

BRANDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CONCEPT OF BRAND AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

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Introduction

Over the last two decades education institutions in the Baltic States have experienced significant changes. They have gone through several education reforms due to political fluctuations and they continue to experience decrease of the financial funding as a result of the state budget cuts. Not only political and financial situation but also demographic conditions have led to the situation that tuition fees have and will become the major part of the investments in higher education.

The globalisation process and the study possibilities offered by the European Union have caused the situation that education institutions start competing among themselves not only inside the state but also internationally, forcing the managers of education institutions to pay greater attention to the branding of the institution by developing new departments and looking for additional funding (Chapleo, 2010).

Due to the competition higher education institutions need to emphasise their uniqueness which brings up a new perspective for higher education – creating the institutional brand intentionally. The above-mentioned observation shows that branding has become a topical issue in education management and it provides a new export product for the country.

The Branding Concept

In times when people receive goods of similar quality and price range, brand often determines the choice of people (Selame and Selame, 1988). Nevertheless, branding is a new area for research in higher education which faces controversial opinions whether it can or cannot be applied. Although researchers stress the importance of brand management in education, there is little evidence of how to evaluate and measure the effectiveness (Chapleo, 2011).

One of the problems that have to be solved is that people consider branding only as a name of the institution, a logo or a slogan. This belief is continuously stated in glossaries and dictionaries, for example, Dictionary of Economic Terms explains “brand” as a trademark, logo, name or a symbol which is specially developed for the company (Ekonomikas

skaidrojošā vārdnīca, 2000). Similar explanation has been stated in the European Union glossary: “brand” is an instrument (like a name or mark) which clearly indicates the origin and ownership, and distinguishes from similar products (Eiropas Savienības terminu vārdnīca, 2004). In real life it is the management style and a hard work of developing a long-term strategy of the institution (Papiņš, 2011).

The author proposes that *brand* is a subjective concept which has to be developed in the minds of people, based on the emotions, associations and unique identity of an institution. Branding depends on emotional communication with internal and external audience (Hammond, 2008).

The author of the article believes that there exists clear and certain correlation between branding and successful institution management. When a student “buys” a service he/she believes that it is not only of high quality but it also ensures positive associations of an institution. These associations (e.g., of the institution, value of the diploma, quality of education) have to be rooted in the beliefs of the society. This proves that not only high quality studies but also its branding is the next rational step for education institutions to compete between themselves and to remain or even increase the market share.

Branding and Management

All operations in the institution are connected; therefore clear aims and values help the institution to reach their set objectives faster. As in all other spheres, also in developing an institutional brand the management of the institution has to take the major initiative of the process.

Manager is the person who influences the existing brand of the institution and develops it further. The style of the brand has to be based on the existing associations or image of the institution and future vision of the management. What is more, this developed brand must be enrolled and equal in all actions of the institution both inner and outer. The hardest goal for the management is to provide that the brand and values expressed by the institution correspond to the wishes of the clients and ensures their satisfaction.

Branding is very closely connected to positioning as for both the main aim is to create

particular associations about the placement of the product or service (Zēģele, 2011). The author of the article believes that the brand is the result of positioning, therefore, the institution needs to differentiate from its competitors according to the wishes of their target audience. She believes that this is the keynote which provides the competitiveness of the institution and supply better business results. The new research made in the field of brand management proves that the brand influences and decreases the risks under competitive conditions and gives the institution the advantages to gain stability in the market (Beneke, 2011).

Students' Role in Higher Education

One of controversial issues in education is whether to consider students as partners of academic life (participants in the joint aim) or as clients/customers of the institution (persons who buy goods for money). It has to be admitted that during the last decades both opinions have been developing.

Adaptation of business activities in education institution management is gradually changing the educational environment. Students (current and potential) are increasingly more often considered to be the clients of higher education institutions. Besides that study programmes provided by education institutions are regarded as a product which is being bought by a student (Natale and Doran, 2012).

Although one opinion is that students are clients, there is also a possibility to consider students as partners of the institution's academic life as they take part in the process of the development of the

higher education institution. The views have also been highlighted in the documentation of the higher education, for example, Communiqués of the Bologna Process (Prague, 2001, p. 1, Berlin, 2003, p. 5).

In 2009, the research of students' impact on higher education quality management was carried out (Valtere, 2009). The research collected the view of 135 respondents (122 female, 13 male) in the age group ranging from 18 to 50 years. During the survey respondents were asked to name the role of a student in higher education. The collected data showed that 66% of respondents considered that students were partners of the higher education institution as they should be involved in all management processes of the institution. 28% believed that students were clients of the institution and the rest 6% stressed that students were both – partners and clients.

During the second research which was conducted in 2012, the same questions were asked to 165 respondents (148 female, 17 male) in the age group ranging from 20 to 57 years and the data demonstrated that the situation had changed gradually. Chart 1 shows that between 2009 and 2012 the opinion that student is a client of higher education institution remained; however, great changes can be noticed in the opinion that a student is not only a partner but also a client. In 2012 more than half (55%) of respondents believe that a student is not only the academic partner of an education institution but he/she should also be considered as a client. The reduction can be seen in the opinion that a student is a partner of an academic life as well. Only 15% of respondents agreed with this opinion.

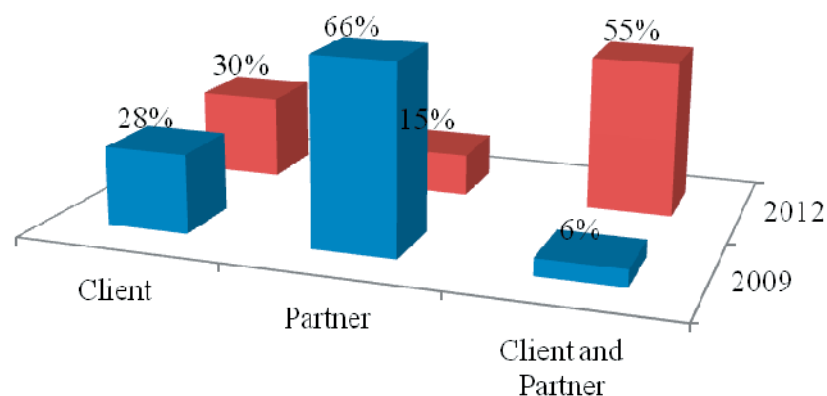


Fig. 1 Students' role in a higher education institution in 2009 and 2012

The author of the article believes that higher education institutions should look at a student as a partner still remembering that students are vital for the institutional development; therefore, he/she should be considered as a client. If students are considered

both, it gives an opportunity for the institution to involve students into the process of branding. Brand management inside the organisation is sometimes more important than communication externally as it is necessary to motivate and involve people

into the development of the brand of an institution (Whisman, 2009).

Alumni and Their Involvement

Branding is very closely connected with the quality; especially it can be stated in the education sphere where high quality education gives the alumni the possibility to get better paid job in the future (Natale and Doran, 2012). While the society believes that study programmes should be based on both theoretical and practical study process (Valtere, 2009), there is an opinion that education should be based more on the theoretical knowledge leaving the practical knowledge for the workplace (Dzelme, 2009). This leads to another invaluable asset of an education institution brand – the alumni.

Due to the changes of education management thinking, increasingly more often the tendency of making strong relationship with the alumni appears. The author believes that alumni give the institution an additional opportunity under the competitive conditions. The author believes that previous students are like a business card of an institution; their knowledge and readiness to work notes the quality of the study programmes and the quality level of an institution.

Besides that, graduates can also be used in the process of estimating the study process as they are capable to evaluate the course content of the acquired study programme, i.e. the suitability of the knowledge to the labour market. The author argues that opinion of alumni about the study programme is more accurate as they have acquired the study programme and they have had work experience.

Conclusion

In the conclusion it has to be stated that it is not an easy task to create a successful institutional brand; it cannot be bought as it is shaped in people's minds and each institution has its own aims and strategy, strengths and weaknesses. Brand is unique and developed with a help of mental process. It is created slowly and it changes slowly. One of the options is to consider the institution alive because it can communicate with the world via the help of Public Relations. Managers need to keep in mind their key role in brand development, i.e. to express the values and ensure easily perceptible information for the society which is creative and original.

The author believes that branding and its influence on the performance of the higher education institution is vital and the statement that strong brand ensures successful development is true not only in business but also in education management. Due to this belief the author recommends the managers of

higher education institutions to pay greater attention to the values of the organisation and the existing brand of the institution.

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BRANDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CONCEPT OF BRAND AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS*Laura Valtere***Summary**

The purpose of the article is to identify the concept of brand and to examine the key stakeholders that influence the process of branding in a higher education institution. Despite the fact that there is a lack of empirical literature written and research conducted, the article provides a review of the pertinent literature that notes the influential parties of higher education brands. Besides that the article reveals a comparison of two surveys carried out in 2009 and 2012. The evidence shows that the views of the society are changing; hence educational institutions should respond to the fact. The author believes that branding of education has become an increasingly topical issue; therefore, managers of higher education institutions need to find additional opportunities to make education institutions more competitive and branded. The paper concludes that branding helps education institutions to survive in the competitive market, thus forming the added value to the institution's image. Further research areas are proposed by the author. The paper examines an emerging phenomenon related to higher education management and offers a research in the field of education branding.

Key words: branding, higher education, education management, student impact, alumni involvement.

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Humanitariniai mokslai

- Filologija