

Marketing in Higher Education in the Agenda of Increasing International Enrolment

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Abstract: Today, there is a growing need to develop and use new effective marketing strategies in the higher education in the agenda of recruiting diverse student population and attracting best talents at domestic and international level. This is closely associated with building a reputable university brand. Modern higher education institutions have to commit more attention, time and resources to support marketing efforts aimed at establishing, maintaining and enhancing relationships with prospective students. In Latvia, recruitment strategies of universities increasingly address international students, as Latvian universities are now competing for them in the global education market. The competition for overseas students is growing worldwide. In some countries (and Latvia is not an exception), sustained growth in international student recruitment is vital for compensating for a decline in the number of domestic students. The aim of the paper is to investigate the main factors that overseas students consider important when choosing Latvia as a study destination. The paper is based on 1) the analysis of research papers and documents on marketing in higher education; 2) a survey conducted in two higher education institutions of Latvia – Riga Technical University (RTU) and Transport and Telecommunication Institute (TSI). The results of the study show that understanding the needs of potential overseas students is vital for education managers responsible for their recruitment, as Latvian universities are now competing for international students in the global education market.

Keywords: university brand, overseas students, marketing strategy, student recruitment.

Introduction

According to M. Vaira (2004), modern higher education institutions are “socially, politically and economically” responsible for both their “products” and processes, taking into account the economy and labour market dynamics and needs. Today, provision of highly skilful labour force for the international market, as well as adaptation of the best international standards and expertise, can be done only in the context of modernization of higher education and its integration in the “global educational space” (Zhanguzhinova et al., 2018).

Contemporary universities are involved in various transformations including the creation of knowledge economy nodes and original new businesses, broadening into technologically-related businesses, etc.; the demands imposed on a modern university also lay serious demands on institutional management (Universities and innovation, 2006). The quest of quality, access and prestige is somewhat imbedded in institutional policies (Fairweather, Blalock, 2015). Such concerns as “managing brand image” and “collecting market intelligence” have become common practice for higher education institutions (Moogan, 2011).

University management has to develop effective marketing strategies, which are necessary to build a reputable university brand based on high quality of educational services delivered by faculty members. Marketing programmes are designed so that they will help a) increase awareness of the quality, scope and impact of research and education; b) accomplish the university’s overall target enrolment for a diverse and talented student population in the extremely competitive modern environment.

The competition for overseas students is growing worldwide, as sustained increase in international student recruitment is crucial for compensating for a drop in the number of domestic students in different countries. In Latvia, recruitment strategies of universities increasingly address international students, as Latvian universities are now competing for them in the global education market. Though the total number of foreign students in Latvia is not large, it is increasing every year; Latvia has signed agreements with some countries aimed at strengthening cooperation in the educational area; Latvian higher education institutions (HEIs) also have bilateral cooperation agreements with HEIs abroad (Berzina, 2012).

Understanding the needs of potential students is vital for education managers responsible for their recruitment. The aim of the paper is to investigate the main factors that overseas students consider important when choosing Latvia as a study destination.

Methodology

The aim of the paper is to investigate the main factors that overseas students consider important when choosing Latvia as a study destination. The paper is based on 1) the analysis of research papers and documents on marketing in higher education; 2) a survey conducted in two higher education institutions of Latvia – Riga Technical University (RTU) and Transport and Telecommunication Institute (TSI). The research population involves 105 students of the following programmes: Transport and Logistics, Economics and Management and Engineering. An original questionnaire was developed by the authors taking into account the results of the research performed by J. Cubillo (Cubillo, Sanchez, Cervino, 2006), as well as the authors' experience. The questionnaire was designed around the factors that, to some extent, would contribute to the student decision-making process about studying abroad: choice of a study programme, country's image, university's image, advice from family members and friends, some marketing issues and problems related to the recruitment process, etc. The questionnaire includes nine multiple-choice questions. The obtained data were then processed using SPSS software package.

Results and Discussion

1. Literature review

Today, the process of internationalization of higher education is accelerating, which is associated with increased cross-border education and intensified student mobility (OECD, 2009). In this context, the so-called "export philosophy" in this area is being materialised through the growth of "a business-oriented transnational higher education" (Asaad et al., 2013). When universities offer qualifications that meet student needs and expectations, they provide the data necessary for students to make informed decisions about their choices; the tools involved in the process are basic elements of the marketing strategy used by higher education institutions to increase enrolment (Ivy, 2008).

As said by J. Cubillo (Cubillo, Sanchez, Cervino, 2006), it is vital for marketers to know the factors that have impact on the intention of prospective students and to understand the nature of the relationship among the factors. Nowadays, there is a necessity to create and apply novel full-fledged marketing strategies in the higher education area aimed at recruiting diverse student population and increasing student enrolment at both national and international level. This is closely associated with the need to improve quality and innovation in the context of preparing graduates for the modern labour market (Europe 2020, 2010), as quality higher education is key to creating the European Higher Education Area (Bologna Declaration, 1999; Berlin Communiqué, 2003; The Role of..., 2003; London Communiqué, 2007; The European Higher..., 2012, Report to the European Commission..., 2013; Standards and Guidelines..., 2015). There is growing need to improve quality, effectiveness and responsiveness in all the strategic higher education activities including education and research (Vaira, 2004). According to the Hanover Research Report, a few noteworthy trends are now dominating within the higher education marketing, which are associated with increasing student recruitment and enrolment in the agenda of creating and implementing effective marketing strategies (Hanover research, 2014):

- more attention is paid to branding and marketing functions;
- the most effective marketing strategies for universities are event-based;
- recruitment strategies focus on international students;
- novel methods of online and technology-based course delivery are used.

Today, the labour markets requirements, educational environment, students' demands, and the university's reputation are the prominent factors amongst others that influence a strategy of teaching improvement in the context of quality enhancement (Henard, Roseveare, 2012). As the rise of the "export philosophy" in higher education area has "materialised through the expansion of a business-oriented transnational higher education" (Asaad et al., 2013), marketers should devote more attention, time and resources to supporting marketing efforts for establishing, maintaining and enhancing relationships with potential overseas students. Effective export market research analysis and subsequent planning necessitates relevant information generation and dissemination within the HEI (Asaad et al.,

2013). In this context, universities pay increasing attention to the opinions of foreign students for obtaining their feedback on their learning experience, and discovering their reasons for selecting a particular university (study programme).

2. Analysis of the empirical study results

The research findings are presented in Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3.

Table 1

The research findings: Questions 1-3

Answer	Engineering %	Management/ Economics %	Transport and Logistics %	Grand Total %
Question 1: Why were you interested in this particular programme?				
for career advancement	32,43	56,41	34,48	41,90
for personal growth	35,14	17,95	13,79	22,86
this specialty is demanded in the global labour market	13,51	20,51	48,28	25,71
this specialty is demanded in the local labour market	18,92	5,13	3,45	9,52
Question 2: Why did you choose to study in Latvia?				
good career prospects	10,81	23,08	34,48	21,90
good reputation of Latvian education system	35,14	28,21	13,79	26,67
low tuition fee	21,62	28,21	24,14	24,76
relatives/friends are studying/living in Latvia	18,92	5,13	13,79	12,38
Question 3: Why did you choose this University? What makes it distinctive?				
it has partnership with HEIs in my country	21,62	2,56	10,34	11,43
it is a well-known brand	2,70	17,95	0,00	7,62
it provides a specific programme that meets my requirements	48,65	43,59	72,41	53,33
its international ranking is high	21,62	17,95	13,79	18,10
friends/relatives are studying here	5,41	15,38	3,45	8,57
relatives/friends are studying/living in Latvia	0,00	2,56	0,00	0,95

As seen from the Table 1, the most popular answer given by students was that they chose this particular programme because it was important for their career advancement – totally 41,9 % of students chose this option. Especially the students of Management and Economics study programme evaluated the significance of career advancement very high – 56,41 %. Whereas the students of Transport and Logistics (34,48 %) and Engineering (32,43 %) evaluated this aspect as less important. It is interesting that many students of Engineering programme chose their study programme because it was important for their personal growth – 35,14 %. For other specialty student's personal growth was not so significant. Moreover, most of the students of the Transport and Logistics pointed out that it was necessary for their specialty to be demanded in the international labour market – 48,28 %. Whereas the importance of the necessity of their specialty to be demanded in the labour market of students' native country was confirmed only by a small number of the Engineering specialty students – 18,92 %. The data prove that students are concerned about their career advancement. The possibility to grow both professionally and personally modern students see more in the global labour market.

The most popular answer given by students why they chose studies in Latvia was because of a good reputation of Latvian education system – the total number of students given a positive answer was

26,67 %. A high number of students of the Engineering programme and Management/Economics programme answered positively – 35,14 % and 28,21 %. Another popular answer given by students was a low tuition fee. The total number of students who gave this answer was 24,76 %. Much less popular were options: my relatives or friends are studying/living in Latvia (totally 12,38 %) and a safe environment (14,29 %). The data prove that the most popular reasons why foreign students choose studies in Latvia are a good quality of Latvian education and also a comparatively low tuition fee.

Another question asked to the students was why they chose that particular University and what made it distinctive. The most popular answer given by students was that they chose that university because it provided a specific programme that met students' requirements. The total number of students chosen this option was 53,33 %. The students of Transport and Logistics chose this answer most often – 72,41 %, the number of students from the Programme of Engineering and Management/Economics was a little smaller – 48,65 % and 43,59 %. The high international ranking and the partnership of that particular university with some university (universities) in students' native country was not so popular – totally 18,10 % and 11,43 % of students. The data prove that foreign students are very concerned about the growth of their professional career. And they choose Latvian universities because they have a capacity to provide their students with a programme, which correspond to students' needs and expectations.

Table 2

The research findings: Questions 4-6

Answer	Engineering %	Management/Economics %	Transport and Logistics %	Grand Total %
Question 4: What did you expect before you began your studies?				
gaining intercultural experience	2,70	17,95	17,24	12,38
high quality of education	45,95	23,08	24,14	31,43
international academic experience of university	21,62	35,90	27,59	28,57
qualified teachers	24,32	5,13	10,34	13,33
safe educational environment	5,41	17,95	20,69	14,29
Question 5: What kind of recruitment options did you use?				
directly through the University Admissions Centre	27,03	10,26	13,79	17,14
marketing events	5,41	2,56	3,45	3,81
via a student recruitment agency in Latvia	10,81	0,00	3,45	4,76
via a student recruitment agency in my country	51,35	71,79	72,41	64,76
via international student recruitment agencies	5,41	15,38	6,90	9,52
Question 6: What marketing tools used by the University (agency) have influenced your choice?				
Outdoor	24,32	5,13	17,24	15,24
Print (newspaper/magazine)	2,70	7,69	6,90	5,71
Social media	18,92	20,51	34,48	23,81
Web-based tools	54,05	66,67	41,38	55,24

As seen from Table 2, the most of students emphasised that they expected a high quality of education – totally 31,43 %. This answer was the most popular among the students of the Engineering programme (45,95 %). Another expectation of students was an international academic experience of university – totally 28,57 %. Among the students of Management and Economics programme this answer was most popular – 35,90 %. The data also show that it was important for the students of the Engineering programme to be taught by qualified teachers – 24,32 %. Consequently, the data prove that foreign students expect

a high quality of education and choose Latvian universities as they have international academic experience and can provide with the education corresponding to their requirements.

The data also gave the information about the most popular recruitment strategies used by students. The most popular strategy chosen by students was via student recruitment agency in their country – totally 64,76 %. Students of Management/Economics and Transport and Logistics programmes evaluated this strategy at the highest level – 71,79 % and 72,41 %. Students were also asked to express their point of view about the marketing tools used by the University (agency) which influenced their choice. The most of students agreed that the most effective marketing tool was web-based tool (totally 55,24 %). Social media was another marketing tool most often chosen by students (totally 23,81 %). The data prove that the universities have to go along with advanced technologies and use the marketing tools which may ensure the access to the information in the most attractive and informative way.

Table 3

The research findings: Questions 7-9

Answer	Engineering %	Management/Economics %	Transport and Logistics %	Grand Total %
Question 7: What mode of communication with the university did you use?				
Email communication	45,95	48,72	51,72	48,57
face to face (direct) contacts with local students	0,00	0,00	6,90	1,90
face to face (direct) contacts with the academic staff	24,32	12,82	6,90	15,24
Recruiting page on the website	0,00	5,13	3,45	2,86
Skype	29,73	33,33	31,03	31,43
Question 8: In your opinion, what recruitment strategies can be used by the university for increasing student recruitment in the future?				
building a stronger brand image	10,81	2,56	10,34	7,62
developing and sustaining a portfolio of programmes responsive to market demands	32,43	20,51	34,48	28,57
offering special tuition fees/scholarships	37,84	48,72	31,03	40,00
providing a sequential flow of communication with prospective students	13,51	20,51	24,14	19,05
using social media campaigns	5,41	7,69	0,00	4,76
Question 9: What were the main problems you encountered in the admission process?				
poor communication	35,14	41,03	24,14	34,29
technical problems	35,14	41,03	51,72	41,90
unfriendly environment	0,00	0,00	3,45	0,95
unsupportive workers	13,51	2,56	10,34	8,57
visa problems	16,22	15,38	10,34	14,29

As seen from Table 3, the most popular mode of communication was e-mail communication (totally 48,57 %) and Skype (totally 31,43 %). This could be explained with the accessibility and approachability of these tools. They are the most popular modes of communication in almost all spheres nowadays.

The researchers also wanted to find out the students' recommendations on the recruitment strategies used by the University for increasing student recruitment in the future. The most widespread recommendation for the Universities given by foreign students was to offer special tuition fees and

scholarships (totally 40 %). Another popular recommendation for the universities was to develop and sustain a portfolio of programmes responsive to current and future market demands (totally 28, 57 %). The data prove that special tuition fees are still one of the main attractive targets why foreign students choose studying in Latvian universities. Moreover, they are expecting to acquire a specialty which is demanded in the international labour market.

To improve students' admission, process the researchers also asked students to point out what kind of problems they encountered in that process. The most popular problem was technical problems (problems with equipment) (totally 41,90 %) which means that universities have to invest on their technical resources. Another problem was more important – poor communication stated by 34,29 % of the total number of students. The data prove that universities still have to improve their communication and cooperation process with foreign students to succeed in their recruitment. The third problem stated by students was visa problems (totally 14,29 %) which also reveals the reasons why foreign student's admission process does not always meet their expectations.

Conclusions

The analysis performed in the paper has allowed the authors to make the following conclusions.

- With the new challenges offered by globalization foreign students are concerned about their career advancement and have a tendency to see their professional career development in the international labour market.
- The most popular reasons why foreign students choose studies in Latvia are a good quality of Latvian education, a capacity of universities to provide students with a programme corresponding to their needs, international academic experience of universities, and a comparatively low tuition fee. Latvian education may become as one of the main export values of our country.
- Communication and cooperation with foreign universities is the most effective tool of Latvian universities to ensure a steady and growing flow of incoming students. Therefore, the universities have to use advanced technologies and such marketing tools which may ensure the access to the information in the most attractive and informative way. Web-based tools are the most popular modes of communication of universities.
- Universities still have to improve their communication and cooperation process with foreign students to succeed in their recruitment. Visa issues are also one of the problems in the admission process of foreign students.

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