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**PERCEIVED QUALITY OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION
IN RELATION TO BUILDING A STRONG BRAND FROM THE
ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE**

Abstract:

Building of good relationships between higher education institutions and their students or alumni is essential for their long-term success. After all, only satisfied students or alumni can bring the best promotion of the university via word of mouth marketing and other ways. The paper focuses on the quality of higher education institutions and its evaluation from the alumni perspective. The methodology for an alumni attitudes survey on the quality and level of education, image of the university and other similar aspects is proposed. The paper also suggests methods for evaluating alumni satisfaction and loyalty. The methodology should provide recommendations for higher education institutions' managers. Using this methodology, universities can obtain responses to questions of how they should represent themselves to the public in the future, respectively how they should build their image and brand. Finally, the methodology also relates to building good relations with alumni and based on their recommendations, it aims to improve conditions for current students, which would lead to their greater success in the labour market.

Keywords:

Higher education, Alumni perspective, Quality, Loyalty, Satisfaction, Brand

JEL Classification: A00, A14, M31

1. Introduction

Quality and relevance of education and stakeholder satisfaction can be taken as the most important concerns in the quality management of higher education institutions. In our previous research, we focused on evaluating satisfaction and quality of academic institutions from student perspective (Svoboda and Cerny, 2013a; Svoboda and Cerny, 2013b). Our current project aims at alumni as another important stakeholder group closely related to the previous one. At present, we are preparing a research design approach that includes a survey to be launched in 2015.

The main objective of our current research project is to suggest suitable methodology to evaluate attitudes of alumni to their alma mater and find out their opinions on the quality of academic institutions in relation to building a strong brand of the university.

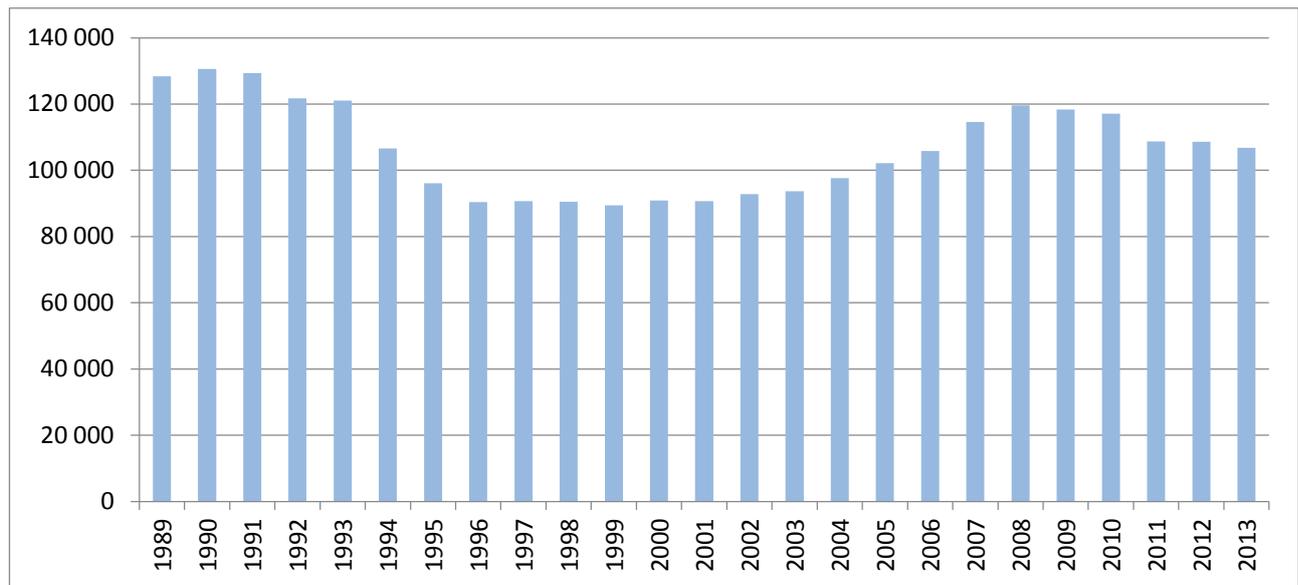
The goal of our research project is not only to find out how to enhance the quality of academic institutions and strengthen their brand value and image, but also to find a suitable approach to evaluate the loyalty of alumni to their alma mater.

This paper will be structured as follows: in section 2, our research objectives will be underlined and the problem defined. In section 3, some related works will be reviewed. In section 4, the proposed methodology to treat this problem will be described. Section 5 describes the expected outcome, conclusions and perspectives.

2. Research Problem

After secondary school every student is given the choice to either find a job or continue their studies at a higher education institution. Each university in the Czech Republic has a certain reputation from the perspective of popularity or prestige which is associated with the issue of quality.

Higher education institutions are attracting students to gain the necessary funds. Today academic institutions faces another problem in the form of an aging population and related decreasing birth rate. This leads to the fact that there will be fewer prospective students in the near future.

Figure 1: Number of births in the Czech Republic in the years 1989 - 2013

Source: Czech Statistical Office, 2014

The importance of improving the quality of universities is continuously increasing also in the countries, where most local academic institutions are financed from the public resources. Although such arrangement necessarily influences the overall market functionality, there still remains a reasonable space where universities heavily compete against each other for new students (Svoboda, Voracek and Novak, 2012).

One of the ways the universities can diversify from the competition is through building a strong brand. Kotler (2007) stated that brands are important assets that need to be carefully developed and maintained. According to him, the true value of a strong brand lies in its ability to attract customers and keep their loyalty.

3. State of the Art

Quality of an academic institution can mean different things to different people, depending on their roles and perspectives. Therefore, quality is, as is generally known, very difficult to be evaluated, although the question of how to do this has been studied for many years. Nevertheless, the intention to improve the quality of HE institutions and their services is agreed by all stakeholders.

Stakeholders of academic institutions can be defined as the individuals or groups who can affect, or are affected by, the institutional activities such as the academic activities, administrative and research work, financial support, student activities etc.

3.1 Quality Evaluation in Higher Education

The quality evaluation of higher education institutions aims at setting up guidelines for the development and enhancing the work of the higher education institutions. High placement in the university ranking process would help the higher education institutions to attract prospective students during the process of the enrolment on the university, to adequately represent themselves to the potential partners with whom they want to collaborate, and to help the employers to select adequate employees.

It is without doubt that academic staff must contribute to the success of the higher education institution. However, current and former students together with their professional success play very important role and thus, they should be taken into consideration when discussing the quality of the higher education institution.

3.2 Evaluating Alumni Attitudes

Flynn (2012) stated that alumni attitudes are psychological construct. Such a construct cannot be physically observed. On the other hand, it can be inferred from the pattern of alumni responses across the alumni perspective rating items that comprise a survey. Alumni attitudes are generally thought of as positive or negative evaluations of an alumni experience with a higher education institution. They are judgments about their student and alumni experiences, the quality of the education they received, campus life, faculty or administration. There are many different variables about which alumni can develop attitudes.

3.3 Building a Strong Brand of a Higher Education Institution

Marketing programmes of services are influenced by four characteristics: Intangibility, Inseparability, Variability, and Perishability, which makes them greatly different from physical products (Kotler, Keller, 2012). With services, the management of customer expectations is closely related. In case of an academic institution, students can be considered as customers. Customers can create their expectations of services based on many sources, such as previous experience, expressions of other customers, and advertising.

Customers generally compare the perceived service with the expected service. If the perceived level of service provided falls below the expected level of service, the customer is disappointed. Successful companies enrich their offers by additional

benefits that make their customers not only meet their expectations, but even surprise them and fully satisfy them. Customer satisfaction is a matter of overcoming their expectations (Kotler and Keller, 2012). In the field of higher education, not only the traditional 4P (Product, Place, Promotion, Price) marketing mix applies, but it is often extended by other Ps by various authors.

To build a strong and valuable brand, there are a few important components: brand awareness, brand loyalty, associations related to the brand, and its financial value (Elliot, Percy, 2007). Based on these components, each academic institution should determine its priorities for building a valuable brand to succeed at the market.

4. Methodology

Quality of higher education institutions is being permanently evaluated on both the national and international levels by implementation of various methodologies. Methodologies used for evaluating the quality of higher education institutions can be divided to methodologies based on academic criteria and methodologies based on non-academic criteria (Sando and Ferencak, 2012).

Methodologies based on academic criteria aims at establishing rankings of the academic institutions by taking into consideration the achievements of the academic institutions. On the contrary, the non-academic criteria in the ranking methodology aims at the success of the current students and of the higher education institutions and also pay more attention towards the success of the alumni together with their perception of the higher education institution from which they graduated.

The basic characteristic of the non-academic criteria is that they do not evaluate higher education institutions directly, but indirectly via current and graduated students. The main goal of these criteria is to single out the quality of the higher education institutions through the success of their alumni and not through the achievements of its staff.

4.1 Alumni Attitude Survey

Surveys of alumni attitudes provide an objective method for evaluating alumni attitudes and scoring the engagement levels of individual survey respondents. Alumni experiences, feelings, opinions and beliefs about their alma mater can be evaluated through this approach. To evaluate alumni attitudes and obtain alumni feedback about

their student and alumni experiences, Likert-type rating items and open-ended questions are generally used.

In our research, we use a seven-point behaviourally anchored rating scale to obtain the ratings of twelve Likert-type rating items to evaluate alumni attitudes, where 1 = Strongly Disagree, and 7 = Strongly Agree. Arguably, this scale has the advantage of being more specific in the area of the higher education sector.

Harford Survey Research organization has developed a pool of standardized, Likert-type rating items that relate to alumni attitudes (Flynn, 2012). We have used and further developed some of these individual rating items and add new ones to fit to local environment. These items evaluate experiences, feelings, opinions, behaviours and beliefs that are important to alumni and define alumni attitudes.

The rating items and open-ended questions are related to the quality of the academic institution and its image. Furthermore, they evaluate alumni satisfaction with their alma mater and related loyalty. In the questionnaire, all these items and questions are in one section without any separation. All rating items and open-ended questions were tested by alumni and are fully understandable for them.

Listed below are few examples from each category of the Likert-type rating items we use. "FM VSE" is an abbreviation of the academic institution where the questionnaire was tested (Faculty of Management, University of Economics, Prague).

Academic Institution Quality:

1. *"A degree from FM VSE really means something"*
2. *"The received education prepared me well for my career"*

Academic Institution Image:

1. *"I remember the logo of FM VSE"*

Alumni Satisfaction:

1. *"I am very satisfied with the education I received"*
2. *"FM VSE had a positive impact on my life"*

Alumni Loyalty:

1. *"I would recommend the studies at FM VSE to my relatives and acquaintances"*
2. *"I speak well of FM VSE to others"*
3. *"Having the opportunity to choose the school again, I would choose FM VSE once again"*

In addition, we also use open-ended questions to dig deeper into the meaning of these rating data. Specific experiences, feelings, opinions, behaviours or beliefs related to alumni attitudes are evaluated through the rating items. Listed below are few examples of the open-ended questions we use to obtain written feedback related to alumni attitudes.

1. *“Which other university would have you chosen and why?”*
2. *“What did you like best regarding your student experience from FM VSE? What does FM VSE do especially well?”*
3. *“What could FM VSE improve?”*
4. *“Where can FM VSE improve in relation to alumni?”*
5. *“Can you think of any way how could FM VSE enhance its brand image?”*
6. *“What type of promotion do you think is suitable for FM VSE?”*

4.2 Data Analysis

To identify the variables and items that define alumni attitudes and are most important to them, structural equations modelling procedures or factor analyses can be used.

To analyse the comments alumni write, a linguistics program can be used. Such a program can sort individual alumni comments into thematic categories and identifies the variables that are underlying alumni comments. These variables are important to alumni.

5. Recommendations and Further Research

In the next academic year, we attempt to apply the suggested methodology on a broader spectrum of alumni. Our next objective is to choose an appropriate approach to compare the perspective of alumni to the perspective of current students as one of the most important stakeholders of higher education institutions. Comparing the attitudes of these two stakeholder groups in order to find out differences in their experiences will be certainly beneficial for any academic institution.

From conducting alumni surveys, academic institutions can draw valuable information for their further existence on the education market. These information are useful not only in terms of the quality and image of an academic institution or satisfaction of current students and alumni, but particularly in terms of the loyalty of all stakeholders,

which is an important component for building a strong brand of the academic institution in the long term.

It is important to bear in mind that higher education institutions differ in their missions, institutional values, teaching methods, campuses, academics, branding and the value of a degree. Furthermore, they differ greatly in terms of the types of alumni programmes, events and services they can offer alumni, and in terms of their overall alumni outreach strategies. Therefore, it is important that alumni attitude surveys are sensitive to these differences and comprehensive in the items they use to evaluate alumni attitudes (Sando and Ferencak, 2012). Individual institutions should add items that are specific to their institution or delete items that do not relate to the experiences of their students and alumni.

6. Conclusion

When conducting an alumni attitudes survey to evaluate the quality of the university, each academic institution should first ask themselves how they plan to put their survey results to work. What are the issues that need to be addressed? What strategies are we considering implementing and what outcomes do we want to positively affect? These questions obtain additional information that universities use to design their particular strategies.

The loyalty factor is emphasized as it is one of the key factors for building a strong and valuable brand. After all, satisfied and loyal alumni can provide a positive references, thus building the image and reputation of the academic institution, and they can even convince potential students to enrol for their studies at the institution.

As Kotler and Keller (2012) stated, brand loyalty not only provides the predictability and certainty of demand, but also builds a barrier to prevent other organisations from coming to the market. For this reason, academic institutions should try to differentiate themselves from their competition, to offer a value added to their services (study programmes), and also to build healthy relationships not only with their current students, but also their alumni.

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