AZƏRBAYCAN RESPUBLİKASI TƏHSİL NAZİRLİYİ

AZƏRBAYCAN DÖVLƏT İQTİSAD UNİVERSİTETİ

BEYNƏLXALQ İQTİSADİYYAT MƏKTƏBİ

Kafedra:Beynəlxalq İqtisadiyyat (ingilis dili)

İxtisas: Biznesin idarə edilməsi

BURAXILIŞ İŞİ

Mövzu: Tələbələr tərəfindən universitet brendinin qavranması:UNEC

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BAKI – 2019

The Ministry of Education of Azerbaijan Republic

Azerbaijan State Economic University

International School of Economics

BACHELOR THESIS

Theme: Students Perception of University Brand: Case of UNEC

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BAKU-2019

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Abstract

This paper represents an exploratory research conducted with primary interview and survey data and aims at analyzing students' perception of university brand case of UNEC.

The importance of university selection factors minimally differs between students those in Azerbaijan and international. The main criterion for Azerbaijani students about the university is its good reputation, prestige and academic program that university provides. As the survey was conducted from students in public universities, we can see the clear difference between foreign and national factors that influence the selection. While foreign customers of state universities think that tuition fees and location of university are essential criteria These findings suggest that even if university branding initiatives need to be customized by each university, all of them should apply modern university experience that includes the latest technology, community involvement and an attractive reputation

Keywords: UNEC, University branding, Students Perception, Reputation, University Selection

Acknowledgment

I would like to express my gratitude to my family and friends for their support. During last several months I have learned a lot, not only about the subject of branding but also the techniques for data analysis. In this challenge I have been able to grow on an individual level and learn a lot from my supervisor. Special thanks to Turan Suleymanov for his prominent guidance and support in structuring and completing my project.

Declaration of Originality

"I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and has not been presented or accepted in any previous application for a degree. The work, of which, this is a record, has been carried out by myself unless otherwise stated and where the work is mine, it reflects personal views and values. All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and all sources of information have been acknowledged by means of references including those of the Internet. I agree that the university has the right to submit my work to the plagiarism detection sources for originality checks."

Nigar Mammadova

10/05/2019

Introduction

Now and then it became more evident that universities are operating in a challenging competitive environment which keeps on growing. As all the higher education institutions provide the same services like teaching and research, they should be able to stand out in the university crowd. In order to positively influence students' choices universities, have to offer "own thing" when it comes to comparing them to each another (The Guardian, 2012).

Every company wants their goods or services to be the buyers' first choice among other similar products in marketplace, and right branding strategies could help to make that happen (Business Link, 2009) and universities are no exception. With the rising amount of competition in each field that businesses operate it never been more crucial to differ from other players in the market and introduce unique identity through successful branding strategies (Forbes, 2013). Good branding helps a company to be successful against other organizations in the market. The company have to remember that it should concentrate on consumers needs and wants and provide goods and services that match these expectations (Business Link, 2008).

 Offering right and good-quality product is half of the success as nowadays markets are so crowded that customer simply will not be able to recognize it and in these kinds of situations companies have to think about advertising in order to create awareness of the services or goods in consumers' minds. But what if it's not enough to advertise your product through different media channels as there are already advertising clutters and customers will hesitate to choose among them? According to Brand Identity, Guru companies should create a branding strategy for the entire company instead of concentrating on the advertising of

one particular product as the brand recognition and brand identity will help to win the competition in long-run and in each product that company will introduce to market (2008).

Corporate branding creates reliability in product and customers value that cannot be achieved with any other advertising campaigns. Even if it is hard to create good corporate branding, it's not impossible. The main thing that companies have to do is "to build a long-term vision and match the companies' objectives with companies' operations" (Brand Identity Guru, 2008).

Most successful managers pursue the idea that brand is just a perception and branding is all about shaping this perception in someone's mind. Wide range of people's interest in learning and development of skills had led to the rapid expansion of the educational system. As a consequence of rapid growth, the whole educational field had changed. An increasing number of universities and services that they provide a reshaped environment in higher education market and institutions faced fierce competition (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka,2006). According to Filip (2012) due to previously mentioned factors universities started to compete in two areas which are: first competition for students as it is done in other fields of business in the form of competition for customers. In this case, the meaning of students for universities and customers for sellers can be considered as the same things since students choose among more alternatives than it was several years ago. Secondly, the competition for funding because even if it is state university and provide education for free especially in Azerbaijani market where students with high scores are excepted from payments government covers tuition fees for them.

Higher Education Institutions are actively engaged in identifying methods, tactics, instruments and branding strategies to reach a strong position in the

modern overcrowded educational market. New marketing philosophies made universities to act accordingly to consumers demands (Knapp and Siegel, 2009).

As a consequence of changes in the higher education environment, universities started to widely use marketing and branding strategies that mainly was adopted from profit-generating organizations. (; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007 Wilkins et al., 2015). Chapleo states that according to the latest reports, there is also evidence of the increase in marketing and branding budget of universities (2014). Historically, the branding of higher education institutions has been done for different purposes. On the authority of M. Joseph et al. (2012) universities used branding to create "awareness among prospective students and their parents; or target donors, professors, business leaders, alumni, and elected officials with branded messages." To Bunzel HE branding is also used to improve the institution's international ranking (2007). Usually, some universities use branding strategies to boost name awareness, others to create an entirely new image (Paden and Stell, 2006).

Problem Background

Enormous numbers of companies make the market so blurry that companies cannot find the entrance for the success of their future. Companies need to develop a unique identity in order to be recognized among competitors and to be chosen by customers to gain profit and prestige. The brand is a vital tool to make these happen but not only one for gaining profit, but the brand is also crucial to illustrate the company's image to society. As it was mentioned above by Business Branding Guru companies should prefer to have a brand for an entire company, instead of particular products or services, which is also known as

corporate branding. The corporate branding is not used in companies' strategy, but also applied by other types of organizations which can be divided into five categories (William Davidson Institute, 2008):

- Government organizations

- Inter-Government organizations

- MNC organizations

- Non-Profit organizations

- SME organizations

In this context non-profit organization refers to the organizations which were established with educational or charity reasons (WebFinance, 2008).

Branding issues are sensitive also for universities as the brand builds a perception about the university in prospective students', families,' society's, academicians' and the community's minds in competition with other universities and Azerbaijani higher education institutions are not an exemption.

Under the extreme global and national competition, Azerbaijani universities began branding activities to position and differentiate their products and services to be the first choice of students. During the last decade, either state or private universities in Azerbaijani HEI market have been applying branding and rebranding strategies to attract more students and to differ in a crowded market. University branding is a new topic of discussion for Azerbaijan; thus it lacks in academic and empirical studies regarding the impact of branding on Azerbaijani students' university perceptions. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the students' perception of university branding regarding the University of Economics in Azerbaijan (Turan Suleymanov, 2019).

Purpose of Research. The current research was undertaken to clearly understand which criteria are important for higher educational institutions in order to attract potential customers; what are the students' perception of University if Economics brand and how much the actual educational environment at UNEC corresponding to perceptions and expectations about university. This paper aiming at answering two questions which are:

- Does really branding of University of Economics influence the students' perception and university choosing process?
- And which dimension of branding have an impact on the selection process?

Education System in Azerbaijan. School education in Azerbaijan generally divided into three steps which are primary, secondary and full secondary education. In the main education life of kids begin at the age of six and conducted based on unique curricula program at state and private schools, lyceums, gymnasiums and lasts 11 years in contrast to schools in Europe, Asia, United States and other regions which is 12 years. Even if the duration of schools in Azerbaijan differs from schools in other regions the general courses and its order remain approximately the same. So first level education starts with teaching children to count, read, write and develop general knowledge for four years. Next two levels are general secondary education which covers curriculum program from fifth to ninth grades and full secondary education which is considered as eleven years. Based on future plans and career goals pupils and their families choose whether to left school after ninth grade and continue vocational education in colleges or study eleven years and continue educational life by applying for universities.

Higher education institutions provide core and general courses for students in order to grow highly qualified specialists in different fields. As school education, higher education also consists of three levels which are; bachelor degree, master degree, and doctorate. Currently, there are 45 higher educational institutions both private and state. The number of private institutions is twelve out of 45 while the number of state-owned institutions is 33, 9 of which are academies, 21 universities, 2 institutes, and one conservatorium. As the main purpose of this paper is to understand the students' perception of university branding in case of Azerbaijan State School of Economics the following analysis will cover the university market in Azerbaijan.

As it was mentioned before the primary purpose of the branding is to win the rising competition between local and even regional universities. To understand the market situation, the dynamics of student number at universities will be illustrated below.

**Total number of students
(private and public universities)**
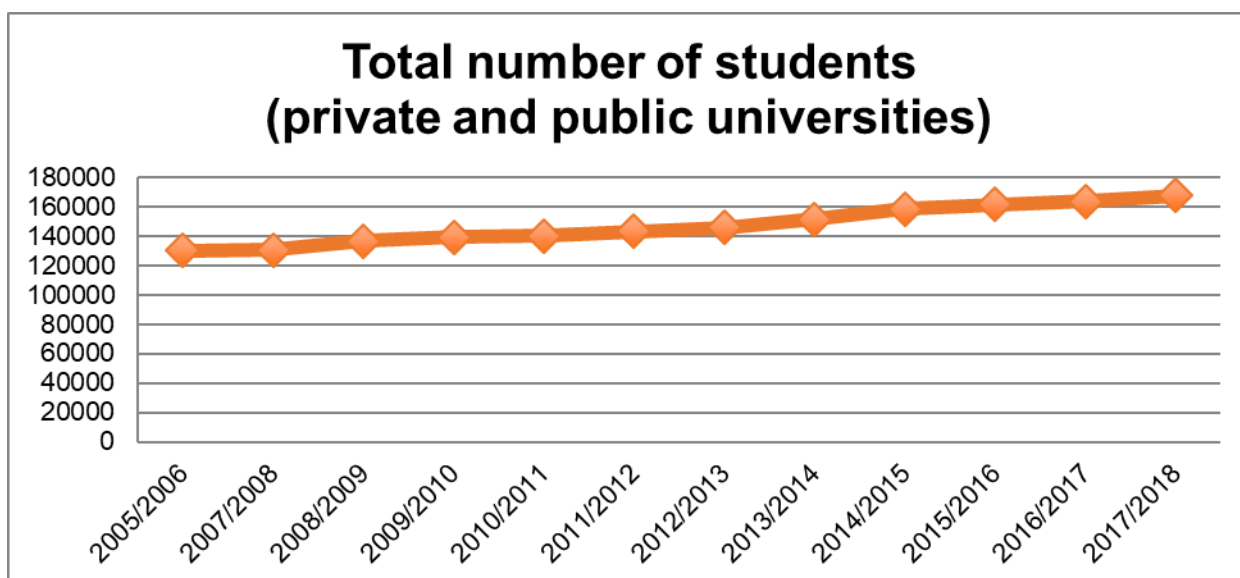
According to the graph it can be seen that the total number of students studying at a university in Azerbaijan rises for more than 29 percent and illustrate stable growing number for 13 academic years from 2005/2006 to 2017/2018. If state-owned and private universities will be analyzed separately, it could be easily seen that the total number of students studying at state universities exceed the number of students studying at private universities by more than 17 times. It's not surprising difference as there are 3 times more state universities in country than private but if the growth dynamics will be compared it may be brought out

**Total number of students
(public universities)**

**Total number of students
(private universities)**
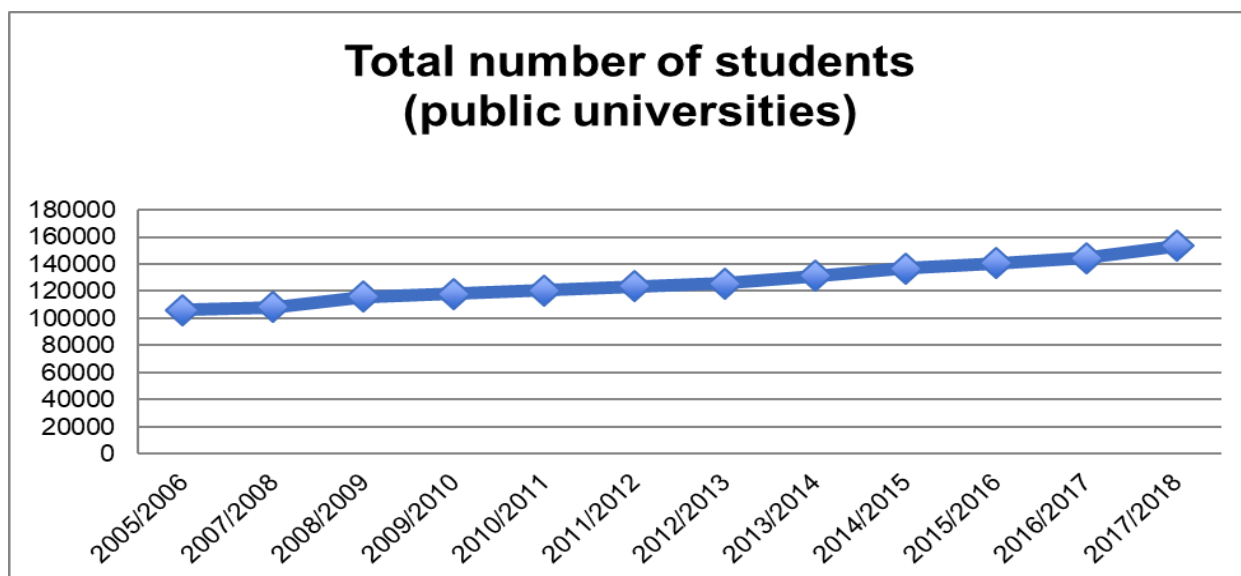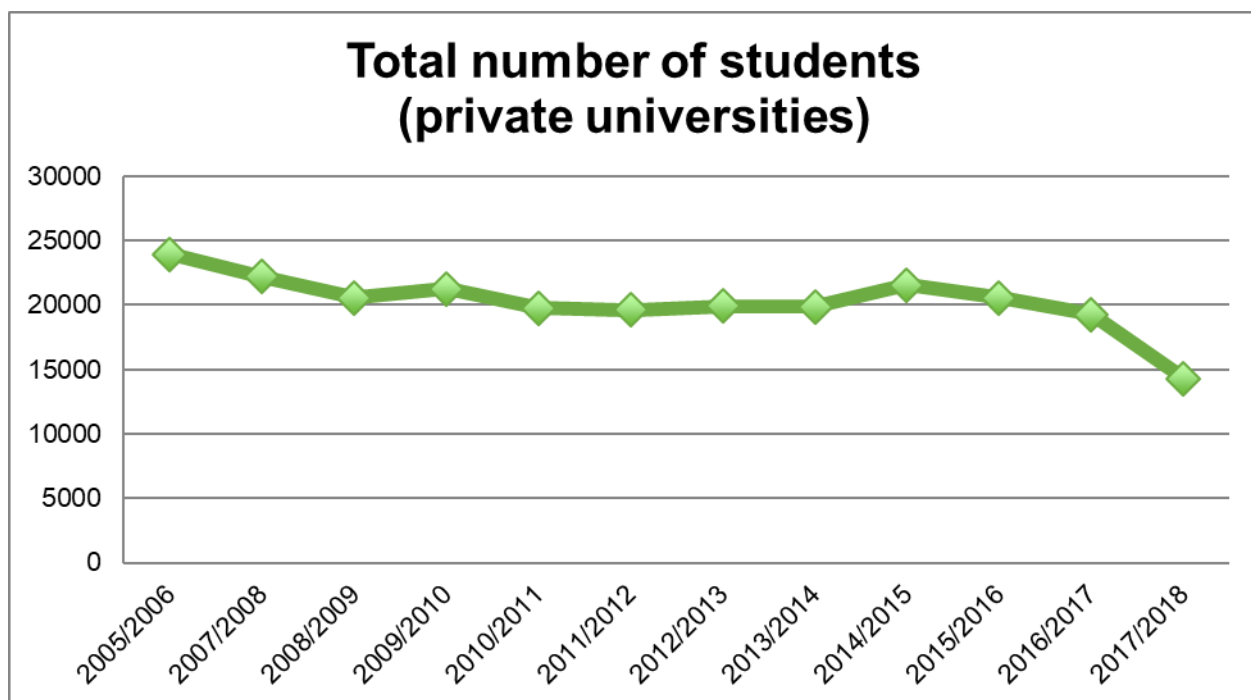
that generally total number of students at private universities have negative slope throughout the years while the number of students at state-owned universities contributed to significant growth in higher education market in country.

Azerbaijan State University of Economics Background. The Azerbaijan State University of Economics was founded in the first half of the 20th century as the part of Baku State University and reemerged later. It operated independently from 1934 and established itself as one of Azerbaijan's leading universities and most prominent universities in Caucasian region with four buildings in Baku and two branches in Zagatala and Darbant. Currently, the university has 9 faculties and educating highly qualified students in 21 different specialties. According to indicators provided by Azerbaijani State Statistical Committee for academic year 2017/2018 shows that the total number of students is more than 16 thousand which makes UNEC second most highly attended university in Azerbaijan after BSU and have more than 11 percent market share in the total number of students in Azerbaijan which is equal to 153,351. Based on statistics it can be seen that UNEC is the market leader in master students' preference which exceeds the

BSU by 2.5 times in the number of master students' application and the total number of alumnus for 2017/2018 academic year.

UNEC mainly specializes in majors as finance, accounting, business, and industrial administration, economics, marketing, management and so on. Currently, the university provides education in 4 languages which are Russian, Azerbaijani, English and Turkish.

Mission. The mission of the University of Economics is to conduct high-quality researches, provide excellent education and social services for a better future.

Strategic Objectives, Targets.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #1: TO BECOME A HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION CENTRE.

To continue increasing the number of solid applicants collecting high scores who pick the UNEC as their first choice university and raise the UNEC's average graduation score up to 500 by 2030.

- Continuously improve the teaching process to enable students to develop the necessary knowledge and skills. E.g. are sufficient qualifications, analytical and empirical analysis skills, critical and decision-oriented thinking, high academic writing skills, ability to use ICT, foreign language skills, leadership and teamwork skills.
- To ensure international accreditation of all UNEC educational programs by 2030.
- Continuously increase the scholarship opportunities for students and provide them with access to the campus by 2030.
- To become a university that offers the best distance education services in the country and region by 2030.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #2: TO BECOME A RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

- To bring master and doctorate education to a completely progressive world experience until 2030.

- To establish and organize at least 2 prestigious international scientific events (conferences, congresses, forums, etc.)

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #3: TO BECOME AN ENTERPRENEURIAL UNIVERSITY.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #4: TO BECOME THE LEADING UNIVERSITY IN SOCIAL SERVICES.

- To realize at least one national level social responsibility, project each year until 2030.

- To constantly improve the mechanisms of transferring of the knowledge and experience gained in UNEC to community.

- To provide educational services for at least five lifelong educational programs by 2030.

- To constantly improve the relationships with the graduates by 2030.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #5: TO BECOME AN INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY.

Based on strategic objectives by 2030 it could be seen that University of Economics aims at developing national university with international standards, become a market leader not only in domestic but also in regional competition. Organization of big scientific events, assurance of international accreditation and improvement of distant education seems like branding strategy that could attract foreign students.

Methodology

This chapter will give a detailed explanation of the methodology and research methods that have been used during information collection by the researcher with the quality criteria "Research methods for business students" book explains research methodology as the way how the research should be conducted, while research methods as the tools and techniques used for data collection (Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, 2003). Saunders gives the definition for the research as something that studied by people in order to find out the answer to their questions in a systematic way and expand their knowledge (2003).

Type of Research

Mainly, researches are divided into different classes regarding the nature of the problem that studied in the paper. Saunders (2003) states these classifications as descriptive, explanatory and exploratory. The ai conducting this research is to study the corporate brand building in higher education institutions and students' perception of the university brand in case of the University of Economy. The research approach of this paper could be referred to as descriptive. The research has been carried out by sending out a survey with close-ended questions to the main target group of the universities. Beside of primary data, secondary data from books and state websites have been used for ensuring the quality and reliability of the research. The previous studies and theories relevant to this topic have been analyzed and cited as the secondary data as well.

Research Design

There are many ways to illustrate the research formulation process. In order to show the research formulation process, the research onion model have been used below. The following model explicates the research design of the study:
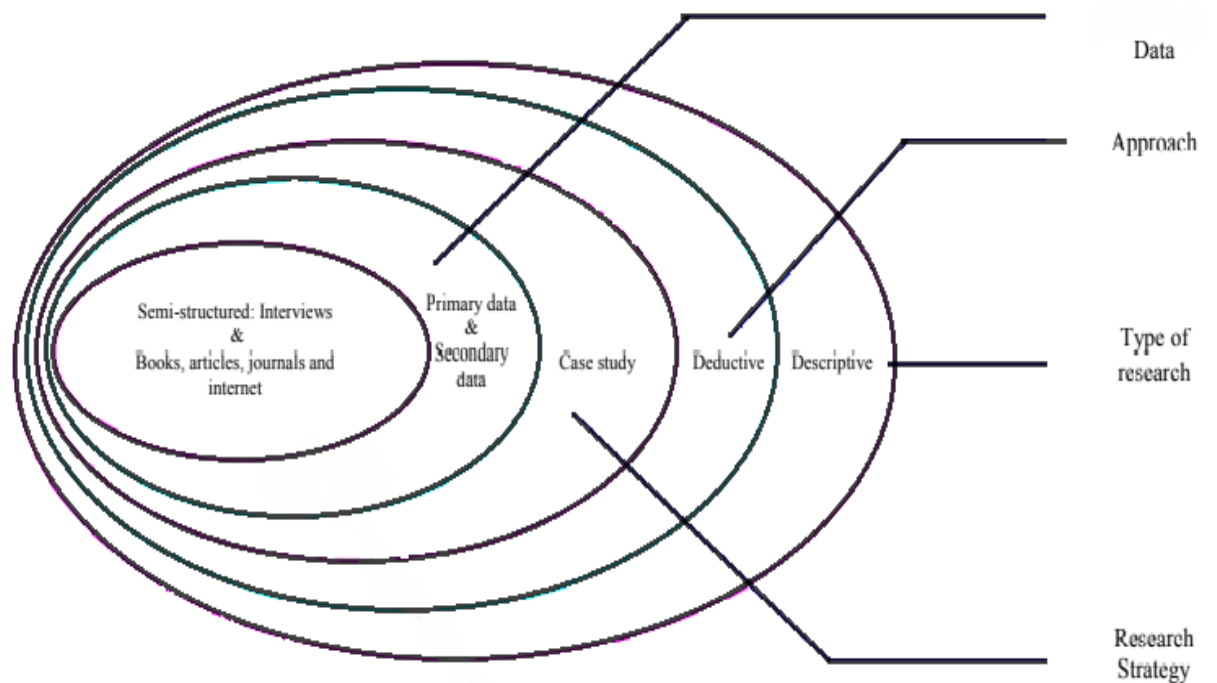
Research Approach

Inductive and deductive reasoning are the most commonly used approaches in economic literature while conducting researches. Saunders defines these two approaches in further ways "Inductive reasoning is a theory building process that starts with the observation of particular cases and examples and seeks a generalization of the phenomenon. Instead, deductive reasoning is a theory testing process which beginning with grounded theory and seeks for applicability of it for specific instances" (2003). According to previously stated sentence this paper conducted by deductive reasoning (Sanders et al.) as he defines the deduction as "a clear theoretical position that has been developed prior to the collection of data" (Saunders et al., 2003, p. 28). There are several reasons that deductive reasoning has been adopted in this research. There are two reasons for applying the deductive reasoning to this research- firstly, this paper examines the theory provided by previous studies and books by conducting the survey from the university target group and secondly, executing deductive approach usually takes less time than inductive approach (Saunders et al., 2003).

Bryman (2002) and Karlsson (2006) classified research methods into two types which are quantitative and qualitative. As this paper mainly studies the theoretical framework and make analyzes according to theoretical data instead of numerological data research could be stated as qualitative. Surveys, interviews or focus groups are the common tools used during data collection in qualitative research. Catherine Dawson in her studies claims (2002) that "An attempt to get an in-depth opinion from a participant is another characteristic of the qualitative approach." As this paper is summarized by conducting the survey (opinion-based), it could be named as qualitative.

A qualitative approach has been chosen because "it can be used to understand better any phenomenon which is little known and to gain more in-depth

information and new perspectives on the things that may be difficult to do quantitatively" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Since the purpose of this research is to analyze and understand the students' perception of the university brand and there are almost no studies done before regarding this topic researcher decided to choose the qualitative approach in order to gain more detailed knowledge and in-depth results.

Type of Research

Mainly, researches are divided into different classes regarding the nature of the problem that studied in the paper. Saunders (2003) states these classifications as descriptive, explanatory and exploratory.

Research Strategy

Saunders et al. (2003) define the research strategy as a plan which shows how the researcher will go about in order to answer the research questions. (Robinson, 2002, p. 178 cited in Saunders et al., 2003 p. 93). As, the aim of this research is to study the contemporary phenomenon and the type of research is descriptive and exploratory, the best tool for providing a clear vision about the topic is the case study.

Research Methods. The research had been accomplished by using both secondary and primary data collection methods. Primary research has been conducted through the survey and interview with target students in order to gain clear vision and careful analysis as there is no data regarding this topic in Azerbaijan. Secondary data has been collected with the purpose either to give a theoretical and conceptual framework for the research or to gain in-depth and reliable information from professionally written research. A large number of books and articles about brand building, branding, also corporate branding, as

well as internet resources and university documents, have been used as secondary data.

Primary Research. "Primary research involves the collecting of the information through direct investigation and observation." (Dr. Catherine Dawson, 2002. pp.40) As it has been stated before the main source of primary data were the surveys conducted among 120 students in different universities and interviews with undergraduate and graduate students of UNEC in different majors. The technique of the survey was an online questionnaire with close-ended answers.

Secondary Research. Secondary research describes the information and data collection from previous studies in a related topic (Dr. Catherine Dawson, 2002. pp.45). the main purpose of the use of secondary data was to expand the theoretical backgrounds and to gain a clear view of corporate branding and how does it influence the students' perception during university selection. Moreover, in pursuance to gain more detailed information about the topic number of case studies, articles, related academic studies and books have been studied and referred.

Validity and Reliability. Reliability and validity of data are the two main criteria that should always be concerned by researchers while carrying out research (Patton, 2001). Consequently, the adequate amount of time has been spent in order to be sure about the validity and reliability of the collected information by the researcher, thus to enhance the quality of the paper. "Validity is the extent to which the research findings accurately represent what is really happening in the situation" (Hussey J. & Hussey R., 1997). In order to get a high level of reliability and validity, all the answers of the target group and recorded tape with interviewees answers were saved.

Theoretical Framework

Brands are one of the important influencers in our life that appear almost everywhere from food people eat to places they attend and have a huge impact on the way we see our world. According to David Aaker who is one of the most famous professors in the marketing field with specialization in branding strategy (1996), brands help consumers to reduce risk while purchasing products and to find the desired product in crowded markets. No doubt that everybody would agree with the fact that brands are an inseparable part of person's daily life and influence his or her decisions on all levels; from purchasing water to choosing a college or university to apply for. As stated by Riezebos (2003), it is believed that the old Norse word "brandr" is a root of the English word of the brand and this word was carried out to England by Vikings and eventually became part of modern English vocabulary. There are several kinds of brands and diverse perspectives existing about the brand concept. Keller & Lehmann in their studies say that a brand can be referred as the most valuable asset of the company (2003), a name that influences customers, a symbol of the product or service that distinguish it from other products in the market. Overall, some studies explain a brand as a system that consists of three parts:

- products and service
- brand concept
- brand name and symbols (Kapferer, 2004)

There are many different definitions of brand and branding concepts, according to the American Marketing Association (AMA)brand is any feature that distinguishes one seller's product from other sellers' products. These features could be symbol, design, name or even term that associates with this particular

product. Nonetheless, one of the commonly-used definitions of the brand in the higher education institutions was introduced by Temple in 2006. According to Temple "the brand operates as a function of how well the institution performs in meeting the demand of its customers: it is the result of effective marketing" (p.17, 2006).   David Aaker author of one of the most popular books in universities Building Strong Brands explains brands equity as the set of assets or liabilities related to product's name, and symbols add or subtracts value respectively to the customer by using this particular well. But what is a product? As stated by Keller and Kotler anything that can be introduced to customers to meet their needs and wants in the form of physical goods, information, services, properties, ideas and even places (Kotler and Keller, 2015). Thus, based on their definition it could be said that anything from food, clothes, and courses to higher education institutions can be referred to as a product.

After defining the definitions of product and brand, it will be easier for the reader to understand the concept of branding and how does branding works. Actually, the concept of corporate branding is a new topic of discussions in the literature and only in the end of the 20th century, i.e. in the 90s the corporate branding concept was considered by some consultants in branding. Despite the fact that until the 90s of 20th-century corporate branding issues draw the attention of several researchers', the importance of corporate branding was getting the popular topic to study. According to Kepferer, the word "corporate" came from the Latin word "corpus." In Latin "corpus" means 'body.' As the companies consist of several business entities such as subsidiaries, networks, it was realized that the corporate branding could increase the meanings and the depth of business by uniting them under one single identity (Kapferer, 2001; Knox &Bickerton, 2003)

Branding is the science of aligning what a person actually thinks about your product with what you want that person to think about it (Jay Baer, The Now Revolution). Bryan Eisenberg in his book Waiting for Your Cat To Bark explains branding as the final result of all the "experiences" that your buyers have with your product (publisher HarperCollins Leadership, 2007). According to Ashley Friedlein, the president of Econsultancy "Brand is how your company is perceived by someone and branding is about shaping that perception in this person's mind."

As claimed by Aaker brand is a specific symbol or name that helps the customers to identify the product of one seller and distinguish it from goods or services offered to the market by his competitors (1991). Nowadays, in competitive markets where buyers are offered similar products brand is something that makes similar products unique. In another words branding is the process that gives meaning to the particular service or good in buyer's mind and by doing so help them to identify the company's products quicker than its competitors that could be the reason for choosing that product over another. Moreover, sellers want their customers to buy their products not only once but make it regularly that's why besides of concentrating on forming brand recognition companies also should build strong emotional ties with buyers (Park et al., 1986)

As the main purpose of this research is to analyze the students' perception of university branding case of the University of Economics firstly, we should analyze the students' behavior and marketing influence on students in order to come to a conclusion. In this paper, students are referred to as the customers of Higher Education institutions. Commonly, in the Oxford English Dictionary customer is defined as a person who buys products from a business . As the students pay their education fees and universities provide services regarding

their demands to Bunzel it made them be considered as customers (2007). Accordingly, in order to alter their consumer behavior requirement, higher educational institutions should meet customers' or in this case students' demands. Through analyzing the buying behavior of the students', universities could better qualify their branding strategies. According to Romanazzi et al. in order to be market leader clear identification of student university choosing behavior is a crucial part of strength and weaknesses analysis (2010).

Rising competition among educational institutions especially universities management is responsible for identifying and focusing on factors that attract students' interests and influence their choices the most. In their study Pratt and Evans (2002) underline university's ranking, academic reputation, geographic location, cost, and availability of the programs as key components of a good university. According to many researchers, the quality of education that HEI provides is the most important factor that students consider while choosing a university for admission because they believe that high-quality education provides great opportunities for finding high-salary jobs in future (Thein et al. 2000). From another side Baksh and Hoyt (2011) follow the idea that socioeconomic status, location, student ability, cost factors, financial aid, and institutional attributes are also undeniable characteristics that students take into consideration while making decisions by comparing the universities while Kotler and Fox stated student behavior reshape the higher educational institution since the student is the person who makes decisions (1995). As it was mentioned before students are customers for universities and businesses, try their best to meet customers wants and needs.

Eagle and Brennan discussed that the students had become the actual customers for the universities and their importance in educational marketing (2007). As the students' role in HEI started to increase, the university management should

concentrate on their demand and the way a university can meet student's need and want by planning strategies to rise the student satisfactions (Gillespie Finney and Zachary Finney, 2010). Moreover, Bacila, Moisescu, Tirca, and Pop described that the higher education institution management should find out the factors that influence the students' satisfaction. Student performance and behavioral drivers also should be identified in order to control student behavior in university (2008). In order to get to know the students' behavior, the institution can use the five stages of consumer behavior which are: 1 - searching information, 2- purchasing product or service, 3- using, 4- evaluating and 5- arranging (Enache, 2011). By using the above-mentioned five stages of customers' behavior, the managerial representatives of the university can create a basis for the opportunity to analyze which stages have to be changed in order to satisfy student's demands. Perez, Diaz Meneses, Beerli Palacio consider that students' satisfaction is a good variable for measuring the effectiveness of provided service in this case education for the price charged from students and regular controlling is done it will be easier for universities to detect weakness and improve them as soon as they occur without losing reputation and time.

To Razak et al. (2008) pursuing good performance and meeting a certain level of expectations drives from university's need to satisfy its customers (2008). The level of students' satisfaction is strongly related to the quality of education at a particular university. (Jiewantoa, Laurensb, and Nellohc, 2012). According to Kotler and Armstrong satisfaction is an emotion that emerges from how much the product or service match buyers' perception and expectations (2011). Identification of the student's satisfaction with "purchased" product, in this case, the education can be tested by analyzing the student's performance in his or her education and how much effort is put. Some studies follow the idea that educational institution and student build mutual relations; thus, students will

provide good performance ad effort as much as university provide good product or service (Naik, Gantasala and Prabhakar, 2010). In order to gain good competitive position universities should concentrate on observation of students' satisfaction level and make improvements if needed. Kanuk and Schiffman (2010) define satisfaction as the comparison of consumers' expectations and perceptions. To attract new customers and maintain the satisfaction of the current student, the higher education institution's management should take students behavior as an essential factor in order to satisfy student's need and want (2013).

Higher Educational Institution Marketing

Using marketing strategies and tools in university management is one consequence of the rising awareness of marketing's countless benefits no matter of the operation field. According to Kotler and Lee (2007) describe marketing as the best instrument for any type of businesses aiming at delivering real value the consumers. To Filip broad application of marketing strategies within high education institutions is considered as the best way for improving effectiveness and efficiency of the educational system (2012) which in its turn lead to long-term competitive advantage (Nicolescu, 2009). One of the first researches that studied marketing in HEI was done by Kotler and Fox in 1985 and state that marketing the educational system is the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of the study programs carefully designed and built order to reach organizational goals.

Even if marketing and corporate branding concepts initially were developed by profit-generating organizations for increasing the income and market share, it started to increase the popularity among higher educational organizations also broadly. Thus, as a result of increasing competition in marketplace universities made huge steps in the adaptation of marketing strategies and establishing

special teams for that. They understood the importance of marketing tools and shaping the positive perceptions and associations of the university (Brookes, 2003; Chapleo, 2010).

Not all of the organizations can accept changes and higher education institutions are not exceptions. Even if the rising role of marketing cannot be unseen some of the universities still resist the change, that's why management should create an environment for adaption of marketing strategies and tools in order to eliminate the perception that universities don't need to apply them within the educational system. Moreover, after resistance, higher education institutions' managers are probably coming to the conclusion that not even traditional marketing tools usage could guarantee competitive success in the market. According to this, more than 80 per cent of university marketers seems to understand that not even traditional marketing methods are enough to reach admission targets (Gauthier, 2012). In this regard, applying corporate branding instruments in the higher education system seems to have a long-run solution in forming and developing university image among their stakeholders i.e.students, parents and other universities in the market.

University Brand. Marketing specialists in the educational field have reached the conclusion that higher education institutions should maintain or develop a unique image in order to have a competitive advantage in the increasingly competitive market like educational (Ivy, 2001). In 2004, Eccles stated in his research that HEIs 'must regularly and consistently communicate their message, and be sure that their values are known to each potential stakeholder groups, both internal and external.' Integrating communication and branding is the next step of HEIs in establishing their identity as these institutions' awareness on the benefits of effective communication of the same message across all divisions of the school is increasing (Hayes, 2007). Furthermore, branding is one of the best

tools for switching the consumer's focus from price to other features, so corporate branding can be seen as a good opportunity for higher education institutions for generating good profit, thus solving financial problems (Aaker, 1991). In other words, good brand name and reputation could be the reason for students to choose university relatively higher prices.

As it was stated by Bennett and Ali-Choudhury in HEI market good university is defined by its unique characteristics, its capacity to satisfy students' needs as it generates trust in its ability to deliver high-quality education and helps potential customers to make smart choices when applying (2009). In simpler words, Bulotaite (2003) explains that the university brand has the purpose of building, managing and enriching the associations and images provoked by the university. Elaborating on that, 10-component list of a university brand was established as it mentioned below: employability of its alumnus, educational identity, reputation, institution's location, visual imagery, available courses, the general environment, sport and social facilities, learning environment and community links (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett and Savani, 2009). One of the most frequently considered features during comparison of universities is the number of prosperous graduates in his or her field or faculty.

According to Bulotaite in contrast to other businesses, in university markets, the main purpose of corporate brand building is to enhance loyalty rather than increase the profit (2003). Furthermore, higher education institutions prefer to have good reputation instead of branding (Chapleo, 2004) because reputation shows the image that university built naturally by providing good services and products rather than the image gained through the different marketing channels. Some studies even show that the strategies that are known as corporate branding, in higher education institutions would be accepted as "reputation management and good public relations" (Temple, 2006)

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006) believe that branding of universities is a new practice that's why there is wide space for further investigation and development of new theories and tools for branding, while in 2005 Maringe followed the opposite view and says that theory and practice regarding higher education branding are limited. Previously conducted researches show that the HEI image has a strong direct and indirect impact on students' satisfaction as well as on their loyalty to the university brand (Alves and Raposo, 2010).

Brand Image. Brand is accepted to think about as a word, personal mark, sentence, logo or mixture of all of these items which are adopted by an organization to distinguish their goods or services from competitors' in the market. "brands incorporate items like the logo, design, smell, shape, sound, color and communication – these factors help to differentiate the brand, although some are often more prospectus than others" (Van der Walt, 1995). Branding is a complex model, and it became more crucial each other day in the marketing field. According to Rosenbaum-Elliott, Elliott, Percy, and Pervan (2015), brand management offers manageability and development for an organization to expand the value of the brand in long-run. Thus, the consumers' experience and knowledge about a particular product are referred to as a brand. Brand image has been explained many times in different researches.

Brand image is awareness about a brand as cast back by the brand communication developed in customers' minds and with the same concept David Aaker defines a brand image as a value that developed in a meaningful way (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 2008). Brand image is the perception of the customer about a specific brand, and it reproduces the subjective or objective value which currently exists in the customer's head regarding the brand.

The brand image also created by the customer's experience with the product or service of the organization. (Koubaa, 2008) Thus, the customer's perception while purchasing a brand transforms into the brand image because studies believe that a brand would create the foundation for brand image. Brand image can spread to others by the surrounding customer environment by channels such as advertising, user review and during communication with peers (Biel, 1993). It often automatically developed and cannot be created because it is about consumer's mentality towards the value that he or she receives from purchasing this product or service in the form of for example functionality, ease to use and good's appeal.

In his studies, Koubaa says the metaphor that "products are made by companies and brands are made by customer" (2008) as it can be seen the organization should always maintain the positive perception and brand image. Marketing tools such as packaging, advertising and promoting can be used as these communication tools could help a company to promote the positive brand image to consumers and as well as to improve the brand value (Malik et al., 2010).Consequently, for marketer players, despite of marketing strategies that companies are applying, Zhang states that the main aim of their marketing activities is to shape the consumer's attitude and perception toward a brand, establish the brand image in potential buyers' mind, and stimulate consumer's purchasing behavior of the brand, in order to increase sales, maximize the market share and develop positive brand equity (2015).

Brand Identity. Brand identity is all about how the brand wants or pursue to be perceived by customers (Aaker ,1996). Meanwhile, the brand image is how actually the consumers perceive a brand.if explain in other words, brand identity is an aspiration of people towards the brands (Shahrin Saad et al., 2017) . The strong brand identity helps the companies to develop the trust by the customer,
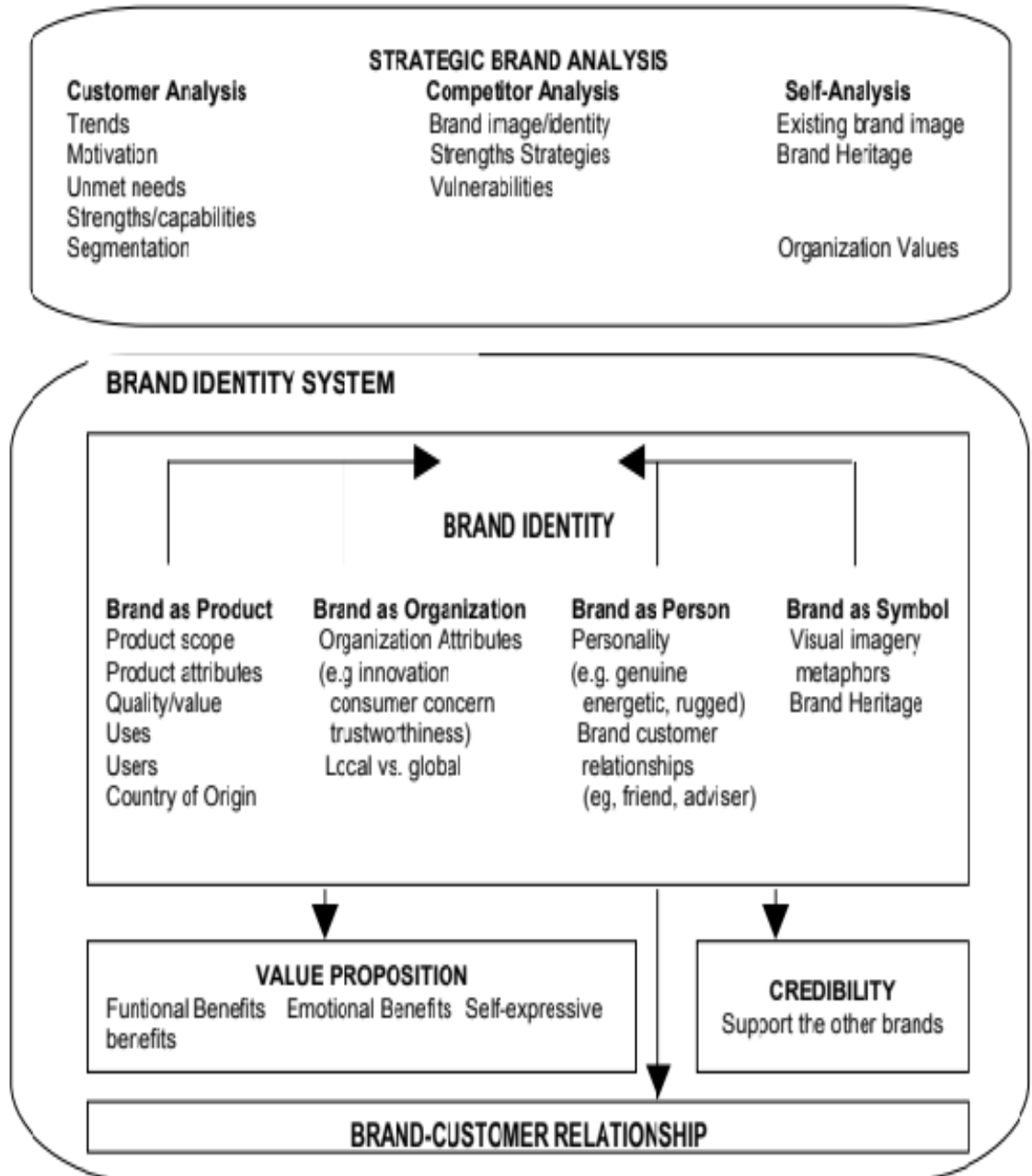
based on what experience customer had by purchasing this brand, in order to differentiate the products from its competitors (Ghodeswar, 2008). As a result, researchers assumed the brand image the same as a brand identity because both give a promise about the product to the consumers. Aaker believes that a brand is more than just a product. In Aaker's brand, identity planning model process starts with strategic brand analysis which consists of consumer analysis, competitor analysis, and self-analysis. Aaker and Ghodeswar follow the idea that there are 4 elements of brand identity-forming process and each company should implement all of these four elements in order to distinguish and enrich brand identity (1995; 2008), while Schmitt and Simonson state that companies should only consider all of these elements but not obliged to implement them (1997). Wheeler in his turn state that, the possibility that one or more elements would be used by a company depends on how the brand wants to be perceived by people (2012).

Brand Personality. Aaker (1997), explains brand personality as "the human characteristics associated with a brand." The brand could be portrayed in the same way as a human personality. Brand personality becomes more important as it will provide a competitive advantage. In order to gain more mature brands, brand personality is an effective strategy to implement (D'Astous and Boujbel, 2007). Accordingly, brand personality is simply human characteristics that companies apply to their brands in order to be more understood by people and shape their attitude and perception toward the brand.

Jennifer Aaker (1997) in her research comes out with "the big five" dimensions of brand personality that were created by taking into foundation the real human personality. The big five model developed by Jennifer Aaker (1997) involving brand personality with characteristics such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and sustainability. These characteristics could be changed

according to the industry or the product type that the company operates in or produces respectively. Aaker thinks that more human characteristics can be applied to the brand that similar to the personality of the actual person for consumers to accept the brands as the person (Aaker, 1997). These would indirectly affect the consumers' perception of the brand personally (Rauschnabel et al., 2016). Sponsoring activities, age of the brand, logo, non-product activities such as celebrity endorsements, company image, country of origin, and advertising style, even CEO reputation or the type of the product or service itself could influence the way how people perceive the brand personality (D'Astous and Boujbel, 2007).

To sum up "The Jennifer Aaker big five brand personality framework" could help an organization to gain more understanding of people, perception, and attitude towards the brand. Brand personality could distinguish the product from other competitors in the market. Briefly, to achieve the brand equity, the organization should form a positive brand personality (Aaker, 2009).

STRATEGIC BRAND ANALYSIS

Customer Analysis	Competitor Analysis	Self-Analysis
Trends	Brand image/identity	Existing brand image
Motivation	Strengths Strategies	Brand Heritage
Unmet needs	Vulnerabilities	
Strengths/capabilities		
Segmentation		Organization Values

BRAND IDENTITY SYSTEM

BRAND IDENTITY

Brand as Product	Brand as Organization	Brand as Person	Brand as Symbol
Product scope	Organization Attributes	Personality	Visual imagery
Product attributes	(e.g innovation	(e.g. genuine	metaphors
Quality/value	consumer concern	energetic, rugged)	Brand Heritage
Uses	trustworthiness)	Brand customer	
Users	Local vs. global	relationships	
Country of Origin		(eg, friend, adviser)	

VALUE PROPOSITION
Funtional Benefits   Emotional Benefits   Self-expressive benefits

CREDIBILITY
Support the other brands

BRAND-CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP

Brand Building. One of the commonly used models of the brand building was established by Urde in 2003. Urde's corporate brand building model is based on core-values. Is his book he claims that the brand building process goes both internally and externally at the same time and shape brand equity. The main purpose of internal brand-building is to understand the importance of brand for the corporation and be committed to this brand. Urde refers to the internal brand building process as internal brand identity which mainly consists of building a vision, corporate ad core values. The external brand building which in its turn concentrates on shaping mutual relationships with customers. The aim of external branding is forming customer values and building a relationship between customer and brand personality. In order to build strong relationship between them company should introduce that kind of product which will be more interesting to buyer than its substitutes in marketplace and make it important for them to buy this particular product (Laurent and KApferer, 1992) which could be achieved by building strong brand awareness and positive brand associations (Aaker,1991). In case if a brand image is attractive to customer's interaction between company and them, could grow into customer loyalty (Higgins, 1987; Gronroos, 1995). Urde says that brand building model forms during long-lasting relations between supplier and buyer.

In 2005 Majken Schultz developed a new 5-step model for corporate brand building. Those steps are:

- Stating
- Linking
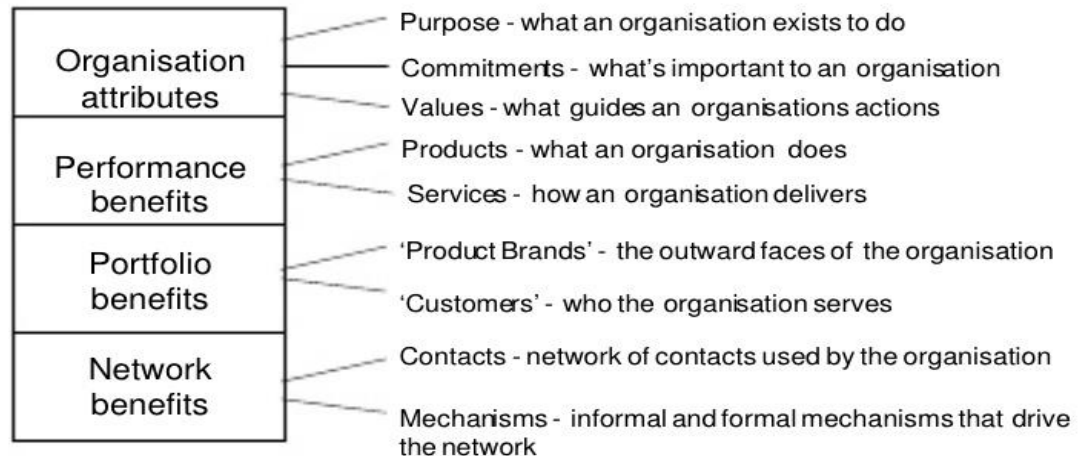- Involving
- Integrating
- Monitoring

The first stage of Schultz's brand building process refers to stating the corporate brand and linking it to the organization's vision. The second stage is linking the company's vision to its image and culture the main question during this stage is " how can company reorganize behind its brand?". The third stage is involving internal and external stakeholders through image and culture. The fourth stage is integrating culture, vision, and image for shaping the corporate brand. And the last stage of Schultz' corporate branding process is monitoring. (Majken Schultz, M.A. Yun, F.F. Csaba Copenhagen Business School Press, 2005).

In contrast to Urde and Schultz theories, Knox and Bickerton's corporate brand building model consists of 6 conventions which are:

- Brand Context
- Brand Construction
- Brand Confirmation
- Brand Consistency
- Brand Continuity
- Brand Conditioning

And Corporate Branding that is forming with the integration of these abovementioned conventions. In this model the first stage is known as a brand context which is shaped by corporate culture, vision, image and competition environment. These elements help to define the strengths and weaknesses of the

company. At the second stage the brand positioning framework is building.

Organisation attributes	Purpose - what an organisation exists to do
	Commitments - what's important to an organisation
	Values - what guides an organisations actions
Performance benefits	Products - what an organisation does
	Services - how an organisation delivers
Portfolio benefits	'Product Brands' - the outward faces of the organisation
	'Customers' - who the organisation serves
Network benefits	Contacts - network of contacts used by the organisation
	Mechanisms - informal and formal mechanisms that drive the network

Corporate Branding in Higher Education. Balmer in his work on student brand identification stresses that corporate branding within the higher education institutions is the special one in terms of the relationship of "universities or business school and its students." This is because, "are not so many customers but are; moreover, life-long organizational members of a corporate brand community." (Balmer, J.M.T. & Liao M., 2007, p. 357).Bunzel (2007) also states that in order to improve the rankings in charts universities started to brand themselves broadly. According to Paden and Stell, there are several reasons for that first reason is to build a new corporate image, the second reason is to improve already existing name awareness, brand associations and students' perceptions. Whatever the motivation for branding is, universities use different practices in order to improve it: most commonly is the improvement of academic quality, scholarships, perks for athletes or unique academic programs and faculties (Kurz et al., 2008).

Benefits of Branding a University Since many decades branding have been used by organizations to distinguish their product offerings in the competitive markets. Branding concepts emerge in higher education institutions as a reflection of how well the university meets the demands of its customers: "it is the result of effective marketing "(Temple, 2006, p. 17). Since clients' daily lives getting more and more active phase and rushed, the role of brands which simplify the decision-making process and eliminates the risk of wrong selection is highly valued (Suri and Monroe, 2003).

For Erdem (1998) good branding can also help consumers to make a decision by showing a certain level of quality. Simms and Trott in their studies say that actually brand exists at an emotional level; thus its appeal to customers based on the logo, symbols, associations and perceptions (2006). For Fournier, it is not out of the question that in some cases, branding is the tool that can build relationships with consumers (1998). Corporate branding has also been a good strategy for organizations with labor-intensive services, as they do not sell physical products so customers can not actually try its quality or other visible features that attract them (Berry and Lampo, 2004).

If the literature in higher education branding will be compared to the research papers and books in another commercial product branding, it appears that first topic has limited studies which highlight that this issue is relatively new and university branding is complicated. In 2006 studies Jevons suggests the universities to make clear what is their brand's meaning and what is the feature that distinguishes them from other education providers in the marketplace. Curtis et al. and Whisman in two different studies follow the idea that higher education branding approaches differ from traditional branding approaches; thus universities should apply "inside-out" practices which mean internal components must be involved more than external. Conducted studies compare the successful

and unsuccessful university branding cases and in consequence, came to result that most university management struggles to develop and apply good branding strategies (2009). Generally, university branding is a complicated process, and it is hard to develop one strategy that could fit all educational institutions (Chapleo, 2010).

Even if the higher education institution branding is a complex process, benefits that organizations in this field face cannot be unseen. In his book, Sevier (p.46) states that universities with better branding strategies interest "more and better students, more full and fuller-paying students, more sustainable students, better faculty and staff, more donated dollars, more media attention, more research dollars, and more strategic partners'' (2007)

Results from successful university branding campaigns include: increased admission applications and better student qualifications (LipmanHearne, 2011); increased retention rates for professors and students; increased faculty recruitment, recognition and donors (Moore, 2010); and increased graduation rates (Lockwood and Hadd, 2007; University of Rhode Island, 2011).

Further, such campaigns can be targeted to different university constituencies with varying images and have been shown to be effective, particularly as many universities are somewhat different from other organizations in that they tend to have two distinct identities – academic and athletic (Alessandri et al., 2006). According to Winston and Judson et al. branding initiatives of public and private higher education institutions differ from each another based on the desire for growth, the place for branding in corporate strategy and vision(2002; 2009)

Examples of Recent University Branding Efforts In this chapter, several notable higher education institutions branding initiatives highlighted by Joseph in his studies done in 2012 will be discussed. Oberlin university changed its slogan to

"Fearless" instead of "Think one person can change the world? So do we" in his studies Dumain (2006) discussed this step as a practice used to improve the perception and awareness of students about the university. Since 2006, The University of Rhode Island started the annual branding advertisement and stated the reasons as "improving student recruitment, involvement and graduation rates; improving the financial situation of the University; creating a more inclusive environment; and improving research and outreach support (University of Rhode Island, 2006). The University of Southern Colorado changed its name to Colorado State University at Pueblo, the aim of this change was to show the potential customers the internal changes as a number of faculties, new academic programs, and the name change was chosen as the best strategy to show it(Finder,2005). Arcadia University was also among the universities that changed its name. Historically, this university started its operations as women's university, thus, in word with the rising popularity of gender equality issues they wanted to underline this feature (2005)

The University of Maryland' s branding campaign, 'Fear the Turtle,' was only the athletic slogan, but now represents all aspects of the university (University of Maryland, 2008) ' Fear the Turtle ' was shown through billboards, trailers, and airport advertising displays (Tam, 2006).Results of the campaign were positive, the University has gain wide awareness and increase in student admissions. Louisiana State University (LSU) also started a new campaign in order to increase international awareness by introducing a new logo and updated website. They chose a modern and young advertising style and created a music track performed by Louisiana State University students who then started to appear on TV (Louisiana State University, 2006). The University of Tennessee was also the one who used national media channels as part of its branding strategy and advertised its new logo through billboards, television, and

newspapers (University of Tennessee, 2008). All of these efforts seem to be done in order to increase the students' admission.

Studies of the students' perceptions and reasons behind their university selection were hard to establish and started to be researched many decades ago. Thus, Wicker, 1969; Bowers and Pugh, 1973; Vaughn et al.,1978 tried to answer the questions about the criteria for institution selection, the desire to attend a particular university and overall students' attitudes and perceptions.

Imperial College Case Study. Chief executive of OPX Frances Jackson shared his experience with Imperial College UK. As a branding agency with university clients OPX was working with Imperial College for the last two years in order to position it as the " intelligent business" higher education institution. The first step of this long process was creating a new visual identity. Thanks to the wide range of contemporary marketing instruments. Introduction of new branding strategies to the university website played an important role in increasing student admission and signing new corporate partnerships. Since September 2015, the number of applications for the full-time MBA was two times more than those for 2014-15th academic year and numbers of students increased by 20 per cents across all educational programs. New branding affected the university not only directly by students' number of profit generated from tuition fees but also indirectly from signed agreements with other organizations such as hotel groups for 10 years period and more than 2 million pounds. Imperial College Business School mainly concentrates on education of both business and technology combined. The brand identity that OPX created was planned to underline the school's main features – dynamic and data – through the slogan: "Imperial means Intelligent Business."" You only have to compare the typical corporate brand mark with the overly ornate, often heraldic brand marks that we tend to

see in higher education to get some sense of how much work there is to be done in this sector.

In a modern world where digital technologies are everywhere, visual identity should provide more functions than distinguishing the product from its rivals but also it has to be flexible enough in order to function in a variety of online and offline media channels. Nowadays, customers spend their time and search any information on devices with small screen, so universities should take into account the images, sizes, colors, fonts, and copies that will fit any kind of social media while making orders to designers they should also consider that online marketing and offline marketing work in different ways. This is exactly what Frances Jackson say OPX pay attention during work with Imperial College. In their work digital marketing was the first and most important approach for building brand identity. They developed a basic visual language that can be used in different platforms and perfectly work for website icons and video animations.

Even if the dean at Imperial College Business School, was enthusiastic about applying new branding strategies, it's not enough because the level of enthusiasm should be equally spread among all levels of workers. Different tests according to brand mark, face-to-face conversations with students, graduates and staff and seminars on how should brand mark used were used (The Guardian, 2017)

Probably one of the most commonly studied cases in university branding was

Warwick University Case Study. As it was previously mentioned the most commonly presented case regarding higher education branding is that of Warwick University (Melewar & Akel). Researches think that the rising popularity and success of Warwick University which before was the same as in any other new educational institution is because of branding, but due to other strategic decisions (Temple, 2006) . From the 1 March 2002 Warwick

University started to apply new branding strategies. Management decided to communicate the visual identity throughout the 30 different academic departments. By starting the placement of the individual departments' own logo next to the Warwick logo they solved some issues with departments. The old crest was completely taken away from the brand logo and replaced with the modern one. They believed that knowledge of the stakeholders would help the university to apply the strategy thus efficiently, stakeholders were divided into two distinct groups first is internal stakeholders such as staff, students and second is external. Because of an increase in international students the British character was emphasized in the communication to the international arena capitalizing on English as a main language of commerce. One of the most prominent decisions as a relatively new university was the establishment of the collaborations with different businesses. But Warwick University has been criticized for being too business minded, making both students and teachers feel like they came to the company instead of the university. (Melewar and Akel, 2005). Despite the criticisms if we will look at the international business rankings due to successful strategies in 2009 Warwick was rated on 6th place out of 113 UK universities.

Examples of Recent University Branding in Azerbaijan. Rising local and international competition push the Azerbaijani Universities to broadly apply branding strategies in order to position and differ their products and win the competition in higher education markets by doing so. Every university wants to become the first selection of potential customers, because the more the number of students is the higher profit university generates. Better financial conditions mean that the institution has more chance to realize its academic projects. Either public or private universities operate with the revenues that come from students' tuition fees, but government scholarships are also an important source of funding

for state universities. Depending on the score that student gain on the national university entry exam, she or he can get the chance to study for free. Students that have higher scores on exams got their tuition fees paid by the government, while students with lower scores have to pay it by themselves.

As it was mentioned before tuition fees are the most important source of financing both for private and public universities that's why applying the branding and rebranding strategies could be a good way for attracting the students and differentiating their products and services from its competitor. Implementation of Bologna accord to Azerbaijani educational system, made the branding process more intense and crucial. After the implementation of this system Azerbaijani students started to take advantage of the expansion of mobility to Europe and choose to continue higher education there. Even if these conditions affected the level of education and know-how positively, Azerbaijani universities were the one who got affected in a negative way. Thus, in addition to local rivals in parallel they started to compete with international universities also. As the Higher Education Institution branding is a new concept for Azerbaijani Universities, the resources, academic and empirical studies according to this topic and overall students' perception and decision making are limited. The e of this study is to analyze the student's perception in university branding and which criteria are essential for students in the university selection process. Because of that, this paper aims to clarify that through which channels students at the universities gained information about the universities they are studying at and whether there are certain factors that are significantly important than others for students' first choice for university.

Examples

Despite that the higher education branding is a new concept in Azerbaijan but there are already some examples of branding and rebranding experiences of Azerbaijani universities. It will be to the point to start this chapter with the University of Economics as this paper studies the student's perception of branding in case of UNEC.

The Azerbaijan State University of Economics or as it is previously was known ASEU started to implement rebranding instruments broadly. Since 2016 it has changed its old logo to the new one and started to use new colors in its campaigns. But the main thing that university has changed is its abbreviation, thus, the university that was known as ASEU for several decades, now is called as UNEC which is the combination of words University and Economics. Since then the Azerbaijan State University of Economics is using UNEC as a trademark. By implementing new branding strategies, the main goal of the university was to develop the reflection of its high-quality education in the field of economics and business and also create the good opportunities for its students and graduates by being associated with UNEC.

Creating a brand-new vision, mission and core values was the first step in the rebranding process. The main purpose of adaptation of new branding initiatives is to position itself as the highest ranked university of its field not only in Azerbaijan but in the whole region as well as to become the students' first choice during the university selection process. In order to improve the position in competition with foreign universities, UNEC started a recruiting campaign to attract young and foreign-educated Azerbaijani lecturers to develop a good image in public as young staff recruiter and applicant of foreign education in home-country for lower prices. As a consequence of successful strategy more than hundreds of young Azerbaijanis that studied in foreign universities get employed as lecturers and administrative staff at the University of Economics.

After one year, UNEC entered the list of top 150-200 universities in regional rankings. UNEC's vision is to enter the list of top 500 universities in the world until its 100th anniversary. Branding process at UNEC is also aimed to contribute to Azerbaijan's global competitiveness and support the sustainable development of Azerbaijan. According to Muradov and Bagirzade (2016, p. 18-41) competitive environment among higher education institutions and advance education infrastructure effect the country's competitiveness in a positive way in the global market. UNEC provides an academic degree in bachelor, master, and doctoral programs in 4 languages: English, Russian, Azerbaijani, and Turkish (UNEC, 2017). Another national higher education institution that adopted new branding initiatives is ADA University which was established as an Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2006 aimed at the training of Azerbaijani diplomats. However, shortly after it decided to expand its education programs and services to several additional fields and majors. Currently, ADA University offers bachelor and master programs in four directions which are: the School of Public and International Affairs, School of Business, School of Education, and School of IT and Engineering. ADA's branding model "an innovative model of learning, a unique setting for collaborative research in a variety of fields – already making ADA University a center of learning in an increasingly strategic geopolitical region of which Azerbaijan is central. " (2018). To some extent ADA university could be named as an innovator in Azerbaijani university market, as it was the first university which established English as instruction language and students' admission with international examination standards as SAT and IELTS while other universities still stick on national entry exams. One of the first branding approaches to higher education institutions in Azerbaijan was adapted by Khazar University. Khazar University was established in 1991 in Baku and is considered

as the first private university in Azerbaijan. Khazar University offers a wide variety of programs from humanities to biomedical engineering. First private higher education institution in Azerbaijan is Khazar University as well as the first applicant of the credit system to measure and assess students' work and effort during their study programs (Khazar University, 2018). UNEC is not the only public university which applies rebranding strategies. Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University or Azerbaijan State Oil Academy as it was previously know put into application many rebranding tools since 2016. New logo and name abbreviation introduced to the same public year. The aim of the university rebranding was to make the main university destination for study programs in different fields of industry, particularly in the oil and gas sector (ASOIU, 2018). Furthermore, ASOIU provides several academic programs in collaboration with American, French and German university. This step could be stated as the true expression of the universal education system application in Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

Previous studies on factors that influence the students college/university selection and perception of higher educational institution suggested that parents take into consideration academic, financial and geographic factors were although students commonly rely on cultural, social and peers/family recommendations during making university choices (Bowers and Pugh, 1973). Another research came to the decision that there are several main factors that influence a student in determining which college to apply (Aurand et al. 2006). Those factors are:

- Image or reputation
- Cost
- Location
- Offered majors

Even though, most studies follow the idea that academic reputation of the university is an important criterion for consumers, according to Conard and Conards (2000) the ability to find a high-salary job after graduation, latest technologies and how others perceive the particular university are clearly illustrating the level of the academic reputation of the higher educational institution. In his studies Joseph (2012) divides research on student's perception and factors that affect their decisions into two categories; firs factors for state university students, and second factors for private university students. The top five criteria for public institution admission were quality of education, accreditation of university diploma, academic environment, scholarship opportunities and university location. In private universities students are seeking approximately the same criteria, but also university reputation and prestige are more important than its location and academic environment.

Survey

During research survey and interviews reflected that the Azerbaijani students take into account wide range of criteria during university admission. Generally, there is no big difference between Azerbaijani and foreign students' university selection behavior. The survey which was answered by 120 students showed that the quality of education, availability of program, majors and foreign languages, university image, prestige, university reputation, latest technologies, good workplace opportunity for alumnus are important characteristics for considering educational institution as good.
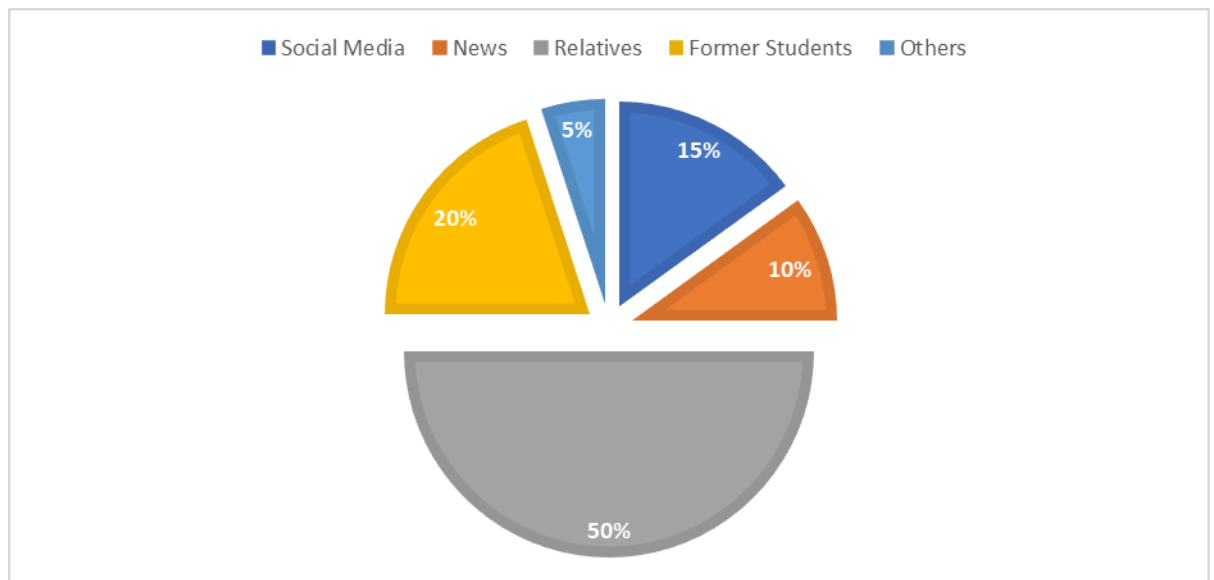
More than 70% of voters said that they choose and heard about the university that they currently studying at or already graduated from their relatives i.e friends and family. While other 30% mainly choose that they heard about it through social media and news.
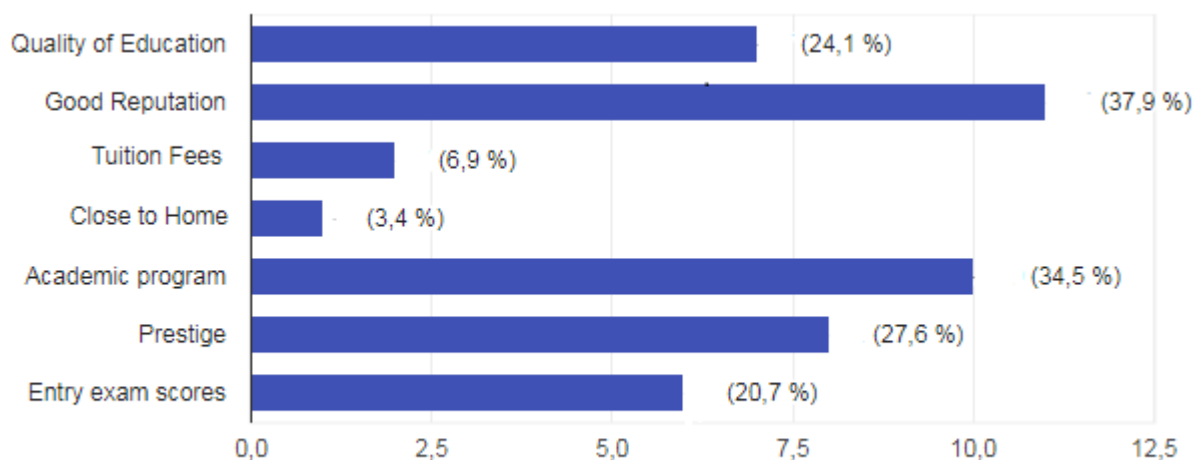
The main criterion for Azerbaijani students about the university is its good reputation, prestige and academic program that university provides. As the survey was conducted from students in public universities we can see the clear difference between foreign and national factors that influence the selection. While foreign customers of state universities think that tuition fees and location of university are essential criteria, Azerbaijani students consider those factors as not essential but positive factor in addition to other for their application to particular university. For Azerbaijani consumers (those who voted) quality of education at the university does not plays role as much as good reputation and prestige. For Azerbaijani higher education market customers (those who voted) stated the reputation and prestige of university as the main criteria for application. The list was followed by the quality of education and availability of academic programs.

More negative
More positive

71,4%

28,6%
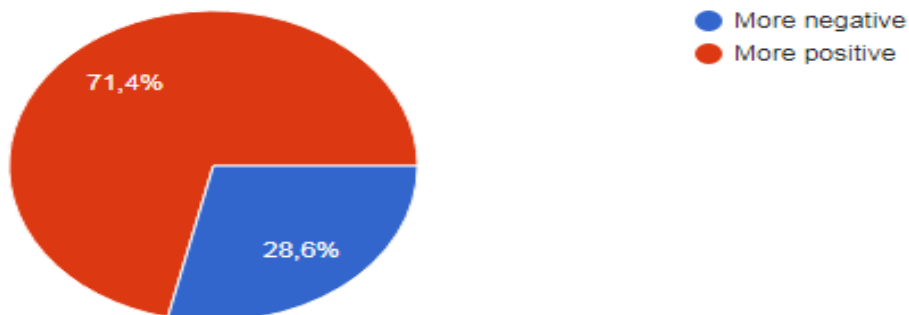
Students' perception of the university brand have changed to be more positive/More negative since he or she started to study there.

To the question "The image of your university was corresponding to your perception when you started studying at university" main half of voters said that the actual overall environment at university did not match their perceptions and expectation. Main part of UNEC students who voted decide that the reality does not match with the perception of the university in some aspects. They mentioned that they already had positive perception of UNEC brand name but accepted that their perception changed even more positively since they started to study there. Based on that it could be said that even if most of the applicants have positive perception of UNEC their thoughts about it still getting better, which mean that UNEC have good brand name but still should work on promotion of its products and services in order to show actual performance of the university. Illustrating true educational environment as it accepted by current and graduated students to potential customers can change their perception of UNEC brand in a positive way; thus increase the share of the university in Azerbaijani competitive higher educational market.

Interviews. In order to save the privacy of interviewees in following context they will be named as X and Y. Both of the interviewees are actual UNEC students. In order to maintain gender equality and analyze the performance of UNEC at all academic degrees interviewees were chosen as: X – Bachelor degree student at International School of Economics department of University of Economics, Female and Y – Master degree student at MBA department of University of Economics, Male.

Interviewee Y stated that he choose the MBA program at UNEC because of the availability of major in banking and insurance, and perception of that UNEC is the best financial oriented in country. None of the marketing channels have an impact on his decision as he already got bachelor degree at UNEC and already have true perception about it that matches with reality, so we could say that his satisfaction is high. Y thinks that his diplomas both in bachelor and master degree don't give competitive advantage over ADA university graduates in terms of prestige and reputation. When asked why UNEC not ADA the interviewee responded that despite the ADA diploma is the most prestigious one in country, the price is do not correspond to the quality of education given. Thus, for the same price as in ADA, students can get more qualitative education abroad.

Interviewee X who is a fourth year student at international school of economics, responded that after attending the classes at the university her perception about UNEC changed in a positive way. Thus, before entering the university she had assumed that UNEC still practices old Soviet education system, but it turned out that the reality is completely differs from her perceptions. As well as Y, X choose the UNEC because of the perception that the university provides better education in Economics and Business Administration that other state universities as BSU or ASOIU. As a consequence, of the responds of both interviewees it

could be seen that their perception of UNEC as Economics, Business Administration and other related majors' education providing brand is high

Finally, if the answers of other interview respondents will be summed up it could be clear that UNEC is an absolute competition winner in financial, economical and administrative fields both in bachelor degree and master degree. According to other 4 respondents UNEC was their first choice as they perceive it as best education provider in their fields at the best price and also the fact that UNEC diploma is accredited in other countries make it more desired during university enrollment.

Recommendations. Branding efforts may be crucial for university during consumers' decision making process. On the other hand, previous researches revealed that university branding is not enough even if it can form image of university, and awareness about it, based on survey it could be said that potential students select universities mainly according to family, friends and former students' recommendations, so constant open door days and invitation of potential students with their parents to the university could help the UNEC to show its potential to the fullest and attract customers. Based on personal experience with UNEC writer could say that the first thing that university should do is to expand the faculties and number of available places with English language of instruction and show how does ISE differ from not only other departments but also from other universities. Quality of education, young lecturers and their modern approaches to teaching should be highlighted more frequently.

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