

Behind higher education decisions: Estonian students' take on choosing higher education institute and speciality

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Abstract

The competition between universities for qualified students has gradually increased, at the same time, the number of students acquiring higher education is dropping. In this article, the authors analyse what factors are decisive for those entering higher education when it comes to choosing a speciality/curriculum and higher education institution. For this purpose, a brief study was conducted in October 2021 and a total of 38 students from different Estonian universities and colleges were interviewed. Based on the interviews, the authors conclude that the choice of higher education institution is subjective and marketing higher education is therefore complex. The most effective external way of shaping the selection is considered to be face-to-face marketing, including the student shadow program, doors open days, and joint fairs of universities.

Keywords: *Higher education institution and choice; higher education marketing; university image; social media.*

1. Introduction

The competition between institutions to attract prospective students has increased due to international and national competition, changing roles of universities, and the underfunding of education and research. At the same time, demographic changes have caused a drop in the number people acquiring higher education. With the “supply and demand” of higher education imbalanced, prospective students and higher education institutions need to adapt with potentially altered ways of decision-making, interaction, and marketing techniques.

Estonia is a small country with a population of 1.3 million. For a small country, Estonia has many higher education institutions: 6 universities under public law and 8 state professional higher education institutions, as well as one private university and 5 private professional higher education institutions. Around 45 thousand students acquired higher education in Estonia in 2020.

Previous studies have focused on factors influencing students higher education choices (Pampaloni, 2010; Stephenson et al, 2016), however, the why-and-how behind students’ decision-making, institutions’ strategies for attracting prospective students, and students’ insight to higher education marketing techniques have not been studied.

The aim of this study is to explore via a qualitative study of 38 first-year students, how they made choices between higher education institutions and specialities/curricula and get their take on higher education marketing techniques. To guide the investigation, we posed the following research questions: How and when did students decide on enrolling to and choosing higher education institution, and speciality? Which information is essential for prospective students’ decision-making? Which values, information channels, and marketing techniques students relate to?

2. Literature Review

Education is often seen as “a first class ticket for life” (Russell, 2005), therefore choosing a university is one of the most important and complex decisions students have to make.

Universities exist in a changing world and they have to adapt to new circumstances. Due to the commercialization of education, many institutions have been pressured to become heavily involved in higher education marketing. At the same time the competition between universities for qualified students has gradually increased.

To develop an effective competitive strategy, all organisations have to know their target group and develop a marketing campaign based on the group’s interests and needs. Thus, it is relevant to know, which factors influence prospective students’ decisions on their choice of higher education institution and how can education institutes appeal to students.

Prospective students' choices of higher education institutions have been studied for decades (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001). Iloh's (2018) analysis on choice of education institutions highlights that the higher education choice process has been framed by multiple perspectives, most notably sociological and economic. At the same time, there are studies approaching choice from different perspectives. For example, Stephenson, Heckert & Yerger (2016) used the consumer decision framework specifically addressing the notation of the consideration set in their work. Earlier studies (e.g. Pampaloni, 2010; Stephenson et al, 2016) have shown the factors influencing students' decisions vary. Papers focusing on how students choose higher education institutions show that a big role is played by personal attributes, including parental background, and socio-economic status. Studies point out students' choices are often utilitarian and may derive from their background, culture, and experience. Therefore, choice involves three broad elements, such as the context, the key influencers, and the choosers, which are interconnected in a complex dynamic (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001).

Alongside "internal" factors, such as parental background and socio-economic status, also "external" factors, including the perception and image of higher education institutions (Wilkins & Huisman, 2015) play a role when it comes to prospective students' choices. Image is created by an organization to persuade outsiders that the organization represents specific and desirable characteristics. It can be conveyed interpersonally, through direct or indirect contact with an organization or its members, or more indirectly based on the mission statement and stated goals of the organization (Gray, 1991). Since higher education institutions vary in size and specialization, the strategies they use to attract potential members, and the image that is created as a result of their efforts takes on added importance. For higher education institutions that are smaller and not as well-known as others (with which they compete for new students), there is an added burden because image has greater significance when consumers have had minimal direct experience with an organization (Sung & Yang, 2008). Alongside the means of image-creating through self-marketing or publicity, indicators of academic excellence – such as global university rankings – are continuously important factors affecting the decision as prospective students tend to strive for "the best" institution (IHEP, 2007).

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

This study was based on semi-structured interviews with 38 students, including 15 bachelors' and 8 masters' students from University of Tartu, and 15 students from other higher education facilities in Estonia (e.g. Tallinn University, Tallinn University of Technology, Estonian Aviation Academy, Tallinn and Tartu Health Care College etc).

Five focus group interviews, one group interview, and two individual interviews were conducted. Open call in University of Tartu mail lists and social campaign in Facebook and Instagram was launched to invite first-year students to partake in the study. Purposive sampling was used on a pool of University of Tartu students who submitted their data to ensure gender and speciality diversity in the focus groups. The same logic was used for students from other higher education facilities when possible, however diversity was harder to achieve due to a “bias“ in a pool of potential participants – social campaign attracted mostly traditionally active people (women, students of social sciences and fields of health care). Thus, diversity on facility rather than individual level was prioritized.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected in October 2021 using focus group and semi-structured interviews. Focus group interviews were chosen as they allow to stimulate discussion between participants with various experiences and background, keeping a focus on a topic of interest. Individual interviews were used when interviewee could not participate in a focus group but their insight was relevant for maintaining diverse sample. Before conducting the interviews, the interview plan was discussed among the experienced researchers, and piloted on one student who met the sampling criteria. The plan outlined topics such as how and when the decision on speciality and institution was made, which (information) channels and for what reasons were used, and a discussion on different institutions’ recruitment campaigns.

The interviewees were introduced to the purpose and structure of the interview, and ethical issues were explained (confidentiality, data retention, and further use). The interviewees were then asked for permission to record the interview. The interviews were conducted by four researchers and lasted on average 90 minutes. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis was conducted. This allowed distinguishing and highlighting the most prevalent themes. In the following paragraph, anonymised and grammatically corrected excerpts from the interviews are presented.

4. Results

4.1. Higher education decisions: choice of institution and speciality

First-year bachelor’s students described institutions’ image as one of the main reasons for choosing the institution they attend. Image was formed by social influence – family member or acquaintances were alumni, institution was continuously ranked high in international ranking system, there was widespread coverage of research and scholars in media. However, image was not on the same level of importance for all participants. It was distinctively highlighted by the students at University of Tartu (hereinafter UT) and Tallinn University of Technology (hereinafter TalTech), which are also the best-known universities in Estonia.

Image was reported important when it came to a choice of institution, however, was secondary for the choice of speciality.

The only logic solution was University of Tartu, because it was like an unwritten rule in our school that /.../ if you wanted an academic education in life sciences, University of Tartu was your only choice. (FG1, F2).

Also, the location of the institution was relevant. Factors like closeness to home and family, prospective traineeship or career opportunities, and social circle affected students' choice of education institution: *I chose Tallinn [University] mainly because I like living in a big town (FG4, F5).*

However, location was important mainly for students who had variety of interests and thus were flexible in terms of choosing their speciality or their preferred speciality was taught in multiple Estonian institutions. Students who were certain in their preference made their decision based on where they could study their speciality (e.g. one can study medicine only in UT, aeronautics in Estonian Aviation Academy etc.).

Students who described various interests also mentioned uncertainty and difficulties in choosing which institution and speciality they preferred. In these cases, factors such as time of the approval of candidates became important.

I like pretty much everything, and I am also pretty good at everything /.../. I'm the one who applied everywhere. I applied to economics and chemistry in TalTech, recreation in Tallinn University, nursing and midwife programmes in Tartu Health Care College, medicine and physics in UT, and commercial air transport pilot programme in Estonian Aviation Academy. The sad thing is that I was admitted everywhere except medicine, where I would have wanted to go the most. (FG1, F3)

Personal interest was reported the most important factor for deciding on a speciality, but not on an institution. These interests had developed in formal and informal education. Most students also considered available career opportunities when choosing their speciality, bringing up “practicality”. Curricula which included traineeships and other practical learning means were attractive to students, both when choosing their speciality as well as the institution to attend to. However, “practicality” did not overpower interest – if students were certain what they wanted to study, traineeships and other practical modules in curricula were less important for them.

It appeared when students had not had a specific interest in certain subjects or speciality from an earlier age, they tended to choose a speciality right before or during the applying period. In these cases, so-to-say systematic self-selection came into play as a factor affecting speciality/curriculum and institution choice – students described they weighed their probabilities of getting admitted to different specialities and applied to the ones they felt they

had the best chances in: *Initially I wanted to become a doctor, but I didn't qualify for a position. And I thought I'll study gene technology because there I was automatically admitted (FG2, F3).* Students who had specific interests usually made their choices for speciality in high school (10-12th grade), rarely already in primary school.

4.2. Information-seeking and higher education marketing

The manner and type of information that freshmen sought was similar across all interviews. The first-year students at the University of Tartu were distinguished from the other students as their knowledge of UT as an educational institution and the related image was formed in communication with their acquaintances. For students of other institutions, the primary focus for information search was on study opportunities in some specific field of interest, or to get acquainted with the general higher education landscape (e.g. descriptions of curricula, admission conditions). Students turned to more specific information channels (e.g. university's websites) primarily for admission information when they had already figured out their preferred institutions and had to choose a speciality/curriculum.

One way for capturing target groups' attention is to appeal to their interests, values, and ways of interacting with the world. Thus, the study also aimed to identify what was relevant for the students.

Freshmen mentioned their family and friends as their biggest role models because they found their positive characteristics (diligence, career, success in life, etc.) inspirational. Additionally, they admitted they tend to notice mainly people and messages which are related to their profession (e.g. lecturers who appear in media or freelance specialists): *Especially in the context of elections, one or another lecturer is giving their commentary [in national media]. This makes me feel proud. (FG1, M1).* Also, students follow people who share their values or interests (e.g. spokespeople for green lifestyle, people who travel the world) mostly in social media.

Freshmen found certain values could be increasingly appealing factors for making decisions on higher education in the near future: environment protection, green transition, and the role of artificial intelligence. It is, however, important to note that while there are some so-to-say general values, each student had also their individual interests based on their profession and experience in life. Therefore, speciality/curricula-based marketing (especially for less popular specialities) was still considered very important in sparking prospective motivated students' interests.

When it comes to marketing in general, students struggled to remember any advertisements that stood out as they felt they had developed "ad blindness". Students ignored advertisements, and in some occasions reported altering their consumer behaviour (boycotting services, institutions, products) due to excessive marketing. A few examples of

advertisements students shared in groups stood out either in a good or a bad way (e.g. an advertisement for educational institute that portrayed gender stereotypes was discussed).

Higher education marketing was seen unnecessary for already well-known universities (e.g. UT, TalTech, Tallinn University), which have a long history and have established a place in Estonian cultural memory. Once again, UT stood out – marketing this university was even considered to have negative effect on prospective students' decisions, because *anything that's good, markets itself. If you need to sell it to someone, it's not good (FG1, F1)*. However, institutions that were smaller and less-known (e.g. Estonian Aviation Academy) won from marketing. As people knew little about these institutions and their specifics beforehand, heavy marketing was rationalised as an effort to make the institutions seen. Students also reported advertisements for less-known institutions in social media or in public sphere (e.g. posters on the streets) made them apply to these institutions (e.g. Aviation Academy). Generally, students found it less necessary to advertise institutions and rather advised to focus on speciality/curriculum-centred marketing. For example, if a student was interested in piloting, advertisements for the speciality rather than institution were the ones that attracted them.

When it comes to marketing, peer-to-peer marketing was seen as the most influential way to persuade students. They also liked advertisements reflecting the experiences of alumni or people still studying in a programme. Also, informal online-marketing (e.g., students posting their student-life situations on social media, faculties inviting people to participate in studies) was considered highly engaging.

Students reported they use social media (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube) and read news from online media channels daily, however, TV and radio are used rarely or never. The first is also where they tend to notice marketing – if at all. Participants preferred the use of well-produced, short videos and marketing in YouTube and other social media. The message students conveyed when discussing marketing higher education was “bigger is not better” – they expected the advertisement of these institutions to be professional, inclusive (racially, sexually etc.), unique, short and catchy, and highlighting achievements and symbols of these institutions.

5. Conclusion

Marketing higher education is a particular challenge. Similar to previous studies e.g. Wilkins & Huismani, 2005, Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001), the results of this study indicate that a big role in higher education decisions is played by internal factors such as personal attributes, including parental background, and external factors, such as image.

Other factors (e.g. location, “practicality”) were reported important by students who were unsure or flexible in terms of higher education choices. In terms of marketing, direct and face-to-face marketing, such as student shadowing, open doors days, and information fairs were favoured by students alongside social media campaigns.

The results the study can be relevant for the marketing and communication specialists in higher education institutions for altering their marketing strategies for attracting prospective students. The findings suggest that higher education institutions should systematically monitor and collect feedback of their recruitment campaigns to get the most direct input from the target group, and involve the students in the processes of developing and conducting marketing campaigns. Monitoring the feedback at regular intervals is suggested as the content and relevance of the campaigns especially attract the people who are unsure of their choice and thus rely on external factors.

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