THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY IMAGE AND ITS IMPACT TO COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

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Abstract: *A great competition among universities existing today is to attract and recruit new, the best and brightest students. This reality must be observed and analysed from various points of view to maximize competitive advantage. Universities must be able to face the challenges of globalization and are required to improve facilities and image of the high educational institutions. People are more selective and a good image or reputation will get better results and a better attractiveness of a university. Because of increasing interest for educational marketing field, this study aims to identify the role of university image in the process of choosing the institution by candidate students.*

Key words: university image, website, higher education, competitiveness,

JEL CLASSIFICATION: M31; I23.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is an important component for the progress of every society. In today's sensitive business milieu, an organization's ultimate chance of survival is to develop a positive image and a favorable reputation in its environment. With the growing competition and the absence of differences in quality, design, price, and benefits, the factor having the greatest influence on the consumer's decision making process is the positive image and reputation of the university and it's brand. [2] In short, it is the result of the past actions of the university. It is formed through accumulated judgments over time of different stakeholders who interact with the institution. Therefore, an university can have multiple ways that shows it's reputation: such as qualiy competences of professors, top-level facilities, price, quality of service, strategic locations, innovative products and services etc. [8]

Universities in our country face a strong competitive environment, created by the the single european space of higher education with a considerable increase of academic mobility and great opportunities for young people to study in a european university. The facts indicated above require developing the capacities to be competitive in the conditions of the educational environment in order to attract more students. Image and perceived reputation becomes important factors in order to increase attractiveness and strengthen competitiveness on the educational market. [3]

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THE IMPORTANCE FOR THE INSTITUTIONS TO HAVE A WELL-RANKED WEBSITE

The worldwide web is one of the main sources of information and the main showcase for everyone who wants to be recognized on in the "real world". At the academic level, universities have a very important role to communicate scientific and cultural achievements. Web publication by scholars is not only a tool for scholarly communication but it is also a way to reach larger audiences and a reflection of the performance of the institutions.

An indicator of web presence and visibility is Webometrics Ranking**,** that measure global performance of a university. These indicators take into account the teaching commitment, the research results, the perceived international prestige, the links with the community, including industrial and economic sectors, of the university. [1]

Also, Webometrics Ranking is measuring the volume, visibility and impact of the web pages published by universities, with special emphasis in the scientific output (referred papers, conference contributions, monographs, thesis, reports) but also taking into account other materials (courseware, seminars or workshops documentation, digital libraries, databases, multimedia, personal pages) and the general information on the institution, their departments, research groups or supporting services and people working or attending courses.

According to last edition of Webometric, bellow are represented top 10 universities from Republic of Moldova in Webometrics Rank:

Table 1. Top 10 universities from the Republic of Moldova, according to Webometrics, July 2022

Ranking	University	World Rank	Impact Rank*	Openness Rank*	Excellence Rank*
1.	Nicolae Testemitanu State University of Medicine and Pharmacy	3875	8593	2386	4078
2.	Technical University of Moldova	3927	6742	2616	4558
3.	State University of Moldova	4026	3587	2785	5413
4.	Academy of Economic Studies from Moldova	7961	8834	8834	7217
5.	Balti State University Alecu Russo	8457	10600	4463	7217
6.	Free International University of Moldova	9205	9634	6242	7217
7.	Moldova Cooperative Trade University	11891	9398	7619	7217
8.	Chișinău State Pedagogical University Ion Creangă	13547	11520	7619	7217
9.	Cahul State University Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu	15426	13873	7619	7217
10.	Academy of Music Theatre and Fine Arts	16327	14934	7619	7217

Source: https://www.webometrics.info/

It's important for institutions to have a well-ranked website, other words a competitive website, because websites are the most important form of their online appearance, as a reflection of the style, the activity and the reputation of the particular institution and can be a an indicator of university competitiveness.

In this era of globalization, which considerably affects higher education, institutions are highly concerned with their position in ranking lists prepared by various national and international agencies. Every year, lists of top-ranked higher education institutions are published by different private agencies according to their own surveys. The purpose is often to enhance the reputation of the university and to have a positive influence on university ranking. **In case the web performance of an institution is below the expected position according to their academic excellence, university authorities should reconsider their web policy, promoting substantial increases of the volume and quality of their electronic publications.**

INTERNET- an instrument of growing competitiveness

The emergence and development of the internet has led to a major change in the nature of education. The use of the internet forced university managers to innovate, rethink and redesign the academic programs in order to adapt to the Z generation expectations. The members of this generation are tech-savvy, active on social networks and demand fast, even instant access to authentic information through new delivery modes and integrated online platforms. The Internet offers the possibilities of instant feedback, allowing marketers to continuously optimize and improve their marketing activities.

The Internet enables direct, interactive and real-time communication between universities and their customers and encourages much greater consumer involvement in the creation and sharing of marketing messages. With the strong penetration of social media into people's lives, consumers have become better informed, more educated, in control of the media selection, information tools and platforms they use to obtain messages or information of a commercial nature. Under these circumstances, it becomes natural for organizations to want to use social media to complement traditional ways of communicating with customers. Whether they choose social media exclusively for communication or use it as a complement to traditional communication platforms, marketers can take advantage of the high diffusion potential, low cost of messaging or the ability to target a wide variety of consumer profiles.

According to hubspot.com, we can see some essential statistics that can serve as useful information for SMM about Social Media Marketing (2022):

➢ Facebook has 1.96 billion daily active users
➢ 98.5% of Facebook users access the platform on mobile devices
➢ Facebook was ranked #1 in social media investment
➢ Facebook ads are used by 70% of marketers,
➢ 98% of marketers say Instagram is the most influential platform for influencer marketing, which is 44% higher than Facebook.
➢ The best times to post on Instagram are Wednesday at 11 AM, and Friday between 10-11 AM. Sunday is the worst day for engagement.
➢ 70% of TikTok users agree they feel a deeper connection to people they interact with on TikTok compared to other social networks.
➢ TikTok was the most downloaded app of 2021.

One of the elements that characterizes social networks is the function of creating reputation, image. This function is related to trust, and in online environments this is measured quantitatively, by the number of fans, the number of likes, the number of views, reorders etc. Analysed from the point of view of social networks presence and number of followers, according to Webometrics, the

last Ranking Web of Universities (June 2022), is represented represented the current situation for Top 10 Universities (state and private) from the Republic of Moldova:
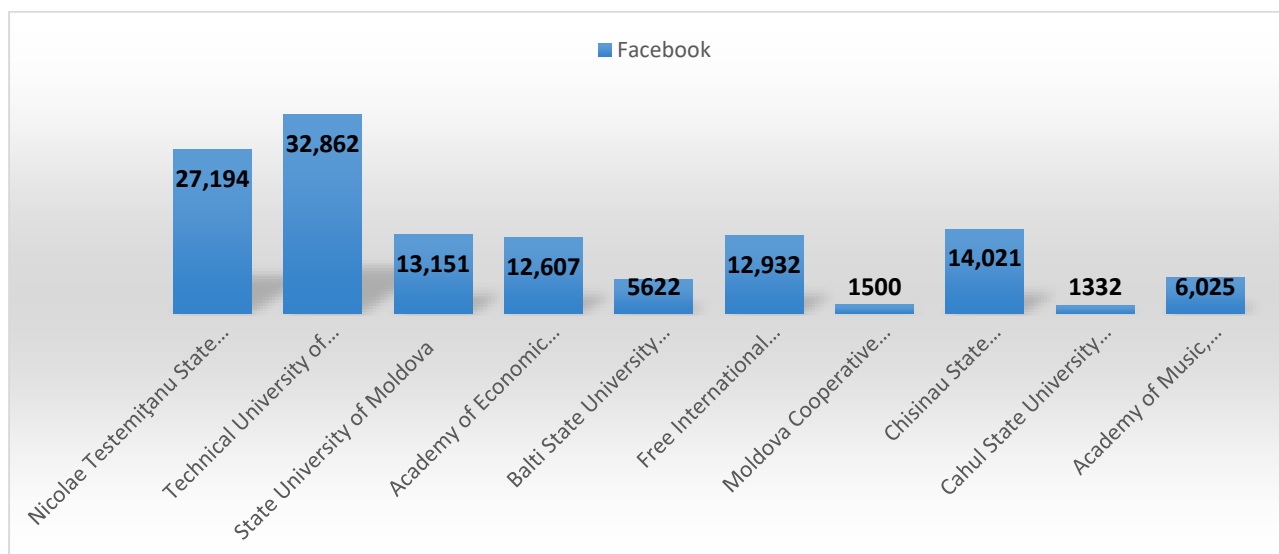

Figure 1. Number of followers on Facebook pages of universities (July, 2022)
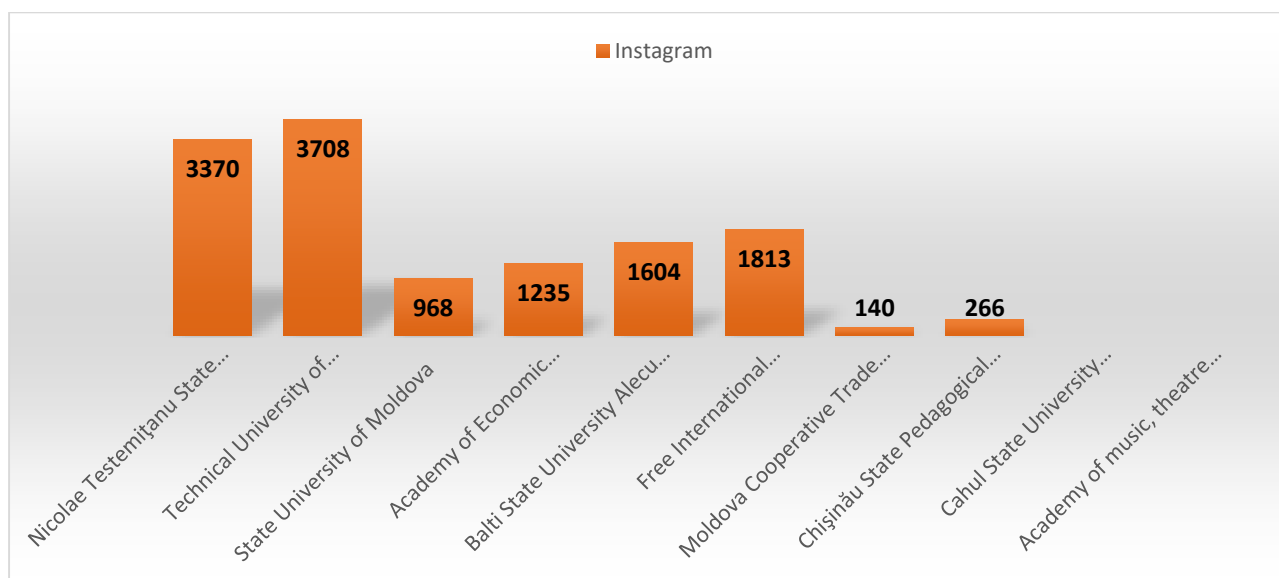*Source: https://www.facebook.com*

Figure 2. Number of followers on Instagram pages of universities (July, 2022)
Source: https://www.instagram.com

Owing to the competitive nature of higher education, it becomes an important task for any educational institution to attract the students. A website is an important tool for this purpose, as it helps to attract students and other stakeholders of higher education by disseminating the institution's portfolio on its portal. The presentation site is the most important online communication tool, because it is responsible for creating and improving the image of the institution. [6] In this context, below is represented the websites situation of the top 10 universities of Moldova:
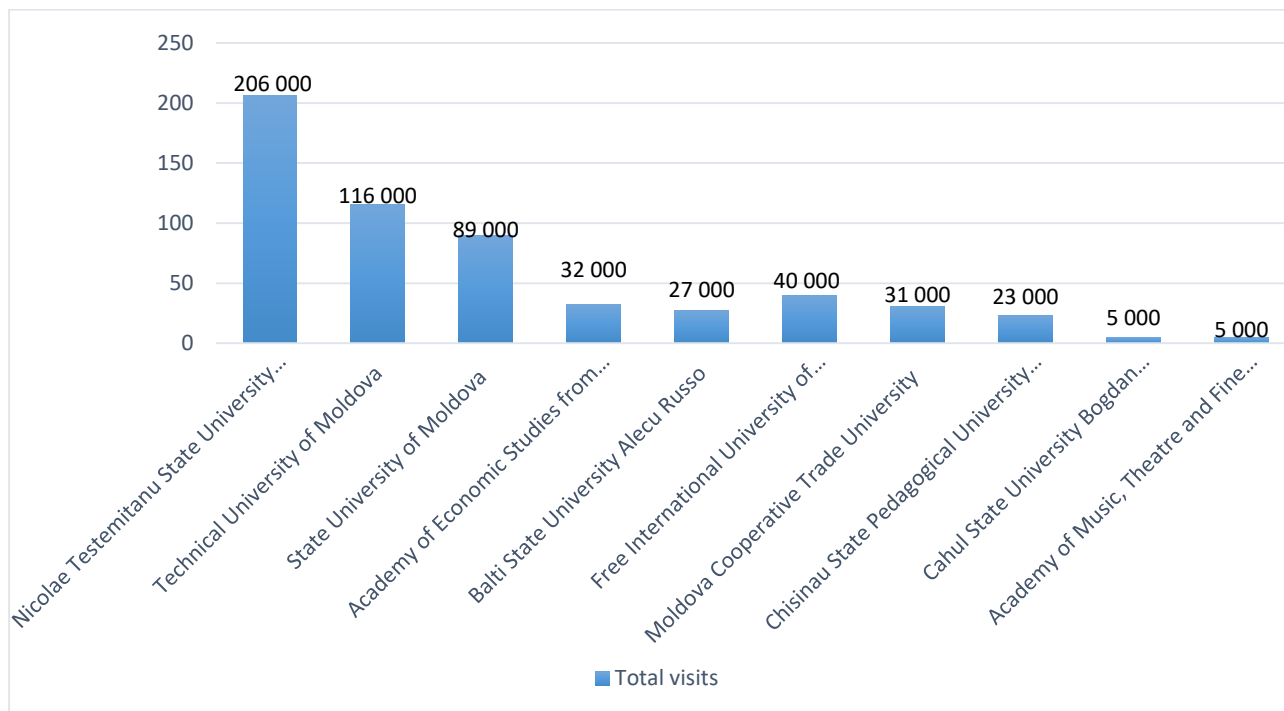
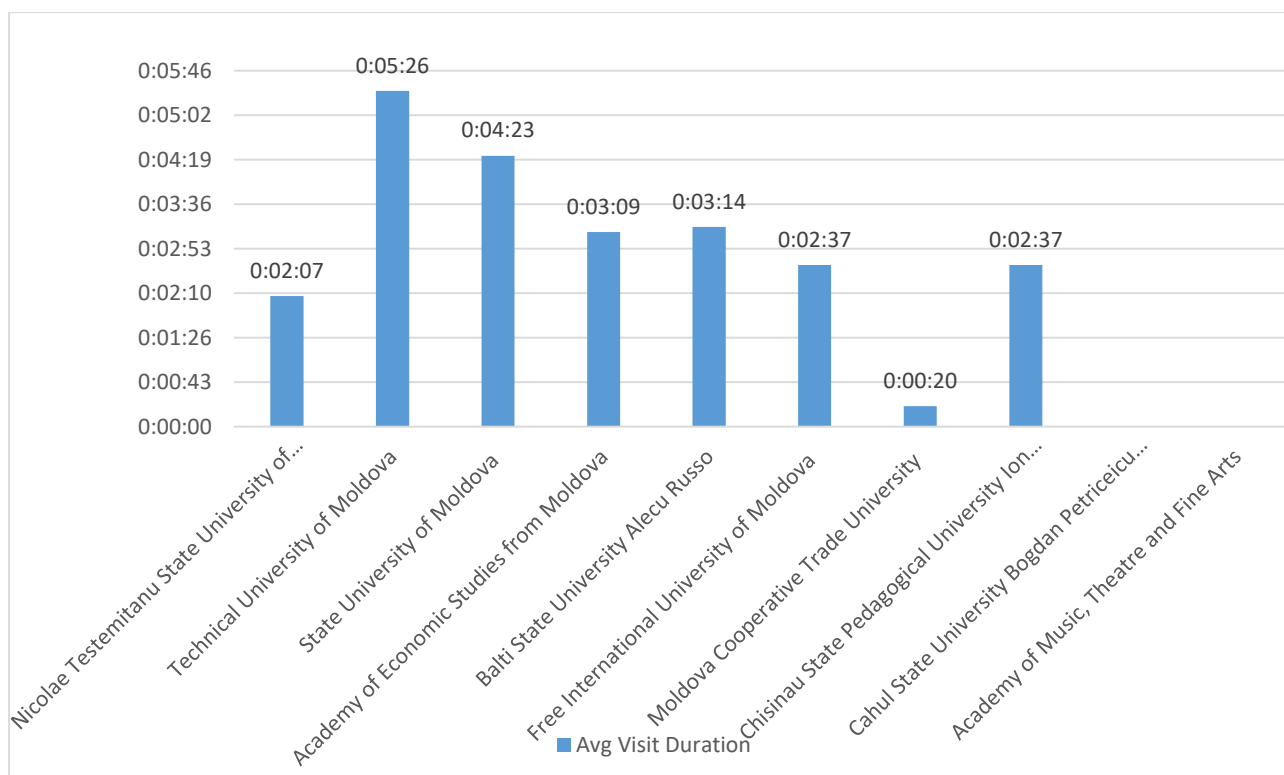*Figure 3. Total visits on universities websites (July, 2022)*

Source: https://www.similarweb.com

Figure 4. Average visit duration on universities sites (July, 2022)

Source: https://www.similarweb.com
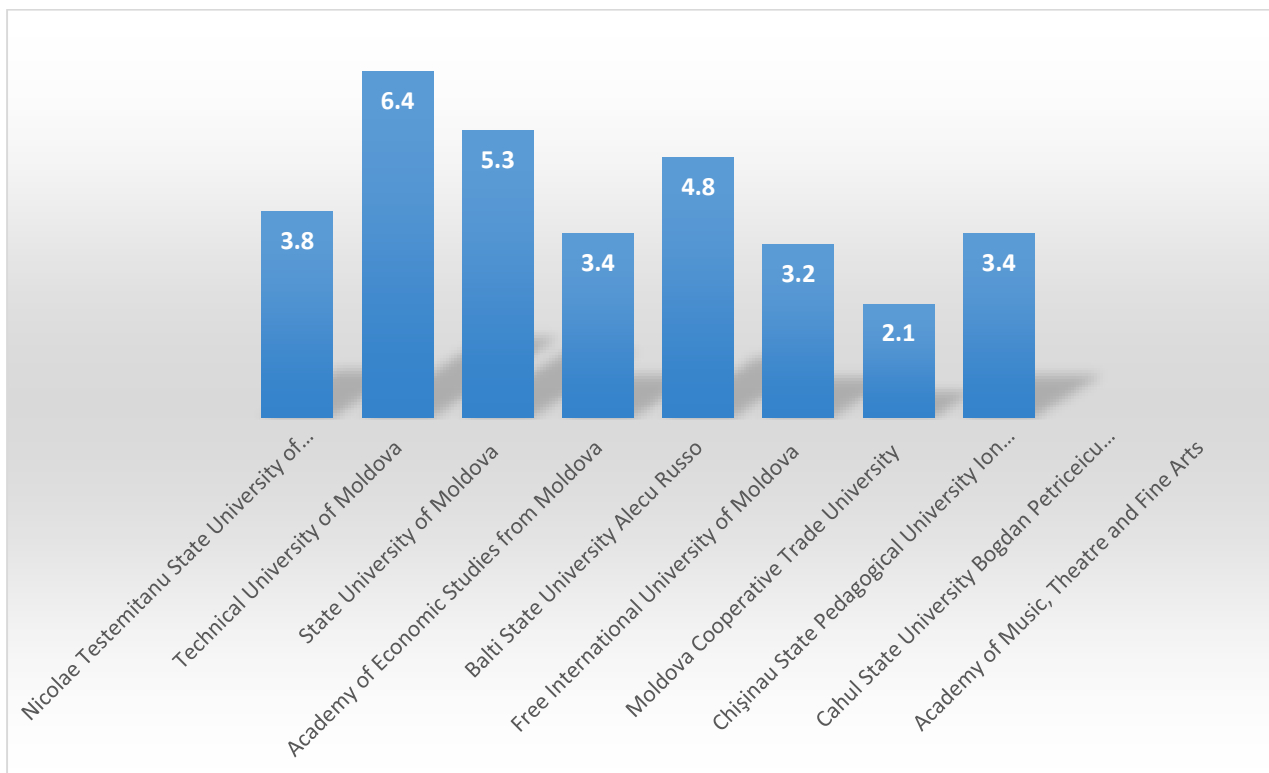
Figure 6. Number of pages per visit

Source: *https://www.similarweb.com*
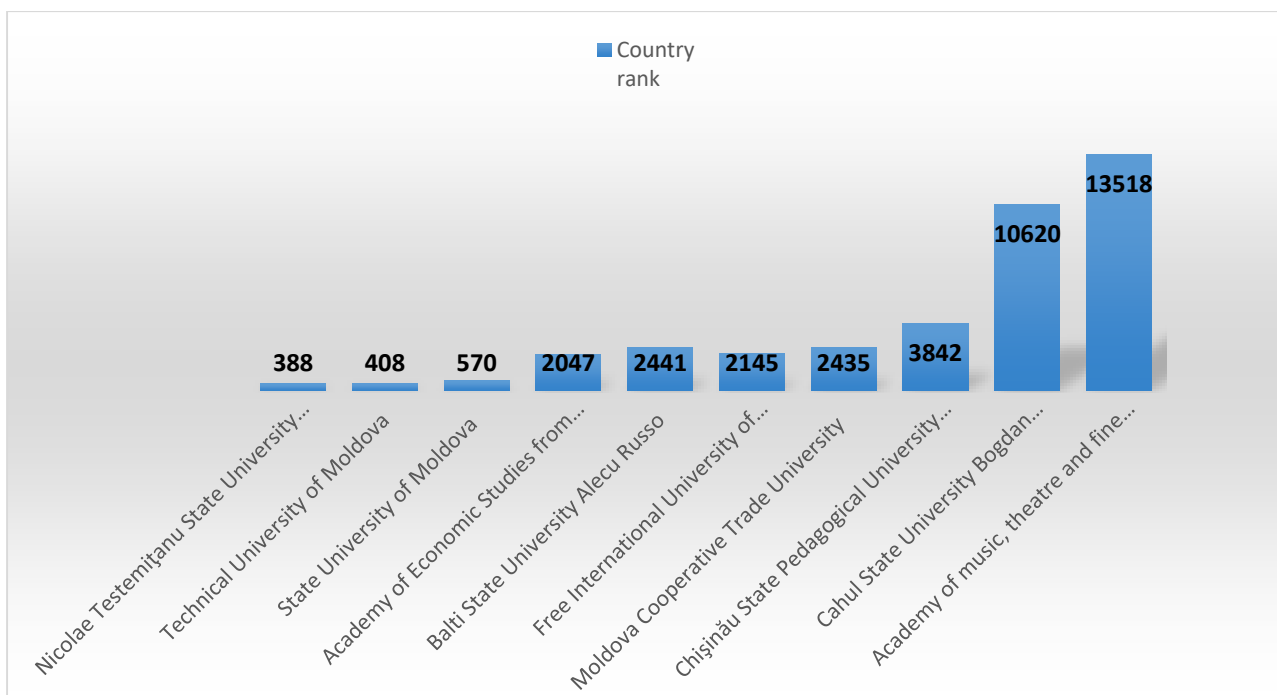
Figure 7. Universities web pages on general country rank

Source: *https://www.similarweb.com*

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY IMAGE IN THE PROCESS OF CHOOSING THE INSTITUTION BY CANDIDATE STUDENTS

The institutional image has a positive influence on the perceived value of the educational offer. For universities it's important to know how to combine the various facets of the perceived value in order to provide the value expected by their stakeholders, primarily by students. The image perceived by the target audience, if it corresponds to the representations about the educational institution, determines the demand for the educational offer of one. Also, the absence of a coherent promotion policy or the lack of communication makes the potential beneficiaries consider the educational offer as uninteresting just because of the lack of information. [5]

In 2021 in the Academy of Economic Studies of Moldova, 704 students participated in a survey where presented their opinion about the decision of choosig the university:
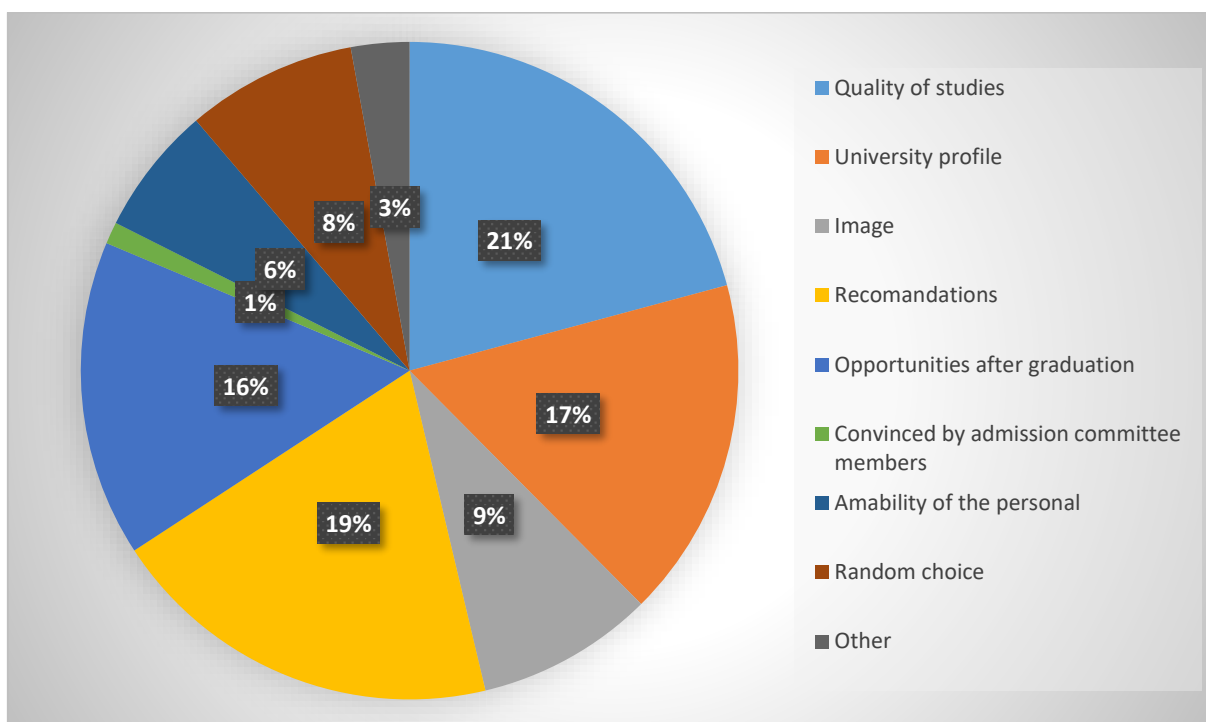
Figure 8. Reasons why students choose a university

Source: Created by the author

Because university image means also quality of studies, amability of personal, recommendations etc., the results of the survey shows that image has a significant impact on competitive advantage and the role in the process of choosing the institution by candidate students it's substantial.

Much research in corporate image has agreed that it is a collection or set of "images" in the receiver and controlled by the organization. Any individual can have many positive, negative and indifferent images of the organization, the organization's product, the organization's reputation and so on. One institution that absolutely depends on its image in order to prosper and even survive is the university. Thus the image influences the increases in sales and strengthening of brand loyalty. Therefore, brand image is being highly considered in the context of companies and in the non-profit field. If we look at the corporate image through the lens competitiveness, it is shaped and communicated to gain a competitive advantage. Starting with the corporate identity, which, through

marketing communication, creates and shapes the image of the university, this image leading to a competitive advantage.

Thus, goals of the university are to create a desirable image among the students/ potential students and to build and maintain a solid reputation. In this context, one of the main conclusions regarding image is that it is an asset that is difficult to imitate and provides a solid basis for competitive positioning in the market. [4]

CONCLUSION

The fierce competition on the global higher education market, forced universities to innovate, to look for new ways to build their offer. Relationship marketing and the knowledge regarding the stakeholders, primarily the students' perception of their offerings, can provide universities with a competitive advantage. As such, university managers need to carry out satisfaction surveys, inquiries regarding the universities image or the perceived value of the academic programs and services offered, need to plan and organize offline and online integrated marketing communication campaigns. Image, as a competitive advantage is a real step in the selection and implementation of a common strategy to achieve and maintain superiority and students.

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