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Keywords: College marketing, Marketing communication, Service quality, Higher education

Synthesis:

The concept of a university has experienced some major changes, from being a privilege of the elites to the mass education that we are now familiar with in most countries, independent of their stage of development.

Considering its essential role at a macroeconomic level in supplying the skilled human capital necessary for a knowledge-based society, tertiary education is directly responsible for

the economic growth of a country (Wolff, 2001) and it is of utmost importance in the creation of a competitive advantage (Dill and Vught, 2010).

There are multiple ways in which tertiary education contributes to a country's economic growth, starting with the expansion of available human capital, increasing the skill level of this capital, resulting in hastening, growing or improving the production or resulting in other ways of economic growth related to innovation: rapid innovation or faster absorption of innovations (Holmes, 2013).

This source of intellectual and material well-being has faced problems in recent decades. Going through different transformations, such as the advent of the research university and globalization, this current „education for the masses” is confronted for the first time with corporate needs. If this openness and accessibility, which was supported by government funds and donations, fueled by the need to educate a considerable number of people¹ has been a benefic factor in the beginning, as universities strived to expand their infrastructure during times of high demand, in recent times, universities are confronted with business needs and parallels have started to be drawn between the two.

Thus, the academic environment has become markedly competitive everywhere in the world. In Romania, after 1989, many private universities appeared, competing with state institutions for potential students. The state, motivated by an entrepreneurial spirit, has also started offering paid places for students who do not qualify for free undergraduate classes in the higher education institutions under its administration. As long as the market was growing, this competitive spirit was a positive influence on the quality and availability of education, but along with the economic crisis of 2008, the rapid increase in the number of universities (including online ones, with massive open online courses) and with the dramatic decrease in the 17-19 demographic segment, the competition between universities has acquired negative connotations.

This fierce competition, fueled by the growing need for funding, for both state universities and private institutions, and globalization – transnational competition – has negative effects on the tertiary sector as a whole, producing, in some cases, a lowering of quality standards (British Council, n.d.).

The juxtaposition of the academic environment and the business world has increased the role of marketing within universities. In America, the combined marketing budgets of tertiary education institutions represent approximately 10 billion dollars (Katzman, 2016) and

¹A relevant example is postwar America, where war veterans have returned to university for professional conversion, funded by the state through the so-called „G.I. Bill”

is growing not just because of heightened competitions, but also because of universities created strictly for profit; these institutions are inclined to artificially raise their marketing budgets, which is also reflected in tuition fees, taking advantage of the low interest rate loan system created by the American government to help students.

Another problem is that the majority of universities are still getting used to marketing tools and do not have the experience of business organizations. It is even more difficult for universities because they do not offer simple products or services, therefore the estimation of a precise return on investment is difficult.

With these issues in mind, I have come to the conclusion that the two possible answers are a high standard of quality and an efficient marketing communication. In pursuit of this end, I have tried to discover and emphasize the relationship between the aforementioned solutions and the possible impact of marketing communication on academic quality.

There is rich literature regarding quality, but in the managerial sphere. Academic quality as a concept was formalized later than the concept of quality in business. There are sufficient works regarding the European Union's efforts to standardize and unitarily implement the concept of academic quality. The Bologna process has created a multitude of organisms and institutions with the purpose of insuring the quality of university studies, both in Europe – ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) – and in Romania – ARACIS (Agenția Română de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior).

Although there is a sufficient number of articles and books that analyze quality in tertiary education, they isolate quality from other factors. This is a necessary step from a scientific standpoint, in order to study the concept in depth, but it does not reflect reality, in which quality interacts with and is influenced by multiple factors.

Higher education marketing, especially higher education marketing communication, is not a new subject, but it is certainly not a subject that has been dealt with exhaustively. The available literature confirms this fact, as the number of articles on the subject is quite small. Universities still do not use marketing communication tools to their full potential, for a variety of reasons (i.e. unlike a company, professors have a much larger independence and a considerable diversity of opinions and attitudes) (Wæraas, A. and Solbakk, 2009). The use of marketing communication can and must be optimized, but in order for this to happen it must be researched in depth.

As a consequence, the present thesis aims to research both subjects, separately at first, and then, through a qualitative research conducted with subject matter experts, a quantitative

research using a tested model, to analyze them as a unit and discover the role of marketing communication in assuring quality in Romanian higher education institutions.