

Partnership-Based Outreach, Institutional Trust, and Student Enrolment in Open and Distance Learning: A Systematic Literature Review

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Received: March 18, 2026

Revised: April 13, 2026

Accepted: May 20, 2026

Abstract

This study systematically reviews the relationship between partnership-based outreach, institutional trust, and student enrolment in open and distance learning (ODL). A systematic literature review was conducted on 25 peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2026. The selected studies were identified through Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, Sage Journals, and Google Scholar, and were synthesised descriptively and narratively. The findings identified four major forms of outreach: digital and social media outreach, institutional and international partnerships, trust- and reputation-based communication, and school–university widening-participation programmes. Partnership-based outreach contributed to institutional visibility, information accessibility, student aspirations, and enrolment-related decisions. Its effectiveness depended on transparent communication, responsiveness, local relevance, authentic testimonials, and sustained interaction with prospective students. Institutional trust emerged as a plausible mechanism linking outreach with enrolment because it reduced uncertainty and strengthened perceptions of institutional competence, integrity, and reliability. However, none of the reviewed studies directly tested the complete mediating relationship between partnership-based outreach, institutional trust, and student enrolment within a single ODL model. The review concludes that institutional trust is theoretically supported as an intervening mechanism, but further empirical verification is required. ODL institutions should integrate sustainable partnerships with credible, student-centred communication and evaluate outreach using actual applications, registrations, and enrolment outcomes.

Keywords: Institutional Partnership, Institutional Trust, Open And Distance Learning, Student Enrolment, Systematic Literature Review

Introduction

Open and distance learning (ODL) has become an important mechanism for expanding access to higher education, particularly for working adults, geographically dispersed learners, and individuals who cannot participate in conventional campus-based education. Its flexible delivery enables institutions to reach broader student populations while reducing barriers related to location and time. However, the expansion of ODL does not automatically ensure student

enrolment. Prospective students may remain uncertain about programme quality, institutional legitimacy, qualification recognition, technological readiness, and the availability of academic support.

Partnerships are increasingly important in addressing these challenges. Collaboration with schools, government agencies, employers, community organisations, regional learning centres, alumni, and other educational institutions enables ODL providers to extend their institutional reach and communicate with prospective students through locally recognised actors. Regional and international partnerships have supported capacity building, resource sharing, institutional networking, and the wider adoption of ODL programmes (Ngalomba et al., 2025; Osuji et al., 2022; Perris & McGreal, 2021; Zhu & Chikwa, 2021). Regional providers may also attract learners more effectively when their programmes and communication reflect local educational, cultural, and professional needs (Ruipérez-Valiente et al., 2022).

Partnership-based outreach differs from conventional institutional promotion because it is built upon interaction, collaboration, and social connection. Rather than relying only on advertisements, institutions work through trusted partners to provide information, guidance, mentoring, consultation, and programme exposure. Evidence from wider higher education contexts indicates that school–university outreach, mentoring, repeated information activities, and collaborative widening-participation programmes can strengthen students’ educational aspirations and progression to higher education (Burgess et al., 2021; Martin, 2024; Ní Chorcóra et al., 2025).

Digital channels have further expanded the forms of outreach available to higher education institutions. Social media, webinars, websites, online advertising, personalised messaging, student-generated content, and virtual consultations can increase institutional awareness and enrolment interest (Bohara et al., 2022; Labausa et al., 2023; Syunita & Tikno, 2025; Wijaya et al., 2023). Nevertheless, increased visibility does not necessarily result in enrolment. Digital information becomes influential when prospective students perceive it as credible, transparent, relevant, and consistent with their expectations.

Institutional trust may therefore explain how outreach is translated into student enrolment. Trust reflects prospective students’ confidence that an institution is competent, reliable, honest, and committed to delivering its educational promises. Institutional reputation, programme quality, faculty expertise, alumni success, service quality, and transparent communication can shape this confidence (Juhaiddi, 2024; Magasi & Bwemelo, 2024; Qazi et al., 2022). Online reviews, alumni testimonials, and authentic student experiences may also reduce uncertainty and strengthen institutional credibility (Aggarwal & Gujral, 2025; Saksono et al., 2025).

The importance of trust may be greater in ODL than in conventional higher education because prospective learners have fewer opportunities to directly observe campus facilities or interact face-to-face with institutional representatives. Recognised partnerships and credible communication can function as signals of legitimacy and reliability. Espelita et al. (2026) found that brand trust was more strongly associated with enrolment intention than exposure to websites or social media alone. Related studies also indicate that trust, reputation, brand image, and student engagement can operate as intervening mechanisms between institutional

communication and student responses (Abu Daabes et al., 2025; Balaji, 2025; Latif et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025).

Despite these developments, the literature remains fragmented. Studies on ODL partnerships primarily examine institutional development, access, collaboration, and capacity building, while studies on student recruitment generally focus on digital marketing, institutional reputation, or enrolment intention. Few studies integrate partnership-based outreach, institutional trust, and student enrolment within a single analytical framework. More importantly, the mediating role of institutional trust in the relationship between partnership-based outreach and enrolment has not been systematically synthesised in the ODL context.

Accordingly, this systematic literature review examines how partnership-based outreach is associated with student enrolment and how institutional trust may mediate this relationship in open and distance learning. Specifically, the review identifies the forms of partnership-based outreach reported in previous studies, analyses their relationship with institutional trust and enrolment-related outcomes, and evaluates the available evidence supporting the proposed mediating mechanism. The review contributes by integrating previously separated research streams and proposing a trust-based explanation of how collaborative outreach may influence prospective students' decisions to enrol in ODL programmes.

Methods

Research Method

This study employed a systematic literature review to analyse partnership-based outreach, institutional trust, and student enrolment in open and distance learning. The review consisted of two main stages: article identification and analysis procedure.

Article Identification

Relevant articles were identified from Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, Sage Journals, and Google Scholar. The search covered peer-reviewed articles published between 2021 and 2026. The keywords included "partnership-based outreach," "community partnership," "student recruitment," "institutional trust," "institutional credibility," "student enrolment," "enrolment intention," "open and distance learning," and "distance education." Articles were included when they: i) were published in English or Indonesian; ii) focused on higher education, open universities, online learning, or distance education; iii) examined at least two main variables; and iv) reported empirical findings. Conceptual papers, conference abstracts, dissertations, duplicate records, and studies unrelated to institutional trust or enrolment were excluded. A minimum of 25 eligible studies was targeted. The systematic review procedure is presented in Figure 1.

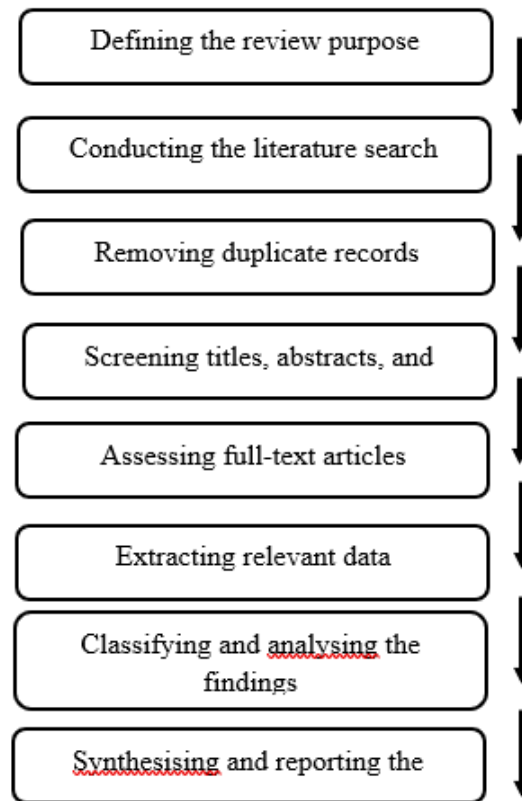


Figure 1. The Systematic Literature Review Procedure

Analysis Procedure

Data from each article were extracted based on author, publication year, country, research design, sample, partnership type, institutional trust, enrolment outcome, and main findings. The studies were classified according to geographical location, research method, partnership-based outreach practices, institutional trust dimensions, and enrolment outcomes. The findings were grouped into three relationships: partnership-based outreach and student enrolment, partnership-based outreach and institutional trust, and institutional trust and student enrolment. Evidence of mediation was identified from studies that directly examined institutional trust as a mediator. Studies examining separate relationships were used as supporting evidence. The findings were synthesised descriptively and narratively to explain how partnership-based outreach may strengthen institutional trust and subsequently influence student enrolment.

Results and Discussion

The final synthesis included 25 studies published between 2021 and 2026. The studies were analysed according to publication year, geographical scope, research design, form of partnership-based outreach, institutional trust, and enrolment-related outcomes. Six studies directly examined partnerships, access, or participation in open and distance learning, while 19 studies provided supporting evidence from broader higher education contexts.

Characteristics of the Included Studies

The distribution of publications indicates increasing scholarly attention to institutional partnerships, outreach strategies, institutional trust, and student enrolment. The largest number of studies was published in 2025, representing 32% of the included articles. Geographically, most studies were conducted in Asia. Quantitative research was the dominant design, particularly studies using questionnaires, regression analysis, path analysis, and structural equation modelling. Mixed-methods and qualitative studies were less common.

Table 1. Distribution of the Included Studies

Category	Classification	N	%
Publication year	2021	5	20
	2022	4	16
	2023	3	12
	2024	4	16
	2025	8	32
	2026	1	4
Geographical scope	Asia	14	56
	Europe	4	16
	Africa	3	12
	Multi-regional	3	12
	Oceania	1	4
Research design	Quantitative	18	72
	Mixed methods	4	16
	Qualitative or evaluation	3	12
Evidence scope	Direct ODL evidence	6	24
	Supporting higher education evidence	19	76

The studies directly related to open and distance learning addressed regional capacity-building partnerships, international cooperation, institutional networking, regional MOOC provision, virtual mobility, and virtual internship partnerships (Ngalomba et al., 2024; Osuji & Chika, 2022; Perris & McGreal, 2021; Reid et al., 2023; Ruipérez-Valiente et al., 2022; Zhu & Chikwa, 2021). Table 2 presents the characteristics and main findings of the 25 studies included in the review.

Table 2. Summary of Studies Included in the Systematic Literature Review

No.	Author(s) and year	Article title and journal	Context and method	Main findings relevant to the review	Evidence role
1	Perris and McGreal (2021)	"Developing Partnerships to Acquire Impact: The Role of Three Regional Centres' Capacity Building Efforts for ODL Adoption in the Emerging World."	Evaluation of three Commonwealth of Learning regional centres	Regional partnerships expanded ODL visibility, institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, and	Direct ODL and partnership

		<i>Journal of Learning for Development</i>		adoption through capacity-building activities.	
2	Zhu and Chikwa (2021)	"An Exploration of China-Africa Cooperation in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges in Open Distance Learning." <i>Open Praxis</i>	China–Africa higher education cooperation; triangulation of primary and secondary data	Mutually beneficial international partnerships supported ODL development, although political, technological, and sociocultural barriers affected implementation.	Direct ODL and partnership
3	Alshurafat et al. (2021)	"Factors Affecting Online Accounting Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic." <i>Education and Information Technologies</i>	Survey of 274 university students in Jordan	Social trust positively influenced the perceived usefulness and ease of use of online learning, which subsequently shaped students' attitudes and usage decisions.	Trust mechanism in online education
4	Qazi et al. (2021)	"The Antecedents Affecting University Reputation and Student Satisfaction: A Study in Higher Education Context." <i>Corporate Reputation Review</i>	Survey of 387 higher education students in Pakistan; PLS-SEM	University trust, social contributions, service quality, research, and student guidance influenced university reputation. Reputation mediated several institutional relationships.	Institutional trust and reputation
5	Burgess et al. (2021)	"Optimising the Impact of a Multi-Intervention Outreach Programme on Progression to Higher Education." <i>Heliyon</i>	Quasi-experimental evaluation of 1,386 learners involved in UniConnect	Participation in outreach was associated with an improved likelihood of obtaining a place in higher education. Greater engagement generally produced stronger outcomes.	Outreach and enrolment
6	Osuji and Chika (2022)	"Roles of Institutional Partnership in the Development of Open and Distance Learning	Survey of 480 academic staff in Nigeria	Institutional collaboration, networking, and joint e-learning	Direct ODL and partnership

		in Higher Education in Rivers State.” <i>International Journal of Education Humanities and Social Science</i>		programmes were perceived as important contributors to ODL development.	
7	Bohara et al. (2022)	“Relationship Between Factors of Online Marketing and Student Enrollment Decisions in Higher Education.” <i>International Journal of Online Marketing</i>	Survey of 800 students in Nepal; SEM	Communication accessibility, value creation, relationship building, convenience, and outreach significantly influenced institutional choice and matriculation decisions.	Outreach and enrolment
8	Latif et al. (2022)	“University Social Responsibility and Performance: The Role of Service Quality, Reputation, Student Satisfaction and Trust.” <i>Journal of Marketing for Higher Education</i>	Survey of 586 students in Pakistan and 311 in China; mediation analysis	University social responsibility influenced institutional outcomes through service quality, reputation, satisfaction, and student trust, although effects differed across countries.	Trust and reputation mechanism
9	Ruipérez-Valiente et al. (2022)	“Large Scale Analytics of Global and Regional MOOC Providers: Differences in Learners’ Demographics, Preferences, and Perceptions.” <i>Computers & Education</i>	Data from more than eight million learners and over 10,000 survey participants across regional MOOC providers	Regional providers attracted more locally diverse learners. Familiar institutions and local partnerships strengthened learner comfort, relevance, and access.	ODL access and institutional familiarity
10	Labausa et al. (2023)	“Investigating Digital Marketing Strategies in Influencing Student Enrollment Decisions in Tertiary Education.” <i>Canadian Journal of Business and Information Studies</i>	Quantitative descriptive survey	Webinars, social media campaigns, mobile-friendly websites, applications, and digital content increased institutional	Digital outreach and enrolment

				awareness and influenced enrolment decisions.	
11	Wijaya et al. (2023)	"Analysis of Digital Marketing Strategies on Interest and Enrollment Decisions of Prospective New Students in Private Higher Education Institutions in Indonesia." <i>Klabat Journal of Management</i>	Survey of 172 students in Indonesia; path analysis	Google advertising and social media marketing positively influenced registration interest, which subsequently affected enrolment decisions.	Digital outreach and enrolment
12	Reid et al. (2023)	"Virtual Internships in Open and Distance Learning Contexts: Improving Access, Participation, and Success for Underrepresented Students." <i>Distance Education</i>	Focus groups and supervisor interviews at The Open University, United Kingdom	Virtual internships and staff–student partnerships improved flexibility, confidence, participation, and access for underrepresented distance learners.	Direct ODL and partnership
13	Martin (2024)	"Do Participants in Widening Participation Outreach Programmes in England Progress to Selective Universities at a Higher Rate Than Would Otherwise Be Expected?" <i>British Educational Research Journal</i>	Administrative data involving 769 programme participants in England	Participants in a consortium-based outreach programme progressed to selective universities at a higher rate than statistically predicted.	Partnership outreach and progression
14	Ngalomba et al. (2024)	"Internationalization at a Distance via Virtual Mobility in the Global South: Advances and Challenges." <i>British Journal of Educational Technology</i>	Interviews with staff at an ODL university in Tanzania	International collaborations and virtual mobility increased access and institutional reach, but infrastructure and staff capacity constrained implementation.	Direct ODL and partnership
15	Magasi and Bwemelo (2024)	"Unlocking Students' Enrolment: A Mixed Methods Study on How Brand Reputation and	Survey of 119 respondents and seven focus group	Reputation, alumni success, academic programmes, faculty expertise, facilities,	Reputation and enrolment

		Perceived Benefits Shape Higher Education Choices in Tanzania.” <i>Indonesian Journal of Social Research</i>	discussions	and financial assistance influenced enrolment intention. Institutional logos were not significant.	
16	Juhaidi (2024)	“University Choice Factors: A Case of Two Types of Higher Education in the Third-Largest Island in the World.” <i>Cogent Social Sciences</i>	Survey of 496 students in Indonesia	Institutional reputation and educational quality were the most important factors influencing university selection.	Reputation and institutional choice
17	Ní Chorcóra et al. (2025)	“Measuring Success: A School–University Partnership Model for Widening Participation in Higher Education.” <i>Irish Educational Studies</i>	Longitudinal study of 3,697 students from 19 Irish secondary schools	Mentoring and repeated college-information activities were associated with stronger educational aspirations and future goals.	School partnership and outreach
18	AbuDaabes et al. (2025)	“From Clicks to Campus: How AI-Powered Digital Marketing Shapes Student Enrollment Decisions.” <i>Asia-Pacific Journal of Business Administration</i>	Survey of 410 students and 15 interviews in the UAE; mixed methods and PLS-SEM	AI-supported marketing increased engagement and enrolment outcomes. Engagement partially mediated the relationship, while personalisation and responsiveness supported trust.	Digital outreach and mediation
19	Li et al. (2025)	“Exploring the Influence of Social Media Communication and Brand Image on International Student Enrollment Intentions in Higher Education.” <i>Frontiers in Education</i>	Survey of 156 international students in China; PLS analysis	Social media communication and brand image positively influenced institutional preference. Brand image served as a mediator.	Outreach, image, and enrolment
20	Balaji (2025)	“Building a Strong Brand: How Digital Marketing Shapes Students’ Online Engagement in Higher Education.”	Survey of 208 students in India; regression analysis	Trust in digital information mediated students’ engagement with higher education marketing.	Trust as mediator

		<i>International Journal of Engineering Technologies and Management Research</i>		Credibility and transparency strengthened communication effectiveness.	
21	Syunita and Tikno (2025)	"Evaluating the Impact of Digital Marketing Strategies on Enrollment Decisions Through PLS-SEM Analysis." <i>Jurnal Sistem Informasi Bisnis</i>	Survey of 325 respondents in Indonesia; PLS-SEM	Social media engagement and personalised direct messaging significantly improved prospective students' enrolment decisions.	Digital outreach and enrolment
22	Saksono et al. (2025)	"From Likes to Enrolment: How Social Media Shapes Decision-Making Among Prospective Students." <i>Jurnal Ilmiah Manajemen Kesatuan</i>	Survey of 320 participants, 25 interviews, and platform analytics in Indonesia	Active social media engagement was positively related to enrolment likelihood. Authentic peer narratives reduced uncertainty regarding institutional quality.	Outreach, uncertainty, and enrolment
23	Aggarwal and Gujral (2025)	"Impact of Online Reviews and Testimonials on Students' Choice of Higher Education Institutions." <i>Lex Localis—Journal of Local Self-Government</i>	Survey of 110 students	Student and alumni reviews were positively associated with institutional trust, image, and students' higher education choices.	Trust and institutional choice
24	Arnup et al. (2025)	"On Widening Participation in Higher Education: A National Examination of Equity Initiatives in Australian Secondary Schools." <i>Australian Journal of Education</i>	National analysis of Australian secondary schools	University outreach programmes focused on aspirations and participation, but their targeting of disadvantaged and regional schools remained inadequate.	Outreach reach and limitations
25	Espelita et al. (2026)	"Social Media Marketing and Enrollment Intent Among College-Bound Learners." <i>Journal of Enterprise Strategy and</i>	Survey of 822 senior high school students in the Philippines; regression	Brand trust was the strongest predictor of enrolment intention. Social media usage had a smaller positive	Trust and enrolment intention

		<i>Management Innovation</i>	analysis	effect, while website usage was not significant.	
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Note. Articles 1, 2, 6, 9, 12, and 14 provide direct evidence concerning institutional partnership, access, or participation in ODL. The remaining studies provide supporting evidence concerning outreach effectiveness, institutional reputation, trust formation, institutional choice, and student enrolment. None of the studies directly tested the complete mediation pathway of partnership-based outreach → institutional trust → student enrolment specifically within an ODL institution.

Forms of Partnership-Based Outreach

The included studies were classified into four major forms of partnership-based outreach. Digital and social media outreach was the most frequently investigated category, representing 36% of the reviewed studies.

Table 3. Forms of Partnership-Based Outreach

Form of outreach	N	%
Digital and social media outreach	9	36
Institutional and international ODL partnerships	6	24
Trust-, reputation-, alumni-, and testimonial-based communication	6	24
School–university and widening-participation outreach	4	16
Total	25	100

Institutional and international partnerships included collaboration among universities, governments, regional centres, schools, employers, and community organisations. These partnerships supported capacity building, institutional networking, resource sharing, visibility, and wider access to open and distance learning (Ngalomba et al., 2024; Osuji & Chika, 2022; Perris & McGreal, 2021; Zhu & Chikwa, 2021). Digital outreach included social media campaigns, institutional websites, webinars, mobile applications, online advertising, personalised direct messaging, virtual campus tours, user-generated content, and AI-supported communication. School–university outreach mainly included mentoring, guidance activities, university information sessions, and widening-participation programmes.

Partnership-Based Outreach and Student Enrolment

Twelve studies examined the relationship between outreach activities and enrolment intentions, applications, university choices, or progression to higher education. Eleven studies reported predominantly positive outcomes, while one identified limitations related to programme targeting and timing.

Digital outreach was consistently associated with increased institutional awareness, registration interest, and enrolment decisions. Accessible communication, relationship building, value creation, and outreach influenced institutional choice and matriculation decisions (Bohara et al., 2022). Social media marketing and online advertising also increased prospective students' interest in registration, which subsequently influenced enrolment decisions (Wijaya et al., 2023).

University webinars, social media campaigns, websites, and educational applications increased

students' awareness of programmes and services (Labausa et al., 2023). Social media engagement and personalised direct messaging also significantly affected enrolment decisions (Syunita & Tikno, 2025).

Interactive and authentic communication appeared more influential than one-way promotional communication. Saksono et al. (2025) found that prospective students exposed to peer-generated content were more likely to apply because authentic student narratives reduced uncertainty regarding institutional quality and student experiences. AbuDaabes et al. (2025) similarly demonstrated that personalised and responsive AI-supported marketing increased student engagement and enrolment outcomes.

School–university partnerships also contributed to progression into higher education. Participation in multi-intervention outreach programmes increased the likelihood of university acceptance (Burgess et al., 2021). Mentoring and repeated information activities strengthened students' educational aspirations (Ní Chorca et al., 2025). Participants in consortium-based outreach also progressed to selective universities at a higher rate than expected (Martin, 2024).

However, outreach programmes were not uniformly effective. Arnup et al. (2025) found that some university outreach initiatives did not sufficiently reach disadvantaged and regional schools and were occasionally implemented too late to substantially influence students' educational aspirations.

Partnership-Based Outreach and Institutional Trust

Eight studies provided evidence that partnership and outreach activities contributed to institutional trust, reputation, credibility, familiarity, or brand image. Partnerships with governments, regional organisations, international institutions, schools, and communities provided external validation of institutional competence and increased the legitimacy of open and distance learning (Ngalomba et al., 2024; Perris & McGreal, 2021; Zhu & Chikwa, 2021).

Digital outreach strengthened institutional trust when the information provided was transparent, consistent, authentic, and responsive. Li et al. (2025) found that institution-generated and student-generated social media communication positively influenced brand image and institutional preference.

Trust was also developed through peer narratives, alumni testimonials, and online reviews. Aggarwal and Gujral (2025) identified positive relationships among online testimonials, institutional trust, institutional image, and students' institutional choices. Saksono et al. (2025) similarly found that authentic student-generated content reduced uncertainty about academic quality and university experiences.

Institutional social responsibility, student guidance, service quality, and social contributions also supported the development of trust and reputation (Latif et al., 2022; Qazi et al., 2021). These results suggest that outreach is more credible when institutions demonstrate genuine commitment to students and communities instead of relying exclusively on promotional claims.

Institutional Trust and Student Enrolment

Six studies directly or closely connected institutional trust, reputation, or credibility with

enrolment intentions and institutional choices. Espelita et al. (2026) found that brand trust was the strongest predictor of enrolment intention and had a greater effect than website or social media usage. This indicates that digital communication may attract attention, but trust is more closely associated with the final enrolment decision.

Institutional reputation and educational quality were also important determinants of university choice (Juhaidi, 2024). Magasi and Bwemelo (2024) found that institutional reputation, alumni success, faculty expertise, academic programmes, facilities, and financial assistance influenced students' enrolment intentions. However, visual branding elements such as institutional logos did not produce significant effects.

Social media communication influenced institutional preference when it created a credible and positive institutional image (Li et al., 2025). Online reviews and alumni testimonials also strengthened university choice by increasing institutional trust and reducing perceived risk (Aggarwal & Gujral, 2025).

Trust was particularly important in open and distance learning because prospective students had fewer opportunities to directly observe campuses and evaluate institutional services. Recognised partnerships, transparent information, credible testimonials, institutional reputation, and responsive communication therefore acted as signals of reliability. Alshurafat et al. (2021) also demonstrated that social trust influenced students' perceptions and decisions regarding online learning systems.

The Mediating Role of Institutional Trust

None of the 25 reviewed studies directly tested the complete relationship between partnership-based outreach, institutional trust, and student enrolment within a single open and distance learning model. Therefore, direct statistical evidence confirming institutional trust as a mediator remains unavailable. Nevertheless, five studies provided evidence of related mediation mechanisms. Li et al. (2025) found that brand image mediated the relationship between social media communication and institutional preference. Balaji (2025) demonstrated that trust in digital information mediated students' engagement with higher education marketing. AbuDaabes et al. (2025) found that student engagement partially mediated the relationship between AI-supported marketing and enrolment decisions. Qazi et al. (2021) found that university reputation mediated relationships between institutional characteristics and student satisfaction. Latif et al. (2022) also identified reputation and student trust as intervening mechanisms linking university social responsibility with institutional outcomes.

Table 4. Synthesis of Findings Based on the Research Relationships

Research relationship	Number of supporting studies	Main findings
Outreach and enrolment or progression	12	Eleven studies reported positive outcomes, while one identified limitations in programme targeting and timing.
Outreach and	8	Transparent, authentic, responsive, and

institutional trust or reputation		partnership-supported communication strengthened credibility and institutional reputation.
Institutional trust or reputation and enrolment	6	Trust and reputation influenced institutional preference, university choice, and enrolment intention.
Exact mediation by institutional trust	0	No study tested the complete proposed relationship in an ODL context.
Related mediation mechanisms	5	Brand image, trust, reputation, and student engagement functioned as mediators in related higher education models.

Note. The categories are not mutually exclusive because several studies contributed evidence to more than one relationship. The findings support a sequential mechanism in which partnership-based outreach improves institutional visibility and information accessibility, strengthens institutional credibility and trust, reduces prospective students' uncertainty, and subsequently encourages enrolment.

Partnership-based outreach → credible institutional communication and reduced uncertainty → institutional trust → student enrolment intention and decision

The absence of direct mediation testing represents the main research gap identified in the review. Although the existing literature supports the individual relationships among outreach, trust, and enrolment, further empirical research is needed to test institutional trust as a mediator specifically within open and distance learning institutions.

Partnership-Based Outreach in Open and Distance Learning

The findings position partnership-based outreach as a relational strategy rather than merely an institutional promotion activity. In open and distance learning, prospective students often have limited direct interaction with campuses and institutional representatives. Partnerships with schools, governments, employers, regional centres, alumni, and community organisations can therefore reduce the distance between institutions and prospective learners. Such partnerships extend institutional visibility while providing external confirmation of legitimacy and educational quality. Regional and international collaborations also support resource sharing, capacity development, and wider access to ODL programmes (Ngalomba et al., 2025; Perris & McGreal, 2021; Zhu & Chikwa, 2021). However, partnerships must produce observable services and engagement. Symbolic agreements without continuous communication, local support, or clear benefits are unlikely to influence prospective students. The effectiveness of outreach also depends on its relevance to learners' contexts. Familiar institutions and locally connected providers may be considered more accessible because they understand students' linguistic, economic, and social circumstances (Ruipérez-Valiente et al., 2022). Partnership-based outreach should therefore combine institutional credibility with locally relevant communication.

Institutional Trust as a Mediating Mechanism

Outreach may increase awareness, but awareness alone does not ensure enrolment. Prospective

students must believe that the institution is competent, honest, reliable, and committed to supporting its learners. Institutional trust is therefore a plausible mechanism connecting outreach with enrolment decisions. Digital communication becomes influential when it provides transparent, authentic, and consistent information. Li et al. (2025) showed that social media communication affected institutional preference through brand image, while Espelita et al. (2026) found that trust had a stronger relationship with enrolment intention than website or social media use alone. These findings suggest that communication channels attract attention, whereas trust helps convert attention into institutional choice.

Trust is also shaped through reputation, academic quality, alumni success, faculty expertise, and programme relevance (Juhaidi, 2024; Magasi & Bwemelo, 2024). Testimonials and student-generated content strengthen this process because prospective students often consider peer experiences more authentic than formal promotional messages (Aggarwal & Gujral, 2025; Saksono et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the mediating role of institutional trust has not been directly tested within a complete ODL enrolment model. Related studies show that trust, brand image, reputation, and engagement can function as intervening variables (Abu Daabes et al., 2025; Balaji, 2025; Li et al., 2025). Thus, the proposed mediation is theoretically supported but still requires direct empirical confirmation.

Practical and Research Implications

ODL institutions should develop outreach through sustainable partnerships rather than relying exclusively on mass advertising. Partners should assist institutions in delivering programme information, responding to prospective students' concerns, validating institutional credibility, and supporting the transition from enquiry to registration. Institutional communication should clearly explain accreditation, learning systems, tuition fees, tutor access, assessment, technological requirements, and graduate outcomes. Digital outreach should also be interactive through webinars, consultations, direct messaging, alumni engagement, and authentic student testimonials.

Outreach performance should be evaluated using applications, admissions, registrations, and actual enrolment rather than social media reach alone. Previous studies indicate that the intensity, continuity, timing, and targeting of outreach influence its effectiveness (Burgess et al., 2021; Martin, 2024; Ní Chorcra et al., 2025). Programmes may produce limited effects when they are introduced too late or fail to reach disadvantaged learners (Arnup et al., 2025). Future research should test the proposed relationship using longitudinal surveys and actual enrolment records. Structural equation modelling and bootstrapping can be employed to determine whether institutional trust mediates the relationship between partnership-based outreach and student enrolment. Different partnership types should also be compared because schools, governments, employers, alumni, and community organisations may generate different levels of institutional trust.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review shows that partnership-based outreach can strengthen student access and enrolment in open and distance learning by extending institutional reach, improving communication, and connecting prospective learners with trusted schools, governments,

employers, alumni, communities, and educational partners. Outreach is most effective when it is interactive, locally relevant, transparent, and supported by credible evidence of institutional quality rather than relying solely on promotional exposure. Institutional trust provides a plausible explanation for how outreach may influence enrolment decisions. Credible partnerships, authentic testimonials, institutional reputation, responsive communication, and clear information can reduce uncertainty and increase prospective students' confidence in an ODL institution. However, the reviewed studies did not directly test the complete mediating relationship between partnership-based outreach, institutional trust, and student enrolment within a single ODL model. Therefore, the mediating role of institutional trust remains theoretically supported but not yet empirically confirmed. ODL institutions should integrate sustainable partnerships with transparent and student-centred communication, while evaluating outreach through actual applications, registrations, and enrolment rather than visibility indicators alone. Future studies should use longitudinal designs, institutional enrolment records, and mediation analysis to test whether institutional trust converts partnership-based outreach into actual student enrolment across different learner groups and partnership contexts.

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