

## Management of university competitiveness based on image creating research

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### Keywords

Higher education, competitiveness, value, image, image assessment indicators.

### Abstract

*The paper addresses the issue of image creating system for educational organizations. It emphasizes the need to apply more marketing tools in university management system to make it more flexible in adjusting to changes in the market economic situation and meeting clients' demands.*

*The paper puts forward a process-oriented axiological approach to the assessment and creation of image. This approach reveals the dynamic properties of image and the prerequisites for its quantitative measurements, detects and strengthens the competitive positions of any university at the region and country levels. A complex of systemic and structural approaches serve as a theoretical methodological base for the obtained results to assess the image creating processes and the impact of image on a university's competitive ability. A questionnaire survey was used in the empirical analysis of university students' values.*

*Within this research, image refers to a symbolic value-determined view of a university among the targeted social groups, clients, consumers of educational services. The research contributes to the expansion of the conceptual and categorical framework of imagology – the concepts, such as “image exploitation”, “image degradation”, “image inertia”, are formulated and justified. The process-oriented axiological approach helps to assess an image and a university's competitiveness on the grounds of value concept at all stages of study (applicant – bachelor, bachelor – master (specialist), master (specialist) – PhD student), helps to make informed decisions about funds allocation.*

*The necessity to evaluate the personal and public values of educational market participants is justified. The impact of each component of image on developing the perception of a university among consumers in the context of the dynamic environment of educational service market is specified. The tools for analysing the image development level and assessing its impact on a university's competitiveness are developed.*

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### 1. Introduction

Nowadays the competition among universities is getting more and more intense. Many Russian State Universities (especially in the regions) cannot manage to adapt to the new social economic environment and continue their educational, economic and informational activities established in the Soviet period, not taking into account the fact that the public “credit of trust” developed at that time is gradually diminishing. There is a need to apply more marketing tools in university management system to be more flexible in adjusting to the changes in the market economic situation and to meet the clients' demands. The image creating system, which does not actually exist in most Russian State Universities, is the most crucial part of market-oriented management. The functioning of the image creating system should result in a set of intangible assets which has long been used by commercial enterprises to achieve positive financial results. However, one should regard the specificity of the education sphere to preserve the balance between commercial and educational purposes, which is quite rare in the Russian practice. In the period of administrative-command system in the country, universities received state funding, and therefore, there was no need to develop a university's image;

in the context of market economy, the expansion of the educational space and the variety of the services, image becomes a competitive advantage of a university. Today, the leading Russian universities are only beginning to apply such new instruments of positioning and promoting as mobile and internet marketing as well as Social Media Marketing (SMM). For example, SMS-marketing is used in Saint Petersburg in the frameworks of the *Mobile Campus* project. In Moscow, online communications are coming into use through the modern interactive media technologies – universities' mobile social networks for students. The main promotional tool is still a website presenting information about programs and forms of studies. The *Study in Russia* website (<http://studyinrussia.ru/>) provides information about all Russian universities and allows foreign students to choose a university to their liking and the preferred mode of study. Yet, the quality of many Russian universities' websites does not meet the modern requirement to the structure and presentation of information, design, technical support, and the "digital representation" if universities in the information space does not perform an image-promoting function.

The lack of a coherent understanding of the axiological nature of image and its roles in marketing strategies can gradually result in the depreciation of a university's reputation and authority, can lead to financial problems, disruption of its sustainable development.

This issue should be further elaborated due to the following contradictions:

- Recognition of the lack of competitive struggle between universities in the educational services market vs. the lack of theoretical grounds for image development as a component of marketing strategy providing the competitive ability of a university in the modern market conditions;

- University administration awareness of the need to create and develop a corporate image vs. the lack of comprehensive expert approach to it.

These contradictions determine the problematic for the present research.

The theoretical and methodological aspects of image creation can be seen in different areas of social humanitarian and economic knowledge. The psychological and sociological approaches prepared the grounds for addressing the problem of image creation from the marketing point of view.

The theoretical and applied questions of corporate image creation were studied by Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2003), Andreasen and Kotler (2003), Balmer and Greyser (2006), Bodin (2001), Dowling (2001), Gee (1991), Helm (2011), Morgan (1998), Salnikova (2008), Sirotkina (2008), Wasib B Latif, Md. Aminul Islam, Idris Bin Mohd Noor, Syahira Bt. Saaban and Md. Rafique Azad (2014).

A number of researches are devoted to image creation for higher education and educational services (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006; Chapleo, 2004; Ivy, 2001; Ressler, 2015; Karpov, 2003; Landrum, Turrisi, & Harless, 1998; Lazarev & Mokhnachev, 2003; Moiseeva, Piskunova, & Kostina, 1999; Parameswaran & Glowacka, 1995; Piskunov, 1999; Reznik & Yudina, 2010; Steiner, Sundström, & Sammalisto, 2013). The use of internet technologies in promoting universities on the Russian educational services market has been studied by Makarets (2009), Neretina (2009) and others.

The analysis of these studies shows the lack of the tools for quantitatively analyzing the status of image and assessing its impact on a university's competitiveness. Today, the research works concerning the problem of competitiveness increase for universities on the basis of image design are rare and very often methodologically disconnected.

## 2. Research Model

All efforts aimed to increase a university's competitiveness are accumulated in its image, each effort contributing to strengthening the image. In the frameworks of this research, image is understood as a symbolic value-determined perception of a university among the targeted social groups, consumers of educational services. If there is a negative component in this perception, it becomes a decisive factor for an applicant, employer or the government, and the image is difficult to

change. All image components can be divided into tangible, dependent on resources (rooms, computers, laboratory equipment, information technologies, etc.) and intangible (spiritual) ones connected with the university's consumer satisfaction (service quality, recognition of students' contribution, ethics in the university's personnel behavior, prestige of studying in this university, etc.).

A university's image has economic relevance, as well as its competitive ability. With the increase of a university's competitiveness, its image becomes more powerful. But it can be quite the opposite. A university's competitive ability stays on the same level even if its positive image was developed in economically more successful times. The consumers, with fragmented knowledge about the inner environment of the organization, still prefer the product of this university. In this case, we may speak about a false university image, which becomes a "safety buffer" for the organization, although it does not show the true situation. Even if the university's administration does nothing to improve the image, the organization can achieve its educational targets by "exploiting" the developed positive image. There is a lag in the mutual influence of image and competitive ability, that is, the changes in the image do not instantly affect the competitiveness of an organization. Here we may speak about the "inertia" of image. Such condition can be determined by two factors which tempt the administration to "exploit" the image. First of all, the elements of the spiritual organizational culture acquired by the personnel and comprising an image are stored in the consciousness for a long time. The second factor is the lack of purposeful comprehensive communications with the external environment. For how many years can a developed image be "exploited" by a university management? In the context of fierce competition (energetic competitors gather the internal information about a university and try to reveal the false image for the applicants and students), this period is about 4 years, while with no severe competition it extends to 15-20 years.

The difference between the true and false images is the gap that should be covered since the lag cannot last forever. The failure to deal with the image lag results in its degradation, i. e., the decrease in its attractiveness, value and prestige. Image degradation can be defined as a number of negative elements in the overall set of elements comprising a university's image. The degradation can be false since the perception of particular image elements as negative can be historically developed, although today these elements have become positive, but the university's administration cannot get this information across to the consumer. One needs time to improve the degraded image since image is inert. For example, if a negative image has been historically developed, it will require on average 20 years (time between two generations) to be changed. If a positive image has been historically developed, it needs significantly less time and resources, for example, 4 years on average, that is, the time necessary to attain a bachelor degree. The time taken to improve an image is averaged since it is necessary to consider the depth of its element or elements degradation and their different importance in the set of elements comprising a particular representation of a university. To be changed, one element requires the organization of long-term measures, while others are aimed at a short-term period. It may be possible to design a program to improve an image with long-term and short-term measures.

The task for a university's administration is to reduce the gap between the true image and the false image. Along with that, one may point out the existence of internal and external gaps. An internal gap occurs when consumers do not have the whole information about the image. An external gap means that the employees and students do not have a full understanding of their university. Here it should be noted that one may have false understanding of both the positive and negative image. The false perception of a negative image gives the administration some time to take particular measures aimed at eliminating the drawbacks in the organization's work and at improving its competitiveness and, as a result, changing its image. The false understanding of a positive image occurs when the administration does not inform the employees and students about all the changes in

the organization and does not deal with the external environment. The image being false or true can be assessed as follows. First, it is necessary to know the number of elements included in the image. This helps to have a quantitative image assessment. Second, one should carry out a questionnaire survey for each element and identify the ratio of the respondents being aware of the situation in the organization and those unaware of it. The respondents are then divided into the following groups:

- 1) Being aware about the true situation (positive image) for a particular element;
- 2) Being aware about the true situation (negative image) for a particular element;
- 3) Being unaware about the true situation for a particular element but being neutral to it since this element does not have any importance for them;
- 4) Being unaware about the true situation (image improved) for a particular element, but thinking that everything remains the same, nothing has changed for the better;
- 5) Being unaware about the true situation (image degraded) for a particular element, but thinking that everything has changed for the better.

The respondents from groups 4 and 5 contribute to the development of a false image. When the respondents belong to groups 1 and 2, the true image is created: negative or positive. In case of group 2, the university administration must change the situation for particular elements, while in the third, fourth and fifth groups it is necessary to remove the gap between the true and false image. It is known from the behavioral marketing that image motivates consumers. Therefore, it is necessary to enrich the image with the perceptions (elements) which motivate people to study at this particular university.

This classification of respondents has led us to the idea of a university education value that is realized in the competitiveness factors which satisfy the needs and meet the expectations of applicants, employers and the government. Through analyzing the value orientations of applicants and their families with regard to education, the Department of University Strategic Development Planning should strive to provide all elements in the image which meet the expectations of the majority of consumers of educational services. We believe that the values are some ideal goals which should be striven for. They serve as the elements of motivation, facilitate decision-making, regulate and direct people's behavior (including consumer and labor behavior), that is, they are implemented in their value orientations.

The concept of "education value" has three "layers": value from the state perspective, value from the labor market perspective, and value from the student's perspective. All three components are interconnected into an integrated education value.

The state and public-market value of education have public importance. The personal value is the core of the integrated value of education.

A university should be consumer-oriented as it positions itself in the economic and social space as a competitive organization providing educational services of high quality. The key consumer of educational services is the applicant who defines the competitiveness of a university being influenced by different information sources (first of all, parents, friends, mass media, school) and having his/her own understanding of the value of education obtained in this or that university.

Nowadays, the educational process and the strategies of university cooperation with its students give priority to the personal value of education. Therefore, it is necessary to identify the place of personal and public-market value of education as the unrecognized factors when assessing the university competitiveness in the research.

Being competitive in the market, an educational institution makes an offer different from the other ones based on its superiority in some elements of value. The consumers may understand the value differently. When positioning these or those advantages which a graduate will obtain during his/her studies, it is necessary to focus on the personal value (material, social, spiritual, symbolic) of the educational service, which is one of the factors affecting the image and the competitive ability of

the university

Previous research (Amirkhanova & Kharisova, 2013) offered a process-oriented approach, which extended the structure of the factors determining a university's competitive ability, thus giving a more objective assessment. This approach considers the university educational process as a structure comprising three consequent and interconnected levels: applicant – bachelor, bachelor – master (specialist) and master (specialist) – PhD student. This system presupposes feedback at the exit from each subsystem to its entry.

It is necessary to specify this approach focusing on its value component. The personal value of education and the quality of education are the factors determining the feedback and thus improving the integrity and continuity of the education system. These factors are developed at each level of the learning process. This approach unites a university's image with each level of education, that is, each education level has its own competitive ability and image. It can often be heard that a certain university is a good base to obtain a bachelor degree, while its master's courses are of low quality. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen both the image at each level and the general image of the university.

A university is considered competitive if it provides further significant benefits – material, social and spiritual-symbolic advantages. In their choice of university for bachelor, master or PhD course, an applicant expects to obtain the education of such quality that can further give them a highly-paid and prestigious job. The 2015 survey carried out by the authors among 400 senior students of Ufa State Aviation Technical University shows that this is the dominating reason. And this increases the education value from the public point of view (the applicants themselves, employers). The employers, in their turn, hire the graduates of the universities providing the education of high quality, thus contributing the appropriate competences to the improvement of the economic and innovative results of the company. Hence, from the state perspective, the value of the higher education is more important if the investment into the education brings about the increase in production volume and taxation profit which is later partially redistributed to education.

A positive image provides profit and success for an enterprise. The increase of a university's competitiveness results in its image strengthening and, therefore, in the growth of its monetary assets. The growth of monetary assets can be defined through the growth of the market share occupied by this university. With the cost of a market share unit, one can find the value of monetary asset growth, which indicates the connection between the image and competitiveness.

The dynamics of competitiveness and its growth rate are connected with the rate of image changes. There is a connection between a university's image and its competitiveness, which is prolonged and formed by performance practice and everyday communications shaping the university's culture during a long period of time.

The image is the result of the administration's work with the internal and external environment of the organization. It reflects the presence of the organization's culture norms supported by the social ethics, the resources quality and the opportunities to satisfy consumers' educational needs which motivate people to have a long-term cooperation with the university.

### 3. Methods

A complex of systemic and structural approaches serves as a theoretical and methodological base for this research aimed at assessing the image creating processes and the image impact on a university's competitive ability. The research is supported by the modern applied inventions devoted to the identification of a university image structure and image development.

The gaps in image development are found with the help of a systemic historical approach and analytical processing of respondent survey results and observations. The historical approach is also applied to reveal the degradation and exploitation of image. The research is based on the objectivity principle with the coherent account of the factors underlying the analyzed social

economic phenomenon. It helps to avoid a biased approach in the assessment of the nature, parameters and the level of image development. A questionnaire survey was used in the empirical analysis of university students' values, the sample including 400 respondents. The authors studied value orientations of bachelor students in their 3rd or 4th year and first year master's students of Ufa State Aviation Technical University. Stratified probability sampling was used. The stratification was performed according to gender, age, socio-economic background, regional background (city or rural area). All respondents were citizens of the Russian Federation.

#### 4. Results

An image is the result of work aimed at increasing a university's competitive ability. As education system is multi-leveled, it is proposed that the process-oriented axiological approach is used to analyze a university's competitiveness. This approach is helpful in developing and strengthening the general image through its elaboration at all stages of the service provision.

The process-oriented axiological approach helps to assess and to study the image and any university's competitiveness on the ground of the value concept at all stages of study (applicant – bachelor, bachelor – master (specialist), master (specialist) – PhD student), helps to make informed decisions about investment in problem areas.

In the context of market conditions, a university's competitiveness is supposed (Amirkhanova & Kharisova, 2013) to be assessed through an indicator  $K_i$  defined as a share it occupies in the market of educational services (Formula (5)):

$$K_i = \frac{N_i}{N_{oi}} \cdot 100\%, \quad (5)$$

where  $K_i$  is the indicator of a university's competitiveness at the applicants' level (bachelors, masters);  $N_i$  is the number of applicants enrolled at this university;  $N_{oi}$  is the overall number of applicants in the country (region, city);  $i$  is the number of preparation level ( $i = 1, 2, 3$ ). Image is proposed to be assessed by experts' opinion with Formula (6):

$$\dot{E}_i = \sum_{l=1}^m \beta_l u_l, \quad (6)$$

where  $\dot{E}_i$  is the image assessment indicator of the  $i^{th}$  education level;  $u_l$  is the score of the  $l^{th}$  element of image (can take negative values);  $\beta_l$  is the weight of the  $l^{th}$  element of image. Here  $\sum_{l=1}^m \beta_l = 1$ .

It is necessary to start the research of a university's image  $K_i$  and competitiveness  $\dot{E}_1$  with the first stage of the education process, when an applicant is enrolled at this educational institution and has his/her own understanding of the educational value of this very university. If the educational value of the university is still high for a graduate with a bachelor's degree, he/she makes a decision to enter the next level (master's course) of the same university. Then  $K_1 \leq K_2$ ,  $\dot{E}_1 \leq \dot{E}_2$ .

When the needs of a graduate with a master's degree are satisfied at the second level of studies and the value of the knowledge obtained in this university is still high, he/she makes a decision to enter the PhD course at the same university. In this case, the level of the university's competitive ability on the master's level remains the same or rises in comparison with the bachelor's level competitiveness of the same university, that is  $K_2 \leq K_3$ ,  $\dot{E}_2 \leq \dot{E}_3$ .

Other combinations of competitiveness and image are possible as well. Let us illustrate one

more of these combinations. If the competitiveness of the first education level  $K_1$  and image assessment  $\dot{E}_1$  are higher than the indicators of the second level  $K_2$ , and assessment  $\dot{E}_2$ , and indicators  $K_2$  and  $\dot{E}_2$  are higher than  $K_3$  and  $\dot{E}_3$  of the third level, we can arrive at a conclusion about the decrease in competitiveness and degradation of the general university's image. In this case, it is necessary to study the factors of model (5) and its elements (6) with further development of measures aimed at improving the competitiveness and strengthening the image.

The combinations given above illustrate the presence of true values of image indicators, which make the competitiveness of educational institution easy to manage. With false image assessments the management of competitiveness of an educational institution will be accompanied with higher spending of financial resources and time.

Thus, the university competitiveness management should be based on the results of a process-oriented assessment of its image with due regard to the axiological approach, which identifies the personal and public values of the educational market participants.

## 5. Discussion

The increase of university competitiveness is becoming an important issue in contemporary Russia. The solution of this task positively impacts the quality of the human capital. However, the uncertainty in the interaction between separate tasks of competitiveness provision and a university's image improvement, the lack of coherent terminology and of assessment parameters system become a barrier in developing a comprehensive approach to increasing competitive ability of the higher education system.

The question about the design of model (6) still remains a discussable one. Along with that, its elements can influence each other improving or possibly degrading the image on the whole. Also, the connection between a university's competitiveness and its image is not sufficiently identified. This can be considered a task for further research in this field. Further research can also address the important issues of the study modes influence on university image, the comparative analysis of the sources and ways of image formation. The research was limited by time and financial resources as well as the lack of exchange practice of databases, research and methodology results among competing universities.

## 6. Conclusion

Our study expands the methodological basis for university image assessment and develops the theory based on the process-oriented value-conscious approach, which helps to reveal the dynamic properties of image and the conditions for its quantitative measurement. An image is shown to be able to trigger a particular set of motives for different public groups towards a university.

The conceptual and categorical framework of imagology is also expanded, the concepts, such as "image exploitation", "image degradation", "image inertia", developed and justified. The contribution to the marketing and imagology theory development in the higher education is made by identifying the prolonged connection between a university's image and its competitiveness.

The research states the fact that the value of education has a multi-layered structure including state, public-market and personal values. The center of the integrated value of education in the personal value.

The image structure and role in the system of marketing strategies aimed at strengthening a university's competitive position are shown; the practical tools are developed to carry out the quantity-based research of image awareness and the assessment of its impact on a university's competitive ability.

**Conflict of Interest**

The authors claim that the information contained herein does not pose any conflict of interests.

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