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DEVELOPING AN EDUCATIONAL BRAND IN A WORLD OF GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE EDUCATIONAL MARKETS

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Education is a part of the services sector of the social sphere, which results in an educational product. The basis for the development of an educational service is considered to be scientific and pedagogical work, as a result of which an educational product is created. Consequently, educational services are not just about fulfilling the needs of the individual (student), but also about responding to the needs of society and, as a result, there is development, progress and innovation. Nowadays, both higher education systems and higher education institutions operate in a highly competitive global market for educational services. This fact leads to the necessity of developing recognisable educational brands. Therefore, it is advisable for them to act as a single brand. The brand will become known on the global market precisely because of the common standard and the coordinated actions of the HEI and the partner institutions.

Keywords: *HEI, higher education, education brand, competition, global market, education market.*

DEZVOLTAREA BRANDULUI EDUCAȚIONAL

ÎN LUMEA PIEȚELOR EDUCAȚIONALE COMPETITIVE LA NIVEL GLOBAL

Învățământul reprezintă parte a serviciilor sociale, al cărui rezultat este un produs educațional. Lucrul științifico-pedagogic, în urma căruia se creează un produs educațional, este considerat ca bază a dezvoltării serviciilor educaționale. În consecință, serviciile educaționale nu sunt doar un instrument de satisfacere a nevoilor studentului, dar și un răspuns la nevoile societății și, ca urmare, presupun dezvoltare, progres și inovare. În prezent, atât sistemele de învățământ superior, cât și instituțiile de învățământ superior funcționează în condiții de concurență acerbă pe piața globală a serviciilor educaționale. Acest fapt determină necesitatea dezvoltării unui brand educațional recunoscut. Prin urmare, este recomandat ca instituțiile de învățământ superior să acționeze ca un singur brand. Brandul va deveni recunoscut pe piața mondială datorită unui standard unic și acțiunilor bine coordonate ale universității și instituțiilor partenere.

Cuvinte-cheie: *universitate, învățământ superior, brand educațional, concurență, piață globală, piață educațională.*

Introduction

Education services are becoming an important strategic tool and a future-oriented area of the developed economy. The demand for higher education is increasing day by day, the same as the offer, which is becoming more diverse. The global market for educational services is developing more dynamically, leading to competition not only within a particular country, but also internationally and between foreign HEIs. It is not easy to be highly competitive in such an environment and there is a need to innovate and achieve international quality standards.

Marketing of educational services is defined as the field that studies and shapes the strategy and tactics of universities in the market of educational services, taking into account the characteristics of the providing, delivery, acquisition and consumption of educational services.

Higher education institutions, when implementing their educational, scientific and technical activities, operate on several markets, which complicates the process of defining the target audience, as each market will have different characteristics and requirements.

An educational service should not only aim to meet the individual needs of individuals, but also respond to the broad needs of society and the global challenges facing the government and humanity as a whole.

The development and maintenance of the higher education brand depends on many factors: teaching staff, facilities, living conditions in higher education institutions and residences, the number of students, students' assessment of the quality of teaching, the number of job placements and/or the number of successful graduates.

A consolidated educational brand is an extension of the brand by releasing a large number of diverse groups of educational services under one name, based on international strategic and marketing approaches to

provide a competitive advantage for educational services in a national and institutional context.

Promoting a service today is no longer enough, focusing only on the quality of education. It is important to increase brand and image relevance, using human relations, developing communication tools, materialising and improving the education service, seeking to fulfil not only the explicit but also the underlying demands of the public.

Results obtained and discussions

The most important tool for marketing of educational services is branding. Many authors see brand from different perspectives, some agree that brand is a transformative commercial force. There are several approaches to defining the concept of 'brand', which consider the definitions of different authors:

1) The physiological approach, which defines a brand as a set of stimuli capable of triggering unconditioned reflexes, the so-called automatic response. According to this approach, a brand is not just a product, a label, but a feeling that stays with the consumer during and after the purchase of a product or service. In the various stages of the purchase, from awareness of need to selection and purchase, brand plays a different role. For example, at the stage of searching for information about the manufacturer and the product/service, the brand helps to identify and distinguish the manufacturer from the mass of competitors.

2) The psychological approach defines a brand as an emotion, an impression people have about the functional features and benefits of a product. Jones J. believes that a brand is a product that fulfills the functional needs of some users and provides them with some additional value that can satisfy certain psychological needs and motivate them to buy [1, p.98]. At the stage of evaluating the selected options, the consumer develops a certain image that evokes trust or suspicion, concentrates certain emotions. The key task of a brand is to evoke such emotions and to form such a positive opinion in the public so that they associate the service or product with their lifestyle and do not imagine it without the interference of that brand.

The modern concept of 'brand' includes all associations (not only positive, but also neutral and negative) of the consumer with a product or service, an organisation, due to his or her own experience, public approval and other people' advice or feedback [2, p.321].

3) The marketing approach implies a special denomination, a symbol designed to distinguish a product or service from the rest. In conformity with this approach, F. Kotler gives the following definition – a trademark (brand) is a name, term, symbol, picture or their combination designed to identify goods and services of a seller or a group of sellers and to distinguish them from the goods and services of competitors [3, p.320]. This definition shows that a *trademark* and a *brand* are identical concepts that identify the producer of goods, services. Other supporter of this approach is David Ogilvy, who refers to a brand as the intangible sum of product properties: its name, packaging, price, history, reputation and way of advertising [4, p.251].

Branding of educational services means techniques, methods and ways of creating a brand and its further maintenance, as well as promotion. A well-formed brand ensures client loyalty, funding, protection from competitors, sustainability at international level, also a high level of interest among target consumers of HEIs, employers towards graduates. In other words, the HEI brand is the image of an educational institution that provides it with a competitive advantage, attractiveness and perspective sustainability in the market.

The brand of an educational institution refers to the system that integrates the product, image, brand image in the consumer's perception, as well as the producer's vision of the images of the service provided, the institution brand and key features to its consumers [5, p.25]. The branding of an educational institution implies the realisation of a service, and the creation of some kind of favourable ambience, atmosphere and physical environment, which helps to cope with this task. With today's plethora of offerings in the educational market, branding is an effective way to speak to the consumer in an intelligible language ("expensive but prestigious", "economical but in demand in the labour market", etc.), explaining and helping to make sense of the general flow of information and highlighting the HEI through its advantages. In this way, the brand creates the external image of the HEI, while the internal image is formed among precisely defined audiences – students, graduates, teachers and other HEI staff.

An educational brand must be worthwhile to its target audience, otherwise it loses its purpose. Levels of brand value formation for the target audience are presented in Table.

Table

Levels of brand value formation [developed by the author with reference to [5, p.24]]

Levels	Characteristics
Social brand equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Social impact of HEI brand in the choice of an applicant for HEI; – Social relevance of the HEI brand in employers' choice of HEI graduates when hiring; – Social prestige of the HEI brand as an added customer value; – The more socially important the brand of HEI is, the more prestigious it is to work in it (administration, teachers, staff of HEI); – Social significance forms the confidence in the HEI.
Analysis of use value	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Understanding the main focus areas that applicants rely on when choosing an institution; – Identifying the unique characteristics that applicants, students and staff attach to the university brand; – The university's brand is not only a matter of a certain level of trust, but also of a certain level of confidence and trust of all the participants in the consumer chains.
Long-term brand equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Forming long-term trust-based relationships; – The university brand becomes recognisable, easily perceived and evokes positive associations not only with the target audience, but also with students and staff of other universities; – Tracking the dynamics of public opinion about the HEI through various marketing surveys.

Long-term brand equity plays a vital role in the branding of an institution. The long-term brand value of a HEI consists of the following components: corporate identity; image; educational services; relations with external and internal environment; students' employment after graduation. Creating an image and a brand is not an easy task, so it should be carried out primarily by qualified marketers or brand managers.

The HEI needs to develop a brand that is clearly identifiable from its competitors, helping it to stand out in the market: it needs to create a unique positioning and, if necessary, reformat the HEI brand, to establish a framework for the brand's existence and operate within it, gradually expanding to an international level, to ensure a unified marketing message in various means of communication, and to ensure the consistency of the brand guidelines and characteristics in time and distance. In developing a conceptual model for an educational institution's brand, two issues need to be taken into account. Firstly, the basis of any branding concept is an educational service (university product), with its own characteristics. Secondly, it is necessary to give this service distinctive advantages and features in comparison with competitors.

Developing a successful HEI brand solves the following problems [6, p.112]:

1. It allows the development of new market niches and facilitates the introduction of new intellectual products to the market;
2. The brand gives the educational institution extra time if a threat to the market emerges;
3. With a brand, an educational institution separates its educational programmes from similar educational programmes of competitors in the eyes of customers.

A brand is created by answering the following questions explicitly:

- Who is the brand for? This question will identify the target audience, the educational services market sector. It is wrong to assume that a new brand will be immediately known everywhere; it all starts with segregation.

- Why do you create a brand? It is necessary to imagine the benefits and advantages that the consumer will receive when he will use the services of the university.

- What is the main purpose of branding? The purpose can be to build a brand from scratch, to reinforce an existing brand, to position it, to reposition it (rebranding), to refresh it, to extend it, to enhance it. As a rule, a quality brand concentrates on one objective at a time.

- With the other educational institutions will the brand be competing? The answer to this question will provide information on where to develop your brand in order to remain unique and different from your com-

petitors, generating original ideas and taking into account competitors' mistakes and miscalculations. The study of competitors will avoid duplication of visual, organisational and branding strategies already actively used in the market.

The university brand development is based on two areas [7, p.66]: the "visible area", including market positioning, brand identification system, and the corporate area, containing internal brand positioning, identification system, communication, internal marketing.

The process of educational branding is divided into several phases:

1. The first phase – positioning the spectrum of educational services of the university. This phase implies positioning the brand of an educational institution in the minds of consumers in relation to competitors. The components of HEI's positioning are based on trust, matching consumers' expectations and reality, value and benefits of studying at HEI, strengths of HEI and its sustainability.

2. The second phase involves the formation of unique features characterising the university – mission, values, competencies, philosophy, image, and corporate culture. The mission, as the *raison d'être* of the institution, increases the chances of success among competitors, taking into account the interests of their stakeholders. The values demonstrate the underlying principles of the life of the HEI, which are set out in the internal rules of the institution. The philosophy of the HEI is based on the vision system of the managers. The philosophy of the HEI represents the system of values and meanings in accordance with which the HEI carries out its activities. The image as a generalised portrait of the HEI, a system of perceptions of the brand, both by the staff of the HEI and the target audience.

3. The third phase involves the creation of brand attributes. The attributes of HEI brand include: history of HEI, logo, unified corporate style, website. The history of the HEI can consist of real events as well as legends and myths, which are usually better remembered and give an emotional appeal to the brand. The university logo should be modern and intriguing. The corporate identity should be unique and eye-catching.

4. The fourth phase is the management and development of the HEI brand. The HEI brand needs the attention of a brand manager and constant improvement and increase of brand equity.

5. The second to last phase is the promotion or periodic renewal of the brand. This stage can be repeated cyclically after a certain period of time, as any brand tends to be forgotten. Promotion of university brand should be done in two directions, promoting both educational programs and the result of their application, i.e. the graduates themselves.

6. The final phase is brand evaluation, analysis of public reaction, feed-back, formulation of conclusions.

As a result, the HEI brand should encourage a positive attitude towards it, be easily recognisable and be associated with high professionalism of the teaching staff and quality of services compared to other HEIs.

The author suggests the development of an educational brand of the Republic of Moldova "LEARN IN MOLDOVA". The association of a group of HEIs under one brand is a form of organization of HEIs' cooperation efforts, providing for special ways and strategies of development and promotion. The creation and maintenance of the HEI brand is associated with a number of key factors: professional level of the teaching staff, modern material and technical basis, number of students and decent infrastructure conditions for them, the possibility to evaluate the quality of education by the students themselves, quantitative indicators of graduates' employment.

The purpose of the Brand is to attract the attention of consumers and partners to higher education in RM as a whole, and then to study at a particular higher education institution. Accordingly, the objectives of the BRAND will be: to conduct ongoing research in education, science, culture and communication, etc.; to promote, transfer and share scientific knowledge through research, training and teaching activities; to develop standards for the development and adoption of international legal acts and regulatory guidelines; to advise higher education institutions in RM on developing their individual brands; to share specialized information in cooperation with interested stakeholders.

The Brand will be designed to promote Moldovan education and increase the possibility of getting into new markets, but the Brand has weaknesses that need to be considered and reduced. The Brand will contribute to increasing the visibility of higher education in RM in the European market, which is the target market at the moment. In the future, it is planned to expand the market and focus the marketing policy of the Brand on other markets. The presented brand is positioned as a result of cooperation between the state (government, state universities and interested state institutions) and private sector (private universities, educational institutions,

language centers). The "Unified Brand" will unite all interested HEIs, both public and private, but will not restrain the HEIs themselves in the possibility of independent promotion and development.

The main aspects taken into account by the author when forming the Educational Brand are: the existence of a similar target audience of higher education institutions in RM; similar geography (brand territory); adjustment to the client and to the situation.

The process of forming a unified Brand will consist of several steps: 1. Positioning – brand consolidation in consumers' mind, its features in comparison with competitors. There is an assessment of conformity of the real situation in the education market to consumers' expectations in terms of value (benefits for the consumer), advantages of HEI, its strengths and sustainability; 2. Brand individualization – establishing missions, values, competences, development philosophy, image and culture; 3. Creation of brand attributes: brand history, logo, unified corporate identity, mentioning of the Brand in the Internet; 4. Brand management – the perspective of Brand development requires constant involvement of many specialists. Brand management will allow to manage the assets, to increase the capitalization of the Brand; 5. Brand promotion is done through the choice of communication channels and methods based on the specifics and the target audience.

Forms of collaboration when merging under a common brand are: cross-promotion or counter-marketing – measures to incentivise sales of products from several higher education institutions at the same time; co-branding – cooperation and collaboration between two or more brands, resulting in a common educational product offered under a single brand; joint advertising campaign implemented in various formats: online, media and visual advertising; developing common loyalty programmes; co-packaging – a common brand of educational products.

It is important to unite not only HEIs, but also partner institutions under the brand "LEARN IN MOLDOVA". The main objective of such cooperation between HEIs and partner institutions is to assess prospective opportunities for the development of exports of educational services in RM, to create prerequisites for improving the quality of higher education based on an objective assessment of export potential, its development based on investment business plans and diversification of funding sources; creation of a competitive educational product based on the proposed set of educational services; improvement of infrastructure to ensure higher education quality and a better quality of education. The graphic and textual component of the Brand is its logo and slogan.

In order to promote the Brand on the domestic and foreign market, a set of activities under the general name "National campaign to promote the brand LEARN IN MOLDOVA" has been developed. It will consist of a series of official Brand presentations on national and international strategic markets, a set of strategic initiatives and quality control of a unified marketing strategy for the internationalization of higher education. HEIs, which will be attributed the LEARN IN MOLDOVA Brand, will automatically be included in the educational promotion programme, both at home and abroad.

By 2030, universities are predicted to have some of the characteristics of global HEIs capable of competing with strong international players. Universities in Moldova will position themselves as major sources of knowledge production; governments and industry partners within and outside the country will have an increasing reliance on them as a source of innovation and technology development.

The involvement of the Republic of Moldova in the process of internationalisation of higher education and the desire to integrate into the international educational environment is an essential necessity, as the educational environment is rapidly changing. The process of internationalisation of higher education will become an integral part of the modern development of educational institutions. An in-depth study of this process will allow us to observe the positive impact of global integration trends on higher education. There is no universal way or single path of internationalisation of higher education.

Conclusions

Creating and maintaining a respected brand of higher education on the market depends on numerous factors: teaching staff, facilities, living conditions in HEIs and dormitories, number of students, assessment of the quality of teaching by students, number of employed and/or number of successful graduates.

In a global and highly competitive market, developing countries and their higher education providers find it difficult to sell all university offerings. Moreover, it is difficult to market themselves and become recognisable. Therefore, it is advisable to act as a single brand.

A single education brand is an extension of the brand by launching a large number of diverse groups of educational services under one name. The name for all categories of services is the same. The name of a single educational brand and its logo will appear in advertising campaigns and all promotional materials.

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