

Marketing Communication Management of Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to analyse how marketing communication (MC) activities are managed at public universities and their economics faculties in the Czech Republic. The main emphasis is placed on the process of planning and control. The further aim is to identify the main issues in this field. It will also seek to specify new marketing communication tools for use in higher education (HE) in the future. This paper is based on qualitative research, whereby management and communications staff working for marketing departments at higher educational institutions were questioned by way of an individual structured interview. The results are summarised and elaborated on in written and tabular form. The qualitative research revealed that many Czech universities do not have a systematic management procedure for marketing communication planning and control. Furthermore, there are several areas in the marketing communication management of higher educational institutions which should be substantially improved upon. These primarily include higher involvement of professionals such as marketing experts from the private sector; implementation of market orientation tools; more widespread use of integrated marketing communications etc.*

Key Words: Higher Education · Marketing Communication Management · Planning · Control · Czech Republic

JEL Classification: M37

1 Introduction

Competition among universities in the Czech Republic is permanently increasing. It is predominantly caused by the high number of universities. But there are several other forces that drive higher educational institutions to make necessary reforms such as internationalisation, globalisation but also very specific reasons, such as the decreasing number of students coming from secondary schools; negative prognosis of demographic trends; austerity caused by the economic crisis; changes in university funding or for instance increasing emphasis on quality in educational and scientific areas. Moreover, in the Czech Republic students seem to be forced to contribute financially much more to their higher education. Therefore both domestic and foreign students choose their university carefully and we can suppose this trend will continue. When universities and their economics faculties offer their products, namely study programmes, they have to manage their marketing communications activities as well as possible and find new strategies of communication and so attract greater numbers of prospective students.

2 Literary review

There are a lot of researchers specialising in marketing management within higher education. For instance, Chapleo (2010) focuses on branding in universities and suggests which factors are important for management in this field. Some authors point out that higher education institutions

should be more marketed and managed like corporate brands Whelan and Wohlfeil (2006) or Maringe and Carter (2007) who says that: “University managers and academics have to consider the marketing not as an alien concept imported from the business world, but as both a viable philosophy and strategy for developing an HE sector which meets the needs of home-based and international customers.” Other authors concentrate on the possibilities and limits of the use of quality management systems and models in higher education Mehralizadeh and Safaeemoghaddam (2010). Hemsley - Brown and Oplatka (2006) give a wider view on the marketing of higher education and systematically review the literature in this field and emphasise that more research is needed to be done. Strategic marketing plays an important role in university management. Hammond, Harmon and Webster (2007) analyse the relation between marketing strategy and university performance focusing on marketing planning. A lot of specialized publications deal with a problem of university management caused by steadily increasing competition. They concentrate on marketing management processes and their optimisation. For example, Ivy (2008) tried to optimise the basic marketing tool and created a seven factorial marketing mix. In the relevant literature, many authors specialise on management of marketing communications tools. The main focus is on websites evaluation, e.g. Nielsen (2000); Bauer and Scharl (2002). One of the fields which the research touches on enhancement of the quality of websites, especially seeking convenient methodology for web evaluation Castro, Marcos and Caceres (2004); Hennicker and Koch (2000). Světlík (2009) concentrates on the marketing of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic. He emphasises the need for the interconnection of all marketing communication elements in one process with joint management. The integrated marketing communication approach increases its efficiency based on synergies.

3 Material and methods

The research was done in three steps to get needed results. In the first stage, the authors of this paper identified the main areas for further investigation on the basis of a previous study of relevant literature (see the overview above). These areas are:

- the system of marketing communications management at higher education institutions,
- the main problems of marketing communications at higher education institutions,
- new trends of marketing communications at higher education institutions,
- implementation of market orientation tools – professionalisation of MC at HE.

In the second stage the pilot study was carried out. The method of individual interview with an expert was chosen for the purpose of the research. The main target was to get deeper information with qualitative character. Three experts specialising in the field were interviewed. The first person was a marketing specialist who does research into the marketing of higher education. The second and the third people are marketing specialists previously working in the private sector and currently responsible for the marketing activities of entire universities. Those experts were given the four above mentioned areas and were asked to describe a contemporary situation regarding the MC of HE according to their experience and define more precisely the aspects within each area which further research should focus on. Their answers were recorded using the transcript technique.

In terms of the first area (the system of marketing communications management at higher education institutions) the authors decided to concentrate mainly on the functions of planning and control. These functions are closely combined. Control cannot exist without targets and planning because the results have to be measured on the basis of previous determined criteria.

On the basis of the conducted pilot study, the following set of questions was finally worked out:

- What are the main MC targets of higher education?
- How is the process of MC planned and for what timescale?
- What stakeholders are important for universities/economics faculties?
- How is MC for different stakeholders measured?
- How is the marketing communication process of a university/faculty controlled?
- What are the biggest problems you have to deal with in terms of MC?
- What new trends in MC should higher education institutions follow?
- Do you think there is a need to implement more market orientation tools in order to enhance MC of higher education?

In the last step the main research phase was conducted. The individual interview method was used. 20 people responsible for marketing communications activities at universities or economics faculties from eight different universities were questioned by using the above mentioned set of questions. The results were recorded using transcript technique and sound recording device. The results of the research are worked out in tabular and schematic forms.

4 Results of individual interviews

Question No.1: What are the main marketing communication targets of higher education? The table 1 contains the targets that respondents consider to be relevant for marketing communication.

Question No. 2: How is the process of marketing communication planned and for what time horizon?

University

From the results of the qualitative research it is possible to say that the most beneficial tool for the planning of all university activities is the same: a long-term strategy. The long-term general strategy is the material that includes the basic aims of the university/department and ways to achieve them. This document is in the planning for 5 years. And the rector, deans, financial directors and other managerial staff are involved in this procedure.

The next step is the creation of the marketing strategy document on the basis of the long-term general strategy. However, it is important to point out that only a few universities then work out this document. This material is very fruitful because of the superior specification and clarification of all marketing activities. Faculties usually adjust their long-term general strategy according to the strategy of their parent university and similarly they create their own marketing strategy.

Where a marketing strategy is produced, short-term plans are normally set for 1 year and are in harmony with the marketing communication strategy. Universities and faculties usually set these plans for the same year and after that these arrangements are adjusted for the academic year. This planning has a more tactical character whereby individual marketing communication activities with important details are listed.

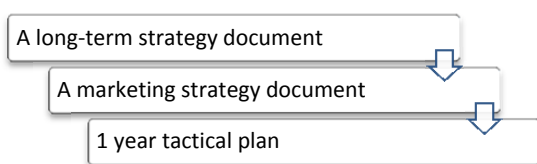
Economics Faculty

The plans of economics faculties are also derived from the long-term intention document of the university. These departments in general also plan their marketing activities for 1 year. However the answers of respondents showed that these plans contain only the main activities and are also more or less intuitive.

Table 1 Targets of universities and faculties in marketing communications

Kind of Stakeholders	The kind of targets		
	Science	Education	Others
Company	- Fundraising - Participation in research projects - Strengthening cooperation with commercial sector - selling vouchers	- Using experts from commercial sector for educational purposes (lectures, tutorials, seminars)	- Creating a stable list of companies on the base of long term partnership
Alumni	- Gaining money from sponsors - Participation in research projects	- Using selected alumni (specialist) for educational purpose (lectures, tutorials, seminars)	- Setting a long term collaboration with alumni
Current students - Czech - Foreign	- Informing, communicating and a supporting: - Participation in research projects - Participation in practical problem solving for commercial sector	- Informing, communicating and a support in order to: - provide high quality education - enable students to study abroad - provide students with the latest information - enable students to use the hi-tech devices	- Preparation of educational, practical and entertaining events for students
Academic Staff	- Supporting a research result promotion	- Highlighting the successes in educational sphere	- Smooth internal communication - Clear determination of competences
Prospective students	- Informing about possible scientific projects, - Participation in practical problem solving for commercial sector	- Providing complete information about the possibilities of study	- Attracting prospective students interested in quality
Media	- Long-term cooperation with selected media in order to increase image and raise awareness of university/faculty. - Informing other stakeholders about scientific successes via media	- Long-term cooperation with selected media in order to increase image and raise awareness of university/faculty - Informing other stakeholders about successes in education via media.	- Long-term cooperation with selected media in order to increase image and raise awareness of university/faculty.
Other universities - Czech - Foreign	- Monitor their marketing communications strategies from the perspective of competition. - Cooperation with other universities/faculties on scientific projects.	- Monitor their marketing communications strategies as these universities from the perspective of competition. - Cooperation with other universities/faculties on educational projects.	- Student and lecturers exchanges

Source: own research

Figure 1 University/faculty planning process

Source: own research

Question No. 3: What stakeholders are important for university/economics faculty?

This question produced the following scheme of stakeholders:

- Company;
- Alumni;
- Academic, Administrative and Technical staff;
 - Current Student;
 - Czech Students;
 - Foreign Students;
 - Prospective Students;
- Media;
- Public;
 - Professional public;
 - Other Public;
- Public Sector Institutions;
 - Other Universities;
 - Czech Universities;
 - Foreign Universities.

However, some universities and their faculties focused only on some of them. Prospective students (applicants) are then seen as the most important group.

Question No. 4: How is MC for different stakeholders measured? The table below contains the main stakeholders and the possibilities of how it is possible to measure MC activities with them according to the respondents' answers.

Table 2 Measuring tools for different stakeholders of university/faculty

Kind of Stakeholder	How
Applicant for studies	The number of application forms
Private companies	The number of sold vouchers, sponsorship - amount of gained money
Alumni	The number of alumni interested in university/faculty activities
General Public	The number of articles about university (faculty) successes and research results
Current students	Questionnaire - University quality service (satisfaction)
Academic and non academic staff	Questionnaire - University quality service (satisfaction)
Foreign students	Questionnaire - University quality service (satisfaction)
Other universities	Number of Projects

Source: own research

Question No. 5: How is the marketing communication process of a university/faculty controlled?

The research revealed that universities/faculties control selected activities rather than operate a complex marketing communication system. They accepted that control of MC is inadequate and listed mainly following reasons:

- a lack of human resources;
- a lack of financial resources;
- time-consuming process;
- problematic quantification of MC objectives.

Some respondents emphasised that it is difficult to control individual MC activities, let alone create and operate a complex control system.

Question No. 6: What are the biggest problems you have to deal with in terms of marketing communication?

The respondents mentioned the following issues:

- Academic staff is not willing to participate in marketing communications project of university/faculty.
- The lack of professionalism – professional specialists from the private sector should be more involved in the marketing communications of universities and faculties.
- Unclear distribution and determination of competences.
- Bad communication between a head office and faculties.
- A lot of activities are done intuitively without any planning or the use of any rules.
- Students who participate in the marketing communications of universities/faculties are not well-trained for these activities and cause many ambiguities, duplications and in some cases even do more harm than good to the representation of their institutions.

Question no. 7: What new trends in MC should higher education institutions follow?

Respondents see the future of MC in higher education mainly in these points:

- Implementation of market orientation tools - universities/faculties should observe, select and implement appropriate MC tools as used in the private sector.
- Integrated marketing communications - universities/faculties should develop a complex integrated system of MC
- Using new forms of marketing communications such as social networks (Twitter, Facebook, Second Life) or internet video applications (Youtube).

Question No. 8: Do you think there is the need to implement more market-orientated tools in order to enhance MC of higher education?

In general, respondents think that it is useful to use more marketing communications tools from the private sector. However, they emphasise the unique position of universities as an institution whose mission is to educate and research. They point out that it is not desirable to commercialise the higher educational sector.

5 Discussion

In general, there are differences in quality among universities concerning their marketing communication control and planning functions in the Czech Republic. In the case of planning functions, a few higher educational institutions have a fairly sophisticated concept of MC planning. On the other hand, some universities and economics faculties do not have their own marketing strategies, which also have negative impact on the quality of MC because without this material these institutions are not able to attain greater specification and clarification of all marketing activities. Also Trim (2003) confirms that the marketing strategy approach allows management in educational institutions to implement an effective tools which meet students expectations.

Even if applicants and students play a key role for institutional planners in higher education, universities and their faculties have a broader portfolio of stakeholders and it is necessary to develop complex marketing communications with all of them. Only this approach can ensure a long-term prosperity and define a successful brand as for instance Chapleo (2010) states good relationship with the media is one of the main factors that positively influences image and brand of HE institutions.

There are specific aims for each stakeholder group and therefore some tertiary education institutions create strategic plans which enable them to specify more detailed ways how these objectives can be reached. A hugely important thing is also the type of bindings among different stakeholders. For instance, for students the key factors for education are cooperation with companies and teachers who provide specialised knowledge, Putnová, Rašticová, Černohorská and Chvátalová (2010). In this case, it is necessary that these three stakeholder groups and the cooperation among them include strategic planning.

The planning process is always connected with control. As mentioned above, the MC controlling system of higher education institutions is inadequate. Even though there is lack of financial, human and other resources it is important for universities and faculties to put greater emphasis on control processes. Since it is not possible to plan MC activities without good control as institution planners do not have the required feedback to improve planning processes. For example, it is not possible to prepare good educational programmes for students without finding out their expectations and requirements.

Measurement of aims plays a key role in a control process. For example, measuring students' satisfaction with a university's quality of service should be a necessary component of any control process. For this purpose, it is worth using, for instance, a laddering technique Voss, Gruber and Szmigin, (2007). Tertiary education institutions should create a good quality measuring system as an integral part of the control process

It is essential for the future development of marketing communication of universities and faculties that the largest problems facing this field are addressed. These include poor communication between a head office and faculties, a lack of marketing professionals, a bad training system of students participating in MC of HE institutions, unclear distribution and determination of competences, the reluctance of academic staff to participate in marketing communications project etc. A great deal of research should be done in this field with a view to implementing appropriate measures.

As the research was done at public universities within the Czech Republic, the results cannot be generalised to apply to private higher educational institutions. In terms of use within Europe, further research is recommended.

Marketing communication management plays a key role in relationships among universities and their stakeholders. The optimisation of control and planning processes in marketing communication management of higher educational institutions will improve the quality of this area.

6 Conclusion

Authors of the paper suggest, on the basis of the research results, that it is worthwhile for Czech universities and faculties to create their own marketing strategy document and implement it into the planning process. Universities/faculties know their stakeholders quite well, but they should focus more on all interests groups (complex approach) - not only on some of them. The portfolio for university stakeholders is specific and there are problems in strategic solutions – it is recommended

to identify appropriate marketing tools for each stakeholder to accomplish their individual aims and work out the marketing strategy more comprehensively. It is necessary to improve the MC controlling process - creation of a control system with an integrated measurement component seems to be the appropriate solution. Finally, integrated Marketing Communications, Social Networks and implementation of MC tools from the private sector is a future way for universities to improve their communications with stakeholders.

There are some limits of the research. The results are limited mainly due to the local nature of the research. Therefore further research will focus on the larger region of Central Europe to get international comparison. The authors are going to conduct research in the following countries – Austria, Germany, Slovakia and Poland. Moreover, authors would like to use the triangulation method in further research. This method will be based on the individual interviews, focus groups and questionnaire technique.

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