

PREMISES AND POSSIBILITIES OF APPLYING EDUCATIONAL MARKETING IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THE IMAGE OF THE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *The results of the investigations with reference to the existing situation in higher education in the Republic of Moldova, in terms of educational demand and supply, highlighted the fact that universities are exposed to an increasing competition both nationally and internationally, and the implementation of Educational marketing is in its infancy. In this context, the paper argues the necessity to apply an educational marketing aimed to increase the attractiveness and strengthening the perceived image of universities among applicants, to take into account both institutional factors (reputation of the university, location, study programs, facilities offered, tuition fees, employment opportunities, availability of scholarships, quality of teaching and scientific staff, etc.), as well as marketing / communication (quality of advertising, campus visits, career fairs, credibility and originality of information provided by institutional representatives who visits high schools, etc.), the emphasis being on the application of differentiated marketing strategies, which ensure a distinct approach for different categories of students, along with knowledge of the factors influencing the choice and possible motivations for potential students.*

Key words: educational marketing, education, higher education, university, competitiveness

JEL CLASSIFICATION: I 23

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a constantly changing world, with a very fierce competitive environment. Unprecedented events are happening, the situation is changing at a rapid pace. One of the characteristics of the modern world is considered to be globalization. At the same time, whether large or small, strong or weak, countries are equal to the challenges posed by globalization, and competition between states means competition between their laws, administrative procedures, tax, monetary, financial, trade, environmental, judicial, and *educational*.

Education is essential for any economy, because, on the one hand, through education the relations between people and society becomes much more diverse and, on the other hand, the current society, constantly changing, globalized, based on knowledge and information, needs a well-educated workforce. In the knowledge society, educated people become the primary capital that contributes to the formation of national wealth.

Taking into account current social and economic developments, universities are becoming increasingly aware of their responsibility in training specialists in all areas of activity, therefore, attracting and retaining students must become the main purpose of university marketing activities. Higher education faces the challenge of finding ways and solutions to survive in a competitive market that is going through a revolution of knowledge and information, and university marketing has a special significance for ensuring the survival of universities in a competitive environment. The analysis of approaches, existing interpretations and references allows the definition of educational marketing as a new conception regarding the organization and functioning of the educational system, educational units and the development of educational activities, as an expression of prospecting and improving the means by which education can use its possibilities to influence the development of society and the individual (Bulat, G. 2012).

Being exposed to a growing competition both nationally and globally, higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova are facing increasing difficulties in attracting and retaining students. This state of affairs is determined, for the most part, by factors, such as: demographic decline, massive migration of the young population, etc. At the same time, the reduction of the demand for higher education services occurred in the conditions in which the number of bidders on the national market decreased insignificantly, and the access to the services of the universities on the international market becomes easier and easier.

2. EVOLUTIONS AND TRENDS SPECIFIC TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Among the main challenges faced by higher education in the Republic of Moldova are (Belostecinic Gr., Serotila I., Duca M., 2021):

1. Low degree of autonomy of higher education institutions.
2. Low academic mobility of students, teachers and researchers.
3. The relatively small share of graduates who fall into employment according to the qualifications obtained.
4. The inefficiency of the mechanism of interaction of higher education institutions with the research-development sphere and the business environment.
5. In the opinion of potential employers, there are discrepancies between the level of qualification and the skills acquired in educational institutions and the requirements of the labor market. At the same time, the economic agents are not opened enough for collaboration with the academic environment, including in issues related to the content and quality of studies.
6. Insufficient participation of universities in International Projects and Programs.
7. Considerable decrease in the presence of the research component in universities, low involvement of teachers in the scientific research process;
8. Low status of researchers in higher education.
9. Reduced responsibility of students towards learning outcomes.
10. Insufficient funding of higher education.
11. Considerable reduction, in recent years, of the number of students studying in our universities.

The last challenge in the list above deserves a special attention, as over in the last 14 years the number of students in universities from the Republic of Moldova has been reduced, from about 128 thousand to about 59 thousand students (Figure 1), registering an increase of 37.5% of students studying part-time. And this trend will continue in the future.

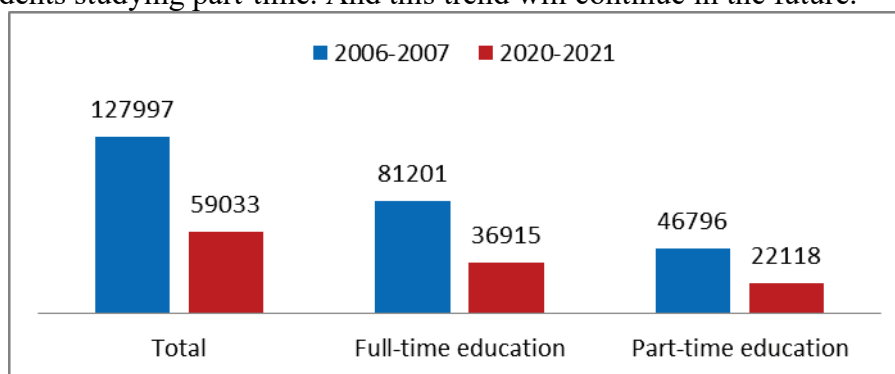


Figure 1. The number of students in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova in 2020-2021 compared to 2006-2007

Source: <https://statistica.gov.md/>

In the academic year 2020 - 2021, the higher education system in the Republic of Moldova consisted of 26 universities, 16 public (state) and 8 private, compared to 2006-2007 when the number of higher education institutions was 31.

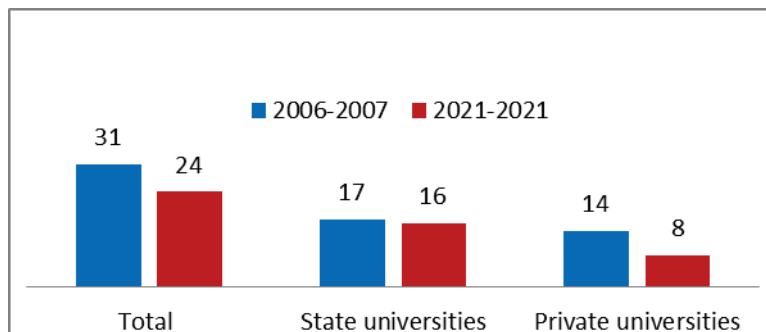


Figure 2. Number of higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova in 2020-2021 compared to 2006-2007

Source: <https://statistica.gov.md/>

In the academic year 2020-2021, in the 26 universities, was studying only 59,033, the majority of them (84%), was studying in public universities, keeping approximately the same ratio (16-17%) as in 2006-2007 academic year (Figure 3 and Figure 4).

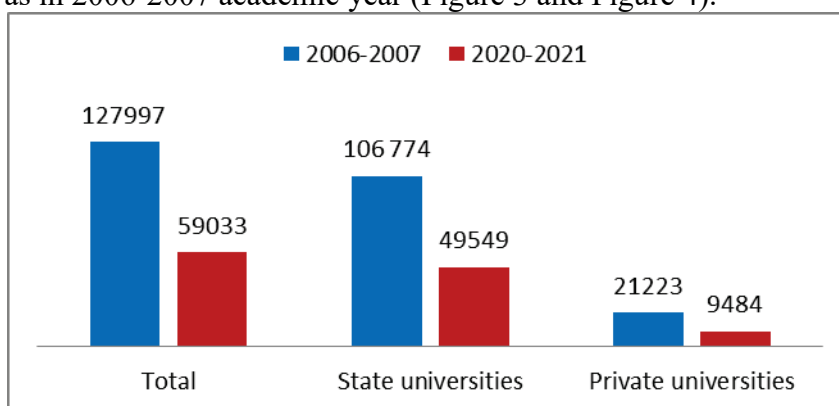


Figure 3: Number of students in higher education in the academic year 2020-2021 compared to 2006-2007, by type of institutions

Source: <https://statistica.gov.md/>

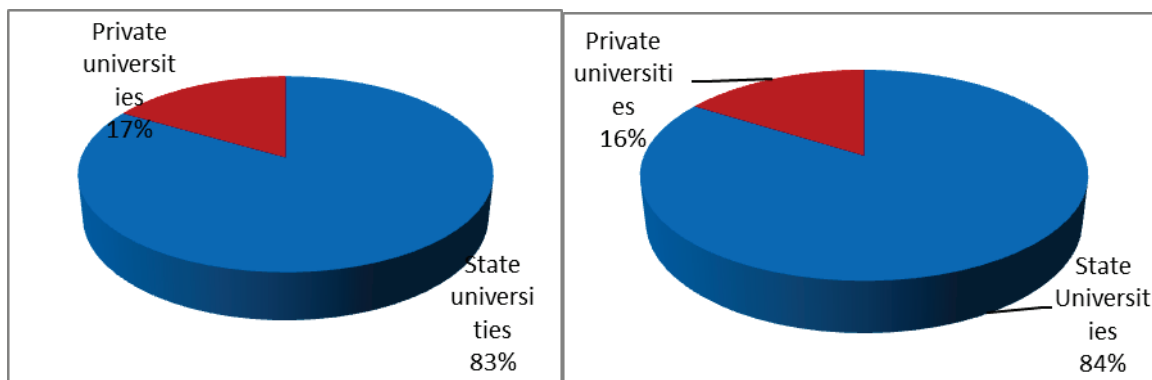


Figure 4: The share of students in higher education in the academic year 2020-2021 compared to 2006-2007, by type of institutions

Source: <https://statistica.gov.md/>

At the same time, there is an increase of the number of students studying in public institutions with budget funding, from 25% in 2006-2007 (Figure 5) to 44% in 2020-2021 (Figure 6), which makes it difficult to opt for specialties required on the labor market.

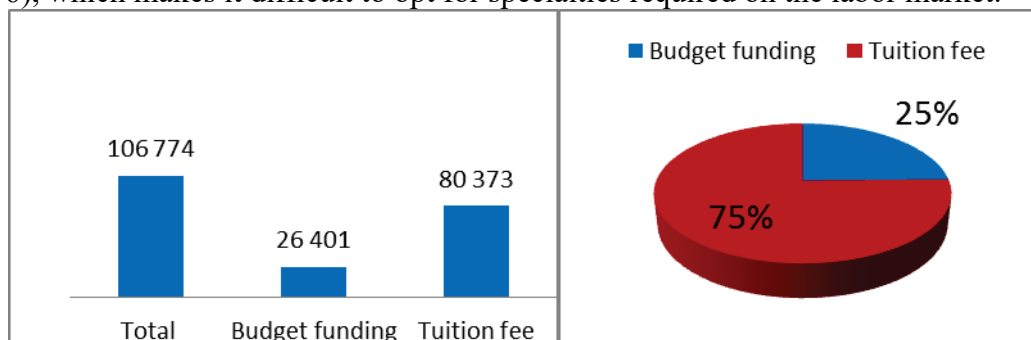


Figure 5. Number and share of students in state higher education, by the type of financing in the academic year 2006-2007

Source: <https://statistica.gov.md/>

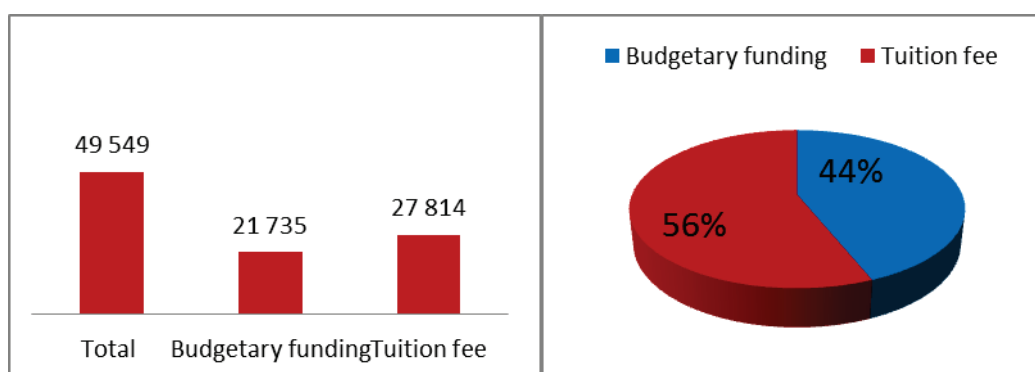


Figure 6. Number and share of students in state higher education, by the type of financing in the academic year 2020-2021

Source: <https://statistica.gov.md/>

There was also a significant decrease in the number of students in higher education areas. We can see a considerable reduction in the number of students at the specialties in the field of "Economic Sciences" (Figure 7), from 35,240 in 2006-2007, to 12,320 in 2020-2021, which is 35% from the total number of students in 2006-2007 and means a loss of image and attractiveness for study programs in the field of "Economic Sciences".

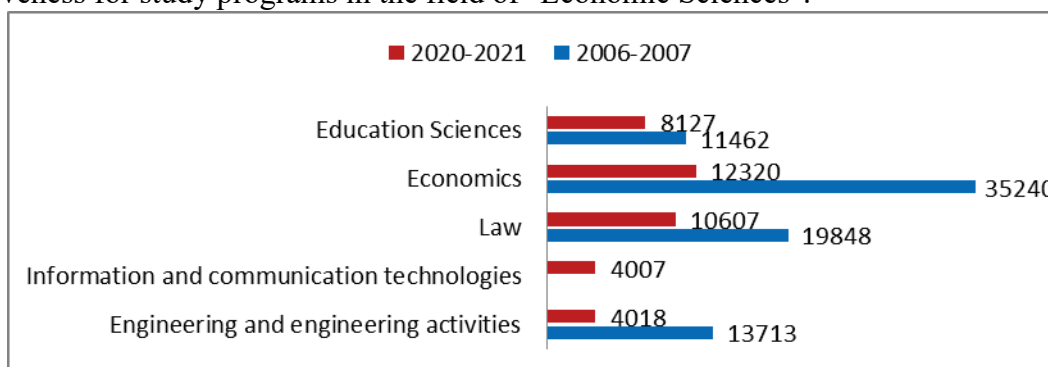


Figure 7. Number of students by general fields of study (Bachelor + Master)

Source: <https://statistica.gov.md/>

3. MARKETING AS A PREMISE FOR IMPROVING THE IMAGE OF THE UNIVERSITY ON THE EDUCATIONAL MARKET

The intensification of competition on national and international market of higher education services highlights the importance of applying a new way of thinking and designing the activity of higher education institutions focused on the principles of the modern marketing concept, and the application of effective educational marketing strategies to attract and retain students, imposes the need to study the behavior of the consumer of educational services and, in particular, the way the future student makes the purchase decision and what are the determinants of choosing the university. At the same time, the emphasis on marketing must shift from supply to demand and from product-centered to consumer-centered. As a result, the student must be treated as a consumer, education as a service, and the educational institution - service provider in a competitive market (Reynolds C., 1998).

It should also be mentioned that university marketing increasingly requires a more comprehensive and coherent approach. In this order of ideas, it's important a distinct approach in the university marketing activity for different categories of applicants for studies is of interest, along with knowledge of the factors influencing the choice and possible motivations for potential students. Among the possible criteria for segmenting the market of services provided by higher education institutions can be considered the required level of education (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate), the level of training in pre-university education (high school graduates, graduates of vocational and technical education institutions such as college, bachelor's or master's degree graduates), motivation (desire to obtain higher education in a specific field, desire to obtain higher education in general, employed people who want retraining, improvement or advancement in the job) country of origin (applicants for studies citizens of the Republic of Moldova, applicants for studies abroad), other criteria that can be identified. The application of differentiated marketing strategies will allow the university management to adapt the recruitment strategies and other marketing activities in order to increase the chances of the educational institution to be selected.

It should also be mentioned that the results of recent research have highlighted a number of elements associated with university marketing, such as advertising, media with an impact on the buying behavior of potential students. In this context, the model of an educational marketing oriented towards increasing the attractiveness of the university for different categories of applicants for higher education must take into account both institutional factors (university reputation, location, study programs, facilities offered, tuition fees, employment opportunities, employment, availability of scholarships, quality of teaching and scientific staff, etc.), as well as marketing / communication factors (quality of advertising, campus visits, career fairs, credibility and originality of information provided by institutional representatives visiting high schools, etc.).

Based on the information on the website of several universities from the Republic of Moldova, it allows to find that only a small number of universities from our country has a Marketing department, in the context when are currently required radical changes and improvements in the higher education system and there is a need to develop effective marketing strategies aimed at increasing the attractiveness and strengthening the image of the university, to ensure and develop the ability to be competitive in the new conditions of the educational environment.

In order to improve the image of the university, educational institutions must develop and promote institutional practices that can be attributed to specific marketing methods and tools, and the strategic objectives of university marketing must take into account several factors, among which the most important can be considered (European Journal of Accounting, Finance&Business, 1(21), 2021):

- strengthening the image and reputation of the university among the public;

- efficient promotion of the educational offer and of the facilities offered during the years of study;
- supporting research in higher education institutions and disseminating knowledge through specialized publications both nationally and internationally;
- fair identification of professional perspectives after graduation
- developing communication through a well-structured site, easy to access, constantly updated, offering a virtual tour of the campus
- presentation of the history, as well as of the different events in the university;
- correctly informing the public about the advantages of holding a university degree
- supporting interactive courses, attractive for students, which combine theory with practice by using numerous case studies;
- identifying the collaboration with other higher education institutions and with the business environment in order to develop partnerships.
- providing services dedicated to increasing the employability of students
- internationalization of the university and increasing the number of international students by:
 - development of specific policies for the recruitment of international students
 - identifying strategies to increase the attractiveness of the institution for international students
 - double accreditation of study programs (with teaching in romanian and / or other foreign languages),
 - internationalization of study programs with emphasis on multilingualism and multiculturalism;

4. ONLINE PROMOTION - A NEW REALITY OF EDUCATIONAL MARKETING

Traditional methods of promotion such as media, television, radio are still actual, but a special importance is given to online marketing, which refers to the set of activities and processes through which value is created, communicated and distributed to consumers and other stakeholders through the Internet. Online marketing includes marketing through websites, marketing through e-mail, marketing in social media. It becomes a mandatory element for universities and offers a number of benefits (Dobre C., Milovan A. M., 2019):

- Reducing the costs of printing and distributing materials used in marketing communication
- Creating the organizational image through communication
- Brand development (notoriety, knowledge, etc.)
- Marketing communication including public relations is faster and more interactive
- Obtaining feedback from students etc.

The trust of consumers of educational services that use the site and social networks of a higher education institution is generated by the image that the university has acquired in the online environment. The content factors of the site include dimensions such as:

- Design and design aesthetics
- Quality of information presentation
- Design elements of the web page
- The style or ambiance of the university
- Communication
- Promotional actions
- Other variables

At the same time, the creation of a quality site that achieves its objectives must be based mainly on the following aspects - usability (ease of use), quality content, ensuring visibility in search engines and design (Savciuc O., 2016).

The Covid-19 pandemic has also had a major impact on online behavior, especially for universities, as the teaching and learning process has shifted to the online environment, with the marketing strategy being largely implemented online as well. The Covid-19 pandemic has placed social media marketing in the spotlight, as it has quickly become one of the most effective ways to promote, with the aim of retaining and attracting potential students in times of crisis.

A recent study shows that in the Republic of Moldova, Facebook is the most accessed social media platform, which confirms that communicating through Facebook with potential and current students is an effective way to attract and retain them.

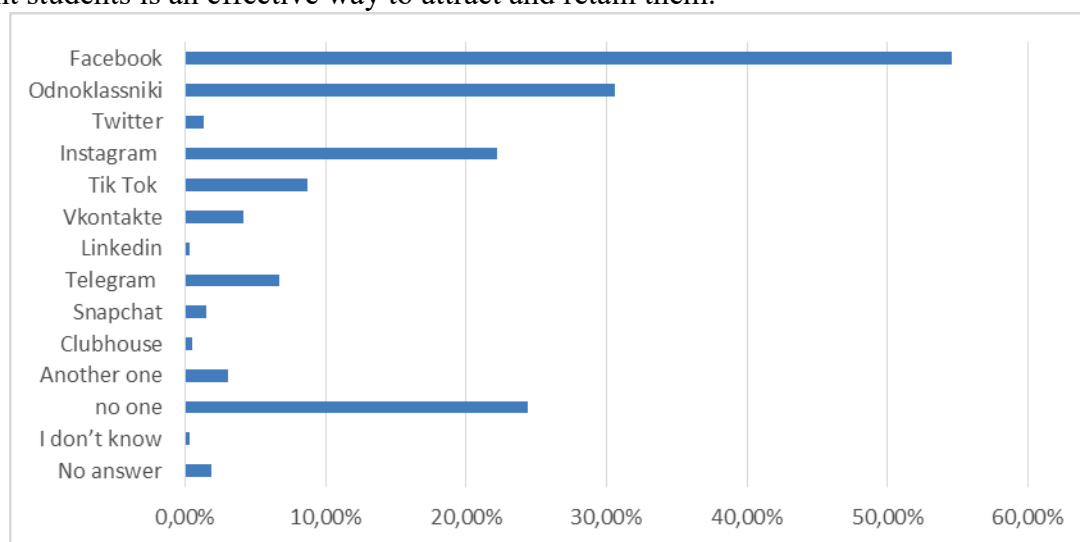


Figure 8. Social networks accessed at least once a week

Source: <https://ipp.md/>

This trend will continue in the future and it is important that universities have a strong online presence, which allows direct communication with potential students and development in the new normal.

5. CONCLUSION

The specific developments of higher education in the Republic of Moldova in recent years highlight the fact that universities must be aware that education has no borders and will operate in the future in a competitive and stronger environment, with a considerable increase in academic mobility and opportunities for young people to study at a European university.

This requires radical changes and improvements within universities, including the development of marketing strategies aimed to ensuring and developing the capacity to be competitive in the new conditions of the educational environment. Certainly, there are no universal recipes that can be implemented in order to develop the competitiveness of universities. Each university must aim to achieve performance in line with its strategic mission and priorities, and the implementation of effective educational marketing, including through the use of social networks and other electronic ways of communication, will greatly enhance their image and increase the attractiveness of applicants for studies.

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