

SOCIAL NETWORKS AS INFORMATION CHANNEL FOR ATTRACTION OF FOREIGN STUDENTS

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Abstract. Increase of international competition for qualified young persons to attract them for higher education is on everyday activities agenda for many higher education establishments worldwide as well as research topic for academic researchers. Development of information technologies and their possibilities are used also by successful higher education establishments to attract students including students from foreign countries. In more and more cases, social networks are the first information source about dream higher education study programmes and later followed by more detailed information on webpage and other information sources. The aim of this paper is to analyse current developments of social network use for higher education marketing in foreign markets. Tasks of the research: update recent scientific findings in social media application for attraction of prospective students; find statistical data on recent situation in the country related to foreign students in HEI; update the expert views on information on higher education institutions in social networks; make comparisons of gateway websites for prospective foreign students based on different criteria. Methods used in the research: analysis of scientific literature, analysis of information in social networks related to higher education marketing in foreign markets, in – depth interviews with foreign relation specialists in higher education institutions, expert survey of public relation specialists and information technology specialists. For most of the evaluations of social network applications and statements in the survey were used evaluations in scale 1 – 10. The research results have indicated that a lot can be done to provide reasonable information about the higher education in Latvia and use recent technology and marketing solutions to attract foreign students.

Key words: social networks, competitiveness, foreign markets, higher education.

JEL code: M31; L86; I23

Introduction

International competition for students develop different marketing strategies specific for this field. A lot of academic research has been conducted to realise the best and most effective approaches. To share the research findings even several specific international journals have

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been created to publish scientific papers. The aim of this paper is to analyse current developments of social network use for higher education marketing on foreign markets. Tasks of the research: update recent scientific findings in social media application for attraction of prospective students; find statistical data on recent situation in the country related to foreign students in HEI; update the expert views on information on higher education institutions in social networks; make comparisons of gateway websites for prospective foreign students based on different criteria. Research methods applied: analysis of scientific literature, analysis of statistic data, survey of social media experts (survey was conducted in December 2014). For survey questionnaire evaluation scale 1 – 10 was applied for most of the questions. For survey data processing were used indicators of descriptive statistics– indicators of central tendency or location and indicators of variability.

Theoretical background

The need for social media in the context of international higher education

The increased global competition for international students among universities has resulted in universities having to find ways to differentiate themselves from the crowd (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). Several researchers in many countries have paid attention and have conducted deep research on different aspects of attracting students by use of social media (Oberer and Erkollar, 2012), widely social media use possibility for higher education institutions in providing an opportunity for a new level of engagement with prospective students (Kowalik, 2011). Researchers from the USA and China have made research on marketing via social media (Luo, *et al.*, 2013) and have found four factors attracting young students. Exploring social media relationships and use of specific tools for attraction of new persons (Hansen, 2011) and international market development through networks (Johnsen&Johnsen, 1999) are new challenges for marketing strategies developers including promoting of higher education institutions and study programmes.

Several research has been conducted related to national characteristics and specifics also for social network applications for higher education marketing needs (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013). In academic research education and social stratification has been applied across Europe and the obtained results are valuable for marketing needs (Vryonides & Lamprianou, 2013).

Some early studies have showed that brand image portrayed by a university plays a crucial role in public attitudes towards that institutions and the whole sector (Landrum et al., 1998) and institutions need to develop a distinct image to create a competitive advantage in the market (Paramewaran and Glowcka 1995). This image likely has an impact of student's willingness to apply to that institution (Ivy, 2001).

In overall, internet adoption was one of the most powerful changes at organizational and personal levels and is now catalyzing the next revolution of communication through social media (Qualman, 2010). Therefore, those findings can be also attributed to high education sector. Every country has its own social networks and usage trends.

These regional differences should be considered if institutions are willing to engage with prospective students from the targeted region or country. However, the overall trends of social media usage are not tied to specific country or region.

Social media are used in different countries and follow similar patterns. Students are the centre of activity for higher education institutions, and effective communication with prospective students will certainly contribute to resource efficiency.

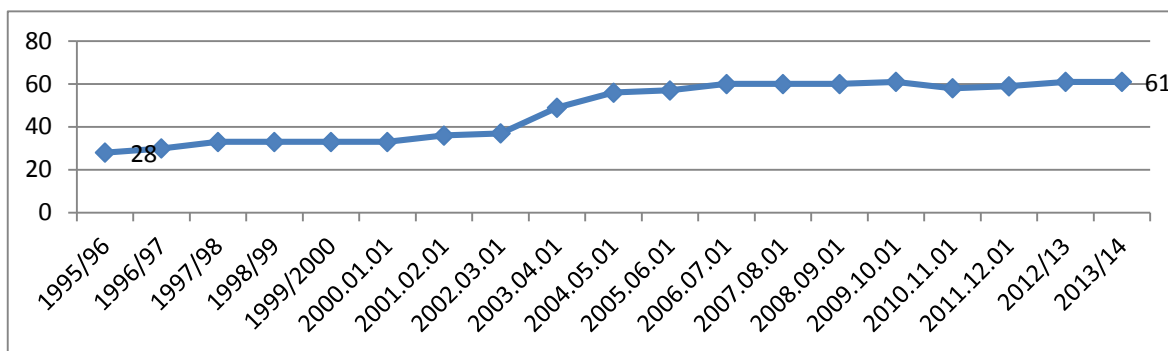
Traditional recruitment methods like exhibitions tend to be more costly and have lack of possibility to continue conversation with prospective students after the first contact. Instead social networks are usually less expensive and provide cost-effective way to reach a large audience; although social media still have costs associated with time and skills required to manage content and others. Moreover, if social media are used correctly and this means involving existing students or prospective students to engage into conversation or content, then promptly provided information would positively influence prospective students' perceptions. The social media offer more credible and cost-effective connectivity with prospective students and give such advantages as relevance, speed, cost and personalization. Like any new practice, the use of social media in international recruitment poses challenges and opportunities.

However, institutions that embrace it can realise a significant competitive advantage. Nevertheless, authors believe that both, website and social networks are very important if used correctly to make first impression, attract potential student and convert them to real student. It should be taken into account that web resources act in different ways, have different capabilities and goals. Website gives more control over the design and entire content, it has multi-language support, on website information is more structured, however, usually user needs additional efforts to find the website and there are limited opportunities to interact with the audience. Contrary, Facebook (FB) has limited opportunities if speaking about structured content, design and multi-language support, however, users usually need less efforts to find page on Facebook or click on adverts that appears on their screen.

Facebook users usually use it daily for interaction with friends, reading news or other daily activities, Facebook is for free (not advertise own page) and using FB the one can easier interact with the users, create word of mouth affect and make conversations with prospect students.

Research results and discussion

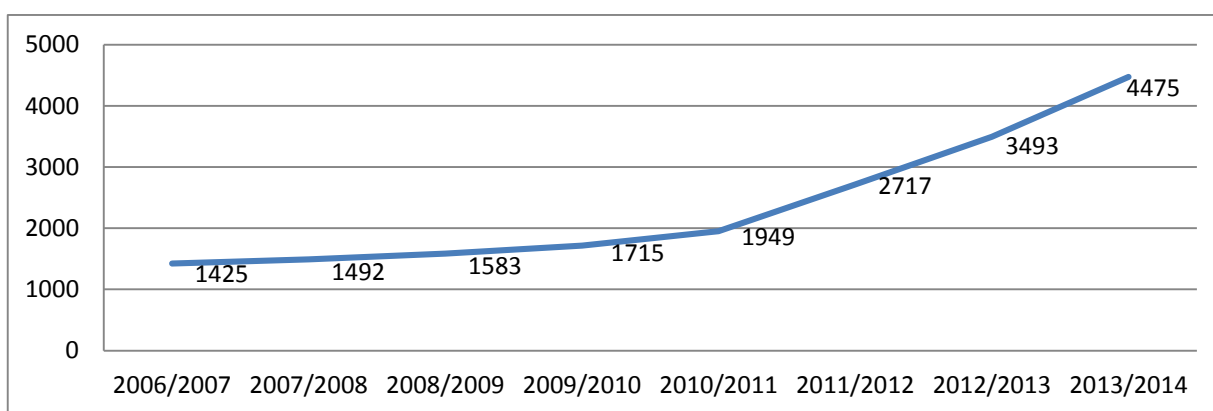
Statistical data indicate that the number of higher education institutions in Latvia is growing (Figure 1) but number of enrolment is decreasing during last years (CSB, 2015).



Source: author's construction based on the Central Statistical Bureau of the Republic of Latvia data

Fig. 1. **Number of higher education institutions and colleges in the Republic of Latvia in 2015**

Statistical data indicate that number of foreign students enrolled in higher education institutions in Latvia is growing during last years (figure 2).



Source: author's construction based on the Ministry of Education of Latvia data

Fig. 2. **The number of foreign students enrolled in HEI in Latvia from 2006/2007 to 2013/2014**

In Republic of Latvia the number of foreign students enrolled in higher education institutions is below the EU average – however, it has increased significantly nearly doubling from 2717 in the academic year of 2011/2012 to 4475 in 2013/2014 resulting in 4.75% of total students enrolled. This should however be considered in the context of total decline of the number of students studying in higher education institutions in Latvia.

Based on the findings of Latvian Higher Education Export evaluation report^{**} every student contributes to the economy of Latvia with an average of EUR 5000 per academic year, which in 2013/14 would generate approximately EUR 22.37 million. In academic year 2013/14 from total 89659 students in colleges and universities in Latvia 4475 (5%) were foreign students. Top universities for studies in Latvia for foreign students were Riga Stradins University - RSU (994 students), Riga Technical University - RTU (874 students), University of Latvia - LU (507 students) and Baltic International Academy - BSA (419 students). Other HEI had less than 300 hundred students each, see table 1.

^{**} KPMG Baltics. Latvian Higher Education Export evaluation report. Seen 11.01.2015, available: <http://petijumi.mk.gov.lv/ui/DocumentContent.aspx?ID=3938>

Table 1

Foreign students in Latvia by countries (countries with more than 100 students) in 2013/14

Country	Total student count	Share from total students (%)
Germany	746	17
Russia	483	11
Uzbekistan	366	8
Ukraine	233	5
Lithuania	209	5
Turkey	199	4
Sweden	198	4
Belarus	170	4
India	149	3
Kazakhstan	143	3
France	134	3
Norway	133	3
Azerbaijan	125	3
Georgia	106	2
Spain	106	2
Other countries in total with less than 100 students per each country	975	22
Total	4475	100

Source: Ministry of Education and Science, Republic of Latvia

Data of the table 1 indicate that most students are from Germany, Russia, Uzbekistan, the Ukraine and Lithuania.

Social media experts were asked to evaluate information on higher education institutions and study programmes in social networks and the main statistical indicators of the evaluations are included in table 2.

Table 2

Main statistical indicators of expert's evaluations on information on higher education institutions in social networks

	How important for foreign students is the information on studies in Latvia in social networks	How you evaluate the information for foreign students on studies in Latvia obtained on social networks
Mean	8	7
Std. Error of Mean	0.477	0.348
Median	8	7
Mode	8	8
Standard Deviation	1.651	1.206
Variance	2.727	1455
Range	5	4
Minimum	5	4
Maximum	10	8

Source: author's calculations based on expert survey conducted in December 2014 (n=12), evaluation scale 1 – 10, where 1 – not important; 10 – very important

Expert evaluations indicate that the evaluations of experts are surprisingly high for importance of social media in information provision about higher education institutions and study programmes (the lowest evaluation was 5).

From practical point of view usually website or social network account, Facebook (FB) in particular, acts as an official gateway of studies in any country, for instance, in Latvia those resources are www.facebook.com/studyinlatvia and www.studyinlatvia.eu.

Most of the countries in the EU have gateways that are run by the official representatives of the country or work in cooperation with them. For instance, *Study in Latvia* cooperates with the Ministry of Education and Science. Still not every company or establishment uses Facebook.

In terms of attracting foreign students, among 28 EU countries, each (except Luxembourg) has separate website for foreign students about studies in their country.

In the gateway website prospective foreign students can find detailed information about studies in the country and from there navigate to concrete universities website. 17 webpages of HEI (data on January 1, 2015) of them also uses FB, some have accounts in other social networks as well. Of course, registered account in social media or presence of website do not really mean that it attracts someone. Accounts and webpage should meet different criteria (for instance, easy to find, contain clear and extensive information, be attractive, accessible via different devices, should be efficiently promoted etc.).

Based on a list of criteria, the authors of this paper have compared website and FB pages in the Baltic States (Table 5). In general, all three countries have both website and FB page to promote higher education in country for foreign students.

Websites provide detailed and structured information about study process, study programmes, fees, scholarships, visas, recommendations etc. Facebook is more oriented on showing good expression about country itself.

The results show that Latvia has overall lower evaluations by different criteria – having two different pages is misleading and can affect credibility, too fragmented information, websites are not attractive for students, are difficult to access via mobile phones. Detailed description follows.

Two different websites for the same purpose (attracting and giving information for prospective foreign students). The one is maintained by the Academic Information Centre (AIC) that is involved in international education fairs and has published printed catalogues (available as PDFs in website).

The other is maintained by the State Education Development Agency (SEDA) and other contributors. It is almost impossible to synchronize the information in AIC and SEDA websites and this could be misleading or at least reduce credibility of prospective students. It was also found that information is fragmented among both websites and other websites providing information on higher education establishments and study programmes.

From one point of view webpage in *.eu domain (maintained by the AIC) is more active and have more attractive information (for instance, recommendation videos) but from other point of view the website do not have full information about study programmes, instead it *sends* user to visit page in *.lv domain. While *.lv domain page also do not have information student would need. Instead if prospective student wants to find more about scholarships, he has to visit the third website of the State Education Development Agency.

As of search possibilities within a website, *.lv page lacks this possibility. This could be because of technical limitations as much information in website is provided in PDFs or other *heavy* formats. This also increases page load time and affects ability to browse website using mobile phones.

Counties websites are more or less adapted to be accessed using different devices but Latvian webpage is the most difficult to access, navigate and find information using mobile device. Unfortunately in overall Latvian website *.lv also has the worst experience in finding the exact study programmes user can be interested in.

Much information is provided in PDFs of *flash*, and there is lack of usable filters that exist on other two pages. It was not also easy enough to find the exact procedure of admission. This created bad user experience. However, it has attractive videos from foreign students already studying in different universities in Latvia as was not found on other websites.

The main study language in all countries for foreign students is English; however, Lithuanian and Estonian websites are also available in Russian. As of usage of social media, countries are more active in their Facebook accounts. Accounts are easy to find using search criteria "*Study in <country>*". Latvian FB page (studyinlatviaLV) is relatively new and was created in the middle of 2014 and has about 1300 *total page likes* (situation on January 1, 2015). The page is new; however, it has quite high activity having posts each week. Lithuanian FB page (studyinlithuania) is the least active and has about 2000 *total page likes* (situation on January 1, 2015).

The most active FB page is Estonian one (studyinestonia), it has more than 5000 *total page likes* (situation on January 1, 2015), more than one post is created each week, some basic interaction can be recognized on FB page. All three FB pages mainly contain posts about topical events in general; however, Estonian page has more education related posts. Estonians are more active also in other social media – in *Twitter* and *Youtube*.

As of concrete establishments, most of them really do not use social networks or more precise – do not use social networks for foreign students attraction. For instance, one of the biggest universities in Latvia (University of Latvia) –it is the biggest university also in the Baltic states have FB page but it is written in Latvian. There is no separate page for international students or potential foreign students. The same can be concluded for other universities in Latvia. The same cannot be said for Estonia where active FB is running in English (e.g., University of Tartu, Tallinn University of Technology) and Lithuania (e.g., Vilnius University).

Results of evaluation on use of social networks for foreign students on higher education establishments in the Baltic states are included in table 3.

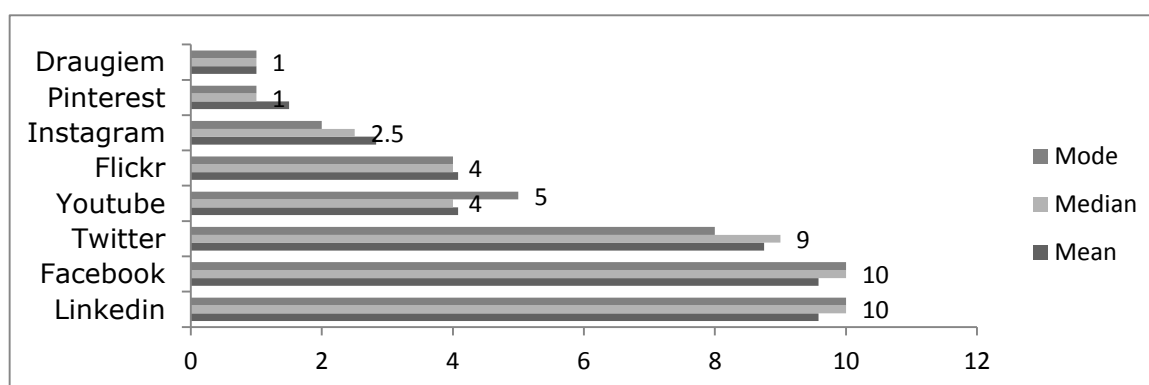
Table 2

Comparison of gateway web sites for prospective foreign students based on different criteria (situation on January 05, 2015)

	Latvia		Lithuania	Estonia
Website	www.studyinlatvia.eu	www.studyinlatvia.lv	http://www.studyinlithuania.lt/	http://www.studyinestonia.ee/
Responsible institution	Academic Information Centre	State Education Development Agency	Education Exchange Support Foundation	Archimedes Foundation
Easy to find	7 It is misleading that there are two gateway websites with the same goal		10	10
Landing page	6	6	8	6
Overall attractiveness	6	5	8	6
Trustworthy recommendations	7	0	10	7
Structure of information	6 Fragmented information. Two website cannot have synchronized information. Not organized well.		9	8
Availability of search	0 Is not built in search	10 Has advanced search with filters	10 Has advanced search with filters	5 No advanced search within the website.
Mobile version	4 Mobile heavy formats, slow loading time, difficult to browse			
Language	only English	only English	English, Russian, Lithuanian	English, Russian (partly), Finnish

Source: Renate Vidruska prepared table based on indicated webpages, evaluation scale 1 – 10, where 1- lowest evaluation, 10 – highest evaluation

Expert evaluations on importance in social networks are included in Figure 3.



Source: author's calculations based on expert survey conducted in December 2014 (n=12), evaluation scale 1 – 10, where 1 – not important; 10 – very important

Fig. 3. **Expert's evaluations of importance of respective social networks for information on higher education institutions in social networks**

Expert evaluations indicate that most attractive social networks for foreign students are LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Next steps for deeper research will be foreign student's survey.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

1. Academic research has paid a lot of attention on effective use of social networks for higher education and study programs marketing in foreign markets.
2. Application of social networks for higher education and study programs marketing in foreign markets increases with every year.
3. The very general comparison shows that Estonian website about studies in the country is more attractive compared with two others (Lithuanian and Latvian) and social network Facebook page has more education related information and is more active. Although Latvian webpage has much information, it does not have good enough user experience and there are ways to improve it.
4. It is not appropriate to have two different webpages (as in Latvia case) that act as gateway pages for foreign students. This leads to lower credibility, information fragmentation and unsynchronized information on both websites. More detailed evaluation of existing web resources and their effectiveness should be created in promoting higher education in Latvia. It should include expertise as well as additional data about audience and page impressions.
5. Most attractive social networks for foreign students are LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter.

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