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Communication Management in Educational Institutions

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Abstract: As competitiveness of higher educational environment is increasing in Eastern Europe, it is important for universities to construct a distinct image. However, managing institutional brands used not to be a priority for educational institutes from this region. An important step of image management activities is investigating consumer expectations and measuring their satisfaction with the services offered. We present the results of a survey-based investigation regarding expectations of secondary school students about education, and their image about two main higher education institutes from Transylvania (Romania). A second survey addressed attitudes of undergraduate university students regarding educational services and the general image of the university they attend. By comparing the results of the two investigations we can observe differences regarding the positive and negative attitudes about an institute of the two groups. When potential customers (future students) does not have the desired image of an educational institute, there is a communicational challenge in propagating positive and real institutional characteristics, as supported by information collected from actual students. This process gives an insight on the nature of information to be propagated for constructing a desired institutional image.

Keywords: *institutional image, communication strategy, customer behavior.*

1. Introduction

Strategic external communication is an emerging domain for educational institutions, especially in ex-communist countries from Eastern Europe. What kind of research data should be considered when planning communication strategies? What are the basic clusters of information relevant in case of educational institutions? We propose a possible approach of these problems by comparing attitude-related survey results of actual and prospective higher education students.

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2. Problem Statement

There is an increasing competitive pressure for educational institutions from Eastern European countries, especially in the domain of Higher Education. Reasons are manifold. From the beginning of the 1990s the number of births is decreasing significantly. Although the percentage of secondary school students willing to study in higher education has increased, the decreasing population result in a lower number of students registered in higher education institutions (HEIs). For example, in Romania there was a 75% decrease in the number of higher educational students in 2011-2015 (INS, 2016) while the number of HEIs has increased since the 1990s (see figure 1).

Figure 1. High school graduates and HEI enrolment in Romania.

One of the possible coping strategies in this fierce competition is creating a distinct image of HEIs (Beerli Palacio, et. al., 2002). Educational branding has become a necessity for similar reasons also in other geographic regions all around the world (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Wilkins, 2015). However, in Romania (and several other EE countries like Poland, Bulgaria and Hungary) the situation is aggravated by the massive migration for livelihood reasons. After graduating secondary school, students prefer to migrate to western European countries for better-paid works.

Institutional image is a short-term perception of principal stakeholders toward the organization or institute. We refer to organization-related attitudes of external persons as external image; attitude of employees and associates are referred as internal image.

The process of building an organizational image is influenced by factors like the quality of services or products, the public relation activities, behaviors with internal and external stakeholders, and, in overall, by any kind of contact between the organization and the target audiences (Scott & Jehn, 2003). Building a positive image will affect the institutional success in multiple ways. Customer choices are influenced mostly by the perceived image of the institution or its services provided (Alves & Raposo, 2010) [2].

This apply for educational institutes as well. Although there is a debate among scholars if universities should be considered as customer-centered service providers, from the perspective of external communication and branding students and can be considered customers (Guilbault, 2018), and prospective students as potential customers. Corporate branding can work for educational institutions as well (Heaney & Heaney, 2008). Research results indicate that developing and maintaining a distinct image creates a competitive advantage for HEIs (Landrum, et. al., 1999; Yavas & Shemwell, 1996).

According to research results, the most important factors that influence students' image about the HEI they attend is the quality of professors and their lectures, learning content (Marič, et. al., 2010), clear benchmarks, skills and experiences relevant for employment (Kandiko & Mawer, 2013). Results also indicate that the degree of loyalty has a tendency to be higher when perceptions of both institutional reputation and institutional image are favorable (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001); loyalty is also associated to student satisfaction and image of the university (Helgesen & Nettet, 2007).

Researchers also investigate factors that influence institutional image and reputation in case of potential students. Social life, academics, and also the physical environment influences image of HEIs, as well as education quality in overall, size of the HEI, family connections to the school and campus morale (Arpan, et. al., 2003). Personal experiences have greater impact on HEI image than media exposure (Kazoleas, et. al., 2001). Research has found that the images of universities formed by prospective students greatly influence their choices (Wilkins, 2015).

An important step of the branding process is researching the actual attitudes of stakeholders – in case of HEIs this includes students, staff,

scholars, and the potential future students (the primary target group of a PR campaign). The goal is to create an accurate map of the images about the HEI (Jevons, 2006). Creating a list of primary customer expectations is also useful in order to investigate if the HEI meets those expectations. If not, specific organization development activities should be implemented; if the HEI meets the customer expectations, but its external image does not incorporate this knowledge or beliefs, strategic communication activities should address the goal to overcome these image shortcomings.

In this study we investigate a specific method for obtaining basic information to be considered when planning branding strategies for HEI: quantitative comparison of differences between attitudes of actual and potential customers of the HEI.

3. Aims of the research

We planned a survey-based research in order to compare external and internal institutional image, as well as institutional expectations of prospective customers (students) in order to reveal possible differences to be considered in branding-aimed strategic communication planning.

Surveys addressed the perceived image of two HEIs from Țirgu Mures (Romania): Sapientia – Hungarian University of Transylvania (Sapientia), and University of Arts (UA) in case of two target groups: actual students, and prospective students.

More specifically, two research questions were investigated:

1. What are quality-of teaching (QoT) expectations of secondary-school graduate students? Do their perceived image of the main Higher Education Institutes incorporate this kind of knowledge?
2. Are there differences in the perceived external and internal image of the investigated HEIs?

4. Research Methods

We developed two questionnaires (in Hungarian language) for revealing quality of teaching expectations of secondary school students (experiences in case of university students) and HEI image for both research groups.

As a first step, two focus groups were organized in two secondary schools (in Țirgu Mures, Romania) in order to reveal the most frequently mentioned expectations regarding quality of teaching, and the core characteristics when evaluating a HEI. Schools were selected on two criteria:

the percentage of successful final exams to be in the top 30% of the country, and the percentage of graduates who continue their studies in higher education to be above 70% in the previous academic year.

Nine indicators were mentioned by undergraduate secondary school senior students (school leavers) as principal determinants for QoT (see table 2). These were included in the questionnaire as items to be evaluated with a 4-point scale (disagree strongly – disagree slightly – agree slightly – agree strongly) for the question “In your opinion what are the main determinants of a good quality education?”.

When discussing the characterization of the two HEIs (Sapientia and UA) five characteristics were mentioned by focus group participants: cheerful students life, students are satisfied with the quality of teaching, teaching methods are practice-oriented, diploma of the HEI is valued on the job-market and teachers are experts in their field (see table 3); these were included as single-choice response items for the “What do you consider as a best description of Sapientia/UA the from this list” questions (with an additional “I don’t know anything about this institute” answer option).

A second questionnaire was elaborated for High Schools Students from the two HEIs, with the aim of evaluating their image of the institutes they attend and experiences regarding QoT. In order to make HEI image comparison possible with the secondary school group, the same image-question as for secondary school students was formulated (What is your opinion about Sapientia/UA), with the same response options (excepting the “I don’t know anything about this institute” answer option). Although research data suggest that non-students use different image-rating criteria than students for the same universities (Arpan, et. al., 2003), by using the same criteria for students will allow to reveal the accuracy of image of potential students.

These questions were part of a larger survey; in this report we present results regarding the questions of HEI image and QoT expectations/experiences.

Questionnaires were completed online, in school environment (in the same schools where focus groups were organized, and in the two HEIs; see table 1), every student answering on his own smartphone. A physically present research assistant presented a standard introductory text before completion and offered assistance if necessary.

Table 1. Subjects included in the survey

Subjects	Institution	N	Av. age
Secondary school students		308	19.06
Higher education students	Sapientia	94	21.02
	UA	41	20.08

5. Findings

Likert scale-responses for QoT expectations were converted to numbers, assigning 1 for disagree strongly answers, 2 for disagree slightly, 3 for agree slightly and 4 for agree strongly. Cronbach alfa indicated a high level of consistency (.805) between the 9 response-items. Item statistics are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Factors influencing quality of teaching, in opinion of secondary school students

Rank	Items	Mean	Std. Dev.
1	Teachers are experts in their field	3.348	.6455
2	Clear benchmarks	3.294	.6695
3	Future-oriented curriculum	3.282	.7005
4	Various teaching methods	3.267	.6611
5	Regular and personalized feedback	3.120	.6797
6	Various teaching sources (videos, internet etc.)	3.115	.6963
7	Lot of interactions with teachers	2.917	.7794
8	Group-based teaching and learning methods	2.600	.8480
9	Personalized tasks for home	2.597	.8123

Results indicate that from the prospect of teaching quality, higher educational institutions will improve their reputations if promoting information about the expertise of their teachers, describing their curriculum and benchmarks, providing descriptions or demonstrations of the various teaching methods and sources used (in accordance with previous findings, see Kandiko & Mawer, 2013; Marič, et. al., 2010).

What do the secondary schools students know or believe about the two HEIs included in this investigation? Focus groups discussion revealed that students do not know this kind of detailed information about the investigated HEIs as in case of QoT, which can be considered an external communicational challenge. In table 3 there are enlisted the frequency of the mentioned characteristics.

Table 3. Secondary school school-leavers' opinions about HEIs

Sapientia University		University of Arts	
			18
1	Cheerful student life 28%	Practice-oriented teaching	%
			13
2	Economical 15%	Students satisfied with QoT	%
			12
3	Expert teachers 14%	Expert teachers	%
4	Students satisfied with QoT 13%	Cheerful student life	8%
5	Valued diploma 9%	Economical	8%
6	Practice-oriented teaching 9%	Valued diploma	4%
	Don't know anything about		38
7	it 12%	Don't know anything about it	%

We can notice that only one QoT influencing item (Expert teachers) is mentioned by secondary school graduates as a characteristic of the HEIs.

Actual students of the HEIs included in this study characterized their institutions along the same criteria as secondary school graduates. Results are presented in table 4.

Table 4. Undergraduate higher education student's opinions about their institutes

Rank	Sapientia University		University of Arts	
1	Cheerful student life*	39%	Practice-oriented teaching*	43%
2	Expert teachers*	27%	Expert teachers	19%
3	Students satisfied with QoT	18%	Cheerful student life	16%
4	Economical	11%	Valued diploma	8%
5	Valued diploma	3%	Economical	8%
		2%	Students satisfied with	
6	Practice-oriented teaching*		QoT	5%

Note: Significant differences between categories are marked with * (as indicated by z-test)

6. Discussions

6.1. *Quality of teaching expectations and institutional image*

When comparing quality of teaching attitudes of prospective higher education students with their beliefs about specific higher education institutes we can make important observations. First, secondary school

graduates have a comprehensive and detailed attitude regarding what influences quality of teaching. There was a high level of consistency between the factors enlisted as decisive of high-quality teaching.

It is expected that higher education institutes to consider their educational management taking into account prospective student's QoT expectations. Our research results indicate that in the case of the two HEIs investigated QoT-defining knowledge elements are not incorporated in prospective student's image about HEIs. There could be several reasons: HEIs does not meet these expectations or they don't communicate them efficiently.

On the other hand students have distinct image about the two HEIs, elaborated along six considerations. The main element of the image of Sapientia University that student life is enjoyable there, and studying is much more economical as in other higher education institutes. These might not be the most desirable image-elements from the perspective of institutional branding. Practice-oriented teaching and students satisfied with teaching quality are the defining elements of institutional image of University of Arts. Expert teachers – which is quality-of-teaching expectation – is part of institutional image in both cases.

The fact that an important percentage of prospective students doesn't know anything salient about the HEIs present in the same town they are studying is an alarming indicator of defective external communication. In order to make an informed decision about the HEI to enroll students should have desirable information about the institute; in our study 38% of the primary target group doesn't know anything about University of Arts, and 12% about the Sapientia University. This is a clear indicator that more strategic and more intense branding-aimed external communications activities are recommended for both institutions. When considering QoT expectations, it is recommended for HEIs to communicate information about their strategy curriculum elaboration, standards, evaluative criteria and benchmarks for graduation, the teaching methods and sources used as well as the various feedback activities given by teachers.

6.2. Comparing prospective and actual student's HEI characterizations

Enrolled students have a more valid image about HEIs. Therefore any major discrepancy between internal and external HEI image should be taken into consideration when planning institutional communication.

Image of Sapientia University

In case of Sapientia University cheerful student life is the major element of internal institutional image (39%, see table 4) similar to the image of external, secondary school students (28%, see table 3). Moreover, z test indicate significant difference between the two proportions, as well as in case of two other defining characteristics: expertise of teachers (27% vs 14%) and practice-oriented teaching (2% vs 9% of secondary school students).

Given that these characteristics are believed as defining for quality of teaching and they can influence the reputation of the HEIs, the origin of these differences should be considered when building branding strategies. It is up to the HEI to decide if a main characterization of the institute that student life is cheerful it is intended to be a part of the institutional image; if yes, this information should be propagated by external communication activities, because prospective students are not aware about it. If no, than future research is needed for revealing the source of this defining image of the HEI.

Enrolled students has a more positive image of expertise of teachers as prospective students, in case of Sapientia University. Research is needed if 27% is an acceptable percentage. In any case, this positive information needs also to be communicated more strategically, given than expertise of teachers in one of the more influential components of HEI image, and therefore has a major role when choosing a HEI for future studies.

Image of University of Arts

As in the case of Sapientia University, the overall tendency to characterize the University of Arts is the same among secondary school students and students of UA, as revealed by Pearson Chi-Square test. A single characteristic, practice-oriented teaching is mentioned most often by university students (43%) as secondary school students (18%).

7. Conclusions

When deciding for higher education studies, usually students have at least 12 years of experience in formal education. In consequence, they are experienced customers of formal education, with experience-based expectations regarding quality of teaching. Reputation of higher education institutes influence the where-to-study decision process; on the other hand, institutional reputation is influenced by beliefs or knowledge about the quality of teaching in that specific institute.

In an increasingly competitive market higher education considering prospective student's quality of teaching expectations and accuracy of their image of a higher education institute (expressed by the number of quality of teaching elements included or the internal-external image discrepancies) is a useful starting point for elaborating a branding strategy. We presented a study for investigating the quality of teaching expectations and internal-external image comparison for two Higher Education Institutes from Romania, making recommendations for the elaboration of research-based external communication strategies. We can conclude that results internal-external image comparison and investigating prospective student's quality of teaching expectations should be incorporated in educational are necessary to be considered on elaborating branding strategies for educational institutions.

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