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## EDUCATIONAL MARKETING STRATEGIES ON THE MARKET OF HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICES

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### Abstract

*The present article mainly aims at identifying the core aspects which have influenced the Romanian and foreign students' decision to apply for mobility and the impact the mobility opportunities have had on the promotion of the universities they belong to, as a marketing technique. In this respect, the authors have conducted a qualitative exploratory empirical research study. As part of it, students from several university centres have been interviewed, the findings allowing the authors to establish the extent to which the respondents appreciate the types of mobility the universities offer at present, the extent to which they succeed in meeting their expectations and the way mobility programmes are promoted by universities. The research is based on the semi-structured in-depth interview. Based on the findings, the authors recommend the management of the Romanian universities should develop strategies to promote educational mobility which should offer more information and which should succeed in better communicating the advantages to students.*

### Keywords

Educational Marketing, Higher Education, Marketing Research, Strategy, Mobility

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## 1. Introduction

Constrained by the present competitive environment, the higher education state institutions in Romania have become aware of the increasing importance and weight of the interest in the services they offer and, consequently, they want to address the needs and expectations of the possible beneficiaries. The direction and adaptation of every educational institution to the demand of the labour market, by determining the needs and interests of education consumers and, implicitly, of society, are based on educational marketing strategies devised in the medium and long term. In the present context, characterized by economic instability, having a generous educational offer at national and international level and maintaining the attractiveness of the programmes of study represent a priority, along with promoting the institution's image (Neacsu and Armasar, 2018).

Considering experience exchanges, the present study aims at two interest areas of the student mobility: on the one hand, the interests and benefits which Romanian students (outgoing students) have through their integration in groups of foreign students and the adaptation to different education systems, the benefits of the foreign students who come to Romanian universities (incoming students) and subsequently promote, through their experience, our country, town and university, and, on the other hand, our institution's use of the experience of these interactions (the possibility to enhance its visibility by turning incoming and outgoing students into promoters of the programmes of study, faculty and university attended. In a global world, multiculturalism plays a paramount role in people's development.

Favourable to the period of academic studies, this opening process towards other cultures and systems (with respect to education, politics, administration) offers its beneficiaries elements connected to their self-development, personality shaping, self-knowledge, integration in and understanding of the world. Thus, Romanian universities exhibit an increasing interest in mobility programmes, due to the diverse experiences involved and to the adjacent advertising (training or internship diplomas or certificates, language certificates). On the other hand, many students in Europe and not only find the educational offers of our universities appealing. The main mobility programmes the students from Romanian universities can participate in are Erasmus and Work & Travel.

The *Erasmus Student Network (ESN)* is a non-profit international organisation which was established on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1989, becoming legal and officially functional in 1990. It offers opportunities for cultural understanding and personal development to international students

through a cultural exchange programme, based on the principle “Students helping Students”, which is also the motto of the organization (Bryla, 2015). Through the services it offers, the organisation represents these international students, whose social and cultural needs it meets, with an aim which covers an unlimited time span and with a maximum generality. It actually represents the connection between the students and the Erasmus programme proper. The organisation holds headquarters in 37 countries and is present in over 430 higher education institutions; it is a network which develops and extends constantly, involving thousands of members each year, with a prosperous activity, based on principles which have been well established for years.

*Work & Travel* aims at offering students the opportunity to experience life in the USA during the summer holiday. Thus, each of the participants learns about the USA, but they also become cultural ambassadors of their country. In addition, the programme helps the employers in the USA find personnel during peak periods, by finding seasonal employees among students. Last, but not least, the programme offers young students the opportunity to have financial independence directly proportional with the effort made. The *Work and Travel* Programme covers the summer holiday (meaning no more than 4 months) and it becomes operational on the arrival on one of the USA airports.

## 2. Literature Review

Each organisation draws up several strategical variants of the marketing activity, as a response to the physiognomy and demands on the market, according to each of its features, and it subsequently decides which variant is the best. A coherent marketing strategy is essential in order to manage changes and progress on the market, since companies worldwide operate in continuously changing technological and legislative environments.

In compliance with the new policies for choosing higher education institutions, universities are managed under the pressure of popularization and they promote their own services using different marketing strategies (Jabbar, 2016). The strategies are applicable to the marketing mix for each P, and, in our case, the classical 4P will be considered:

- Product-related strategies: the options of the enterprise with reference to the dimensions, structure and dynamics of the range of products it produces or trades (Manole, Stoian and Ion, 2011).
- Price-related strategies: price is extremely important irrespective of strategy. It is established according to the life span of the product, the position it holds on the market. According

to the way they manifest on the market, the price strategies can be (Manole, Stoian and Ion, 2011): *penetration* strategies – very small prices, entrance on the market with an accessible product, customers are encouraged to buy and the competitors' entrance on the market is discouraged; *skimming* strategies – prices are very high, bringing a great profit.

- Promotion-related strategies: there are many and diverse such strategies and they are determined by the nature of the products and services, by the enterprise profile (focusing on production, trade, services), the features and tendencies of the markets on which they operate.
- Placement-related strategies: according to the channel chosen, the distribution or placement can be done: directly; through short or long channels. According to the number of intermediaries, the distribution can be: exclusive, selective or intensive.

The participants involved in the marketing process have released a new concept, namely “value of the product in the customer’s perception”. More and more traders have developed a considerable belongingness to what the “value for the customer” supposes (Londhe, 2014), this fact stimulating the customer’s interest and purchasing decision. Creating and providing a unique value for the potential customers presents a strong advantage in a competitive environment, both as regards traditional techniques and the online space.

The key tool of the marketing mix considers certain suggestive and practical criteria, i.e. the persuasion intention (inducing positive aspects with a view to using the product) and the way the final objective is attained. Thus, while the means that focus on persuasion are aimed towards the direct communication (the selling forces) and the indirect communication (advertising, public relations, promoting sales), the non-persuasive communication means are represented by packaging, trademark, price and product image (Anghel, 2009). Holding an essential place in the marketing mix, promotion is considered its most costly component, its achievement involving a wide range of actions. The promotion policy represents the basic element of the marketing mix, which determines all the positive or negative messages issued towards the target audience. The main components of this process of conveying information are: the sender (the service enterprise), the receiver (the present and potential customers) and the message, which represents the most important element of the process and which contributes to the generation of a certain value. The message has to comply with several types of appeal, namely: rational, emotional and moral. These elements contribute to inducing the usefulness of the product in the consumer’s perception and, at the same time, they aim at the sensitivity of certain situations to enhance the purchasing decision. In the marketing mix, promotion is a tool which prioritizes the development and distribution the

image of the product proper on the target markets. The visual identity of the finite product (logo, slogan, colour scheme, style) represents the essential element in the promotion process, presenting an appealing and unique view for its homogenisation.

The supremacy of the internet in the daily life offers marketing a wide area of promotion which aims at the digital advertising. Advertising on the web represents a tool for mass communication and it has total success on the social networks sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter), but also within content communities (e.g. YouTube). At the same time, the web allows the trader to communicate with consumers directly, both by means of blogs and vlogs, methods of promotion which reach the individual even though he does not focus on the message imparted. Sharing success stories in the online environment and conveying favourable information to the consumer represent the key point for promoting the finite product (Krush, Pennington, Fowler III and Mittelstaedt, 2015). All the marketing communication techniques, whether new or traditional, have a considerable impact on the consumer decision regarding the purchasing of the product. In this marketing environment based on technology, companies should combine the communication techniques (traditional and new) properly, with an appropriate marketing mix (Menegaki, 2012).

### 3. Methodology

The research conducted presented in this article was a qualitative one and it aimed at identifying and analysing students' opinions regarding mobility programmes.

The main objective of the paper was to create a clear image of the way in which students perceive these mobility programmes, of their beneficiaries, but also of the way in which these programmes are a means to promote universities and to attract students.

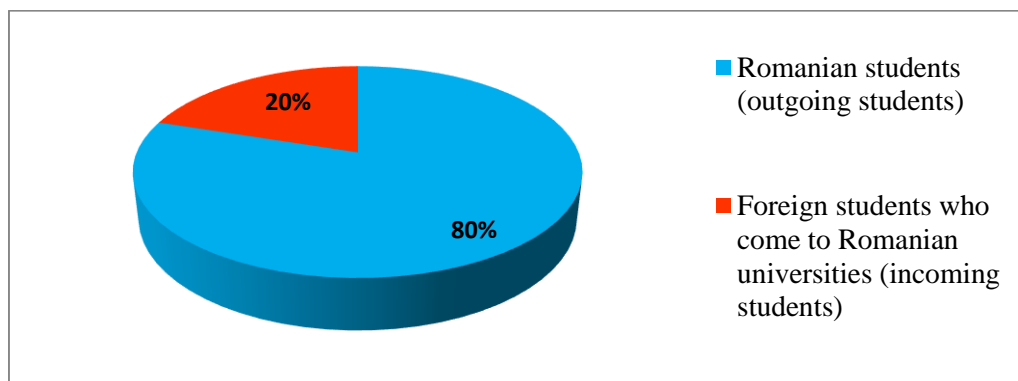
The qualitative research method chosen was the interview, and the qualitative research technique was the in-depth interview. The procedure used in the research was the semi-structural interviewing, and the research guide was used as a tool.

The specific objectives focused on in the research were the following:

- to identify the most efficient techniques to promote mobility programmes among students;
- to establish the way students adapted to the new behavioural culture during the mobility;
- to identify the impact of these mobility programmes on one's personal career and development;

- to establish the success of using mobility programmes as a marketing strategy for a better promotion and to attract future students.

The sample comprised 30 students, who fulfilled the necessary conditions to attain the research aim and objectives. The participation in the interview was voluntary, and it involved the use of a selection questionnaire, at the beginning of which the research aim and objectives were presented. After the 30 students gave their consent, the guide for the in-depth interview was devised. The semi-directing in-depth interview was conducted between May 4<sup>th</sup> and June 30<sup>th</sup> 2019, based on the above-mentioned topic. The answers were recorded and then stored in electronic files. Subsequently, these files were transcribed, the information being processed by the technique known as content analysis. Out of all participating students, 20% are incoming students from other countries, having come to a university in Romania in a mobility programme, and 80% are Romanian students who benefitted from a mobility programme in another country (Figure 1).



**Figure1:** *Structure of the Students Interviewed*  
*Source: Own Research of the Authors*

## 4. Results

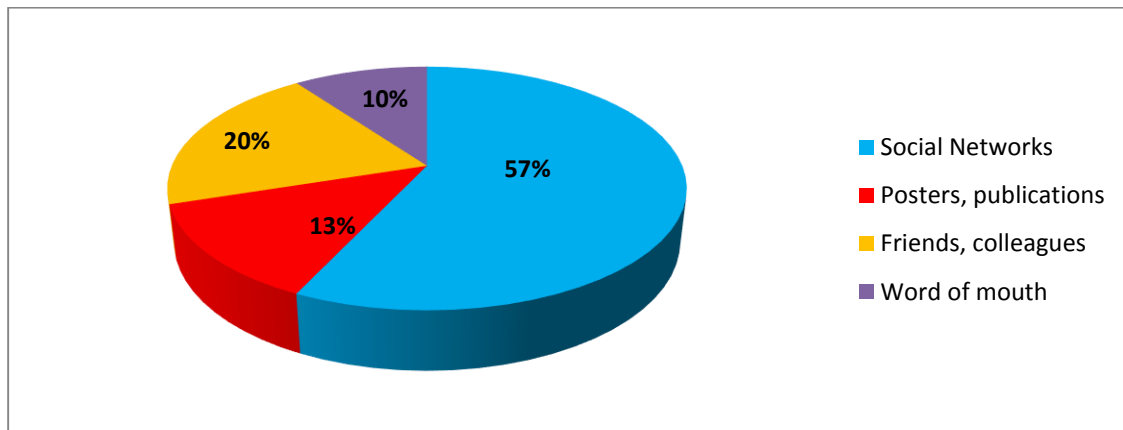
After having been transcribed and centralized, the interviews were analysed in two ways:

- The vertical analysis, by the individual approach of each interview, namely the opinions of each manager, where the attention they gave to the issues included in the further topics of the interview was highlighted;
- The horizontal analysis, by the synthesis of the approach of each topic analysed by all 30 students.

### 4.1 The Promotion Techniques of the Mobility Programmes

Most of the respondents interviewed (57% of the respondents) stated that the most successful way in which the information reached the consumer was represented by social networks

(Facebook, Instagram), the online environment being more and more present in students' life. Although in case of certain respondents, the “word of mouth” techniques and the direct marketing represented the decisive factor for becoming the final customer, the events organised by the agencies Work & Travel and by the universities and the coordinating teachers monopolized all the information each student needed. It can be noticed that 4 out of the 30 respondents (13%) stated that the most important for them was the advertising through posters and publications within the universities, while for 6 of the respondents (20%), the decision was influenced more by friends and colleagues (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** *The Most Efficient Techniques for Mobility Promotion among Students*  
*Source: Own research of the Authors*

#### 4.2 The Adaptation Behaviour to a New Culture

Regarding this issue, opinions have been divided, the adaptation to both the American lifestyle and to the European culture being equally either easy or difficult. 5 of the 30 respondents stated that their cultural identity was not at ease in the stormy and demanding American lifestyle, the adaptation was more difficult, but they succeeded in overcoming difficult situations during the programme. On the other hand, the other 25 respondents specified that language represented a hindrance at the beginning, but the friends' help contributed to the improvement of their linguistic competences, being the essential factor in this situation. Furthermore, all the 30 respondents admitted that the citizens of the host country were warm and welcoming, happy to know their culture and to share, at their turn, their traditions and habits.

#### 4.3 The Impact of Mobility Programmes on Students' Professional and Personal Development

From the respondents' perspective, opinions are divided. Thus, a considerable impact on one's professional development is held by the Erasmus+ experience. As regards the personal

development, the mobility programme Work & Travel had a greater contribution, due to the difficult situations which the subjects faced and which they had to solve on their own. The 30 subjects interviewed had a good command of English, but they faced small discrepancies when having to speak fluently in this language, this experience helping them improve their English language. None of the respondents mentioned anything with respect to the diplomas obtained following this experience, but it is assumed they will influence their career and personal and professional development in a positive way.

Among the students who were interviewed and who benefited from mobility, some came with a new view on what being a good leader means. Thus, as in other experiments of this kind, they considered a good leader should be approachable, caring, supportive and responsible, as communicated through a formal or casual but neat physical appearance (Martikainen, 2018).

#### **4.4 The Use of Mobility Programmes as a Marketing Strategy to Better Promote Universities and Attract Future Students**

For the strategic objectives of university marketing, the educational offer and the facilities offered during the study years should be efficiently promoted, along with the consolidation of the university image and reputation. Thus, our study revealed that the experience which the mobility brought to the respondents was a positive one. That is why, on the occasion of certain programmes, such as *The Doors Open Day*, *The University Day* or *A Different Week*, they recommended both the faculty and their programme of study to senior high school students, the mobility being regarded by the direct beneficiaries as a key element of their intellectual, cultural and emotional development. From the perspective of the institution, the mobility proved to be a real promotion tool (especially through the testimonial method).

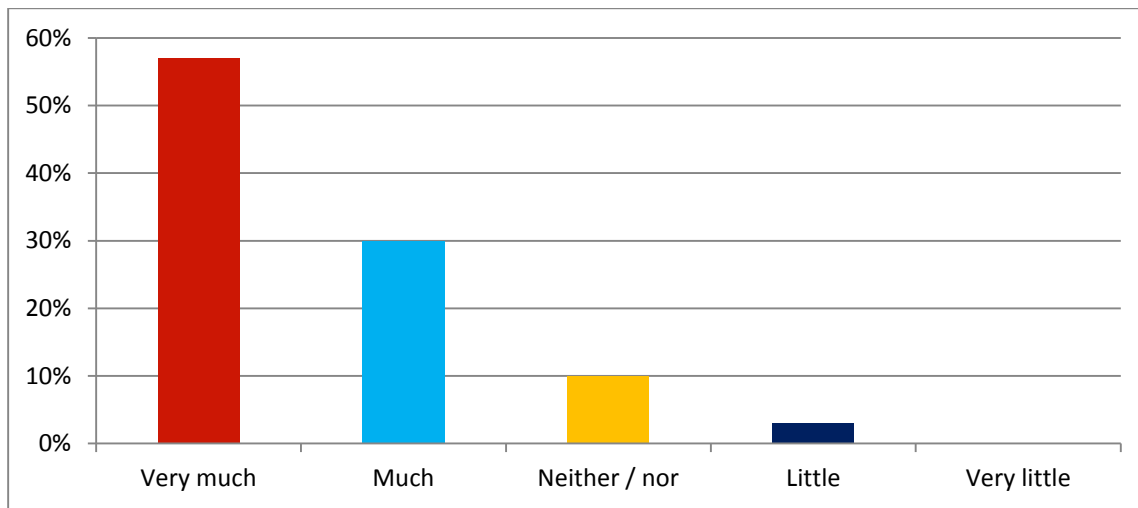
The students interviewed suggested that a new assessment method should be represented by the evaluation through online platforms, which facilitate the registration of the data entry and the control functions, saving costs and time (Setyowati, & Ma'ruf, 2018). They considered that this opportunity would enhance the appeal of the study programs, especially among students who cannot physically attend the exams.

As regards the respondents' desire to continue/ repeat the mobility experience, 40% wanted to continue the mobility or to attend additional courses at the faculty where the mobility took place (12 out of the 30 respondents). As far as the foreign subjects are concerned (the sample comprised 20% incoming students), they were delighted not only by the mobility proper, but also by Romania, and they also recommended their peers in the home university should come to Romania for studies



or visit it . More than half of them (67%) would like to come back to Romania for business or to certain tourist destinations.

57% of the subjects consider that the mobility helps to promote the university “to a very great extent”, attracting new candidates, 30% “to a great extent”, 10% “neither/ nor” and only 3% of the subjects consider that it contributes to the university promotion just “to a small extent” (Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** *The Way Mobility Programmes Contribute to the Promotion of Universities*  
Source: Own Research of the Authors

## 5. Conclusions

In the economic theory, educational services are considered goods and services consumed by primary customers with a view to attaining a certain personal educational level. The storage of this human educational capital in order to subsequently use it offers a perspective on education as capital or investment good. Education, as a field which has become paramount in Romania for social, technological and economic changes in the modern society from Romania, faces the great challenge of identifying the resources for ensuring the sustainable development of society. The bottom line is represented by the creation of human resources by going from simply knowing to applying and capitalizing the abilities and competences acquired by the beneficiaries (students/ graduates). The present social, economic and pedagogical context, targeted towards the market, determines a new vision on the development of the Romanian education. The economic-social dynamism makes the presence of the competition very strong even on the educational services market and hence the necessity of universities to adapt to the dynamics of the market. In order to

survive and develop, but especially to be promoted, universities attract students by offering different mobility programmes, as an educational marketing strategy and as a premise of quality and competitiveness, of the consolidation of the university image and reputation among the public, in a globalized ever-changing environment. The Romanian universities' obtaining a competitive advantage (especially over one another) is influenced by their positioning on the educational services market by adding value for their consumers (students), either by promoting specific educational programmes, or by offering additional services and lower prices, as well as scholarship and mobility programmes.

A possible limitation of the present research is given by its qualitative character, which means that the obtained results cannot be extrapolated. Determining the way in which students have adapted to the new behavioural culture during the mobility is another limitation, as subjective elements that cannot be quantified could have influenced the quality of the responses.

Our future research on educational marketing strategies will aim to analyse, in addition to other parameters, the degree of emotional and cultural involvement that intervenes in the perception of the respondents participating in the mobility. In order to properly address this issue, we consider an interdisciplinary collaboration with specialists in the field of psychology.

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