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Prospective Students as University Stakeholders – the Relational Aspect

Abstract. The paper aims to depict the needs and expectations of higher education students considered as a group of external stakeholders in a higher education institution, with special emphasis on communications targeted at this group. Learning about these needs enables a university to establish relationships with this stakeholder group, while requirements identification through research is an essential element of stakeholder relationship management. The author brings up such issues as e.g. the time frame for the decision making process involving university and course selection, prospective higher education students' expectations toward the form and content of communications addressed to them and toward the media used, the factors affecting the choice of university, and the specific benefits derived from research focused on this key stakeholder group. The paper is based on an analysis of secondary sources and the findings of the author's original research.

Keywords: stakeholder concept, university stakeholders, prospective students, prospective student expectations

Introduction

The turbulent environment surrounding today's higher education institutions compels them to try and create lasting and positive relationships with respective stakeholder groups in an effort to reduce the risk of operations in the higher education market. Some of these efforts are centered on secondary school leavers, who

are seen as prospective higher education students. As a matter of fact, this group is not counted among university stakeholders by all scholars and higher education institutions. There are, however, a number of institutions that regularly schedule promotional events addressed to this stakeholder group, such as open days, open lectures, contests, and roadshows (presentations) in secondary schools. Potential candidates are not normally surveyed by higher education institutions regarding the decision making process involving the choice of university, nor are they examined for their needs and expectations toward the university. Surveys, if any, are only limited to enrolled candidates who are, as part of the admission procedure, asked to state the information sources used in contemplating their choice of university (department) alongside the main reasons for the choice. Universities' failure to embrace prospective candidates – secondary school leavers – has an adverse effect on the outcomes of initiatives targeted at this stakeholder group, making it difficult to customize communications (both media and content) to prospective students' actual expectations and undermining universities' ability to exploit market opportunities and gain a competitive edge.

1. The origin and evolution of the stakeholder concept

The rapidly increasing interest in stakeholder relationship management stems from the volatility and unpredictability of a contemporary organization's environment and the belief that it is requisite for the attainment of organizational goals. It was not until the 18th century, however, that the role of stakeholders was fully recognized and the modern stakeholder concept emerged. In 1759 [Smith 1987: 57-148], Adam Smith touched upon some ethical issues that had broad implications for stakeholder theory [Brown, Forster 2013: 301]. A pivotal point in the theory's evolution was the novel approach proposed by Stanford Research Institute (SRI) in 1963, under which stakeholders were seen as "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist" [Freeman 1984: 31]. Significant contributions to the development of the concept were also made by the business community, notably by such companies as: Johnson &Jonson, General Electric Company or Sears, Roebuck & Company. Their practical observations of stakeholder relationships in market settings bore on the concept's subsequent evolution [Preston, Sapienza 1990: 362]. Present-day approaches, both to defining and to listing stakeholders, are much broader than those originally proposed by early scholars or companies. The most commonly cited definition of stakeholder was coined in 1984 by R.E. Freeman, who is regarded as the originator of the concept and who designated a stakeholder as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" [Freeman 1984: 25].

Nowadays the list of an organization's stakeholders can include its owners, employees, customers, consumers, suppliers, local communities, investors, banks and financial institutions, the media, the government, non-governmental organizations, competitors, labor unions, public administration, and the general public (public opinion) [cf. Rudnicka 2012: 98]. The actual number of stakeholders and their relevance to a specific organization will depend e.g. on the type of business and its internal structure, on the complexity, stability, predictability and competitiveness of its environment, and on the relationships that the organization has with that environment.

Subject literature offers a variety of classifications that are supposed to facilitate stakeholder relationship management. The most popular distinction is that into internal and external stakeholders. Other stakeholder distinctions that are often made are e.g. into primary and secondary; positive and negative; consubstantial, contractual and contextual; economic and social; strategic and moral stakeholders [Rudnicka 2012: 93-96]. As the initial steps in the stakeholder relationship management process, all of an organization's stakeholders should be identified, diagnosed, and categorized. Further steps are as follows [Savage et al. 1991 cited in: Bukowska 2008: 90]:

– formulating relevant strategies to improve or modify the existing relationships and to benefit the overall situation of the organization,
– effective implementation of these strategies.

Effective stakeholder relationship management, i.e. such that meets stakeholder needs and expectations while at the same time generating satisfaction and hence building loyalty toward the organization, represents a key component of the strategic approach to management and impacts the organization's ability to attain its economic as well as social goals.

2. University stakeholders –
their types, characteristics, and roles

As has been pointed out already, it is very common to discriminate between internal and external stakeholders. For a higher education institution, internal stakeholders will include:
– students (in all types of programs and modes of study),
– employees – teaching (faculty) and non-teaching staff,
– university authorities and their support units,
– the senate,
– the executive council.
While external stakeholders will include:
– prospective and existing (enrolled) candidates,

  – parents of students and candidates,
  – alumni,
  – the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (Ministerstwo Nauki i Szkolnictwa Wyższego),
  – the National Accreditation Board (Polska Komisja Akredytacyjna),
  – other higher education institutions,
  – the business community,
  – labor market institutions,
  – local government bodies,
  – the media,
  – the local community,
  – scientific and trade associations.

Under another distinction, an organization should differentiate between three major groups based on whether they form part of the internal, the external direct, or the external indirect environment, with the external direct environment usually being the most numerous faction. The first group comprises teaching, research and administrative staff. The second encompasses students in all types of programs and modes of study, prospective students and candidates, alumni, members of the business community, cooperating research institutes, local media, financial institutions, etc. What all these entities have in common is the fact that they use or intend to use the university's services and are willing to form cooperative links in the hope of obtaining economic, social, reputational or altruistic benefits. Finally, the external indirect environment is composed of actors on whom the links with direct stakeholders may be contingent. This group includes e.g. the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, local governments, national media, government administration agencies, etc. [Waśkowski 2015: 37-38].

The type and number of stakeholders that, under the most common distinction (that into internal and external stakeholders), belong in respective groups varies between theoretical and practical interpretations, depending on the approach taken by particular researchers or university authorities. For example, students and alumni can be treated as either internal or external stakeholders in a higher education institution [cf. Waśkowski 2015: 37-38; Raport samooceny; Cranfield University].

The more detailed the list of stakeholders, and the more meticulous the analysis of each group's role, needs and expectations, the more effectively stakeholder relationships can be managed (for example, the U.S.-based University of Saint Mary is in the habit of performing in-depth studies of both short- and long-term needs and expectations of its stakeholders, isolating narrow categories within a single student cohort, e.g. among "traditional" students, adult students, and online students).[1]

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[1] www.stmary.edu/AQIP/III-Students-Stakeholders-Needs.aspx [accessed 20.08.2015].

Looking from the perspective of a higher education institution, stakeholders within each major group will have diverse roles. For example, external stakeholders such as the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, the National Accreditation Board, employers and labor market institutions will be able to influence the quality of instruction, curricula and program offerings, because they have a say in determining the expectations and requirements toward the knowledge, skills and competencies of students and graduates. The recent years have been marked by an increasing role of internal stakeholders – students and staff – which is reflected in the number of publications on their needs, satisfaction, loyalty, motivations, and behaviors. From a marketing standpoint, emphasis should be placed on students. The high priority given to students these days is justified by the critical impact that they have on a university's major asset – its image and reputation – and hence on candidates' decisions regarding the choice of university. It is easier than ever to exert such influence now that one can instantly give testimonials and share opinions through social networking sites and blogs. Both existing and prospective students, the latter group currently shrinking due to demographic factors, seem to be posing a key challenge for higher education institutions today. The ability to form positive relationships with these groups should therefore be seen by higher education institutions as a primary objective of their marketing activity.

3. The needs and expectations of higher education candidates toward university course offerings and communications as input for stakeholder relationship management at higher education institutions – research findings and anticipated benefits

It has already been said, based on information sourced from topical literature and websites (of those institutions that do recognize, and account for, the role of their stakeholders), that prospective higher education candidates are not often given due attention and subject to opinion polls. However, there are institutions, notably in western countries, that put a lot of effort in analyzing respective groups of stakeholders, including prospective students, and looking at their short-term (diversified course offerings, availability of scholarships and financial assistance) as well as long-term needs and expectations toward an institution of higher learning (affordable fees, sense of belongingness, quality of instruction, security).[2] In Poland, systematic and sophisticated surveys are carried out by e.g. the University of Warsaw (Uniwersytet Warszawski). The research is primarily focused on the

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[2] www.stmary.edu/AQIP/III-Students-Stakeholders-Needs.aspx [accessed 20.08.2015].

critical factors determining candidates' choice of university and field of study (program), since these are presumed to reflect their needs and expectations toward institutions of higher education. The findings show that individuals choose to study at the University of Warsaw mostly rely on two factors: a conviction that the University offers high-quality education and its degrees are highly recognizable by employers, increasing their chances to find and retain a rewarding job in the future. A relatively large number of responses indicated the possibility to combine work and study (among full-time students, too), and tuition fees. It should be added that, except for surveys conducted by specific higher education institutions, there are no broad, nationwide studies focusing on the needs and expectations of higher education candidates [Wroczyńska 2013: 249-272].

Research performed by H. Hall and K. Peszko[3] demonstrated that prospective students, while still at secondary schools, had lots of questions that they would like answered directly by representatives of higher education institutions. What they would expect to hear about was e.g. the details of programs and major available from specific institutions, the likely effects that the degree would have on their professional careers, financial assistance offered, opportunities for and terms of international mobilities, admission requirements including advice on relevant secondary school subjects, and academic staff. The respondents admitted to having tried to find all this information (some of them unsuccessfully) in official websites and social networking sites. Many of them argued that promotional content, whether text (e.g. slogans) or graphics, should be co-authored by young people in order to make it sound and look more authentic, avoiding the maladjustment and ridiculous flavor of the "other generation" language – something that they encountered in marketing campaigns run by a number of higher education institutions. What they saw as the most effective communication tool was personal contact with university representatives (current students were most welcome in that role) during in-school roadshows where candidates could not only watch a presentation of what the university has to offer but also ask questions about any aspect of study at the institution (interestingly, candidates for second-cycle programs also perceived meetings with university staff and students as more relevant to their choice of field and major). The interviewees believed that visits from university representatives should be more frequent and paid earlier than it was the case with them. They suggested that the first visit be during their second year at secondary school at the latest, since this would help them timely concentrate on the key subjects given their intended field of study.

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[3] The survey sample was composed of first-year students in first-cycle (Bachelor's) programs, third-year students in first-cycle programs, and first-year students in second-cycle (Master's) programs at two higher education institutions – the University of Szczecin (Uniwersytet Szczeciński) and the Rzeszow University of Technology (Politechnika Rzeszowska) – using the FGI method, with the respondents broken down into 8 mini-groups. See: [Hall, Peszko 2015: 50-67].

Interesting feedback was provided concerning education fairs and open day events held by higher education institutions. In the respondents' opinion, participation in such events brings an institution closer to candidates, who are then more likely to choose a "familiar" institution rather than one that is, in that sense, completely strange to them. In that they also highlighted the importance of personal contact that is made with university representatives during such events and their perception of the atmosphere at the institution. Different forms of personal interaction with a particular university's academic community were very often pointed out in the interviews, and the argument was that such interaction is very effective in introducing prospective candidates to the new environment because it would reduce the estrangement and stress associated with the selection of university and the commencement of study. Furthermore, it helps create an emotional attachment and develop a positive relationship.

The research also delivered a lot of useful comments (including many criticisms), suggestions and recommendations on the forms of marketing communication used by higher education institutions as well as on other kinds of incentives employed to attract candidates.[4]

The survey findings described above inspired the author to conduct a pilot research project in a different group of respondents – among potential candidates – and using a different method – an online questionnaire focused on the selection of higher education institution. The questionnaire was given to secondary school leavers from the city of Rzeszów who had already decided to continue to higher education. The survey aimed, in the first place, to capture the moment that the candidates started thinking of which university to choose, to identify the key drivers behind their choices and the sources of information on higher education institutions that they considered the most useful, and to learn about the institutions and programs that they were contemplating as well as about the problems that they encountered in their decision making process. The survey was performed in July and August 2015. Although the sample was relatively small (54 respondents), and the survey was designed merely as a pilot project, the findings encourage a more extensive follow-up study and imply that it is advisable for higher education institutions to target communications at the group examined.

The pilot project showed that nearly a half of the respondents did not begin thinking of which university to choose until the final year in secondary school (and a half of those not until the second term), while the second largest faction started contemplating their choices as early as in post-primary school (*gymnasium*), in the first or second year of secondary school, or as late as after the maturity exam (the Polish secondary school leaving examination). Every fourth of

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[4] A broader treatment is provided in: Hall, Peszko 2015.

the respondents had not yet made any choice (still considering a number of institutions and fields of study), slightly more than a quarter of the group were still to choose from a limited set of alternatives, and the remainder were absolutely clear about what and where they were going to study. Regarding the preferred sources of information, most respondents relied on informal ones, such as other students or graduates, and the second most used source was university websites. Much less frequently used and much less valued were such information sources as printed matter (brochures), rankings, educational fairs, and open day events. The crucial factors influencing the ultimate choice included: career prospects, the university's reputation and prestige, quality of instruction, availability of the preferred study program (or major), and the university's location, where the location was perceived either in terms of attractiveness (a good city to live in) or convenience (the distance from home and, consequently, the cost of commuting).

Other findings, e.g. the higher education institutions and study programs contemplated by Rzeszów's secondary school leavers, will not be discussed in this paper, as they are of "local" relevance only.

By way of summary, it should be highlighted that, even if the largest respondent group did not start thinking of which university to choose until when in the final year of secondary school, roadshow visits from university delegates, current students most welcome, should be addressed to first- or second-year secondary school students. If the timing of visits is adjusted in this manner, potential candidates are likely to initiate the decision making process earlier, while presentations of specific study programs could help raise awareness and influence preferences, particularly among those who are yet to make decisions.

What was not surprising in the findings is the list of information sources that the respondents considered the most useful. The way the sources were prioritized by the candidates underscores an imperative for higher education institutions to concentrate on generating student satisfaction with study experience and hence students' loyalty in giving positive testimonials to potential candidates, a factor that often proves decisive for their choice of university. The survey responses were also indicative of what kind and scope of information should be found on university websites.

Many higher education institutions, in a less or more formal manner, look into their students' motivations for choosing the particular institution and the information sources that they used when making the decision. Surveys are usually conducted among candidates during the enrolment procedure or amongst first-year students. Most findings are for internal use only, rather few are publicized. Published research indicates that most decisions are dependent on firm preference for a specific field of study, whereas choices between universities running similar programs are based on two core criteria – cost and reputation [Mikosik 2014: 10-11]. The findings of the author's own research are not consistent with

these conclusions, implying a need for higher education institutions to carry out regular surveys focusing on their specific areas of interest and to conduct these at the right time and in the right type of secondary school. The benefit is that in this way a university gains an invaluable insight into potential candidates' interests, their motivation for choosing a particular institution, and their preferred form and content of marketing communications, which makes it possible to center in-school presentations on the most relevant programs and majors, deploy reasonable supporting argumentation (relating e.g. to what employers seek in applicants), and tailor the communication tools, media and content to the audience's expectations. An additional value that universities can achieve through such surveys is making first contact with prospective candidates, thus building up the image of an institution that "cares" – something that is highly appreciated by secondary school leavers.

It should be added that the focus group interview method, applied to the first research presented in this paper, seems particularly adequate in surveying higher education students and candidates, as it allows mutual stimulation and interaction among group members, producing a lot of additional (not included in the interview scenario), unsolicited but very useful feedback, e.g. spontaneous evaluation and comparisons between a given institution and its competitors. A questionnaire, even one including open-ended questions, does not return such answers, since the respondents cannot be prompted by a moderator or other group members to provide exhaustive replies and support these with relevant arguments. Where they do provide answers to open-ended questions, the responses are brief and catchphrase-type. It appears, too, that they tend to forgo reading the instructions or overlook some replies in broadly-scaled close-ended questions.

Conclusion

The recent commitment of higher education institutions to forming and maintaining long-lasting links with all of their stakeholder groups has arisen in reaction to changes in the environment pushing them to transform and keep looking for ways to face emergent challenges and strive for a competitive edge. One of the crucial ingredients of the stakeholder relationship management process is identifying stakeholders' needs and expectations. The paper demonstrates that a consistent effort to learn about prospective higher education candidates, representing an external stakeholder group, can contribute a hoard of exceptionally useful information implying measurable and non-measurable benefits for each higher education institution. The research discussed in the paper also showcases how a well-designed and targeted survey can enable a university to determine the

optimal timing to start its enrolment campaign in secondary schools, customize the information to be conveyed to candidates, and select the most suitable forms, media and tools of communication.

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Potencjalni kandydaci na studia jako interesariusze uczelni – aspekt relacyjny

Streszczenie. Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie potrzeb i oczekiwań kandydatów na studia, jako jednej z grup zewnętrznych interesariuszy szkoły wyższej, względem uczelni, a szczególnie jej komunikacyjnych działań skierowanych do tej grupy. Wiedza na temat tych potrzeb i oczekiwań stanowi podstawę kreowania relacji uczelni z analizowaną grupą, a ich rozpoznawanie poprzez realizację badań jest jednym z niezbędnych elementów procesu zarządzania relacjami z nią. W artykule zwrócono uwagę m.in. na czasowy zakres procesu decyzyjnego kandydatów na studia,

ich oczekiwania względem wykorzystywanych przez uczelnie instrumentów, środków i treści kierowanych do nich przekazów, czynniki decydujące o wyborze danej uczelni, jak również korzyści wynikające z realizacji badań w ramach analizowanej grupy. Artykuł opiera się na analizie źródeł wtórnych oraz wynikach pierwotnych badań autorki.

Słowa kluczowe: *koncepcja interesariuszy, interesariusze uczelni, potencjalni kandydaci na studia, oczekiwania potencjalnych kandydatów na studia*