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Educational Institution's Image: A Case Study

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This article presents our findings about the factors influencing educational institution's image. Based on the literature review we composed a web questionnaire which was send to all current students at University of Maribor's Faculty of Organizational Studies. Based on our research results we found out that eight factors influence educational institution's image which have various amounts of influence on the educational institutions image. The factor with the most influence is the quality of professors and of their lectures and the second most important factor is the learning content. These two factors come before all of the others in the matter of influencing the educational institutions image. Our basic recommendation is to build on these factors starting with the most important ones first.

Keywords: education, image, University of Maribor, Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Slovenia

1 Introduction

The concept of brand image can be extended to the university or even faculty context. That is a relatively new area of interest, especially in Europe where the universities' environment is not as competitive as it is in North America. Nevertheless, the process of globalization affects universities across the globe, including Slovenian faculties. We can discuss several reasons why it is becoming increasingly important that universities have a distinct image in order to maintain their competitiveness. The advance in new information technology is one of the most important reasons. It has led to new teaching techniques (distance learning) and made possible greater mobility of professors and students among different countries and even continents. The result is greater competition among faculties in attracting students, recruiting teaching staff and finding additional sources of funding. In recent years many universities have increased investments in their brand image in order to maintain their competitiveness in the market.

In this study we look for factors that influence the educational institutions image and aim to determine the extent to which they influence they have on the educational institutions image and by that to give educational institutions the knowledge necessary to improve or build their image.

2 Literature review

When we take a look at some general literature about company image we can see that there is no generally accepted and simple definition about company image. In the literature we can also find some expressions like company reputation or company's identity (Barnett et al., 2006) that are sometimes used as synonyms for image, but other authors separate those expressions from image (Schwaiger, 2004).

There is no agreed definition and distinction between corporate image and corporate reputation (Rose and Thomsen, 2004), however there are some suggestions in the literature. Reputation is a kind of signal to a public about firm's products, strategies and vision comparing to competing companies (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990) and therefore it reflect organization's success in realizing the expectations of different stakeholders (Freeman, 1984).

Gray and Balmer (1998) defined corporate image as immediate picture that public have of an organization, while corporate reputation indicates a judgment about the organizational attributes. Corporate reputation typically evolves over time while image can be perceived more quickly through well established communication programs.

According to Chun (2005) there are three schools of thought related to the reputation paradigm: evaluative, impressional and relational. The main difference between in the perception about stakeholders – whether we are dealing with single or multiple stakeholder view. Evaluative school assesses reputation merely from its financial value, where the key audiences are stakeholders whose main interest is in financial attributes (shareholders). Impressional and relational schools are assessing reputation in terms of stakeholders' perception and not financial performance, where impressional is focusing mainly on employees and customers.

We have to distinguish between image and identity. Identity represents what an organization is in reality. Image on the other hand represents how an organization is perceived from its environment. Differences between what something really is and how it looks from the »outside« definitely exist. This does not apply only on schools, but also a lot broader. Corporate image can be projected by organizational communicative actions, and it also can be enhanced (or damaged) by external parties, particularly the media (Park and Rees, 2008).

The concept of organizational image shifts form and shape as often as an amoeba (Arpan et al., 2003). Most often it is used interchangeably with the term reputation. Most of the existing definitions consider image as a set of beliefs that is prone to a merely cognitive approach (Palacio, Meneses and Pérez, 2002). Besides these cognitive oriented definitions, recent studies consistently distinguish two sets of components of an image: rational (cognitive) and affective (emotional). The distinction between two components is important from the analysis perspective because they are considered as forerunners of the overall image of the organization. Researchers emphasize that they should not be approached as they are not interrelated. They agree that the cognitive component is an antecedent of the affective component and that the overall image of the organization is formed through its cognitive and affective components. It is more influenced by the affective component than by the cognitive one. Both components also influence the satisfaction of the stakeholders.

Brand image has a great importance not just in the context of companies but also in the non-profit field, such as universities. It is becoming increasingly important that universities have a distinct image in order to maintain their competitiveness in the market (Palacio, Meneses and Pérez, 2002). Public sector organizations are beginning to understand the importance of reputation, as many of its benefits are vital for their survival; a good organizational reputation among the stakeholders is understood as reputational capital (Luoma-aho, 2007).

The corporative image of an organization is a good predictor of the power of attraction can exert on its internal and external publics, both present and potential, of its influence on sales growth, as well as on improvement of satisfaction (Luque-Martínez and Del Barrio-García, 2008).

Oplatka argues in his paper that the concept of image is related to themes such as corporate personality, which refers to the organization culture, corporate identity, in turn referring to the overall activities characterizing the organization and corporate image, the others' perception of the organization, based on its personality and identity (Oplatka, 2002).

Image is the result of how the signals or massages emitted by organizations are interpreted overtime by stakeholders. With the other words, messages about the organization delivered by the media and other observers, such as family, friends, or employees of a firm, also factor into the images of organizations held by those who evaluate the organization (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990; Arpan et al., 2003).

Brown et al. (2006) in their study distinguishes between intended image and construed image. They suggest intended image as an appropriate term for reflecting management's view of how it wants an organization to be perceived by important others. Those associations that members (individuals outside the organization) believe they label as the organization's construed image (Brown et al., 2006).

Image is a multidimensional concept, based upon any of a variety factors, such as organizational size, profitability, extend of diversification, an individual's degree of familiarity with the organization, the perceived nature of community and employee relations, the extend of charitable contributions, perceived quality of products and services and advertising intensity (Arpan et al., 2003).

Most often organizational image has been defined in numerous ways: as a mere association based in an organization's name, as a psychological personality profile constructed by an individual regarding an organization, as an individual's current idiosyncratic representation of a particular organization including related attitudes, beliefs, and impressions about the organization and its behavior, as an individual's overall perception of an organization's products, services, management style, communication efforts and global activities and as a basic summary of attitudes toward and organization (Arpan et al., 2003).

Image is likely to vary; depending on the groups among the image is assessed (Arpan et al., 2003). Two components of image that are also distinguished are functional, related to tangible stimuli that can be easily measured, and the emotional, associated with psychological conditions that become apparent in feelings and attitudes (Palacio, Meneses and Pérez, 2002).

Arpan et al. (2003) analysis of the discussions reveals that the participants considered multiple factors when assessing a university image. These factors included name recognition, academics, social life, athletics, and to a lesser extent, the physical environment of the university. More specifically, the academics component of image reported to consist of the perceived worth of degree when entering the job market, characteristics of the student body, and degree-program characteristics. The study found that items that were included to provide an overall or global image rating for each university are general impression of the university, if it evaluated positively by most people, proposing a methodology by which to identify the dimensions.

A qualitative study identified university attributes that might determine enrolment fount several factors such as ranking of particular schools, family connections to the school, departments or majors, overall education quality, size of the university and its classes and the relative emphasis on sports. Additionally, several factors noted by other authors are among other are location of the university, appearance, scope of offerings, excellence of the faculty, extent of endowments, diversity of students, campus morale, service to the community, institution visibility, prestige, existence of family atmosphere, friendliness of students, extent of family-related values on university, interpersonal communication, news coverage… (Arpan et al., 2003).

Study of Kazoleas et al. (2001) found that image factors controlled by university itself (e.g. existence of particular programs, strength of academic programs, sports programs, libraries, and technical facilities) were stronger predictors of overall image ratings than demographic characteristics of respondents or environmental factors (e.g. location, expense, admission standards) and that personal experiences with the

university had a greater impact on overall image than did media exposure related to the university (Arpan et al., 2003).

Palacio, Meneses and Pérez (2002) explain the process of image forming by means of its different components, both in its cognitive and affective dimensions. They stress that the cognitive components of image significantly influences the affective component of image. Those components positively and significantly influence the overall image of the university. In their research they noticed that the "university orientation and preparation" is mainly characterized by factors related to university's orientation toward students, society and companies and by the preparation it provides for the students, and on the other hand the "reputation" of the university is explained by the variables regarding the prestige, reputation of the university and also by the facilities and range of courses. The result of their work verified that the overall university image is formed by cognitive and affective components, but it is more influenced by the affective component than by the cognitive (Palacio, Meneses and Pérez, 2002).

A cognitive psychological approach examining university image among two groups of evaluators and found that different groups used different criteria when rating universities (Arpan et al., 2003). Found to significantly predict the image among current university students were academic factors, athletic factors and the extent of news coverage of the university. On the other side found to significantly predict the image of the same university among adults, non-students was a combined factor including all university attributes (including academic and athletic), the extent of news coverage, the education level of respondents, and the respondents of sport fan ship (Arpan et al., 2003). Study of Arpan et al., (2003) also found that an adult, non-student population will use different criteria than a student population to arrive at image ratings for the same universities.

Several studies have analyzed university image from the viewpoints of students and external interest groups, whereas relatively few have concerned themselves with teaching staff (Luque-Martínez and Del Barrio-García, 2008). Oplatka argues that the programmes for excellent students are driving force behind the university image (Oplatka, 2002).

Helgesen and Nesset (2007) point out in their work that the students perceive the image of the university college and the image of the study program as two distinct concepts. The study's preferred model only indirectly relates the image of the study program to student loyalty (via the image of the university college) while student satisfaction and the image of the university college are directly related to student loyalty. Researchers claims that an organization has several images and the various images can be assumed to be positively related (Helgesen and Nesset, 2007) Image of the organization seems to be positively linked with image of the study program, student satisfaction and student loyalty. The students perceive image of a university college and image of a study program as being distinct concepts. Image of study program is only indirectly related to student loyalty (via image of a university college) while student satisfaction and image of university college are directly related to student loyalty (Helgesen and Nesset, 2007).

Bunzel (2007) in his analysis found that there has been little evidence to show that a university branding program really creates a change in perception or ranking of a university. Gordon and Berhow (2008) analyzed universities' websites and claims that the interactive potential of university websites provides new opportunities to build relationships with audience and explore if a correlation exists between the use of dialogic websites features and an institution's success.

3 About the University of Maribor's Faculty of Organizational Sciences

The Faculty of Organizational Sciences is a member of the University of Maribor and is located in Kranj, Slovenia. It has almost 50 years of tradition in the field of education and scientific research. Within the people-processes-information triad that forms the foundation of expert and managerial work in organizations - the Faculty has seen more than 15,000 of its students graduate.

The Faculty of Organizational Sciences covers the theory and practice of organizing business and work systems, information systems, human resource and educational systems. The faculty's educational activities take place within the pedagogic unit, which includes various chairs, the Information Technology Centre, the library and the INDOK centre. The scientific research activities are organized within the Institute for Organization and Management, the Research Centre and the individual laboratories. In addition, the Faculty also comprises the Centre for Education and Counseling and the Moderna organizacija publishing house. The Faculty publishes a scientific journal, as well as ten textbooks and professional books per year.

The Faculty has established connections with numerous institutes, faculties and universities around the world, to enable cooperation in terms of student exchange and research work; the cooperation of institutions in organization and participation in various conferences that the individual institutions cover; the exchange of study literature, etc.

4 Methodology

Research questions

Through the research, we wanted to know:

1. *Which factors influence educational institution's image?*
2. *How important is the influence of individual factors affecting "educational institution's image"?*

Instrument

We tested the validity of the model through a web questionnaire. The web survey was carried out in September 2009. We have sent the questionnaire to 5.229 current and former students at the University of Maribor's Faculty of Organizational Sciences of which emails were available in faculty's records and from which we have received 737 complete responses. The response rate was 14.09%. The relatively low response rate was because a lot of the students changed or do not use

any more the e-mail addresses which the faculty records hold so that we received a lot of "undelivered mail" replies.

The questionnaire comprised 33 questions relating to (1) data on the respondent (*sex, study method, study level*) and (2) elements that compose educational institution's image. The questionnaire was of the closed type. Respondents evaluated in questions 4 to 32 certain quality elements (shown in Table 1) of educational institution's image on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (very good).

Sample

For questions 4 to 33 (where we offered respondents a scale of answers from 1 to 10) we calculated Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The value calculated is 0.964, which indicates great reliability of measurement. With regard to the composition and characteristics of the sample, we believe that it is representative.

The sample consisted of 329 men and 408 women (N=737). 285 of the respondents were full-time students whereas 452 of them were part-time students. 588 of the respondents were undergraduate students and 149 were post-graduate students.

5 Results

All questions were referring to the elements that compose the image of University of Maribor's Faculty of Organizational Sciences and all evaluations were given on a scale from 1 (very bad) to 10 (very good). The students were asked to evaluate how they perceive:

4. *The complete graphical design of the faculty;*
5. *Faculties webpage;*
6. *Faculties location;*

Table 1: Frequency tables for the variables

	N=737		Mean	Median	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
	Valid	Missing					
4	737	0	7.4830	8	1.67626	2	10
5	737	0	7.0896	7	2.02232	1	10
6	737	0	8.2754	9	1.89933	1	10
7	737	0	6.9091	7	1.84704	1	10
8	737	0	6.2551	7	2.05033	1	10
9	737	0	6.1954	7	2.04828	1	10
10	737	0	6.5183	7	2.08188	1	10
11	737	0	8.1194	8	1.68170	1	10
12	737	0	7.5455	8	1.90919	1	10
13	737	0	6.9959	7	1.97160	1	10
14	737	0	6.5115	7	1.94634	1	10
15	737	0	6.5482	7	1.92401	1	10
16	737	0	6.3935	7	1.94974	1	10
17	737	0	6.1954	7	2.23481	1	10
18	737	0	5.6784	6	2.31394	1	10
19	737	0	6.2985	7	2.07480	1	10
20	737	0	5.8318	6	2.08160	1	10
21	737	0	7.0461	7	2.20746	1	10
22	737	0	6.8209	7	2.14500	1	10
23	737	0	6.3528	7	2.06559	1	10
24	737	0	6.2741	7	2.21736	1	10
25	737	0	6.0787	6	2.12562	1	10
26	737	0	7.2320	8	2.03479	1	10
27	737	0	6.5916	7	1.93160	1	10
28	737	0	6.5156	7	2.02836	1	10
29	737	0	6.5957	7	1.93070	1	10
30	737	0	7.1221	7	1.92700	1	10
31	737	0	5.6784	6	2.09126	1	10
32	737	0	6.2293	6	2.11819	1	10
33	737	0	7.4939	8	2.30023	1	10

7. *The study program's actuality;*
8. *Contents of the lectures;*
9. *The transfer of knowledge between professors and students;*
10. *The implementation of education;*
11. *Classroom equipment;*
12. *Library equipment and access to on-line materials;*
13. *Services for the students;*
14. *Student associations;*
15. *Research activity;*
16. *Contribution to the economic development of the faculties surroundings;*
17. *Connection to the companies;*
18. *Employability after graduation;*
19. *Integration into the international surroundings;*
20. *Connection to other domestic and foreign faculties;*
21. *Administrative services;*
22. *Accessibility and responsiveness of the professors;*
23. *Curriculum;*
24. *Usefulness of gained knowledge;*
25. *Adequacy of literature;*
26. *Accessibility of study related information;*
27. *Study demandingness;*
28. *Grading;*
29. *Quality of the professors;*
30. *Faculty image;*
31. *Student influence on management decisions;*
32. *Faculty management accessibility;*
33. *Student offices.*

The frequency tables for all of the variables that represent the elements that compose educational institution's image are presented in Table 1. Variables from one to three are gender, method of study and level of study.

We also investigated how gender, method of study and level of study influence the rating of the image of the faculty. The results are presented in Table 2 from which we can see that there is not much variation in the perceptions.

We calculated the Cronbach alpha coefficient. The value calculated is 0.964, which indicates great reliability of measurement. We further conducted a factor analysis. We used the following methods and parameters for the calculation:

- Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
- Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
- Suppression of small coefficients: Absolute value below: 0.6.
- Selection variable: "*Faculty image"*, Value of the selection variable: 8.

On the basis of this factor analysis we obtained eight new factors from 28 elements of image and the selection variable as seen in Table 3. The new variables (factors) are:

1. Factor 1: "*Integration into the environment*"
2. Factor 2: "*Management*"
3. Factor 3: "*Learning content*"
4. Factor 4: "*Administration*"
5. Factor 5: "*Quality of the professors and of their lectures*"
6. Factor 6: "*Material conditions*"
7. Factor 7: "*Grading*"
8. Factor 8: "*Graphical image*"

We have suppression the small coefficients with absolute values below 0.6. The variables that are not included in these eight factors are the following: "Faculties location", "Student associations", "Research activity", "Contribution to the economic development of the faculties surrounding", "Employability after graduation", "Accessibility and responsiveness of the professors", "Adequacy of literature", "Accessibility of study related information", "Study demandingness", "Quality of the professors".

We also conducted regression analysis, from which we found the influence of factors on the dependent variable (see Table 3 and Table 4). The dependent variable was the image of the faculty.

We found that the eight new variables can account for 66.4% of the variance of grades of the faculty. Within this influence, we used regression analysis to investigate the influence of individual factors on the grade at the exam.

Limitations and further recommendations

Our study is based on only one of the stakeholders – the students of the faculty. For further research we also suggest including other stakeholders, like the media, the alumni, the staff, other faculties, etc. In this study we tried to require data from a web based questionnaire from only one group of stakeholders for which we believe is the most important one. For further research we suggest also the use of qualitative research methods.

Table 2: "Faculty image" in regard to "Gender", "Method of study" and "Level of study"

	Gender		Method of study		Level of study	
	Male	**Female**	**Full-time**	**Part-time**	**Undergraduate**	**Postgraduate**
Valid	329	408	285	452	588	149
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	7.0395	7.1887	7.1123	7.1283	7.1293	7.0940
Median	7	8	7	7	7	8
Std. Deviation	1.99274	1.87212	1.87872	1.95887	1.85146	2.20669
Min	1	1	1	1	1	1
Max	10	10	10	10	10	10

Table 3: Rotated Component Matrix (a, b)

	Component							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
The complete graphical design of the faculty								.806
Faculties webpage								.707
Faculties location								
The study program's actuality			.635					
Contents of the lectures					.700			
The transfer of knowledge between professors and students					.816			
The implementation of education					.716			
Classroom equipment						.663		
Library equipment and access to on-line materials						.701		
Services for the students						.668		
Student associations								
Research activity								
Contribution to the economic development of the faculties surroundings								
Connection to the companies	.683							
Employability after graduation								
Integration into the international surroundings	.714							
Connection to other domestic and foreign faculties	.802							
Administrative services				.747				
Accessibility and responsiveness of the professors								
Curriculum			.668					
Usefulness of gained knowledge			.752					
Adequacy of literature								
Accessibility of study related information								
Study demandingness								
Grading							.673	
Quality of the professors								
Faculty image		.813						
Student influence on management decisions		.721						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.
a. Rotation converged in 10 iterations.
b. Only cases for which Faculty Image = 8 are used in the analysis phase.

Table 4: Model

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.815(a)	.664	.660	1.12386

a Predictors: (Constant), REGR factor score 8 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 4 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 1 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 7 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 3 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 2 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 6 for analysis 1, REGR factor score 5 for analysis 1

Table 5: Coefficients (a)

	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	7.668	0.045		171.826	.000
Factor 1: "Integration into the environment"	.308	.041	.172	7.549	.000
Factor 2: "Management"	.205	.045	.105	4.586	.000
Factor 3: "Learning content"	.364	.039	.229	9.290	.000
Factor 4: "Administration"	.223	.042	.121	5.359	.000
Factor 5: "Quality of the professors and of their lectures"	.497	.034	.378	14.571	.000
Factor 6: "Material conditions"	.190	.037	.118	5.069	.000
Factor 7: "Grading"	.351	.042	.197	8.405	.000
Factor 8: "Graphical image"	.127	.040	.071	3.159	.002

a Dependent Variable: Faculty image (1 to 10).

Factor 5: "*Quality of the professors and of their lectures*" has the most influence (β=0.378). It is followed by other factors which are listed by their importance: Factor 3 (β=0.229), Factor 7 (β=0.197), Factor 1 (β=0.172), Factor 4 (β=0.121), Factor 6 (β=0.118), Factor 2 (β=0.105) and Factor 8 (β=0.071). We have also found out that all eight factors are important with statistical significance levels below .005.

6 Conclusion

Many authors have studied image and its influence on corporations or other organizations. Based on the knowledge of the theories and results of our research we can answer which factors influence the "image of an educational institution". Through the empirical research presented, we wanted to investigate which are these factors and what is their actual importance for one group of the stakeholders – the students.

From our research and the data collected in our survey we have found out that eight factors influence educational institutions image. Through regression analysis we found that these eight factors can explain 66.4% of the variance of the dependent variable "the educational institutions image". This seems quite high to us.

Through regression analysis we also found that the Factor 5: "*Quality of the professors and of their lectures*" has the most influence (β=0.378) on the educational institutions image. This result seems realistic to us. Factor 3: "*Learning content*" (β=0.229) is the second factor regarding its influence on the educational institutions image.

Our recommendations for practice are for the faculties to build on the factors that are important to their students and for their image to achieve greater success and better image in the future.

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