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EDUCATIONAL MARKETING: FACTORS INFLUENCING THE SELECTION OF A UNIVERSITY

Literature
review

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Abstract

Competition in the higher education sector is forcing the higher educational institutions (HEI) to develop more competitive marketing strategies. For developing universities marketing strategies HEI need to understand the student choice process of a university. Understanding university choice process is not easy, this process involves complex decision which affects students' life (future career, friends, residence, etc.). Therefore, this paper presents a conceptual framework to explore the factors that influence university choice decision, in general, by investigating factors, relevant in literature, which most influence this decision. Among the factors identified are: institutional reputation, cost, employment opportunities, parents' influence, educational offer, location. This study has been done in order to find the most important factors that influence choice of a university among Romanian students.

Introduction

The university choice process it's not easy:

- The diversity of factors influencing student choice is great: there are factors related with institutional characteristics, personal factors, factors related to influence of others;
- The institution and/or program attended have effect on student life/future;
- Involves personal and economic sacrifices

The major objective of this study is to highlight a large range of factors which has been identified in the literature as influence factor in the choice of a university decision process.

Understanding of the various factors involved in the students' decision with regards to choosing a HEI is a key to formulating and manages effective marketing and recruitment strategies for HEI to attract prospective students.

Factors that influence university choice (literature review)

Researchers, in their numerous studies and examinations (since 1930 till present), discovered different factors that influence university choice, in diverse context/situations/circumstances. Many researchers had common factors but the degree of importance vary.

1. The reputation of the institution

Institutional image had a powerful influence on future student attitudes toward choosing a university in many ways, such as university age, university reputation, university accreditation, competitiveness of admission, brand name of the university. There are many surveys where reputation of the institution is one of the factors ranked high by students (Lay & Maguire 1981, Murphy 1981, Webb 1993, Chapman 1993, Coccari and Javalgi 1995, Kallio 1995, Absher & Crawford 1996, Soutar & Turner 2002, Keling 2006, Bartl 2009, Pampaloni 2010, Willich et al., 2011, Kim & Gosman 2011).

Staff quality, the perception of teaching quality, the perception of education quality, teaching, learning and research methods, variety of education, credit transfer facility to the abroad, flexibility (possibility to combine studies and work) are quality aspects that are also very important attributes for students to choose a HEI (Maringe 2006, Yusof et al., 2008, Hell & Haehnel 2008).

Others quality aspects are curriculum offered where we can consider: quality of curricula, scientific research quality, course diversity, novelty, actuality, mobility (exchange programs with foreign universities) (Tavares et al., 2008)

2. Career

Previous research noted that for many future students

possibilities/opportunities/preparation, including employment opportunities, university help in searching for a job (while studying and after), job placement rates, improved job skills, better job, better paid occupation, better choice of a job, internship opportunities, university-industry partnerships are very important in decision to enroll (Soutar & Turner 2002, Standifird 2005, B cil et al. 2006, Bowman & Bastedo 2009, Brewer & Zhao 2010).

3. Costs

Economics-based approach are assuming that students are rational and make a careful cost/benefit decision considering the benefits and costs of all possible alternatives.

This factor has several aspects: *fee for study* including value of tuition fee, scholarship opportunities, other financial aid's, materials cost, *fee for accommodation* (social costs) including value of rent, other living expenses and *family budget*. It is found that this factor negatively affect enrolment probability. (Schwartz 1985, Shanka et al, 2005, Briggs & Wilson 2007, Wagner & Fard 2009, Beneke & Human 2010)

4. Information sources/advertising

For building a very good institutional image and visibility it is necessary for universities to know what message to spread through which media at what time to which target group in order of being noticed by the students and make them to enroll. In US, universities have the opportunity to by data (about prospective students and their parents) from agencies such as SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) or ACT(American College Testing) so that they can target their communication strategies.

Internet, in general, and particularly university website, students' social networks, mailed brochures are a very valuable source of information nowadays. University ranking can be used to refine which universities to consider and which to disregard. (Fischbach 2006, Brown et al., 2009, Pampaloni 2010, Kim & Gasman 2011, Willich et al., 2011). Websites should be easy to navigate, include correct and targeted information, written for prospective and current students, with pictures and videos displaying students' experience of the university.

Other information sources such as publications, television and media advertising, leaflets, newspapers and magazine articles (written by journalist not by universities), have been valuable sources before and they still seems to be important for students less educated, with lower academic abilities, from specific geographical areas (Galotti & Mark 1994, Hoyt & Brown 2003, Willich et al., 2011).

Events such as visits to schools by university representatives, visit to campuses, open doors days

were rated to be an extremely effective influence for prospective students. (Lay & Maguire 1981, Pampaloni 2010, Kim & Gasman 2011).

5. Infrastructure

The conducted surveys analyzing the influence of infrastructure when choosing a university, found the following factors related to infrastructure: classrooms, computer facilities, quality of library infrastructure (books, academic journals, IT, quiet learning zones, common learning zones (for group work)), use of technology (projector, printer, etc.) campus size, hostel facilities, canteen, university safety (Price et al., 2003, Veloutsou et al., 2004, Ritesh & Mitesh 2012). Among infrastructure related facilities can be consider other facilities such as: restaurants, beauty salons, commercial centers, fitness center located near university campus, café, medical center, hotline number available for students to book tickets.

6. Location

A range of research considered the location: the geographical location of the city, of the university, of the campus (living close to university), proximity to home as an important factor (not only as a cost but also as a quality) of student's choice of a university. (Webb 1993, Donnellan 2002, Shanka et al., 2005, Wagner & Fard 2009, Beneke & Human 2010).

This factor was found of highest importance to students who are first generation in their family, female, from working – class families. A near home location of the university gives them the emotional security of remaining close to family and friends. Students also prefer socially and culturally active big cities.

7. Social life

From this factor point of view HEIs should aim their efforts on: the availability of a large range of sport programmes within the institution, opportunities for leisure, events organized by the university representatives, student associations/organizations, clubs and student groups, religious life, traditional events (annual festival for the students, special events, class traditions) (Donnellan 2002, Wiese et al. 2010, [39]).

8. Family

Family members, their aspirations/expectation, parents educational level, family social backgrounds are items that can be taken into account for this factor, researchers considering that parents were key in encouraging their children to pursue higher education. The recommendations that come from family and friends have a strong influence on student perception (are consider “trustworthy”). Students with parents having higher

levels of education and income are more likely to attend HEI (Pimpa 2005, Ceja 2006, Joshi et al. 2009). Pimpa (2005) identified that beside finance, family have other roles: information, persuasion, competition.

More and more students emphasize that their decision to choose a particular HEI was entirely their own thus indicating another influencing factor: personal factor, based on academic backgrounds, achievements, intrinsic interest in the field (Owie 2003).

9. Opinion/ recommendation/advice of other people

Prospective students, in addition to formal information sources, seek advice from other interpersonal sources: friends, sibling recommendations, counselors, career advisers, former professors, former/current university students, word of mouth (Murphy 1981, Shanka et al., 2005, Briggs & Wilson 2007).

Awareness and knowledge about a HEI (information gathered from other people) seems to influence students' choice indirectly. A better and more objective idea about student life in the university seems to be provide by the experience and views of former/current students (this can become ambassadors of their HEI and interacting with juniors).

Conclusion

From this review of the literature, focused on process of decision-making by the students as they choose a place to study, numerous factors have been identified in this study: institutional reputation, educational offer, cost, employment opportunities, location, parents' and other influence.

Future research

Future studies should focus on examining these factors discovering many aspects of students' decisions (pre and post decision to further their studies) that may or may not be pertinent for HEI, particularly for marketing strategies. Can be longitudinal or/and latitudinal study, to compare the students preferences, see changes over time/space, make considerations about changes in the future.

Indications of the importance of choice factors will enable HEI to use more efficiently their funds for recruitment/communication policies, to segment the student market more appropriately, to determine if there are differences (demographics, cultural, etc.) with regard to selection process (selection of choice factors), to offer other services (in addition to training) to differentiate from the competition (sport, social activities, etc.).

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