consideration for parents of female students. This became more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic period when travel was avoided as much as possible.

There were many statements in the interview transcripts that revealed the importance of proximity to home. Some examples are given below:

"I like to be with my parents. Proximity of the college to my home is important."

"Distance from home prevented me from joining ASB."

"Did not consider Rajadhani College, as it is far away from my home."

"My mother was not ready to send me outside Kerala."

"Parents were happy when I joined ASB as I would be near my home."

Transportation facilities to college did not emerge as part of any interview. However, two students refused to join the college since ASB did not provide transportation facilities from Trivandrum city to the college. That made me add the factor as a point under accessibility.

9.5.3.2. Availability:

In many product categories, the degree to which the product is available to the customer is an indicator of its success. Robert Woodruff, former chairman of the Coca Cola company, wanted to ensure that Coca Cola was always available "within arm's reach of desire" (Butler, 2015). The key value in availability is an adequate supply of the product or service.

In case of institutions of higher education in India, if admissions are available easily in any institution, then that indicates that its stature is not very high.

The business school with the highest ranking in India is the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (NIRF, 2020). To get admission to this institution, a student needs to score above the 99-percentile level in the Common Admissions Test (CAT) conducted by the IIMs (Mukhija, 2021). Students who have high academic credentials and who have such high scores in the entrance test are called for group discussion and personal interview and about 1 student in 6 finally gets admission to the MBA programme.

Even in Kerala, RCBS got over 1100 applications for their 360 seats during their 2020-21 academic session. When students fail to secure admission, the impression about the institution and the quality of the programme goes up. This feeling has come out in many discussions with prospective students who did not succeed in getting admission to the management programmes offered by RCBS.

Thus, one may say that easily available admissions in a business school may not help in building the brand unlike in the case of consumer products where lack of availability can destroy the brand.

During the fifth cycle of our action research process, we decided not to offer admission to every student who came to us. Six students who did not have good academic records were told that we would not be able to offer them admission at ASB.

Availability also covers the accompanying pre- and post-purchase advices offered to the students. In our case, the initial contact with the admissions team, the briefing before the interviews and the structured interview process made a positive impact on the prospective student.

The expanded framework for accessibility is given below as Figure-9.4.

Since difficulty in securing admission is a factor that helps in building a business school brand, it can be considered as a deviation from the regular 4 A's framework and hence, shown in a different colour.

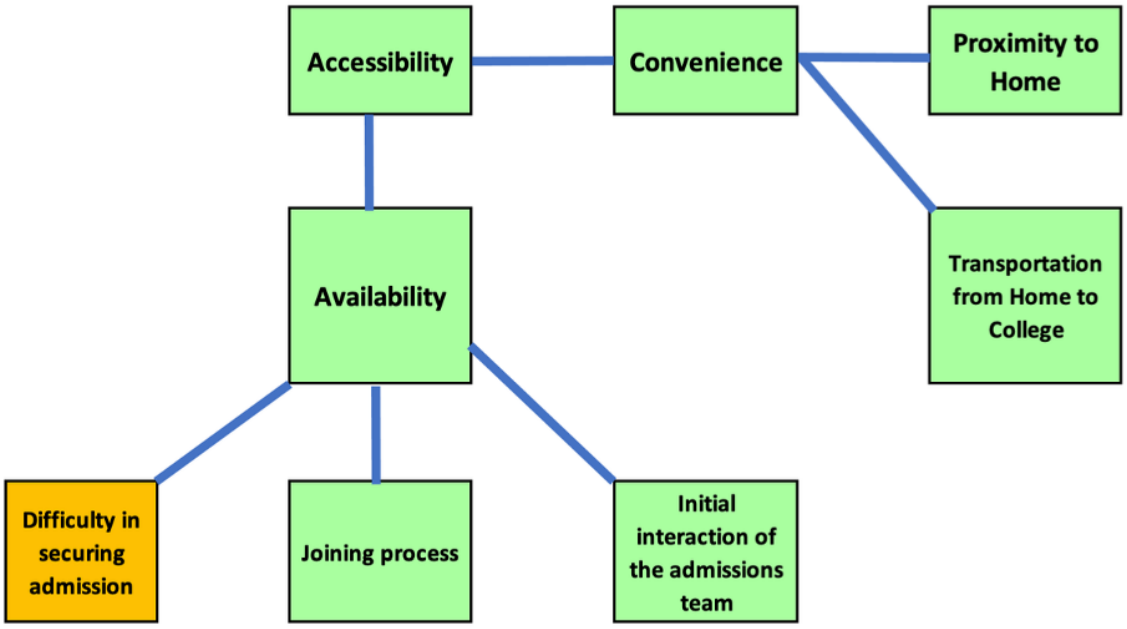


Fig. 9.4. Expanded framework of Accessibility in the revised 4 A's Framework

9.5.4. Categories related to affordability:

Affordability also has two dimensions – economic affordability and psychological affordability.

9.5.4.1. Economic affordability:

The programme cost should fit within the budget of the parents, since all the students depend on their parents for funds. In case they do not have cash available with them, they resort to bank loans. Educational loans are available without collateral guarantee and affordable interest rates to students pursuing higher education in good institutions. At ASB all documents are usually kept ready and as soon as students ask for supporting documents for loan application, the admissions officer provides the complete set immediately. After changing over to the MBA programme we have not heard of any student having any type of difficulty in availing educational loans from the banks.

9.5.4.2. Psychological affordability:

Psychological affordability is the willingness of the customer to pay for the product and it is indicated by the perceived fairness of the

prices and the price of the product or service related to competitive products.

Many parents in India are quite concerned about the health and education of their children. A survey by the banking group, HSBC revealed that 71% of the parents surveyed are willing to go into debt to fund their children's university education. Over 40% felt that spending on education was more important than savings for retirement (Saraswathy, 2016).

In the health beverage category in India, Horlicks is the undisputed leader with over 50 % market share (Unilever, 2021). In 2009, GlaxoSmithKline Consumer Healthcare (GSK), owners of the Horlicks brand at that time, decided to create an affordable health drink for the rural masses who were at the bottom of the pyramid (Prahalad, 2005). They decided to brand it as ASHA (hope) from Horlicks (Singh, 2012). The price for a 500gm pack of Asha was Rs. 85, while the price of regular Horlicks was Rs. 135 (Bhushan, 2009). Asha was test marketed in one state of India. The response from customers at the bottom of the pyramid was very poor. They assumed that it was a stripped-down version of Horlicks without its real goodness (Pande & Bhushan, 2011). After seeing the reaction from customers, GSK decided to withdraw the product without attempting a national launch. One may see that the product offered economic affordability but could not provide psychological affordability. The attitude of parents in selecting a nutrition product could also be extended to education. Parents would like to give the best education to their children that would help them to get a good job and become economically stable.

The students who join ASB have never complained about the fees. Many colleges charge a lower fee at the beginning and keep asking students to pay for all the additional activities. ASB fee structure is very transparent. Once the students pay the fee mentioned in the admissions offer letter nothing more needs to be paid. All additional activities and value-added programmes are offered without charging any extra fee from the student.

Parents and students do not understand the fee structures of various colleges and are unable to do a proper comparison. However, when they discuss the campus placement status, quality of faculty, value-added courses and other activities at the campus with the admissions

team or the faculty, most of them get convinced and are ready to pay the fees.

As Sheth & Sisodia (2013) explains, customers are willing to pay at two levels. They are ready to pay if they feel that the price is reasonable. At the second level, they become ready to pay when the value offered exceeds the price demanded.

In the case of ASB, customers possibly feel that we are offering far more value than other institutions in the region. They also see good infrastructure and qualified faculty, which may also make them feel that the ASB programme is a superior product and they would like their children to have the better product.

The fact that the parent wants the best for their children can be considered to be an extension of the psychological affordability. This factor is not discussed by the 4 A's framework and could be unique in the Indian context. The applicability in any other region/culture may have to be studied.

The factors that have come up in my study are illustrated in the expanded framework for accessibility that is given below as Figure-9.5.

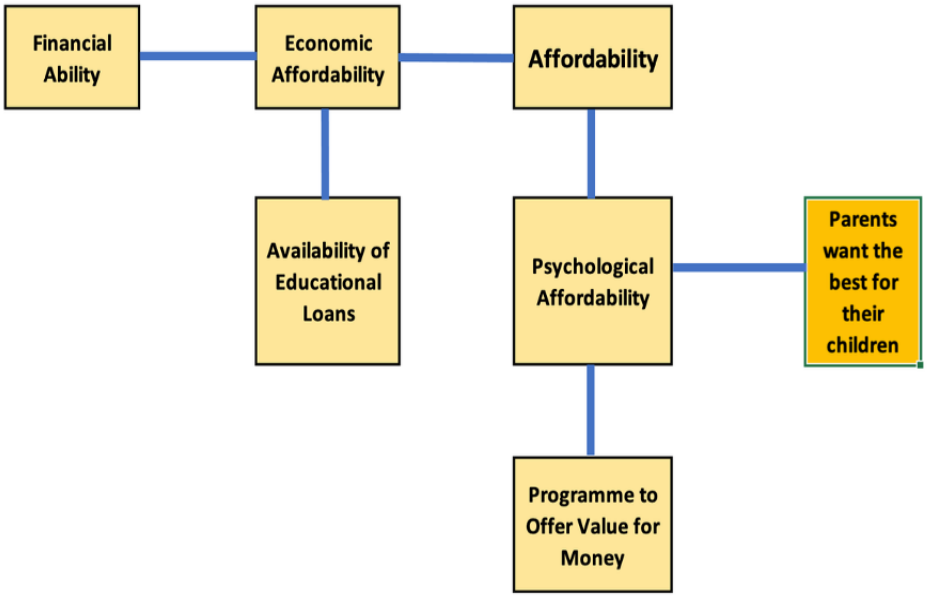


Fig. 9.5. Expanded framework of Affordability in the revised 4 A's Framework

9.6. The revised and expanded 4 A's framework for marketing higher education in Kerala:

The 4 A's can be put together in their extended form to get the expanded 4 A's framework that applies to business schools in Kerala.

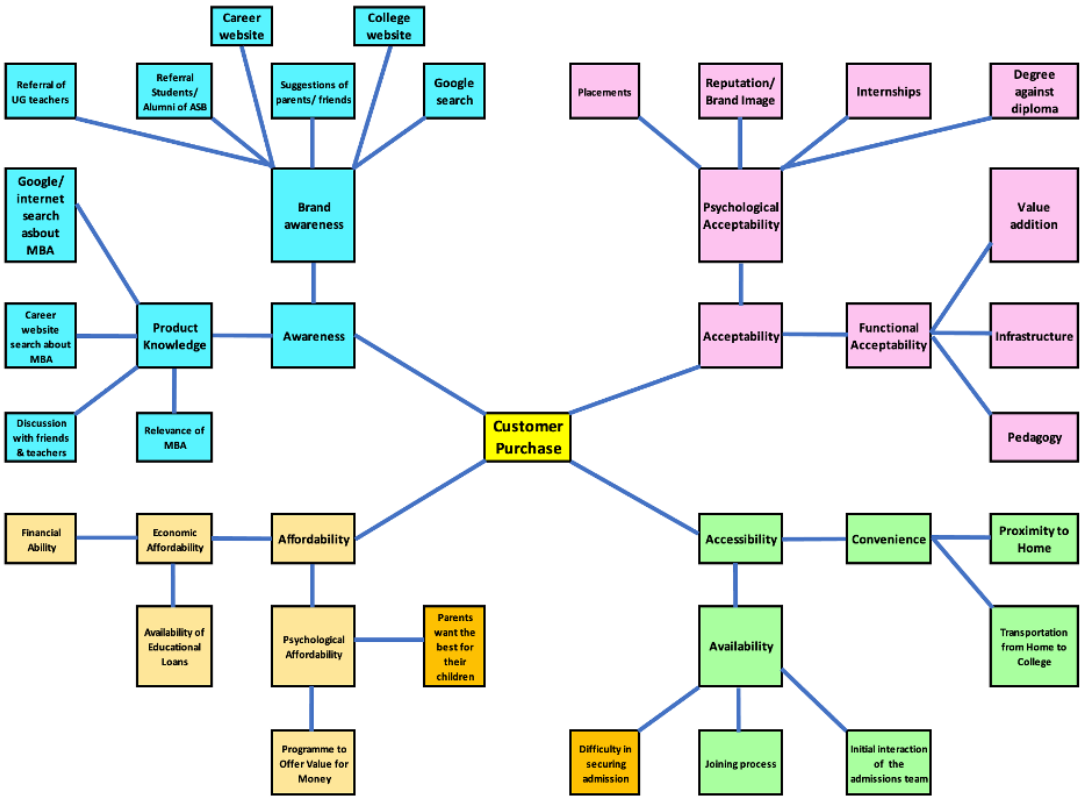


Fig. 9.6. The revised and expanded 4 A's framework for business school marketing in Kerala

The expanded 4 A's framework can now be seen as a perfect model to understand the various elements that need to be brought together to make a management institution successful in Kerala. As Sheth & Sisodia (2019) mention, the 4 A's are not compensatory in nature – shortfall of scores in one A cannot be made up by a higher score in another A.

9.7. Conclusion:

ASB floundered for a long time since it scored poorly on many A's of Sheth & Sisodia's (2019) framework. The change in nomenclature from PGDM to MBA and improvement in many elements mentioned in the revised and expanded framework increased the scores on most of the fronts and helped ASB attract the requisite number of student enrolments.

In the concluding chapter, I would be discussing how improvements in each of the A's were carried out at ASB and offer suggestions that could help the institution perform even better in future.

Chapter – 10

Conclusions and recommendations

10.1. The role of action research in this journey:

When I joined ASB as a member of the faculty team, the responsibility to enhance admissions was given to me in addition to my teaching job. I realized that this was not an easy assignment since many highly qualified people in the past had attempted to do this and failed.

As a DBA student, I realized that the only route to reach my objective was to create an action research team and pool in our knowledge and ideas. I hoped that the members of the team would bring with them expertise from their own lives and experiences (Elvemo et al., 1997).

As the academic intake happens only once a year, each action research cycle took a year to complete. Some of the members of the team had experience in sales and marketing in the corporate world and others had experience in business schools elsewhere. By combining our resources and ideas and by reviewing activities that took place during the earlier years, we formulated our actions and implemented them. After each activity, we observed the reactions from prospective students and reflected upon these reactions. Based on discussions and reflections by the team, corrections and modifications were made to our action plans.

We realized that the knowledge that we had about the decision-making process of students in selecting an institution for their MBA studies was not adequate enough. I started in-depth interviews with different stakeholders that included faculty, parents, present students and prospective students. The critical factors that emerged from these interviews were also discussed in the action research group and used to modify our activities. One such activity was to focus on campus placements to ensure that a very high percentage of students received job offers while on campus.

The discussions with parents and students also confirmed our belief that the PGDM programme itself was not acceptable. This made us to push the management of the institution to apply for a change in nomenclature to MBA.

After each cycle of the action research, we were able to create a more desirable offering that started to gain the attention of students and parents.

We also understood the importance of delivering an industry-oriented programme that helped the students to get good placements.

By the fourth action research cycle, ASB managed to get more than 60 students and in the fifth cycle the number was exceeded and a cash profit was shown for the first time in the history of the institution.

The interview transcripts generated interesting themes that could be mapped to the 4 A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2013). The framework gave the team more clarity in looking at the programme and its marketing from the perspective of the consumer. This helped us to look at effective activities to create awareness and acceptability to the programme. The high level of campus placements, good pedagogy and value-added programmes made the customers realize that they were getting more than what they paid for.

I now realize that the structured approach of the action research process was instrumental in helping ASB reach the desired number of enrolments as well as profitability.

The journey also helped me develop as a researcher. As a researcher, I understood and defined my research problem, generated alternatives, searched and reviewed literature for guidance, and went through various iterations and cycles of reflection till the desired result was achieved. I am thankful that this action research process helped me create new knowledge in the context of marketing business schools in Kerala by developing a revised and expanded framework based on the 4 A's framework of Sheth & Sisodia (2019). As a professional who was given the responsibility to enhance the enrolment numbers, it is also gratifying that this journey helped us to achieve the required enrolment numbers and bring the institution to a level of cash profits for the first time in its existence.

10.2. How ASB managed the first A-Awareness:

Awareness has two dimensions- **product knowledge** and **brand awareness**

10.2.1. Product knowledge:

In the context of this study, product knowledge is more likely to be the understanding about an MBA programme. The prospective student discusses various possibilities of higher education with his friends, seniors, and teachers. He or she also checks out the advantage of doing an MBA on the internet and through various career guidance websites like

shikhsha.com, collegedunia.com, career360.com and mbauniverse.com. Once the student gets convinced about the utility of the MBA programme, the search for institutions that offer good MBA programmes begin. The dimension of brand awareness emerges at this stage.

10.2.2. Brand awareness:

The themes that have been grouped under brand awareness are referral of undergraduate teachers, referrals of students and alumni of ASB, suggestions of friends/parents/relatives, career websites, websites of colleges, and search through Google.

By providing a very good programme and giving good placements, ASB gets very good support from all its students and alumni (from the year 2016) in terms of highly positive referrals.

A digital marketing agency manages the search engine optimization activity during the admissions season that brings up the name ASB when students search for the best MBA college in Kerala or Trivandrum.

We had reached out to some undergraduate colleges. However, referrals from such teachers are likely to come more when the reputation of ASB gradually gets built. Not much of direct action is likely in this area. The same would apply to parents, relatives and friends.

Promoting the institution on different career websites can be a very expensive proposition. It does not guarantee any results. After discussing in our task force, we decided to request our students and alumni to post their reviews on the sites. Students who visit these sites give great importance to such reviews and treat them as trustworthy since they are not paid postings.

Traditionally, brands create awareness using media like newspapers, TV, radio and billboards. For educational institutions the popular media in Kerala are newspapers and billboards. ASB had tried advertisements in newspapers. Despite spending large amounts of money, the returns were very low. We also tried out billboards that were much less expensive. Here too there were no direct returns. The only comment that came up from the student community about advertisements was that "advertisements are not trustworthy."

ASB team collected student data from the locations where entrance examinations for MBA programmes were held. This student data was relevant since all of them were interested in an MBA programme. Our

team ran SMS and email campaigns to all these numbers and mail IDs in order to create awareness about our programme. A copy of our brochure was attached to all the emails. Students, even those who study at ASB, are not regular users of the email. So, the email campaign was not very effective.

Students are avid users of the social media. The ASB Facebook page had postings of all the functions at ASB. Whenever a senior person from the industry gives a speech to the students, we report the event on Facebook. When celebrations take place at ASB, photos of the event are posted. Posters are made and posted for every student who gets placed in an organization. From practically no followers, the page has close to 4500 followers today, which indicates that many outside the community of students, alumni and staff of ASB are following the page. This is an indicator of increasing awareness of the brand.

In the last two years we saw a shift from Facebook to Instagram. Many students admitted that they are no more very active on Facebook but have taken to Instagram. The team immediately started an Instagram page for ASB.

Understanding the trends of the media usage of students, we also asked our digital marketing agency to push posters and videos on the ASB Instagram page. Students and others have started following us now. There are over 200 posts on the ASB Instagram site, that indicates it is a fairly active site.

10.3. How ASB managed the second A-Acceptability:

Sheth & Sisodia (2019) describes two dimensions of acceptability- **functional acceptability** and **psychological acceptability**.

10.3.1. Psychological acceptability:

In the Kerala market for higher education, a postgraduate diploma is considered inferior to a postgraduate degree. However, the team at the helm of affairs decided to go ahead with a PGDM programme assuming that such a programme would be a differentiator among the dozens of MBA programmes in the region.

Only in 2019 the top management relented and agreed to shift to an MBA programme. For ASB to succeed it needed to score high on all the 4 A's. When it offered a PGDM programme, ASB scored very low on acceptability. The changeover to MBA helped ASB to overcome that

shortcoming. The affiliation to CUSAT, a highly respected university was an added advantage.

Almost every student who came to ASB mentioned that the major reason for joining the programme was to get a good job. A good internship helps the student to understand the corporate culture. An institution that offers very good **internships and placements** becomes psychologically acceptable to both students and parents.

During the first two years after the formation of the taskforce, not much focus was given on placement related activities. Once we realized the importance of placements in the minds of parents and students, a faculty member was given the responsibility of placements. She created a team of students to help her coordinate the activities. We also realized that specific activities needed to be undertaken to make the students prepared for the interviews. The usual process of recruitment follows three stages - an aptitude test, a group discussion and a few rounds of personal interviews. We realized that we needed to give specialized training for each round of the selection process.

Aptitude test preparation is a specialized activity. In India there are organizations who offer such training to MBA students. We decided to hire a reputed firm to carry out the training. The training was for 40 hours followed by 24 practice tests online.

In order to make the students ready for group discussions, we decided to conduct regular discussions on various topics. A member of the faculty team monitored the discussions and gave feedback to the students.

The faculty team of ASB has many members who have years of corporate experience. The team conducted regular mock interviews to make the students ready for the personal interviews during placements.

The placement team started a docket for each company that invited our students for placements. The placement team filed the details of the interview process that included the type of aptitude test, duration of group discussion, topics given for the discussion, stages of interview and questions asked during the interview. These dockets were shared with the future batch of students to make them well-prepared for the interviews.

The activities we carried out to make our students ready for the interview process were successful. The next three years saw close to 100% placements.

Once contacts with companies were established, getting internship opportunities for students became easy.

News about our placements started spreading. Students also discussed the quality of the faculty and the pedagogy. Gradually, the reputation of ASB started to spread beyond Trivandrum to other districts of the state.

An institution of higher education has a social responsibility. It has to harmonize the individual needs of training and learning with the collective needs of the society. The fulfillment of this responsibility is visible through the professional and personal development of its graduates (Filip, 2012). In the Kerala society, if the institution is able to place the student in a good job, that is seen as a great service to the society. The knowledge and skills, in such cases, are tested and approved by the organization that selects the candidate. As ASB was able to train students well and get them placed in good positions in reputed organizations, we were also serving our society well.

We can now state with a fair level of confidence that ASB scores well on psychological acceptability.

10.3.2. Functional acceptability:

The three factors that contribute to functional acceptability are – **value addition, infrastructure and pedagogy**.

10.3.2.1. Value addition at ASB:

Prospective students came with a number of expectations from ASB when they join the programme. Improving **communication skills** is an important reason. Many teachers in the undergraduate programmes teach using a combination of English and the local language, Malayalam. Discussion between students in most colleges are also in Malayalam. This makes them less proficient in speaking English. When they complete their graduation, they realize this shortcoming. Some students pursue their further studies in cities like Bangalore and Chennai, outside Kerala where they would be forced to speak English and thus improve their communication skills.

At ASB every member of the faculty ensures that teaching is done only in English. All discussions between faculty and students take place only in English. Many students find it difficult in the initial months. However, by the end of the two-year period, most of the students speak the language fluently.

Students also expressed their desire to hone their **presentation skills**. At ASB, the students have to make at least two presentations for every course. They present their topics to the class. The large number of presentations make them confident to present in public.

The level of **general awareness** about current affairs was quite low in many students. We knew that this would become a problem when the students face an interview for a job. Following the practices of RCBS, we procured English newspapers for the whole class. During the last three semesters, the regular newspaper was changed to a business newspaper. This helped the students to improve their awareness about the business scenario and the economy. The improved awareness helped the students face job interviews with more confidence.

Another expectation of prospective students was to improve their **leadership skills.** Many activities were carried out to fulfil these expectations. We tied up with a team of retired navy commanders who ran training camps for team-building and leadership skills. The camp took place at Munnar, a hill station. This was highly appreciated by the students and has become an annual affair at ASB.

Students were asked to create clubs for each domain like a marketing club and a finance club. They select the office bearers and chart out their activities. We earmarked the second half of Tuesday for their activities. This gave opportunities to many students to improve their organizing skills and leadership skills. On their own initiative, students started a blood donation camp where volunteers regularly donate their blood to the government blood-bank.

We started a management festival called Constello. The objective was to invite undergraduate students to the institution so that they could see our infrastructure, meet our students and spread positive word-of-mouth for ASB. The management promised to share part of the expenses and asked students to find sponsors to generate the rest. Students split into teams and managed to raise funds. The events and their management are totally left to the students with a faculty member overseeing it superficially. This annual event gives our students a good platform to hone their organizational, leadership and event management skills.

10.3.2.2. Infrastructure of ASB:

Infrastructure came out to be another element of functional acceptability. ASB is fortunate to have one of the best infrastructures

among MBA colleges in Kerala. The centrally air-conditioned building has spacious classrooms, a 230-seater seminar hall, amphitheatre for outdoor activities, library with a large collection of management books and journals, cafeteria, well-appointed gymnasium and so on. Students who stayed in congested hostel rooms during their undergraduate programmes were quite surprised to see the ASB hostel. The hostel has single rooms and double rooms with attached bathrooms. Food at the cafeteria is prepared by a professional catering team that maintains very high standards. We also gave the students the responsibility to decide the weekly menu for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

10.3.2.3. Pedagogy at ASB:

Pedagogy was the third element of functional acceptability. ASB had its own curriculum based on the curricula of top business schools. After becoming part of CUSAT, the syllabus prescribed by the university is being followed. However, the way of teaching at ASB is still different as personal experiences of the faculty are shared with the students. My experiences in domestic sales in India and international trade while in Dubai and Angola helped me share interesting anecdotes that one usually does not find in textbooks. Similarly, my colleague who headed a retail chain, narrates operational issues faced in her job. Students understood the difference between narrating stories from the textbooks and telling them from personal experience.

In my classes, I made the class read a popular management book each semester and made them present different chapters in class. Books like, "Positioning - the battle for your mind," by Al Ries and Jack Trout, "Fortune at the bottom of the pyramid," by Dr. C. K. Prahalad, and "My life in advertising," by Claude Hopkins are some of the books that were discussed in class. Students could mention about the concepts discussed in these books during their interviews and score a few extra points.

Looking back, the team was able to fulfil the requirements of functional acceptability quite well.

10.4. How ASB managed the third A-Accessibility:

The third A in the framework, accessibility, also has two dimensions – convenience and availability.

10.4.1. Convenience:

Students and parents considered **proximity** to home as a great **convenience**. In case of female students, many parents are not willing to send their children to a hostel. Unfortunately, there are quite a number of

crimes against women reported in Kerala. According to Kerala Police (2021) 14293 cognizable crimes were recorded against women in 2019 and 12659 cognizable crimes in 2020. Hence, parents prefer to send their children to hostels only if they feel that they would be taken care of very well.

Trivandrum International School is an institution under the same management. As the school is a residential school, the hostels accommodate children from grades 1 to 12. The female students who wish to avail the hostel facility are allotted rooms there. All the hostels have lady wardens and a nurse on campus. The students are not permitted to stay outside the hostel beyond 6 pm. The MBA students are brought to the campus by a bus from the school and taken back after classes. When these systems are explained to the parents, they feel quite comfortable.

10.4.1.1. Transportation from home to college:

In the city of Trivandrum, almost every school and college run a fleet of buses that pick up the students from home to school or college and drop them back in the evening. In undergraduate schools and colleges, the enrolment numbers are in hundreds if not thousands, which makes it viable to run such a transportation system. This was not feasible for ASB with just about 30 students in a batch. However, with more enrolments there could be a viable proposition to operate such a service. During the previous year, two students mentioned lack of transportation as a reason for not joining.

A bus roaming around the city with “Asian School of Business” painted in big letters would also give mobile publicity to the brand.

Sheth & Sisodia (2019) advices organizations to increase the **convenience value** by reducing the distance a customer needs to travel to get the product. Many companies have understood this requirement and have started their online shopping portals where consumers shop without moving away from their homes.

Online delivery of education is possible today. Many institutes are offering such courses. We too had to shift classes to the online mode when the country was locked down for months during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such an online system increased the convenience value a lot. However, students expressed the feeling that the effectiveness of face-to-face interaction was missing online.

10.4.2. Availability:

Availability is the second dimension of accessibility. Fundamentally, it refers to adequate supply of the core offering, in this case, the MBA programme. As of today, seats are available for a qualified candidate. Availability also involves availability of **pre-purchase and post-purchase advice**. The **admissions process** was considered an important factor at the pre-purchase stage. Students expect the admissions process to be quite formal in a good business school.

ASB has developed a process over the years for interviews. Students and parents are invited to the college and a presentation is made about the programme, its rigour, faculty, placements and so on. The students are then taken for a group discussion. After the group discussion, a panel consisting of members of the faculty interviews the candidates. After the interview, a writing assignment is given to check out their skills in written communication.

Students who had attended interviews at other institutes commented that the ASB process was quite exhaustive. In some other college in the region, the questions were about their personal details and whether they would like to pay their admission fees then and there. Some students did not like this and expressed their feelings that the college appeared to be desperate to get students.

10.4.2.1. Initial interaction with the admissions team:

The initial interaction of the students with the admissions team is another important factor that becomes part of the pre-purchase advice. A friendly administrative / admissions staff that guides the students through the processes of the institution and provides all the required information in a friendly manner also enhances the perception of quality by the students. This is more important at the time of joining the programme (Icli & Anil, 2014).

In case of ASB, the initial contact of the student could be the tele-caller or the admissions officer. Proper briefing was given to the whole team about the features of the programme, fee structure, placement history etc. We told the team not to exaggerate things or over promise. Salesmen have the nature to over promise to get the sale. My experience in sales have been quite the opposite. By under promising and over delivering one gets satisfied customers who come back repeatedly. This philosophy has helped ASB to gain credibility over the years. During the farewell functions of outgoing batches, we ask them whether we left any promise

unfulfilled. The answer always was that they got more than what they expected and were promised.

I have called admissions teams of other colleges as a parent to check their strategies. When I asked about their campus placements, knowing well that the placements were very poor, the answers used to come that they have close to 100% placement.

We tell students and parents that no institution can guarantee placement. However, ASB manages to get placement offers from a large number of companies. ASB offers special aptitude training sessions by external experts, gives practice sessions on group discussions and mock interviews. It depends on the student how he or she wishes to make use of such support and get a good job offer. All the parents and students are quite happy with this explanation.

10.4.2.2. Articles to students after joining (before start of classes)

A large number of interesting articles have been created by the faculty team. They are short in length so that students can read it within three to five minutes. Once fifty students paid their admission fee, a Google-group was created and these articles were shared to them regularly.

Students who became part of the group started forming a bond that helped us retain them with us. Usually, during this period many students get new information about other colleges and change their choices.

10.4.2.3. Bridge courses:

The students who join the first year of the programme come from different educational streams. Some of them are not very strong in the language skills. Many of them show some weakness in mathematics. Students from non-commerce streams may have very little idea about the basics of accounting. In order to bring all of them at a more or less similar level, we offer support courses before the start of the formal session.

In the online mode, these classes are held only in the forenoon and some assignments are given for the rest of the day. Classes are taken in a very simple format that enables every student to understand the subjects. Technically, these are not part of the regular programme. However, no additional costs are charged to the students for these support classes. Parents and the students have always appreciated the additional effort put in by the faculty team of ASB.

10.5. How ASB managed the fourth A-Affordability:

The final A of the framework, affordability, also has two dimensions – **economic affordability** and **psychological affordability**.

Customers should be able to **economically afford** to pay the fees. In cases where there are financial issues, other options should be available. In India banks give educational loans without a guarantor or collateral security up to Rs. 400,000. Such loans are approved provided the bank manager considers that the degree is of value and the students would get good jobs soon after completion of the programme, enabling them to repay the loans. When ASB offered a PGDM programme, some managers who did not know about programme refused to approve the loan. With the changeover to the CUSAT MBA programme, such hurdles were removed.

ASB usually asks the students to pay Rs. 50,000 to confirm their admission and the rest of the first-year fees before the start of classes. The COVID pandemic had caused financial uncertainties across all the spectrums of the society. The task force recommended to change the policy and charge only Rs. 10,000 against confirmation, Rs. 90,000 before the start of classes of the first semester and Rs. 140,000 before the start of the second semester classes. This policy offered relief to a large number of students and parents.

The **psychological value** of an offering reflects the customer's willingness to pay the amount asked in exchange for what is being offered. The customer accepts the product if he or she perceives that the price is fair and reasonable. In case of an MBA admission in Kerala, parents who are the payers, get a surprise when they hear that the two-year programme costs Rs. 480,000. When students do their bachelor's degree in arts, science, commerce or business administration, the annual fees are similar for all programmes. When they get into the next level the fees for postgraduate for all streams are similar except for the MBA programme. The fees for postgraduate programmes in arts, science or commerce in a government college are less than Rs. 2000. The wide gap between the cost of these programmes make them wonder whether the investment would yield great value.

When parents come to ASB, we are able to convince the parents that the investment for the two-year programme is recovered within one year, as the average salaries received by our students were close to Rs. 500,000 per annum.

We still have not figured a method to clear this psychological block in parents who do not contact us.

ASB has finally tasted success by getting more than the required number of students for two consecutive years and brought cash profits in for the first time in history. This would indicate that the college has scored well in all the 4 A's of the framework. In the earlier years, scores in some areas were definitely low, which manifested in very low numbers of enrolment.

In this chapter, I have tried to summarize how each element in the expanded framework has been addressed by the task force. Based on this analysis some recommendations are also being made for our future operations.

10.6. Recommendations for future activities:

10.6.1. Awareness related activities:

10.6.1.1. Search engine optimization:

All students mentioned that they did a Google search to find the best MBA colleges. To come into their initial consideration set, the brand needs to come up in these searches. A digital marketing agency was engaged to bring up ASB in these searches during the admissions season. This should now be carried out as a year-long activity.

10.6.1.2. Revamping the ASB website:

Students visit the college website to understand more about the college. The three most important factors that came out in the interviews were – placements, faculty details and infrastructure. On our opening screen these details are not given prominence. These details need to be given more prominence.

We have very good buildings and other facilities. These should be highlighted in a more striking manner. 360-degree views can be shot of the classrooms, seminar hall, amphitheatre, library and hostel rooms and displayed on the website.

"MBA entrance exam support" could be a tab on the screen. When students click it and enter their name, mobile number and email, the site should permit them to download the booklet prepared by the task force, "Graduated- What next?" and a compilation of past questions of KMAT

examinations. Details of the students would help the tele-callers to contact them at a later date.

10.6.1.3. Distribution of e-books:

The task force had created a booklet titled, "Graduated – What next?" This booklet contained details of many career options, including MBA, a list of words that had been used in past KMAT examinations with their meanings, shortcuts in solving arithmetic questions and over 300 general knowledge questions based on previous KMAT examinations. Only the last two pages talk about ASB and the admissions process. We also have compiled all the previous question papers of KMAT. These need to be constantly revised, updated and expanded. These two booklets, now available as e-books are likely to be of use to prospective students. If the book could be distributed to undergraduate students of around 50 colleges in an around Trivandrum, that could raise brand awareness of ASB to a new level.

To achieve the above objective, the admissions officer of ASB would have to find out the faculty in charge of student activities or career guidance of these undergraduate colleges. The two e-books could be sent to them by WhatsApp with a request to forward it to the final year student groups. Since there is very little self-promotion of ASB in these books, it is likely to be forwarded. We had distributed hard copies of the book before the first COVID lockdown and there was no resistance from any college.

10.6.1.4. Posters to colleges:

Every year we print posters about our MBA programme and send them to different college principals with a request to put them up on notice boards. We are not sure whether these posters reach the notice board or not. To make it more effective, we plan to find out the undergraduate colleges where our alumni graduated from. Specific posters would be made for each of these colleges. In addition to programme details the poster would have the pictures of one or two of the students from that college. It would state their current job details and testimonials about their undergraduate college and ASB. Students are likely to be attracted to the poster since they see their own senior students in responsible positions after graduating from ASB.

10.6.1.5. Student reviews on Google and career websites:

Prospective students check the reviews of existing students and alumni on Google reviews and career sites like Shiksha.com, Collegedunia.com, MBAuniverse.com, and Career360.com. Since these are posted by

students, the prospective students attach a lot of value to the comments. They get a feel of the teaching style, quality of faculty, type of atmosphere in college, hostel facilities and food and so on from these reviews.

We plan to request all our students and even our alumni to go to these sites and record their true views. Making students do this is likely to be a long-drawn task. The faculty in charge of student activities may have to be given the responsibility to carry this out.

10.6.1.6. Social media activities:

Social media has opened up new avenues of communication between the marketer and the consumer. As the current generation of prospective students are regular users of the internet and social networking sites, social media apps like WhatsApp and Instagram give better possibilities than traditional media as text as well as video content can be shared at a low price.

The digital marketing agency has been told to create more interesting content, primarily based on videos so that more likes and shares and followers can be created for ASB.

10.6.2. Acceptability:

Most of the elements that comes under acceptability have been managed quite well. There is only a possibility of incremental improvements.

10.6.2.1. Value-added courses:

As internet has opened up the world of education to students, they are able to credit interesting courses of top universities. ASB could tie up with an online education provider like Coursera or EdX and get discounted rates for all the students. The students could be asked to take two such courses of their interest every semester. This will give them eight additional certificates to display on their resume. This will also make the interviewers interested in the candidate as they could ask questions beyond the regular MBA syllabus.

10.6.3. Accessibility:

10.6.3.1. College bus:

As mentioned earlier, a college bus that could ferry students from the city to the campus could be considered once the numbers go up.

The role of the bus as a moving promotion medium should also be considered while calculating the cost of operations.

10.6.4. Affordability:

10.6.4.1. Scholarship to deserving students:

A proposal to offer a full tuition fee waiver to at least three academically sound but financially weak students has been proposed to the management.

10.7. Creation of new knowledge:

I could not locate any literature about building a business school brand in Kerala. My five-year action research journey took my team and me through a variety of situations that helped us realize the complexities of creating a brand in the higher education sector in our state.

The themes that emerged out of many discussions with different stakeholders helped us to understand the factors that are considered important in choosing a business school. An attempt was made to see whether these themes could be mapped to the 4 A's framework that attempts to see the situation from the customer's perspective. Most of the factors could be mapped to the framework.

There were two factors that stood apart. One was related to accessibility. According to the 4 "A"s framework, ease of availability is important. In India, parents and students attribute higher values to institution where it is extremely difficult to get admission. The same rule would apply to ASB too. It is possible that such a situation may arise only in the education sector where lack of availability adds to the value instead of reducing the value of the brand.

The second factor was related to affordability. Provided there is economic affordability, parents are likely to select the best institution for their children without looking at the cost. In Trivandrum there are business schools that offer the programme at less than 50 percent of the fee charged by ASB. However, they fail to fill even half their approved seats for the programme.

I could not find any literature where the 4 A's network has been applied in the higher education sector. Since this study has been carried out in Kerala, business schools that are not able to fill their approved seats may look at this framework and see how they score on all the 4 A's. As

mentioned earlier, the 4 A's are not compensatory. So, the schools will have to see whether they score well on each of the 4 A's.

The mapping of the 4 A's framework in ASB can be seen as new knowledge. If it can be tested to be relevant across other business schools in Kerala, that would be adding substantially to the bank of knowledge in the context of higher education marketing in Kerala.

10.8. Limitations:

The results of this inquiry have its limitations. I had interviewed forty stakeholders to get insights into the selection process of business schools for their MBA programmes. There appeared to be a certain level of saturation in the categories that emerged from these discussions. However, there is no certainty that different reasons would not emerge if more interviews were carried out.

I interpreted the categories and themes that arose from my interviews and ran it through the members of the action research team to see whether they could identify different dimensions or perspectives. We had a series of discussions and came to an agreement on the interpretations. However, a different set of researchers could possibly interpret the findings from a different perspective.

The participants of the interview were those who had come into contact with ASB. Hence, one may not assume that the results can be generalized to the college choice process of all the MBA aspirants in Kerala.

10.9. Future research possibilities:

Additional studies can be carried out at ASB itself to see whether the ratings for each A go up with modifications in marketing activities and the programme delivery.

Changes in student choices are likely to happen over a period of time. The COVID pandemic situation has created many changes in the society, especially in the educational sector. It would also be interesting to track changes in the factors that students consider most important in the choice of institutions over the next few years to see whether substantial differences are visible.

There are successful business schools and not so successful business schools in Kerala. If this extended framework can be used to study and rate each of the A's for these business schools, one may be able to check the applicability of this framework across institutions in Kerala. Such a

study may also reveal new factors that could be mapped to the themes of the framework.

End note:

The task force struggled with an almost impossible, uphill task for the past five years. However, our planning, action, observation and reflection over many cycles helped us achieve our goals and also helped us to create a framework for building and growing an MBA college in Kerala, bringing a satisfying end to a long saga. As an academician and a research student it was also gratifying that the inquiry helped me create an extended framework of the 4 A's framework that helps to understand how the team at ASB finally managed to achieve its objectives. This framework would also be useful to plan activities in the future and manage changes to the programme and its delivery. My research thus helped me to add my little contribution to the vast knowledge already available in the system.

ANNEXURE 1 A
QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS SAMPLE - AWARENESS

Interviewee Code	Interviewee Type	Transcript	Condensation	Code	Category	Theme	Linkage to the 4 A's framework
18	Alumnus of ASB	I took advice from my UG teacher, Mr. Godwin about my higher education choices.	One of the influencers in my MBA college selection was my undergraduate teacher	My UG teacher influenced my MBA college choice	Referral of UG teachers	Role of UG Teachers in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
20	Alumnus of ASB	The biggest inspiration came from a teacher of my BBA class who taught me economics, Mr. Suhail Palakkode. He was the person who sent me here. He said that ASB is a good college. I had made a shortlist of colleges. I showed this list to him and he said that I should join ASB.	My undergraduate teacher told me that ASB is a good college	ASB suggested by undergraduate teacher	Referral of UG teachers	Role of UG Teachers in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
20	Alumnus of ASB	On what basis did you shortlist colleges? I looked at the website. The website shows the infrastructure. Then had a look at the syllabus.	I looked at the websites of colleges	Website review of shortlisted colleges	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of College Website in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
1	Student of ASB	I saw the details of faculty.	Checked ASB faculty details on website	Website review for faculty details	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of College Website in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
17	Alumnus of ASB	I did not know about ASB. I asked this Uncle to give his ideas about some colleges I had shortlisted. He suggested ASB, Rajagiri and SCMS. (These are institutions which have PGDM programmes) I checked about these colleges on the net.	Suggestions about colleges from a senior person known to me.	Suggestions from parents/friends/significant others in MBA college selection.	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of parents/friends/significant others in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
2	Parent	How will you find a good college? Maybe through friends.	Good colleges could possibly found through friends	Suggestions from parents/friends/significant others in MBA college selection.	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of parents/friends/significant others in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
20	Alumnus of ASB	Shiksha.com website is there to find good colleges.	Checked on Shiksha.com website	Checked on Shiksha.com website	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of Career Guidance Websites in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
39	Prospective student	To find right colleges I went to Shiksha.com. They gave me details about all the colleges.	I checked Shiksha.com to find good MBA colleges	Checked Shiksha to find good MBA colleges	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of Career Guidance Websites in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**

Interviewee Code	Interviewee Type	Transcript	Condensation	Code	Category	Theme	Linkage to the 4 A's framework
11	Student of ASB	Last year I researched about colleges in Kerala itself. I searched on Google for Business Schools in Kerala.	I searched Google to find out best business schools in Kerala	Google search for best business schools in Kerala	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of Google Search/review in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
40	Prospective student	I did my research about MBA colleges and ended up with ASB. I googled.	I Googled to find the best MBA college	Google search to find the best MBA college	Search process for MBA colleges	Role of Google Search/review in creating **BRAND AWARENESS**	**AWARENESS**
34	Alumnus of ASB	Worked for one year in Karvy. When went for interviews saw that companies want experience and MBA. Hence decided to do MBA	Saw that companies preferred candidates with MBA, hence decided to join an MBA programme	Why MBA?	The importance and relevance of an MBA programme	**Product knowledge** indicated by factors like interest and relevance	**AWARENESS**
40	Prospective student	I wanted MBA because I wanted a holistic view, a big picture of how business is run. Would help me to be a better decision maker and good leader. I always wanted to start my own business.	I chose MBA to help me start my own business	Why MBA?	The importance and relevance of an MBA programme	**Product knowledge** indicated by factors like interest and relevance	**AWARENESS**
26	Parent	How will you find the right college? Maybe through website, through students, or through friends.	Good colleges could possibly found through friend	Search process for MBA colleges	Developing understanding about different colleges; involvement in the process	**Product knowledge** indicated by factors like understanding and involvement	**AWARENESS**
37	Student of ASB	Checked in Google colleges in Trivandrum saw ASB and Rajadhani.	Google search came up with ASB and Rajadhani as two good MBA colleges in Trivandrum	Search process for MBA colleges	Developing understanding about different colleges; involvement in the process	**Product knowledge** indicated by factors like understanding and involvement	**AWARENESS**
39	Prospective student	To find right colleges I went to Shiksha.com. They gave me details about all the colleges.	I checked Shiksha.com to find good MBA colleges	Search process for MBA colleges	Developing understanding about different colleges; involvement in the process	**Product knowledge** indicated by factors like understanding and involvement	**AWARENESS**

ANNEXURE 1 B
QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS SAMPLE - ACCESSIBILITY

Interviewee Code	Interviewee Type	Transcript	Condensation	Code	Category	Theme	Linkage to the 4 A's framework
28	Former Admissions officer of ASB	Accessibility is a major factor. I can see my child every day is a great plus.	Parents like their children to study at a place near their homes	Proximity of institution to home important factor for parents	Influence of proximity to home	Influence of proximity to home indicating **CONVENIENCE**	**ACCESSIBILITY**
6	Career consultant	Some students are reluctant to leave Kerala.	Some students do not want to leave Kerala	Interest of students in studying within Kerala	Influence of proximity to home	Influence of proximity to home indicating **CONVENIENCE**	**ACCESSIBILITY**
17	Faculty	A small set of parents are reluctant to leave the children without direct control. They feel that the children would get spoiled without direct control.	Some parents are not ready to let their children study in colleges away from home.	Parents like children to stay near home	Influence of proximity to home	Influence of proximity to home indicating **CONVENIENCE**	**ACCESSIBILITY**
5	Prospective student who did not join ASB	What was the main reason for choosing Mount Zion college? Mainly it was proximity. It is just 20 km from my home. College bus service is available.	The college I joined for my MBA is close to my home	I joined college near by home	ASB not selected due to distance from home	Influence of proximity to home indicating **CONVENIENCE**	**ACCESSIBILITY**
17	FACULTY	Once you attend the admission interviews, this feeling really influences you. I got admission to PSG and to Amrita. I felt that Amrita was very different from PSG. The way they maintained the campus and managed the interview process were very different. Amrita did it very professionally.	A professionally managed interview process gives an insight into the quality of an institution	Good colleges have well-managed admissions process	Importance of admissions processes	**Customer availabilty** value that includes pre and post purchase advice	**ACCESSIBILITY**
14	PROSPECTIVE STUDENT	I started calling and asked about their admissions process. I think I called Asian School of Business last Friday. A sir talked to me. I feel comfortable and I was ready to attend the interview.	Called ASB. The discussion with the admissions officer made me comfortable and prompted me to attend the interview	Good interaction with admissioins team prompted me to attend interview	Importance of initial interactions with the admissions team	**Customer availabilty** value that includes pre and post purchase advice	**ACCESSIBILITY**
20	ALUMUS 2017	The fees at SCMS were high. They way they spoke was not good. It was slightly indifferent. I left it at that. Did not even check their website.	The admissions team spoke with indifference when I contacted them which made me drop the college from my shortlist	Indifferent response from admissions team made me drop the college	Importance of initial interactions with the admissions team	**Customer availabilty** value that includes pre and post purchase advice	**ACCESSIBILITY**

ANNEXURE 1 C
QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS SAMPLE - ACCEPTABILITY

Interviewee Code	Interviewee Type	Transcript	Condensation	Code	Category	Theme	Linkage to the 4 A's framework
22	Guardian of prospective student	How do you judge a good college? Better placements. And Better teaching. These are the two main things.	A good MBA college would have good placements	Good placements indicate quality of an MBA college	Importance of Placements in making a HE choice	Institution with high placements makes it **PSYCHOLOGICALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
28	Former Admissions officer of ASB	The biggest impact could be the previous placement history. He will have a feeling, if I join there I will get a job. The colleges usually publicizes the top salary. That can be a great attraction.	Colleges that have good reputation for placements at high salaries are attractive to MBA aspirants	Colleges with high placements are attractive	Importance of Placements in making a HE choice	Institution with high placements makes it **PSYCHOLOGICALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
34	Alumnus of ASB	Looked at reviews. Called each college. Checked fee structure and placements.	Called up each college in my checklist and got details about placements	Checked placements of shortlisted colleges	Importance of Placements in making a HE choice	Institution with high placements makes it **PSYCHOLOGICALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
35	Alumnus of ASB	Krishnapriya's relative in TVM said ASB placements were good.	My relative in Trivandrum told me that placements at ASB are good.	Relative said placements at ASB are good	Importance of Placements in making a HE choice	Institution with high placements makes it **PSYCHOLOGICALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
1	Student of ASB	I saw the details of faculty.	Checked ASB faculty details on website	Checked ASB faculty details on website	Importance of Faculty	Qualified and experienced faculty makes an institution **FUNCTIONALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
10	Student of ASB	What do you mean by experienced faculty? Experience in the business field, not just teaching.	Experience means experience in the corporate world	Faculty should have corporate experience	Importance of Faculty	Qualified and experienced faculty makes an institution **FUNCTIONALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
1	Student of ASB	Mainly I asked about hostel facilities.	Hostel facilities are important	Hostel facilities are important	Importance of good hostel facilities	Good infrastructure makes an institution **FUNCTIONALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
14	Prospective student	Its infrastructure is entirely different.	ASB has very good infrastructure that is different from that of other colleges	ASB infrastructure very good	Influence of good infrastructure	Good infrastructure makes an institution **FUNCTIONALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**
15	Alumnus of ASB	One day I had come here. Met Mr Harish the admissions officer. Once I saw the place my mind told me that this is where I want to join.	The infrastructure of ASB attracted me and made me decide to join ASB	ASB infrastructure attractive	Influence of good infrastructure	Good infrastructure makes an institution **FUNCTIONALLY ACCEPTABLE**	**ACCEPTABILITY**

ANNEXURE 1 D
QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS SAMPLE - AFFORDABILITY

Interviewee Code	Interviewee Type	Transcript	Condensation	Code	Category	Theme	Linkage to the 4 A's framework
16	Career consultant	Do parents have a say when cost is involved? Definitely yes since they have to fund it.	Parents fund education of their children	Quantum of fee critical to parents as they fund the education	Importance of fees	Economic **affordability**	**AFFORDABILITY**
20	Alumnus of ASB	The fees at SCMS were also high.	SCMS charged high fees for their programme	Did not consider SCMS due to high fees	Importance of fees	Economic **affordability**	**AFFORDABILITY**
25	Parent	I was told that Rajagiri could cost almost 10 lakh rupees. Then I told her to write test of any central university. Then so much fees may not be required.	Central Govt University programmes are far cheaper in cost	Central Govt University programmes are far cheaper in cost	Importance of fees	Economic **affordability**	**AFFORDABILITY**
28	Former Admissions officer of ASB	Proximity is an issue. A cheap college if it is near home is very good.	Proximity and lower fees could be factors that impact college choices	Lower fees can impact college choices	Importance of fees	Economic **affordability**	**AFFORDABILITY**
39	Prospective student	Then fee structure is important.	Fee structure is important	Fee structure is important	Importance of fees	Economic **affordability**	**AFFORDABILITY**
20	Alumnus of ASB	The fees charged by ASB (Rs 700,000 for the 2 year programme including hostel and food, approx. $10,000) was acceptable.	Fee of Rs 700,000 acceptable if programme is good.	Fee should be related to quality of programme	Fee should be related to quality of programme	Psychological **affordability**	**AFFORDABILITY**
20	Alumnus of ASB	There were colleges that had much lower fees. In fact, some colleges called me and offered me a discount in the fees. That made me suspicious. I decided not to join such colleges.	Some colleges offered a fee discount that made me suspicious about their genuinity	Fee discounts are not expected from good institutions	Fees are likely to be higher for good programmes	Psychological **affordability**	**AFFORDABILITY**

ANNEXURE-2 -A

Asian School of Business
Experience the Change

How Tiger Bread was rechristened as Giraffe Bread

Organizations discuss the importance of customer feedback. However, very few take it seriously and act upon it.

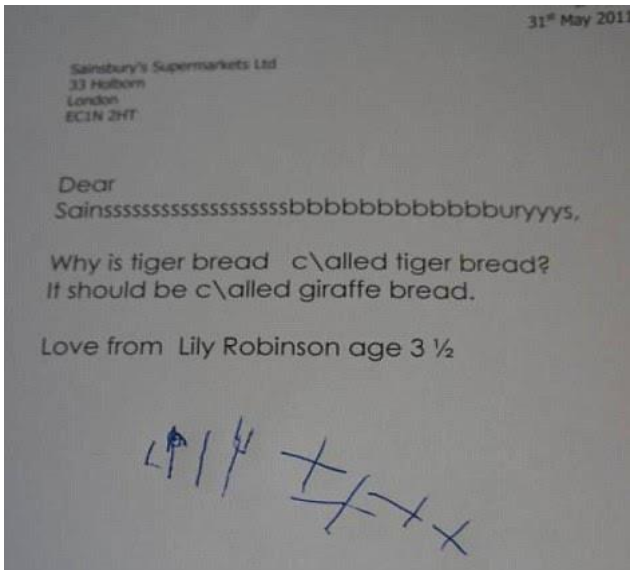
Sainsbury's, the second largest supermarket chain in the U.K. Sainsbury's received an interesting feedback from a three-year old customer and took prompt action.

Sainsbury's sells a type of bread in their bakery section called the Tiger Bread. Rice paste is brushed on to the surface before baking, forming a pattern as it dries and cracks while it bakes. The baker who created it thought the textured crust looked like the skin of a tiger and named the bread Tiger Bread.

Little Lily Robinson who saw the bread thought otherwise. She felt that the crust resembled the skin of a giraffe rather than that of a tiger.

She wrote a letter to Sainsbury's (with a little help from her mother) and suggested that they should call it Giraffe Bread instead of Tiger Bread.

The letter was signed - Lily Robinson Age 3 ½.



31st May 2011

Sainsbury's Supermarkets Ltd
33 Holborn
London
EC1N 2HT

Dear
Sainssssssssssssssssssbbbbbbbbbbbbburyyys,

Why is tiger bread c\alled tiger bread?
It should be c\alled giraffe bread.

Love from Lily Robinson age 3 ½

Chris King from the Sainsbury's customer services team wrote back:

"I think renaming tiger bread giraffe bread is a brilliant idea - it looks much more like the blotches on a giraffe than the stripes on a tiger, doesn't it?"

But he went on to explain how it had got its name: "It is called tiger bread because the first baker who made it a looong time ago thought it looked stripey like a tiger. Maybe they were a bit silly."

He included a £3 gift card, and signed the letter "Chris King (age 27 & 1/3)".

Our reference: 1-251167934

14 June 2011

Sainsbury's

Thanks so much for your letter. I think renaming tiger bread giraffe bread is a **brilliant** idea – it looks much more like the blotches on a giraffe than the stripes on a tiger, doesn't it?

It is called tiger bread because the first baker who made it a looong time ago thought it looked stripey like a tiger. Maybe they were a bit silly.

I really liked reading your letter so I thought I would send you a little present. I've put a £3 gift card in with this letter, if you ask your mum or dad to take you to Sainsbury's you could use it to buy some of your own tiger bread (and maybe if mum and dad say its OK you can get some sweeties too!). Please tell an adult to wait 48 hours before using this card.

I'm glad you wrote in to us and hope you like spending your gift card. See you in store soon.

Yours sincerely

Chris King (age 27 & 1/3)
Customer Manager

Enclosed: £3 gift card

Lily's mother posted her daughter's letter and the response on their Facebook page which went on to get more than 140,000 'likes'.

This story of human interest became quite viral and Sainsbury's decided to rename their Tiger Bread as Giraffe Bread.

Almost every major publication in the UK carried this story and Sainsbury's managed to get a lot of free publicity, thanks to its customer-centric attitude.

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ANNEXURE 2-B

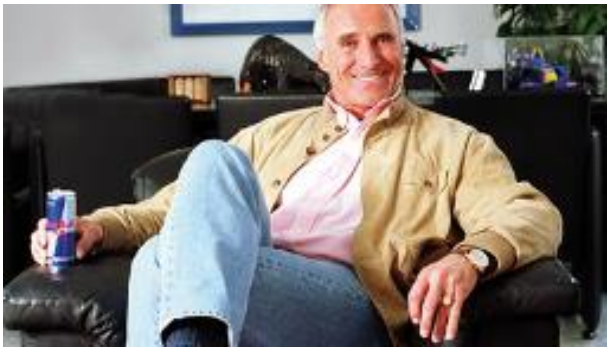
Asian School of Business
Experience the Change

RED BULL – THE BEST SELLING ENERGY DRINK IN THE WORLD

When someone thinks about the energy drink category, one brand is likely to spring up in the minds of most people – Red Bull. With a worldwide market share of over 32 percent and sales of a mind boggling 7.5 billion cans a year, Red Bull is the undisputed market leader in the energy drink category since it was launched in 1987.

Red Bull®

Red Bull has made its co-founder, Dietrich Mateschitz, the richest man in Austria with a wealth of over $12.4 billion.



Red Bull, however, did not originate in Europe. It evolved from the Thai drink, Krating Daeng, which roughly translates to Red Bull in English.

Chaleo Yoovidhya, the founder of T.C. Pharmaceutical Co. in Thailand, developed a drink for blue collar workers, especially truck drivers who needed to remain alert during long drives.

The drink Krating Daeng, became a huge success in Thailand, predominantly among blue-collar workers.

Dietrich Mateschitz was an Austrian salesman who used to visit Thailand on official work. One day he tried Krating Daeng to overcome his jetlag and found it to be very effective. Dietrich obtained a license from Yoovidhya to make it in Austria. Both then became partners in Red Bull GMBH.

Dietrich changed the ingredients marginally to suit Western tastes. He also changed the packaging from a bottle to a stylish silver and blue can. Instead of positioning the drink as a blue-collar drink, it was positioned as a trendy drink. Dietrich actually created a new segment in the carbonated drink category – the Energy Drink.

The brand was marketed in Austria initially. From there it went to other countries in Europe and later spread worldwide. Dietrich decided to associate Red Bull with extreme sports. Today Red Bull is associated with a range of extreme sports like Formula -1 car racing, Power Boat racing, Motocross, Mountain Bike stunts, Red Bull Air Race and so on.

Red Bull came to India in 2000 through a distributor arrangement. In 2012, the company discontinued the distributor and started the Indian operations on its own. Today India is the fastest growing market for Red Bull with a 37% growth, followed by Brazil with 30%.

In the Western markets, Red Bull uses a Mini Cooper with a huge Red Bull can mounted on top as a publicity medium. In India, modified Suzuki Swifts are used to promote the brand.

The caffeine and sugar content of the drink gives a fresh feel, a sense of energy and faster reactions. There is evidence that the drink improves mental and physical performance. No wonder that the younger generation is accepting Red Bull as one of their regular drinks.

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ANNEXURE 2-B

Asian School of Business
Experience the Change

JUMBO

When Boeing launched the Boeing 747, a huge aircraft that had 2 ½ times the capacity of its predecessor, the Boeing 707, people called it the **Jumbo Jet**.

The international courier service has a **Jumbo Box** which can be used to ship large packets weighing up to 25kg at a reasonable price.

Very large prawns that come 20-25 per pound weight are called **Jumbo Prawns.**

The word JUMBO today means a very large thing. But, what could be the origin of this word?

Hunters caught an elephant calf in East Africa in 1860. They sold it to an animal dealer who managed to ship it to Europe. The calf was sold to a botanical garden in France. This was the first African elephant specimen to set foot in Europe. The elephant was named JUMBO and soon became a star attraction. The London Zoo gave a large number of rare animals to the French and managed to get Jumbo in exchange. Matthew Scott, the zoo-keeper at the London Zoo took excellent care of Jumbo and it eventually grew to become one of the largest elephants the world had ever seen, standing almost 13 feet tall.

In 1882, legendary American circus company, P.T. Barnum bought Jumbo from the London zoo and took it to America. In America, it was billed as “the largest elephant in the world” and used in every publicity material. Jumbo became a top attraction in America too.

A few years later, Jumbo was hit by a train and killed. After its death, the name Jumbo became synonymous with anything that was extremely large.

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