

# BRANDING OF UNIVERSITY ATTRIBUTES PROMOTING HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS TO BE POSITIVELY DIFFERENT FROM COMPETITORS

Ana Kazaishvili

PhD student, International Black Sea University, GEORGIA, ana\_yazaishvili@yahoo.com

## Abstract

Branding of the universities is rather new thing in nowadays world. In fact, universities have been chosen considering their features for years.

“A brand is defined as a name, term, sign, symbol (or a combination of these) that identifies the maker or seller of the product” (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Accordingly, creating brand in most cases is started from inventing name and logo and positioning them on the market. But, besides visual components (name, logo) invisible process inside organization gives brand competitive advantage (Szczepanska-Woszczyna, 2016). The aim of the present study is to show that internal factors, processes are really valuable and crucial in decision-making process.

Leading universities all over the world are involved in the process of creating valuable brands, have invented and implemented innovative, as well as attractive tools of branding. “University branding requires that the higher education institutions clearly define their differentiating features” (Reketye & Pozsgai, 2014). Importance of branding derives from the fact, that exactly brand recognition is valuable factor in the process of choosing service (Srinivas, 2012). The universities of most eastern European countries lag behind not considering trends of top international universities.

The main focus of the article is how Georgian universities lead to positioning themselves. The problem in their branding process is that most of them do not define their differentiating features and position themselves the similar way. High school students have no opportunity of choosing universities according to their requirements, that makes studying abroad more and more popular.

The objective of the article is to show how much important it is to plan and develop university internal attributes so, that they strengthened brand itself and made it desirable for customers. Creating identity for the university is the strategy of university branding. Identity can be created using differentiating features this particular institution provides. The aim of many universities in nowadays world is making life easy for students and passing difficult periods with less harm (Javani, 2016).

**Keywords:** branding, university branding, internal marketing, internal factors, differentiation

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Branding is one of the main components of effective marketing. According to the American Marketing Association “A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller’s good or service as distinct from those of other sellers”. It means that branding is a great tool for standing product out.

While looking through the top universities of the world it seems clear why branding is an important thing.

When the higher educational institution stands out with its special feature and the seeker is able to choose one according to his/her needs, means that marketing works well.

Most of the universities in Georgia try to be competitive using the same tools for the advantage. Despite the fact, that according to the standards of the authorization of higher educational institutions, listening and considering students` voice is significant, only very few universities try to get feedbacks about students` needs.

Besides, internal environment is not often considered in branding process and frequently the universities are positioned with similar messages.

## **2. BRANDING OF HIGHER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS**

### **2.1. Importance of University Branding**

In a very quick process of globalization there exist great competition, especially in the field of education. As it is mentioned in the article by Rekettye et al.: "In the globalizing landscape of higher education more and more universities are going international. These universities are facing growing competition, especially in enrolling international students. International competition forces them to use marketing and especially branding activity. University branding requires that the higher education institutions clearly define their differentiating features." (Rekettye & Pozsgai, 2014)

Those differentiating features make marketing activities important, because one thing is to define and stand competitive sides and features of the university out, and another, to deliver this information to the potential customers, i.e. future or existing students. However, Srinivas states, that the importance of branding emanates from the fact that exactly brand recognition is valuable factor in the process of choosing service (Srinivas, 2012).

An experienced and motivated marketer is able to assess customer needs, analyze them and forecast market trends, use sophisticated tools and develop valuable solutions in cooperation with the customers (Harvard Business Review, 2012).

The leading/top universities in the world try to compete one another to base, invent or pilot innovations, in process of attracting students they use many different types of marketing tools: highlighting professionalism of their staff, teaching methods, teaching environment, electronic or other kind of support in process of learning. According to the findings of Szczepanska-Woszczyna (2016) the main influencing factors of creating strong brand include: "professional research and teaching staff, the atmosphere of the institution and education programs" (Szczepanska-Woszczyna, 2016). Therefore, before starting to build a message that university will share among young people that want to study at universities, it is important to find the key strengths and emphasize them (Bulls Eye Magazine, 2016).

Name and logo are one of the main attributes of the brand, but not crucial, because in case of acceptable environment and conditions name and logo can be made recognizable. In the work Szczepanska-Woszczyna states, that besides visual components (name, logo) invisible process inside organization gives brand competitive advantage. Company, in this case university, should try to make and show it according to customers` wills. Image is the picture created by the consumer in the mind. So, if university representatives, marketers try to penetrate in their mind, they will succeed in making brand. Besides, companies should ask their customers if they understand the brand message and its value proposition. Furthermore, employees should be involved in branding process, since a brand needs motivated staff to deliver the expected brand promise and participate in its further development (Konecny & Kolouchova, 2013)

One of the most significant factors in branding process is invisible process mentioned above, which can include offering different things to students: providing jobs for successful students; highly qualified professors with modern views, the Association of American Colleges and Universities in 2005 identified critical thinking as a key area to promote in higher education (Mortensen & Nicholson, 2015); besides, according to Altunisik (2013) lecturers with smiling face, easy to communicate, gentle and serious are highly evaluated by students (Altunisik, 2013); new teaching methods, such as flipped classroom and gamification - "flipped classroom" is a pedagogical model in which the typical lecture and homework elements of a course are reversed. Short video lectures are viewed by students at home before class session, while in-class time is devoted to exercises, projects or discussions, according to Mortensen et al. (2015) students taught in this format develop critical thinking skills, as for gamification in this case lecturers explain new topic by method of the game, they connect the topic with some game type and involve the whole class in it, this way students avoid boring monologue about unknown topic, games are well known stimuli that drive people to take voluntary actions in a predictable way (Dicheva & Dichev, 2016); e-learning courses, one of the most frequently

mentioned positive aspects of e-learning according to Matsumoto (2016) is that it can overcome problems related to space and time (Matsumoto, 2016); events taking place as frequently as possible, they can be educative or just for fun, student and lecturers exchanges can be included; experience, such as trainings in university businesses, in their article Bennis and O'Toole (2005) consider that "Polaroid's Edwin Land was right tens of years ago, when he suggested that every business school run its own business, because professor of surgery who has never seen a patient, or piano teacher who does not play the instrument is difficult to imagine" (Harvard Business Review, 2005). Monitoring the satisfaction of students requires that educational institutions collect information on students' attitude towards the services provided (Dominici & Palumbo, 2013). Student satisfaction is considered to be an important indicator of the quality of learning experience according to Altunisik as well.

## **2.2. Contemporary Models of University Branding**

Branding being one of the techniques of market differentiation, requires discovering differentiating features. Therefore, universities from all over the world try to make themselves distinguished. Hanze University Groningen's position about branding strategy sounds like: "The increasing competition for students, as well as the battle for ever scarcer staff and resources, require us to create a clear market position for ourselves. Now more than ever, we must be aware that Hanze University is just one of over knowledge institutes in Europe" (Drori, Delmestri, & Oberg, 2013).

Features, universities try to show off, are mostly the ones customers will be interested in. Marketing external tools, such as SMS advertisements, banners, advertisements in different media sources are no longer effective if internal factors are not attractive. Internal atmosphere and environment are considered by the universities in re-branding process.

How do the leading universities try to stand themselves out? What is their branding strategy? In 2001, during the inauguration of Spangler Hall, Harvard Business School's new building, the architect Robert A.M. Stern noticed: "A building can take a symbolic role, it can become an emblem, it can become a part of a brand and even be a brand in itself. A building can express the identity of an institution through a stylistic language; it can express both an institution's inspiration and its aspirations; it can reflect a system of values and place those values in a continuum". (Drori, Delmestri, & Oberg, 2013)

As competition between the universities is a recent phenomenon, branding can be discussed as a new fashion on this market. Architecture of the building has been one of the trends top universities try to follow. Competition with architecture designs of the building is quite a good idea to attract attention of different media sources. One can easily find information about top universities branded with this differentiating feature.

Rice University presents its new building, Moody Center for the Arts, as designed to foster the sense of collaboration and openness, it is made of double-layer brick and glass structure;

The Bloomberg Center, Cornell tech chose an energy canopy and solar panels as its distinguishing feature;

Duke University has made great decision putting modern glass-box building between the old, traditional ones. Glass box serves as social hub for students, who on their end have opportunity to watch historical buildings while sitting in the transparent one;

University of Bergen decided to stress on history and innovation together and divided university building into communal spaces to enhance collaboration. Students have opportunity to use glass-like swings to feel comfortable and special;

University of Pennsylvania made its Perry World House in Gothic Revival style of house, existing before and glass-enclosed atrium;

University of Utah is very original to make the building exterior to fade and change color as it ages, the structure allows rooms to be easily reconfigured;

Tsinghua University designed its building considering eastern and western principles at the same time. The interior and exterior are made in the style all the cultures would like (Architectural Digest, 2017).

Besides architecture there exist several factors, which can be used as distinguished features. Here are the examples of some famous universities: unlike many universities, not being able to boast about its observatory, this is Manchester University, which gives opportunity to the students interested in astronomy and astrophysics to be part of the university having its own observatory, Lovell telescope is also used for scientific researches, including observation of the cosmos;

Warwick University can be the dream place for the students interested in arts, because of its own Arts

Center, it has five main auditoria and visual spaces for performing arts of all kinds;

If any student dreams about living in the castle, Durham University is the opportunity, this historical educational center is known with its ancient castle, in conjunction with cathedral. Significant part of the story is that, the castle is not for just visual effect, but students can also live there;

Punting opportunities at the Cambridge University – world's one of the oldest and most desirable university is not famous for only its architecture and great atmosphere, but all-night punting opportunities, which is great experience for a lot of students and other university representatives as well;

Nottingham University has discovered very original way for being different, students interested in Vikings, are able to take course of Viking Studies, which includes allowing students spending a year in Scandinavia;

Cranfield University has its own airport, where students are able to be trained, besides conducting research in aerospace engineering is available;

Oxford University, one of the oldest universities in the world and among top ones all the time is not known solely for its astonishing architecture, but also with its unique museums, dining hall, but the most interesting – The Bodleian Library, which is the second largest library in the UK and the world's oldest, it automatically receives the copies of every book published in the UK. Students while joining the university have to swear that they will never set fire to the library (Oxford Royale Academy, 2014).

## 2.3. Types of Differentiation

Differentiation mentioned several times above is a very strong tool of marketing in any type of business, but when it comes to the universities, differentiation becomes one of the most important things, regarding great competition on the market.

Differentiation referring higher educational institutions can be divided into horizontal and vertical ones. The thing which should be considered in the re-branding process is which of them is more significant for the students. Horizontal differentiation is depended on the ability of students themselves, while the vertical one is measured with the academic standard of the institution. The universities differentiating themselves with high quality of teaching are normally more expensive, that means higher ability students are readier to pay more for their study, than the lower ability ones (Huxley & Peacey, 2016). Accordingly, horizontal and vertical differentiation strategies are somehow connected to each other. If the university has high standards it can have corresponding prices, since high ability students will do everything to become part of this institution.

But, to the response of this statement The Council of German Higher Education can be presented, which states that universities should not differentiate cost issues in the vertical differentiation model and only teaching environment and structures can be considered. Justification of this statements is, that high ability students are not always able to pay much, on the other hand, universities being educational institutions should be interested in high standards despite financial income.

When it comes to the branding, differentiating features are of main concern, because of the fact that, without it, simple external tools, such as SMS, media or billboard advertisements cannot be effective.

Coming closer to the reality, branding of internal environment and processes is branding principle itself, without internal factors, there cannot exist tools for external positioning and showing differentiating features.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Methods

Getting to know with the experiences of different countries and universities is interesting and useful, but since the aim of the present thesis is to identify differences between the branding processes of internal factors of the higher educational institutions, correspondingly, the anticipation of the seekers/decision-makers is the most important part of it.

To identify and prove the importance of marketing internal factors in higher educational institutions research was conducted among high school students intending to enroll the university, also bachelor students of several Georgian universities. Quantitative method of investigation was chosen to identify students' needs and requirements, it provides with generalizable results. Questionnaire was chosen as the tool of empirical study. Questionnaire was designed so, that there was less chance of biases: it included possible answers, as well as open-ended questions.

Secondary data of the article consists of scholarly articles, books, media sources used in the literature review. Discussed literature shows the importance of branding of internal factors for higher educational

institutions, also the fact that nowadays it is more significant to develop strong brand so that it was easier to position.

### 3.2. Results

Considering the fact, that the core contingent for Georgian Universities are bachelor students, they were chosen as the target of research, although in positioning process higher educational institutions try to attract potential students, i.e. high school adults, they are target audience of external marketing. That is the reason, why those two groups were chosen for filling the questionnaire.

A limitation regarding this research is that students were not distinguished according to the schools or universities; more precisely, all the participants were taken randomly, not considering were their schools or universities private or state ones. Another limitation refers to the number of participants. 70 students participated in the research, out of which 41 (59%) were bachelor students, 29 (41%) – high school adults. The age of majority of the participants was between 17-19.

In response to the question: “Do Georgian universities determine messages according to students’ requirements” 70.6% answered “No”. After more detailed investigation the majority of these students, mentioned that they feel ignored, because their anticipation is most frequently neglected. It was not very surprising, that 100% of the participants considered teaching quality as the core factor of decision-making while choosing the university. Other factors with high coefficients (with equal 75.6%) were teaching methods and practice opportunity. For 47.1% of participants, leisure space is one of the main components of university branding; meanwhile 29.4% considers building architecture as the pleasant factor to choose the higher educational institution.

Among significant factors in process of branding and positioning appreciated by the students were: specialized departments (such as specialized schools) - 11.8%, career opportunities - 58.8%, amusing events - 29.4%, sport clubs - 23.5%, playgrounds - 17.6%, gym (fitness hall) - 23.5%.

94.1% of participants positively answered the question: “Do you seek/notice differentiating features while choosing the university?”

Infrastructure was the factor most of the students distinguished while talking about branding failures of Georgian universities.

58.8% pointed out that universities with differentiated brand messages cause positive emotions, which are connected to the quality, career opportunity, prestige, loyalty. Out of these participants 90.9% reckoned, that when the higher education institution has differentiated feature while positioning it is perceived to be of high quality.

While some students mentioned that external tools for branding (SMS, media and banner advertisements) are annoying 43% of the participants admitted that they can be good tools for further investigation if the message content is attractive. Figure 1 shows the statistics on the question: “Do SMS, banner and media advertisements attract your attention?”

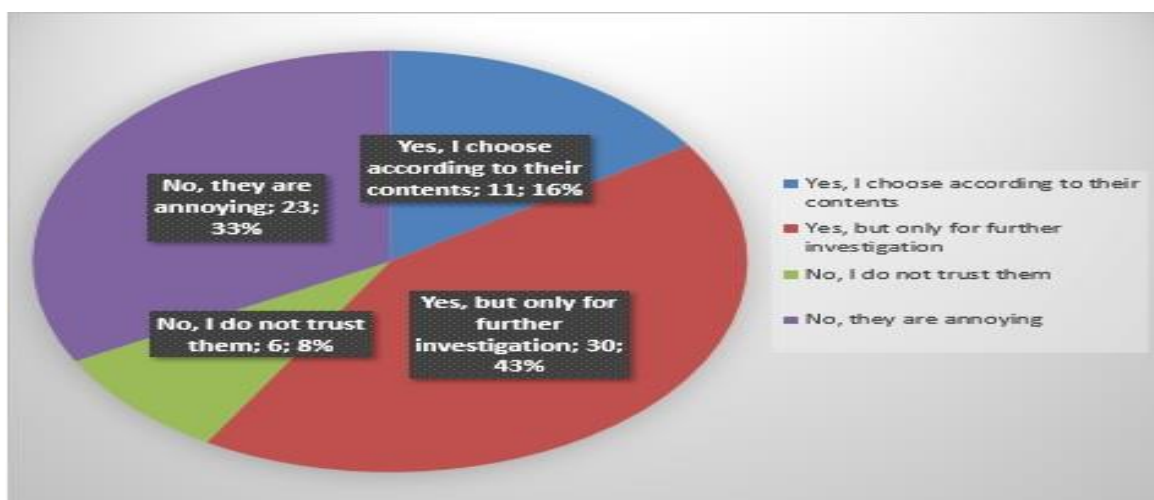


Fig. 1

The overall impression of the research was, that teaching quality is the main concern of Georgian students,

since universities are educational institutions and high standards regarding teaching is anticipated to be obligatory, but openness for innovations, finding differentiating features and branding internal atmosphere is highly appreciated, more than that, required by the students.

## CONSLUSION

In the reality of globalization there exist severe competition in the educational field. Higher education becomes more desirable and correspondingly universities have to do their best to attract more and better students comparing their competitors. Without considering international trends and experience, finding new ways, implementing innovations, it will be extremely difficult to survive.

Alongside appearing new educational institutions, number of them are also disappearing from year to year. Avoiding failure can be real only in case of considering significant features of differentiation, since everything positively different from competitors is attractive and easier to sell.

As mentioned above, the research has its limitations, which leaves space for further investigation and finding new points for standing out. Distinguishing students according to their university types, ages and even faculties might give us a slightly different picture, considering that some branding factors can be appreciated more by one profession than the other according to their needs.

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