

[DOI: 10.20472/IAC.2015.018.120](https://doi.org/10.20472/IAC.2015.018.120)

PETR SVOBODA

Faculty of Management, University of Economics, Prague, Czech Republic

MONIKA HARANTOVA

Faculty of Management, University of Economics, Prague, Czech Republic

STRATEGIC MARKETING IN HIGHER EDUCATION FROM ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

Abstract:

Higher education institutions involve in marketing efforts to build up a good image and improve the level of satisfaction of all stakeholders. Building of good relationships between higher education institutions and their students is essential for their long-term success. After all, only satisfied students and alumni can bring the best promotion of the university via word of mouth marketing and other ways. Higher education institutions should identify and meet expectations of students to attract more prospective students and to retain the present ones. This study aims at the quality of higher education institutions and its evaluation from the alumni perspective. The paper also suggests methods for evaluating alumni satisfaction, loyalty and other factors. Using this methodology, higher education institutions can obtain responses to questions of how they should represent themselves to the public in the future and how they should build their image and strong brand.

Keywords:

Alumni, Higher education, Image, Loyalty, Marketing, Quality, Satisfaction

JEL Classification: M31, A00

1. Introduction

Customer satisfaction research in the service industry has risen dramatically in past years. The main reason is that today's increasingly competitive environment forces companies to be more customer-oriented (Kotler and Keller, 2013). The higher education sector relies on key performance indicators to demonstrate maintenance of high standards of practice. Various quality assurance activities and measures are used to ensure that higher education institutions (HEIs) meet the needs of students and maintain a competitive academic edge in an increasingly complex economic and technological environment of the twenty-first century.

Evaluation data gathered from the student body provide critical evidence about the performance of higher education providers and enable the student perspective to be embedded in all aspects of teaching, quality enhancement and quality assurance (Ramsden, 2003).

The main objective of this study is to gain more insights into alumni satisfaction, loyalty, motivation and other dimensions. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the marketing processes of higher education institutions that concentrate on the general emphasize of marketing concept which focuses on customer satisfaction. The paper also suggests 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 paper is structured as follows: In section 2, related works are reviewed. In section 3, the proposed methodology is described. Section 4 summarizes results of the survey and section 5 covers conclusions and recommendations for further research.

2. State of the Art

A lot of literature emphasise traditional marketing approaches to higher education institutions. Educational programmes are viewed as the product while students as the sole customers (Weaver, 1976; Robinson and Long, 1988; Doyle, 1998; Palihawadana and Holmes, 1999). The objective of these approaches is to gain clear understanding and insights of the educational needs of students by evaluating students' past processes (Morstain, 1977).

Service quality and customer satisfaction are inarguably the two core concepts of the marketing theory and practice (Spreng and Mackoy, 1996). The key to sustainable competitive advantage of HEIs lies in delivering high quality service that will result in satisfied customers (Shemwell et al, 1998). Thus, HEIs have been advised to adopt a consumer-oriented philosophy and become more student-centred.

According to Gyure and Arnold (2001), students can be made satisfied through relationship-marketing tactics. Therefore, a development of systems for continuous in-

depth understanding of students' expectations, needs and experience is needed (Kotze and Plessis, 2003). Total student's life influences their satisfaction (Elliot and Healy, 2001). Furthermore, student life itself is affected by many factors such like social, academic, physical and spiritual environments. While a student may be satisfied with their academic programme, they may not be satisfied with the other on campus facilities or supporting activities. Student's willingness to recommend their former HEI to friends and acquaintances can serve as an evidence of satisfaction and loyalty.

Measuring Students' Attitudes

HEIs employ a number of both quantitative and qualitative tools in order to measure students' attitudes. According to Flynn (2012), student attitudes are psychological construct. Such a construct cannot be physically observed. On the other hand, it can be inferred from the pattern of students' responses across the students' perspective rating items that comprise a survey. Student's attitudes are generally thought of as positive or negative evaluations of a student's experience with a HEI. They are judgments about their student experiences, the quality of the education they received, campus life, faculty or administration. There are many different variables about which students can develop attitudes.

Quality of HEIs is being permanently evaluated on both the national and international levels by implementation of various methodologies. Methodologies used for evaluating the quality of HEIs 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 HEIs and also pay more attention towards the success of the alumni together with their perception of the HEI from which they graduated.

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

3. Methodology

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 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 added 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.

HEI Quality:

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

HEI Image:

1. *"I remember the logo of my alma mater"*

Alumni Satisfaction:

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

Alumni Loyalty:

1. *"I would recommend the studies at my alma mater to my relatives and acquaintances"*
2. *"I speak well of my alma mater to others"*
3. *"Having the opportunity to choose the school again, I would choose my alma mater 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 your alma mater? What does it do especially well?"*
3. *"What could your alma mater improve?"*
4. *"Where can your alma mater improve in relation to alumni?"*
5. *"Can you think of any way how could your alma mater enhance its brand image?"*
6. *"What type of promotion do you think is suitable for your alma mater?"*

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.

4. Results

The methodology has been tested on alumni of Prague's University of Economics. The data have been collected in a questionnaire survey. The sample consisted of 145 respondents. 51.03% were female, the rest were male alumni.

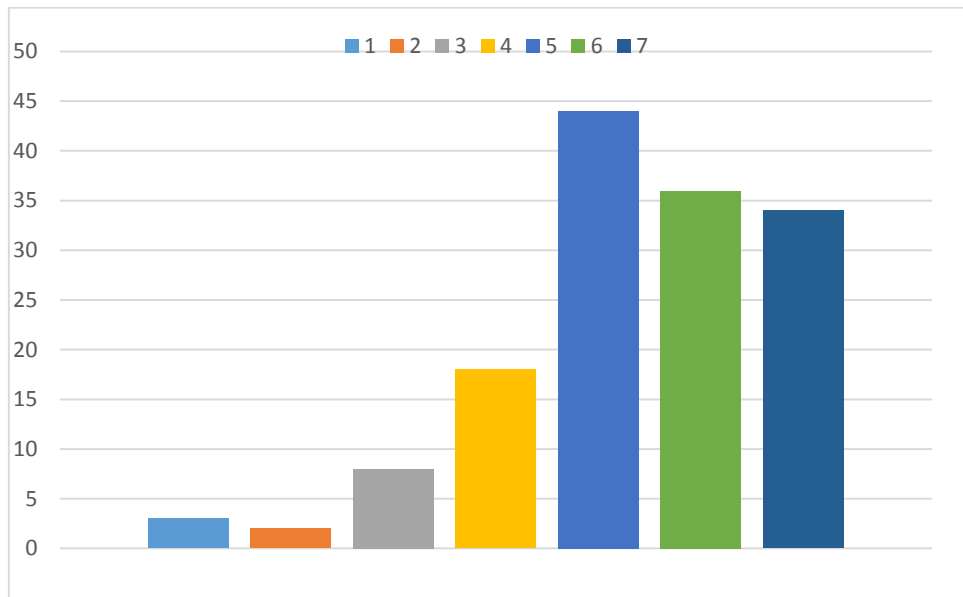
Higher Education Institution's Quality and Alumni Satisfaction

One of the most interesting open-ended questions was: ***“What did you like best regarding your student experience from your alma mater? What does it do especially well?”*** Alumni of Prague's University of Economics emphasized several things, such as *opportunities of study internships abroad*, which many of them value as the greatest quality of their studies. In this way, they have become familiar with different styles of education and learnt foreign languages. *Teaching of foreign languages* was another factor which many students mentioned here. Finally, the alumni appreciate that the studies gave them an *insight into many practical disciplines* along with *the ability of searching for information*.

On the contrary, much useful information for the institution can be extracted from the question ***“What could your alma mater improve?”*** In this case, the alumni emphasized *greater cooperation with practice* as the most important factor to improve. They see many study subjects as too much theoretical, although the connection with practice would have been desirable there. Many of them also recommend *compulsory internships in enterprises*. According to many of them, the problem of most higher education institutions is that their alumni are theoreticians who are unable to adapt in the practice quickly. Possible solutions to this issue could be: (i) inclusion of the case studies methodology into majority of study subjects; (ii) involvement of more professionals from practice into teaching; (iii) putting more emphasis on critical thinking instead of memorization.

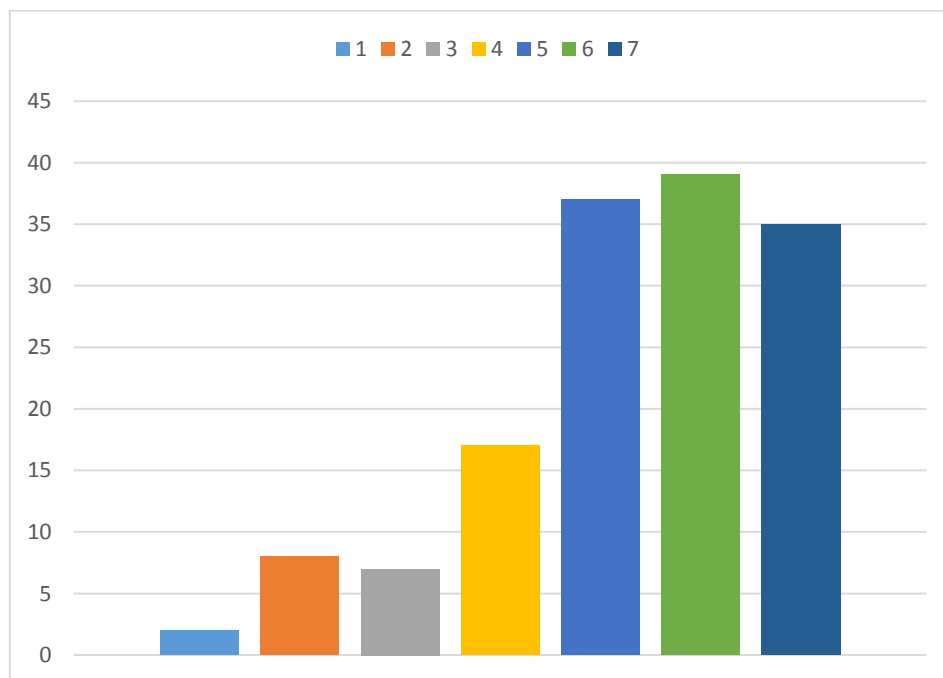
Even despite mentioned complaints, alumni are satisfied with the education they received. **Figure 1** shows alumni responses on the item ***“I am very satisfied with the education I received”*** and **Figure 2** represents alumni satisfaction through responses on the item ***“The received education prepared me well for my career”***. Interesting fact is that the alumni satisfaction is dependent on gender (at statistical significance level of 0.05). Men are more satisfied than women. This can be seen in **Figure 3**.

Figure 1: Alumni responses on the item “I am very satisfied with the education I received” (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).



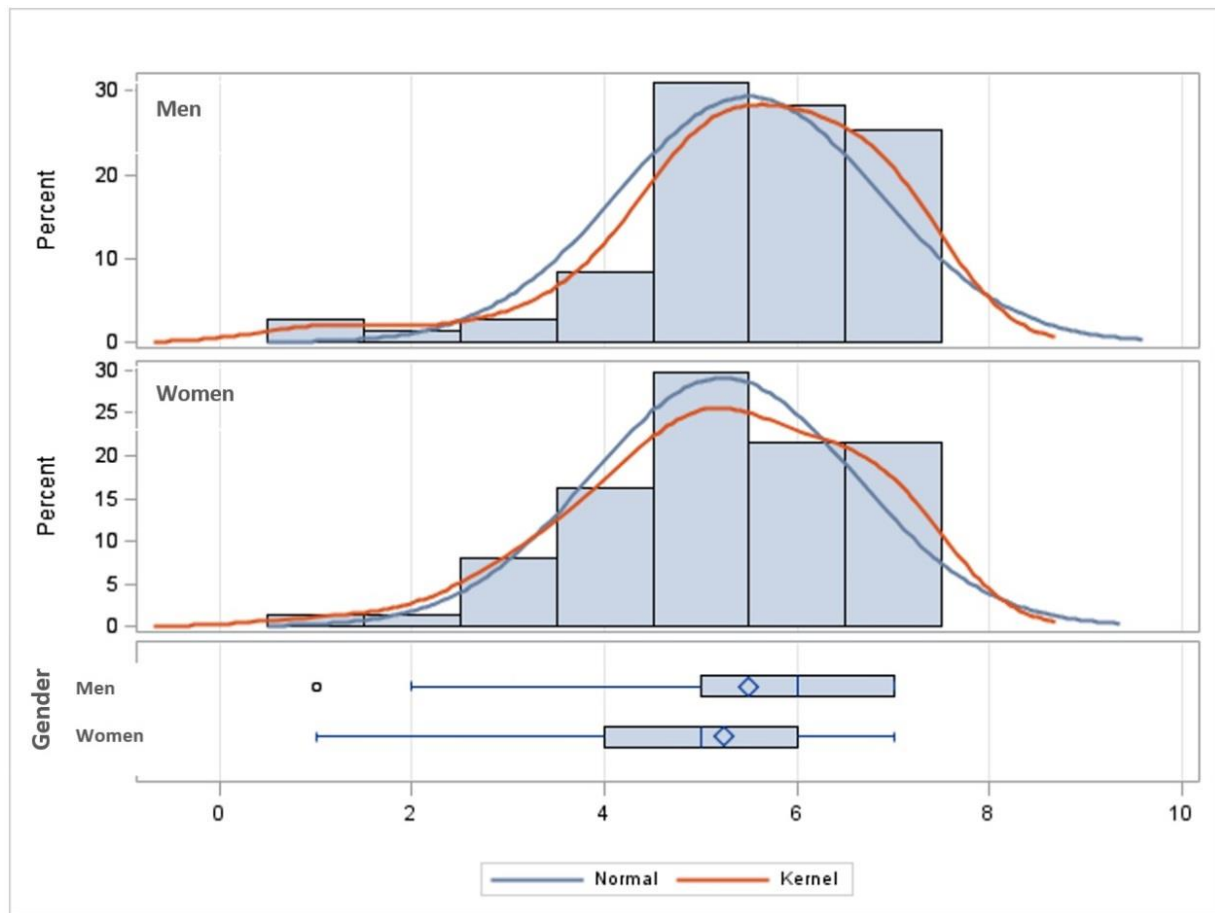
Source: Own processing based on the survey data

Figure 2: Alumni responses on the item “The received education prepared me well for my career” (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).



Source: Own processing based on the survey data

Figure 3: Distribution of the item “I am very satisfied with the education I received”. Men are more satisfied than women.

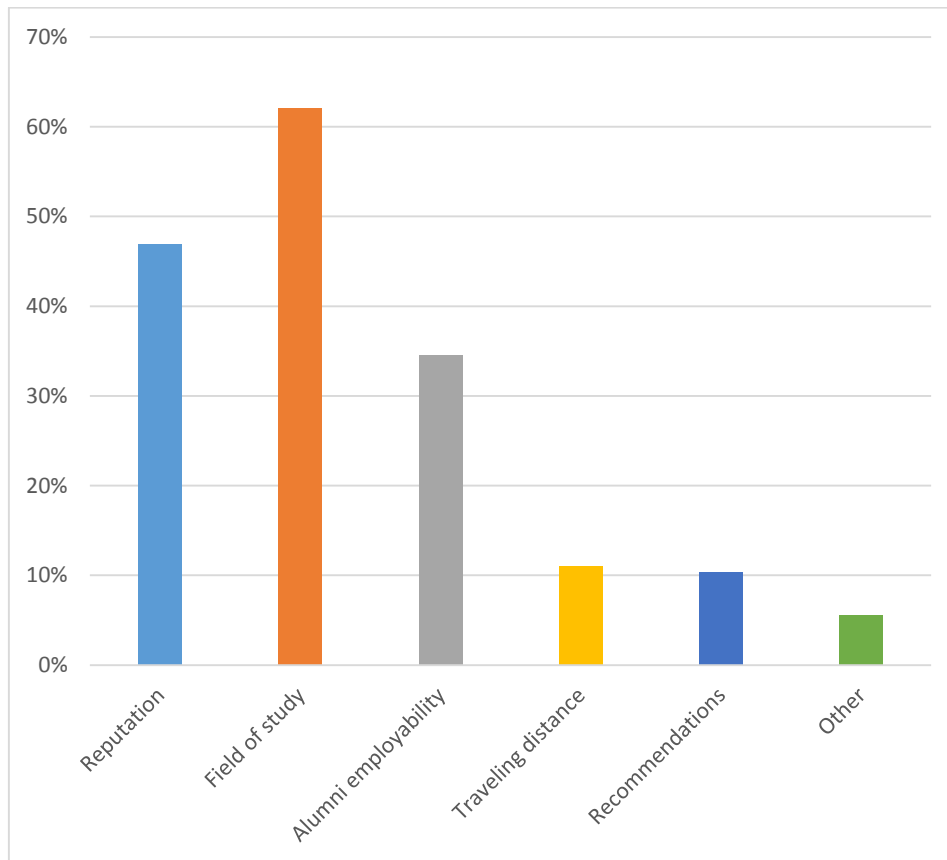


Source: Own processing based on the survey data

Alumni Motivation and Loyalty

One of the survey questions was “**What led you to choosing your alma mater?**” – which aimed at alumni motivation. In case of this question, alumni were able to choose multiple choices. The main motive was the field of study, which was chosen by 62% of alumni. The second motive was reputation (47%), followed by alumni employability (34%). Traveling distance (11%) and recommendations (10%) also worth mentioning. Among other motives (6%) were the opportunity of studying abroad or focus on foreign languages. The responses can be seen in **Figure 4**.

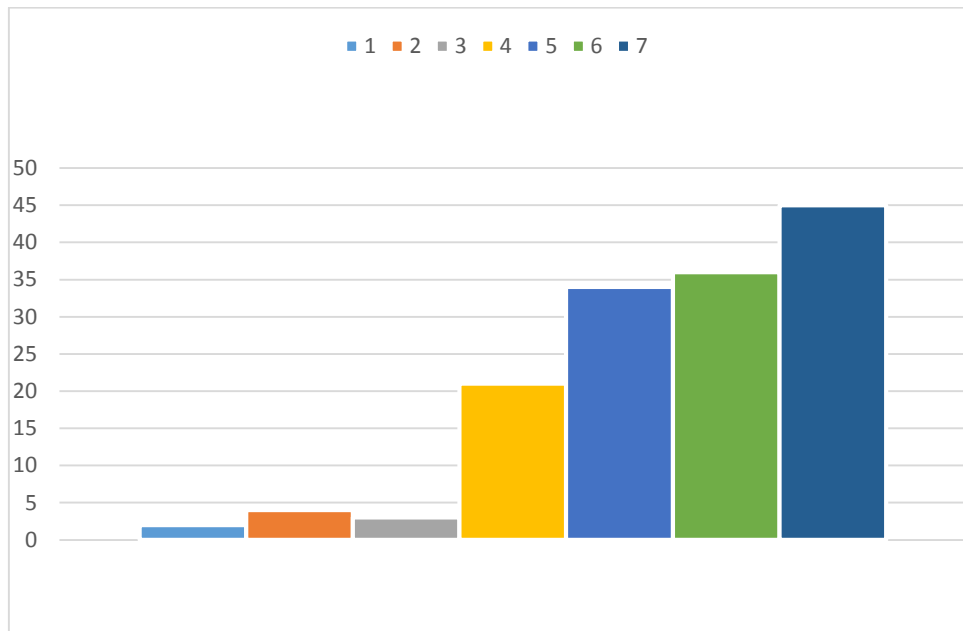
Figure 4: Alumni responses on the question: “What led you to choosing your alma mater?”



Source: Own processing based on the survey data

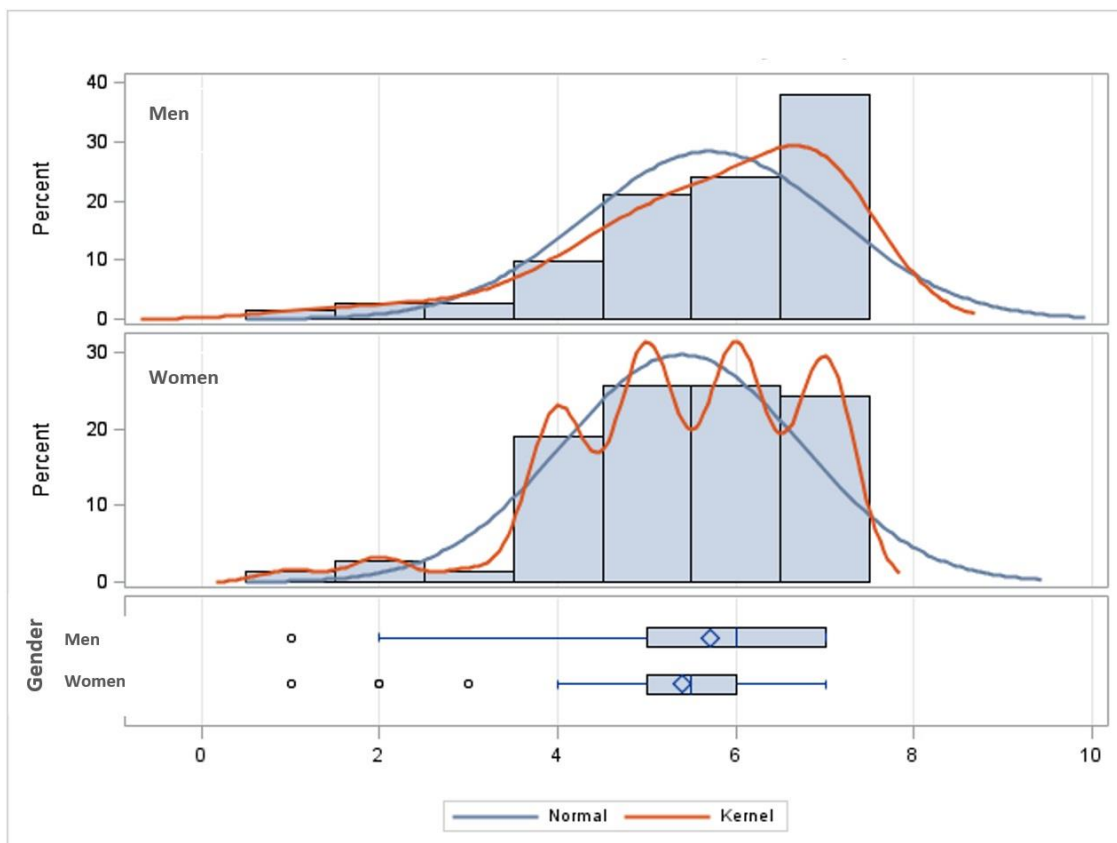
Much like in the case of alumni satisfaction, alumni loyalty seems very positive. **Figure 5** shows alumni responses on the item ***“I would recommend the studies at my alma mater to my relatives and acquaintances”***. Alumni Loyalty is also dependent on gender (at statistical significance level of 0.05). Men’s willingness to recommend their alma mater is higher than women’s. This can be seen in **Figure 6**.

Figure 5: Alumni responses on the item “I would recommend the studies at my alma mater to my relatives and acquaintances” (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).



Source: Own processing based on the survey data

Figure 6: Distribution of the item “I would recommend the studies at my alma mater to my relatives and acquaintances”. Men’s willingness to recommend their alma mater is higher than women’s.



Source: Own processing based on the survey data

Higher Education Institution's Image and Promotion

As a part of the survey, alumni opinions on the brand and image of their alma mater have been studied. They were asked a following question: ***“Can you think of any way how could your alma mater enhance its brand image?”*** Most alumni agreed that their alma mater should prioritize higher education quality and expertise of its alumni over quantity. They propose to tighten the conditions for the admission procedures, but especially for passing the studies. And how to achieve higher alumni expertise? Mainly through the form of compulsory work experience (internships in enterprises) during their studies, but also through collaboration with foreign universities and student exchange programs. Finally, higher education institutions should pay attention to high professionalism of their teachers, who should have rich experience from practice and present themselves on the outside through scientific publications.

The following question aimed at university's promotion: ***“What type of promotion do you think is suitable for your alma mater?”*** In terms of suitable promotion for a higher education institution, alumni agree that the most effective advertising is done by former students through the word-of-mouth marketing, along with a good alumni application in the labour market. According to some of them, well-known alumni could serve as so-called Ambassadors of the institution. Additionally, higher education institutions may reach better visibility by participating in numerous domestic and international projects; by cooperation with both domestic and international companies through internships for students; but also by standard participation in exhibition fairs.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, a case of alumni evaluation data interpretation has been made. It can be used to effectively enhance the quality of activities in higher education. Small shifts in the way data are analysed and presented can lead to big shifts in both stakeholder morale and engagement, and in the way the data can be used to bring about positive and measurable improvements of education.

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 their current students and alumni, but particularly in terms of all stakeholders' loyalty, which also is an important component for building a strong brand of the academic institution in the long term.

While a collection of student data seems an obvious goal of most higher education institutions' feedback activities, there is often a disconnection between the collection of data and the implementation of improvements based on the information obtained. However, identifying and capitalising the value of the collected data is crucial to ensure

growth and adaptation of higher education institutions in a dynamic and increasingly complex global environment.

Acknowledgement

The research was supported by the Internal Grant Agency of the University of Economics projects F6/57/2015 and F6/45/2015.

References

- Doyle, J. L. (1998), "Class, consumerism and education", *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 183-187.
- Elliott, M. K., Healey, A. M. (2001), "Key factors influencing student satisfaction related to recruitment and retention," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 1-11.
- Flynn, J. B. (2012), *Evaluating Alumni Attitudes and Engagement – A Discussion of the Constructs and Survey Methods*. Harford Survey Research.
- Gyure, F. J. and Arnold, G. S. (2001), "Using 'Relationship Marketing' theory to develop a training model for admissions recruiters," *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, Vol. 10, No. 4, pp. 35-49.
- Kotler, P., Keller, K. L. (2013), *Marketing management*. 14th [ed.]. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, c2012, xxii, 657, [127] p.
- Kotze T. G., Plessis P. J. Du, (2003), "Students as 'Co-producers' of education: A proposed model of student socialisation and participation at tertiary institutions", *Quality Assurance in Education*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 186-201.
- Morstain, B. R. (1977), "An analysis of student satisfaction with their academic programs", *Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 48, January-February, pp. 1-16.
- Palihawadana, D., Holmes, G. (1999), "Modeling Module Evaluation in Marketing Education," *Quality Assurance In Education*, Vol. 7, No. 1, pp. 41-46.
- Ramsden, P. (2003), "Student surveys and quality assurance", *Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum*, Melbourne.
- Robinson, A., Long, G. (1988), "Substances vs trapping in marketing non-advanced F. E", *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 21, No. 1, pp. 42-53.
- Sando, S. and Ferencak, M. (2012), *Alumni Indicator as a Criterion for Evaluating the Quality of Academic Institutions*. *International Journal of Industrial Engineering and Management*, Vol. 3, No 2, pp. 113-119.
- Shemwell, D. J., Yavaş, U., Bilgin, Z. (1998), "Customer-service provider relationship: An empirical test of a model of service quality, satisfaction and relationship oriented outcome," *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 9, pp. 155-168.
- Spreng, R. A., Mackoy, R. D. (1996), "An empirical examination of a model of perceived service quality and satisfaction," *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 72, pp. 201-214.
- Weaver, T. (1976), "What is the good of higher education?", *Higher Education Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 3-14.