



Original Article (Mixed)

Facilitators and Enablers of Competitive Advantage Creation in Practical Training Centers

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Receive:

11 June 2025

Revise:

15 March 2026

Accept:

31 May 2026

Keywords:

Resource-based approach, Competitive Advantage, Applicative training centers, Facilitators, Enablers

Abstract

The aim of this study is to design and validate a conceptual model of effective facilitating and enabling factors in creating competitive advantage of applicative education centers. This study is applicable in nature, and descriptive-survey with a mixed approach (quantitative-qualitative) in terms of method, which was conducted in two stages. In the first stage and in the qualitative phase, in order to develop an initial conceptual model, the opinions of 15 experts in the field of higher education and management were employed, and a set of initial variables were identified and organized into four categories (process, service, audience-oriented, and support). Then, in the quantitative phase, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was employed through AMOS software to validate the developed conceptual model. The statistical population of the study included managers, instructors, and experts of higher education centers organizing MBA and DBA courses. Sampling was carried out by the available method, and a total of 188 questionnaires were completed and entered into the analysis. The results of the analyses showed that the final model has a good fit and that the identified variables play an effective role in promoting competitive advantage. This model can be a basis for strategic decision-making in applicative education centers.

Please cite this article as (APA): Hasanpour, V, Sarikhani Khorami, M, Shafiee, M and Panahali, I. (2026). Facilitators and Enablers of Competitive Advantage Creation in Practical Training Centers. *Management and Educational Perspective*, 8(2), 483-508.



<https://doi.org/10.22034/jmep.2026.529725.1526>



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Publisher: Research Center of Resource Management Studies and Knowledge-Based Business

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Higher education is recognized as one of the fundamental pillars of scientific, technological, and social development of countries. (Moreno, 2023) For the past two decades, the development of higher education has been considered in the third and fourth five-year plans for economic and social development. Increasing the number of universities, increasing student enrollment, establishing new majors, and formulating and approving new laws to transform education are among the measures taken in this area. (Heydari et al., 2025) Research evidence shows that continuing education, management training, and short-term professional programs have become one of the main sources of non-tuition income in many universities (Höhn & Teichler, 2021). Also, the expansion of the number of providers of applicative education and the movement of universities towards market logic have intensified competition in this industry not only for inclusive recruitment, but also for quality, innovation, educational brand and creating a sustainable competitive advantage. In such circumstances, improving the competitiveness of higher education has become one of the key axes of policy-making in the field of science and technology. Sustainable competitiveness requires the use of resources and capabilities not only valuable, but also rare, inimitable and irreplaceable; a concept that has been emphasized in the resource-based value theory (RBV) (Fariz & Winarsih, 2024). Research has also emphasized the role of variables such as information technology, knowledge management, organizational structure, human capital, participatory leadership and innovation in strengthening the competitive advantage of organizations. (Francis, 2023; Marti & Puertas, 2023) Despite many efforts in the field of higher education policy-making, evidence shows that Iran's applicative education centers face fundamental challenges in achieving sustainable competitive advantage. Weakness in organizing knowledge resources, lack of strategic coordination, limited use of new technologies, and the lack of a scientific framework for analyzing these factors have caused decision-making in these centers to be mainly short-term, subjective, and unsystematic. This has created a significant gap between the current and desired status of applicative education centers; a gap that not only prevents these centers from improving their position in regional and global competitions, but also seriously limits their main function of linking education with the real needs of the labor market (Yeganegi, 2020). Therefore, the necessity of the present study is to fill this scientific and practical gap and provide a platform for evidence-based decision-making at the management and policy-making levels. In fact, what the country's higher education today, especially the applicative sector, needs is a comprehensive, indigenous, and evidence-based model that can systematically identify and organize the facilitating and enabling variables for creating competitive advantage (Miotto et al., 2020). In new approaches to higher education, it is not enough to examine the factors affecting competitiveness separately; rather, it is the simultaneous integration of structural, managerial, knowledge, and policy factors that allows moving from descriptive analysis to the design of implementation interventions (Krstić et al., 2020). This simultaneity both increases the explanatory power of the model by understanding the interaction between structures and strengthens its managerial applicability by transforming components into operational levers; in such a way that facilitating factors do not lead to sustainability without enabling mechanisms, and enabling factors do not become a realizable competitive advantage without appropriate institutional contexts. Such a model can serve as a basis for scientific and executive policy-making, strengthen the strategic decision-making of higher education administrators, and pave the way for improving the competitiveness and more effective presence of the country's higher education system at the international level (Beerkens, 2018). Accordingly, the importance of conducting the present study can be expressed in several axes:



first, the existence of a theoretical and practical gap regarding the systematic identification and classification of facilitating and enabling factors in applicative training centers; second, the need for higher education managers and policymakers for a local and evidence-based model for strategic decision-making; and third, the role of these centers in linking education with the real needs of the labor market and enhancing the competitive advantage of the country's higher education system. This study attempts to reduce this knowledge and implementation gap by presenting a valid conceptual model and provide a basis for evidence-based planning and policymaking. In response to this gap, this study presents three innovations: (1) an integrated facilitating/enabling framework with an emphasis on simultaneous and synergistic application; (2) localization based on RBV in the context of Iranian applicative training centers and structural validation of the model; and (3) production of actionable output for management and policymaking in the form of a priority-oriented roadmap. Then, to accurately formulate these innovations, the following central question is raised: Which facilitating and enabling factors play a role in creating competitive advantage in applicative training centers and what is the conceptual structure of the relationships between them?

Theoretical foundations

In the strategic management literature, the concept of competitive advantage is defined as the ability of an organization to provide superior value to customers compared to competitors; a value that is sustainable, inimitable, and based on the organization's internal resources (Sudirjo, 2023). Competitive advantage is formed when the organization can exploit its unique resources and capabilities; resources that respond to market needs, given environmental conditions. In turbulent educational environments, especially in applicative training centers, creating such an advantage requires a deep understanding of internal structures and the surrounding environment. One of the key frameworks in analyzing competitive advantage is the resource-based perspective (RBV). This approach believes that organizations can achieve sustainable competitive advantage by relying on resources that have characteristics such as valuable, scarce, inimitable, and irreplaceable (Shafiee Roodposhti et al., 2019). In the field of higher education, these resources can include human capital, technological infrastructure, flexible organizational structures, and organizational and experiential knowledge. Instead of focusing on external opportunities, the resource-based perspective focuses on the internal capabilities of the organization and believes that each organization can chart a unique path to value creation. In this framework, two key categories of factors are considered: facilitating factors and enablers. Facilitators are factors that provide the conditions and context for the successful implementation of processes, such as innovative educational processes, audience-oriented interactions, or post-training services. In contrast, enablers are factors that directly enhance the operational and decision-making capabilities of the organization; including smart technologies, market analysis, access to financial resources, and the development of advantage-oriented strategies. The conceptual distinction between these two groups helps organizations analyze and manage the enabling and capacity-building factors separately (Fariz & Winarsih, 2024). In applicative training centers, whose mission is to provide practical training tailored to market needs, identifying these two categories of factors plays a pivotal role in improving performance and competitiveness. The structure of these centers is usually more agile than traditional universities, and their dependence on the labor market doubles the need to accurately identify the audience and use efficient resources (Francis, 2023). Therefore, a detailed understanding of the role of facilitators and enablers in the form of an analytical model can be a key to strategic decision-making by managers of these centers. Thus, relying on a resource-based perspective and focusing on the analysis of

facilitating and enabling factors, the present study attempts to present a local model for strengthening the competitive advantage of applicative education centers.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted in a combined exploratory-confirmatory manner. In the qualitative phase, with a three-stage Delphi and the participation of 15 selected experts in three groups (applicative center managers, faculty/researchers of educational management and competitive advantage, and consultants/policymakers), 32 variables were identified and organized into four process, service, audience-oriented, and support clusters, and served as the basis for the questionnaire. In the quantitative phase, the model was validated with confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in AMOS. The statistical population included managers, experts, and active instructors of MBA/DBA courses; with the rule of at least 5 respondents for each item, the sample size was estimated at least 160, and finally 188 questionnaires were collected through convenience sampling. Data were obtained and analyzed from reputable management training centers such as Mahan, Bahar, Farda Management, and Ariana.

Research Findings

The findings of this study showed that creating competitive advantage in applicative training centers is the result of the systematic interaction of two groups of factors: "facilitators" and "enablers," each of which can be explained in four dimensions: process, service, audience-oriented, and support. The results of first- and second-order confirmatory factor analysis indicate that all identified dimensions (except for one item in the support enablers dimension, which was removed) have a meaningful factor loading and appropriate validity and reliability, and the final research model has an acceptable fit. These findings indicate that competitive advantage in applicative training centers is not formed as a single factor, but as a multidimensional and coherent mechanism.

Conclusion

The findings of the present study are consistent with the results of Yousefghanbari et al. (2023), and Seifi et al. (2024), and Mansoori et al. (2024).

Based on the results of the study, the following suggestions were made:

- In the process area: designing flexible and innovative programs in line with the market, establishing continuous content evaluation and updating, and strengthening active learning with LMS and blended learning.
- In the service area: attracting and retaining experienced professors, developing post-training services (counseling/job introduction/graduate network), and inter-school collaborations to enhance credibility.
- In the audience-oriented area: designing based on a detailed analysis of the target market, strengthening brand identity and differentiation with effective narratives, and customizing courses according to the needs of the audience.
- In the support/infrastructure area: improving physical and digital infrastructure, transparent and targeted allocation of financial/human resources, and expanding communication networks with stakeholders.

The output of these four axes is a practical roadmap for increasing the competitiveness and sustainability of applicative training centers in the rapidly changing education market.