

A Strategic Model for Enhancing University's Specialist Identity for Global Recognition

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Abstract

This study aims to develop a strategic model for enhancing Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University's (SSRU) specialist identity to achieve global recognition. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines qualitative data from semi-structured interviews and document analysis with quantitative survey data collected from faculty, administrative staff, students, and international partners. The study examines the relationships among institutional inputs (leadership, human capital, resources, policy, and stakeholder engagement), strategic processes (specialist program development, research capacity building, international collaboration, branding, and quality assurance), outputs (recognized programs, research publications, international partnerships), and outcomes (global recognition, sustainable specialist identity). Structural equation modeling (SEM) validates the proposed model, demonstrating that effective processes mediate the impact of institutional inputs on outputs and international recognition outcomes. The findings highlight the importance of aligning SSRU's strengths with coordinated processes, emphasizing branding, international partnerships, and strategic resource allocation. The study provides a practical roadmap for SSRU and similar mission-driven universities to consolidate their specialist identity, enhance global visibility, and achieve sustainable international recognition.

Keywords: Global recognition, Higher education, Specialist identity, Strategic model

1. Introduction

1.1 Principles and Rationale

In the era of globalization, higher education institutions are increasingly required to differentiate themselves through unique academic strengths and specialist identities. Universities that clearly define their specialist areas i.e., fields of distinctive expertise are better positioned to achieve international recognition, attract global talent, and establish meaningful research partnerships (Altbach & Knight, 2023; Salmi, 2009). Specialist identity is not only a marker of quality but also a strategic asset that enhances institutional visibility and competitiveness in the global higher education landscape (Yulianto & Agnie, 2018; Noreen, 2023).

Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU) is a Thai public university with a historical focus on teacher education, professional training, and community engagement. Over time, SSRU has expanded its academic programs to include arts, sciences, business, and social sciences, alongside initiatives for internationalization, such as programs taught in English, international partnerships, and faculty exchanges (SSRU Strategic Plan, 2023–2027). Despite these efforts, SSRU faces the challenge of consolidating its specialist identity across faculties and departments in order to establish a coherent institutional profile that is recognizable and respected internationally. In the context of SSRU, areas of potential specialist identity include

arts and cultural studies, teacher education, tourism and hospitality management, and community-based research and innovation. However, these strengths require strategic alignment, resource investment, and systematic processes to translate them into global recognition (Pungnirund, 2025).

The development of a strong specialist identity is particularly critical for Rajabhat universities, which are traditionally mission-driven institutions aimed at regional development, teacher training, and community service (Chaeddhananan & Dhirathiti, 2022). While these universities have achieved local relevance and recognition, they often struggle to compete on the global stage due to limited international branding, resource constraints, and challenges in aligning local mandates with global expectations (Altbach & de Wit, 2015). Therefore, the articulation and strategic enhancement of specialist identities can serve as a bridge between maintaining local relevance and achieving international visibility.

Given these dynamics, there is a clear need to develop a strategic model that integrates institutional resources, processes, and capabilities to enhance SSRU's specialist identity. Such a model would guide university leadership in leveraging institutional strengths, addressing limitations, and aligning initiatives with international standards and expectations. Furthermore, it would provide a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of strategies designed to increase global visibility while maintaining SSRU's commitment to regional development and professional training.

1.2 Research Objective

The primary objective of this study is to develop a strategic model to strengthen Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University's specialist identity for international recognition. This objective is supported by the following specific aims:

1. To identify key factors and indicators that contribute to the development of a specialist identity in higher education institutions, with reference to international best practices and regional contexts.
2. To develop a strategic model for enhancing SSRU's specialist identity, aligning institutional inputs, strategic processes, and measurable outcomes that collectively support international recognition.

2. Literature Review

By synthesizing insights from these domains, this literature review provides a theoretical basis for developing a strategic model that strengthens SSRU's specialist identity and enhances its global recognition through integrated institutional enablers, strategic processes, and measurable outcomes.

2.1 Specialist Identity and Institutional Differentiation in Higher Education

Institutional identity in higher education refers to how universities conceptualize and express their distinctive mission, culture, strengths and reputation (e.g., brand identity, specialist academic focus). In the global higher education environment, universities increasingly emphasize niche specialization to distinguish themselves and build competitive advantage (Altbach & Knight, 2023). The idea of a "specialist identity" refers to a university's commitment to concentrated areas of excellence or unique expertise which become part of its institutional brand and strategy. Research on higher education branding and identity suggests that internal coherence, external communication and alignment of resources/processes are

critical for building a strong identity. Thus, specialist identity can be seen as one of the enabling conditions for international recognition by focusing on defined areas of strength, a university can align its strategies with international expectations.

2.2 Specialist Identity in the Context of Rajabhat Universities in Thailand

Rajabhat universities in Thailand, including Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University (SSRU), have traditionally focused on regional development, teacher education, and professional training. Prior studies highlight the challenge of balancing strong local missions with increasing demands for international visibility (Altbach & Knight, 2023; Knight, 2012). Jantanukul (2024) and Yodpichai et al. (2025) suggest that Rajabhat universities must integrate community-based innovation with strategic specialization to enhance global orientation. Leadership, policy alignment, curriculum internationalization, and institutional support have been widely recognized as critical factors in shaping specialist identity and achieving global recognition (Sporn, 1999; de Wit et al., 2015). Accordingly, SSRU's specialist identity should build on its regional and professional strengths while aligning with international standards to achieve sustainable global positioning.

2.3 Strategic Models in Higher Education: Inputs, Processes, Outcomes

Strategic development frameworks in higher education commonly adopt an input–process–outcome (IPO) logic, in which leadership, human capital, and institutional resources (inputs) enable core academic and managerial activities (processes) that lead to measurable performance outcomes such as international recognition, rankings, and global partnerships (Burton Clark, 1998; Sporn, 1999). Within this framework, a strategic model aimed at strengthening institutional or specialist identity typically includes inputs such as leadership commitment, faculty capabilities, infrastructure, and alignment with international policies; processes such as specialist program development, branding and positioning, international collaboration, quality assurance, and student and faculty mobility; and outcomes including enhanced global visibility, increased international enrolments, stronger research networks, and a distinctive institutional reputation (Altbach & Knight, 2023; de Wit et al., 2015). This IPO approach provides a systematic lens for understanding how universities translate strategic resources into sustainable international competitiveness.

2.4 Research Gap

Despite extensive literature on internationalization and institutional strategy, empirical research remains limited on how mission-driven regional universities, such as Rajabhat institutions, can systematically develop a specialist identity for global recognition. The interaction between local missions, specialization, and global positioning is particularly underexplored in the ASEAN context. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes a strategic model for SSRU that integrates specialist identity with international recognition, grounded in international best practices while reflecting SSRU's institutional mission, strengths, stakeholder perspectives, and Thai higher education policy environment.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative component is used to explore perspectives of key stakeholders regarding SSRU's specialist identity and strategies for international recognition. The quantitative component is used to validate the proposed strategic model using empirical data. The mixed-methods approach allows triangulation of insights from literature, experts, and

stakeholders to ensure the model is comprehensive, practical, and contextually relevant (Hair et al., 2021).

3.1 Population and Sample

The study population comprises three groups: (1) university administrators, faculty members, and academic staff involved in program development, research, and international activities at SSRU; (2) students enrolled in SSRU programs with international engagement components; and (3) international partners, collaborators, and alumni with experience in SSRU's internationalization and specialist programs. Purposive sampling will be employed to select key informants—such as administrators, faculty members, and external partners—who possess in-depth knowledge and direct involvement in SSRU's specialist identity development initiatives.

For the quantitative phase, stratified random sampling will be used to select faculty members, students, and administrative staff across faculties and programs to ensure proportional representation. The target survey sample size of 200–300 respondents meets the minimum requirements for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) recommended by Hair et al. (2021), ensuring adequate statistical power and model reliability.

3.2 Research Instruments

Qualitative data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with university leaders, department heads, and international partners, complemented by document analysis of strategic plans, accreditation reports, and policy documents.

Quantitative data will be obtained using a structured questionnaire with 5-point Likert-scale items measuring stakeholder perceptions of institutional inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes related to SSRU's specialist identity and global recognition. Content validity will be ensured through expert review, and reliability will be assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha \geq 0.70$) (Hair et al., 2021).

3.3 Data Collection

Data collection will be conducted in two phases. The qualitative phase involves in-depth interviews with key informants and a review of institutional documents related to specialist programs and global initiatives. The quantitative phase consists of administering structured questionnaires to faculty, staff, and students, followed by data preparation for analysis. All procedures will comply with ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and SSRU research ethics guidelines.

3.4 Data Analysis

For Data analysis, qualitative data will undergo thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and themes that reflect SSRU's institutional identity, strengths, and opportunities for global positioning. Quantitative data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency) to summarize stakeholder perceptions. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) will validate the measurement constructs, while Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will be employed to test relationships among inputs, processes, outputs, and outcomes, confirming the overall fit and reliability of the proposed strategic model.

4. Results

A total of 250 respondents participated in the study, including faculty members (40%), administrative staff (25%), students (30%), and international partners or alumni (5%). The demographic profile indicates that 65% of respondents had more than five years of experience in their current positions, ensuring that responses reflect insights from experienced stakeholders familiar with Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University’s strategic direction. Gender distribution comprised 55% female and 45% male participants, with representation from all major faculties and programs across the university, thereby ensuring comprehensive institutional coverage.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Institutional Inputs and Process

Descriptive statistics were used to provide an overview of the faculty’s institutional strengths and areas for improvement, as shown in Table 1-2.

Table 1 Descriptive of Institutional Inputs

Institutional Inputs	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Leadership & Vision	4.25	0.62	High
Human Capital	4.10	0.71	High
Resources & Infrastructure	3.75	0.80	Moderate
Policy & Governance	3.85	0.77	Moderate-High
Stakeholder Engagement	4.00	0.69	High

The descriptive analysis of institutional inputs revealed that leadership and vision (Mean=4.25, SD=0.62) and human capital (Mean=4.10, SD=0.71) were perceived as strong enablers in the development of SSRU’s specialist identity. Stakeholder engagement also scored high (Mean=4.00, SD=0.69), emphasizing the value of collaboration. In contrast, resources and infrastructure (Mean=3.75, SD=0.80) and policy and governance (Mean=3.85, SD=0.77) were rated moderately, suggesting the need for further investment and structural reinforcement. Overall, the results indicate that while leadership and personnel capacity are key institutional strengths, greater resource optimization is necessary to achieve global recognition. Respondents assessed the effectiveness of processes in transforming inputs into outputs.

Table 2 The Effectiveness of Processes

Strategic Processes	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Specialist Program Development	4.05	0.65	High
Research Capacity Building	3.90	0.72	High
International Collaboration	3.60	0.85	Moderate
Branding & Communication	3.50	0.88	Moderate
Quality Assurance & Accreditation	3.80	0.76	Moderate-High

For strategic processes, respondents reported relatively high effectiveness in specialist program development (Mean=4.05, SD=0.65) and research capacity building (Mean=3.90, SD=0.72). However, moderate ratings were observed for international collaboration (Mean = 3.60, SD=0.85) and branding and communication (Mean=3.50, SD=0.88), indicating that SSRU must enhance its global partnerships and visibility strategies. Quality assurance and accreditation (Mean=3.80, SD=0.76) were perceived as moderately high, suggesting a foundation for improvement toward international benchmarks.

4.2 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Tested

A structural equation model is considered acceptable when it meets standard thresholds for model fit. Key criteria include CFI and TLI values of 0.90 or higher, RMSEA and SRMR values of 0.08 or below, and a chi-square ratio (χ^2/df) of 5.0 or less. Meeting these benchmarks indicates that the model fits the data adequately and represents a reasonable approximation of the underlying theoretical structure. The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) results shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) Results

Path Relationship	Standardized Coefficient (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Institutional Inputs → Strategic Processes	0.75	< 0.001	Strong, significant positive effect
Strategic Processes → visible achievements	0.79	< 0.001	Strong, significant positive effect
visible achievements → Specialist Identity for Global Recognition	0.85	< 0.001	Strongest effect; outputs strongly shape outcomes
Institutional Inputs → Specialist Identity for Global Recognition	0.35	0.004	Moderate, significant direct effect

The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis examined the hypothesized relationships among institutional inputs, strategic processes, visible achievements, and specialist identity for global recognition. Institutional inputs show a strong positive effect on strategic processes ($\beta=0.75$, $p < 0.001$). Strategic processes, in turn, exert a strong and significant influence on visible achievements ($\beta=0.79$, $p < 0.001$). Visible achievements exhibit the strongest effect on specialist identity for global recognition ($\beta=0.85$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, institutional inputs have a moderate but significant direct effect on specialist identity for global recognition ($\beta=0.35$, $p = 0.004$). Overall, these results indicate that institutional inputs, particularly leadership, human capital, and resources, strongly drive strategic processes, which in turn lead to effective outputs such as recognized programs and research publications. The strong path from outputs to outcomes confirms that visible achievements contribute significantly to SSRU’s international recognition and specialist identity.

4.3 Qualitative Insights from Interviews

Insights from semi-structured interviews complemented and reinforced the quantitative results. Key themes from interviews with university leaders and partners included the need for stronger strategic alignment of specialist programs with global standards, improved branding and communication to address limited international visibility, more structured and sustainable international collaborations, and better resource optimization through investment in technology, infrastructure, and international marketing.

The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings indicates that although SSRU possesses strong leadership, human capital, and academic processes, further efforts are required to enhance branding, strengthen international partnerships, and upgrade supporting infrastructure. Achieving sustainable international recognition as a specialist institution therefore depends on a coordinated strategic model that integrates academic excellence with effective global engagement, branding, and resource management, as proposed by this study.

5. Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive assessment of the key factors influencing Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University's (SSRU) progression toward strengthening its specialist identity and enhancing global visibility. The findings demonstrate that institutional inputs—particularly leadership, human capital, and resource availability—play a critical role in driving strategic processes, including specialist program development, research capacity building, international collaboration, and quality assurance enhancement. These results are consistent with higher education research highlighting the importance of vision-driven leadership, academic talent, and sustainable resource systems in guiding institutional transformation and strategic advancement (Salmi, 2009; Sporn, 1999).

The Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) results further reveal a very strong relationship between institutional outputs and outcomes, indicating that SSRU's visible academic and international achievements significantly contribute to its global reputation and progress toward becoming a specialist university. Such performance-based outcomes—such as research productivity, international partnerships, and academic recognition—are widely acknowledged as core drivers of international competitiveness in higher education institutions (Altbach & de Wit, 2015; Hazelkorn, 2015).

Importantly, the findings suggest a clear developmental pathway for enhancing SSRU's specialist identity and global recognition. This pathway begins with strengthening foundational capacities, followed by the implementation of targeted academic and internationalization processes, and culminates in the generation of high-quality outputs that translate into sustainable global outcomes. Aligning institutional strategies with global mobility and internationalization trends (Altbach & Knight, 2007), national higher education policy directions, and entrepreneurial university frameworks (Etzkowitz, 2013) positions SSRU to enhance its competitiveness while remaining grounded in its regional mission.

Based on the findings, SSRU should strategically leverage leadership, human capital, and institutional resources to strengthen specialist programs and research excellence. Expanding international collaboration, enhancing branding, reinforcing quality assurance, and supporting global engagement will sustain international visibility, while continuous performance monitoring will ensure alignment with global standards and long-term international recognition.

Acknowledgment

The author would like to formally express appreciations to Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University for financial support and the Faculty of Management Sciences for providing full assistance until this research was successfully completed. The author is also grateful for suggestions from all those who kindly provide consulting advices throughout the period of this research.

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