
Higher Education Competitiveness: Definition, Assessment and Ways of Growth

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Abstract:

The article is devoted to the search and the description of marketing reserves determining perspective competitiveness of higher educational establishments.

The study refers to highly efficient institutions possessing the development potential and their own operational and marketing possibilities to comparative ways of growth.

The research led to a conclusion that it is necessary to actualize the marketing competence of the Russian higher educational establishments based on the modernization of the educational activity through the development of the full-fledged training and production complexes providing the students with employment experience and real labor activity.

Keywords: *Educational services, higher school, marketing environment.*

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1. Introduction

Currently the Russian Federation higher educational system is appealed to get to the qualitatively new level of the competitiveness which is fixed in the corresponding program documents and is implemented in the course of the corresponding project. Such leap is to be done under saving budget financing of the educational function implementation in general and increasing attention to the education quality as well as the results, i.e., graduates' competence and their ability to work. It should be emphasized that there is an asymmetry in the market relation development in the educational sphere, manifested in the lack of access of the universities to state order and budget assignments of educational orientation.

To achieve and retain the high competitiveness within regional, national and global space the Russian higher educational establishments (HEI) has to adopt real infrastructure nodes of the knowledge economy able to generate, monetize and use efficiently competitive advantages of the innovative type on the basis of growing qualitative use of intellectual capital of the faculty members and students. Such transformation is impossible without universities' marketing strategy reorientation through multi platform activities integrating educational, scientific and entrepreneurial initiatives within a competitiveness model of a modern educational organization.

2. Theoretical, Empirical, and Methodological Grounds of the Research

Modern approaches to assess the content and competitiveness factors of modern HEIs are considered by Ayupova *et al.* (2015), Babanova (2016), Bart *et al.* (2015), Verkhovtsov (2014), Startseva *et al.* (2015), Golodobina (2015), Danakin and Shutenko (2014), Donina (2014), Zhdankina (2013), Zakharova and Gisina (2013), Khazova and Komarov (2015), Kudryashov (2014), Kushel (2011; 2012), Manakova and Prima (2016), Romanova (2005), Tretyakov and Udovichenko (2015), Vovchenko *et al.* (2017), Guskova *et al.* (2016), Sazhin and Saraikin (2016) and Filimontseva and Yambushev (2016).

Due to the lack of a clear definition of competition at higher education market, insufficient scientific definitions of competitiveness of basic and additional educational services and products are available. Therefore it is necessary to modernize the theoretical basis of the marketing management of competitiveness of a comparative educational organization.

In our opinion a typical situation of "marketing myopia" artificially constrained by the limitations of the basic type of economic activity and supported by the reducing, but by substantial budget financing (in fact non-market factor inaccessible till recently for the decent non-state educational organizations) has formed the education market.

Perspective competitiveness of the Russian universities, in our opinion, is determined by the possibility and reality of their marketing transformation with organization of complex and multi-aspect entrepreneurial activities ensuring effective monetization of the educational, scientific and production component. The Russian higher educational establishments can and must become independent training and production complexes able to finance their activities without government intervention and subsidies ready to generate and implement economically effective and competitive scientific, educational and entrepreneurial initiatives. At the same time formation and development of the full-fledged competitive education market of higher and middle professional level is inevitable, though it is slowed by the state management structure unwilling to lose the administrative initiative to manage the Russian education. In its turn full-fledged market relations will quickly withdraw the Russian higher educational establishments from the market, especially those having only formal competitive advantage and accustomed to endless state financing of the nominal educational activity.

Strategic concepts of the marketing management of the competitiveness, applicable to the specific activity of higher educational establishments are proposed by Bospalko (2014), Butenko (2013), Senyuk (2015) and Tretyak (2011). In the marketing content of operational activities there are grounded preconditions to introduce the principle of a multi-format; the preconditions are substantial material, technical basis and intellectual capital of the faculty members, on the one hand, and reduced to morally obsolete educational process of the traditional format not providing minimal level of the graduates' competitiveness at the labor market, on the other.

The concept "customer lifetime value" presented by Tretyak (2011) is among the most progressive marketing concepts which can and must be present in the modern universities' marketing strategies. The author's approach is maximum marketing use of customer value during the consumption life cycle in fact it is a kind of competitive strategy of the continuous growth and improvement of the "Kaizen" corporate effectiveness. According to Tretyak (2011), strategic marketing approach (including modern educational establishments' activity) has to be based on the principles of sustainability and long-term that requires both the formation of new clients flow and management of outflow of the existing ones. We agree with this judgment but note that this marketing concept can and must be supplemented by the conceptual approach of the multi-format marketing activity ensuring the real complex satisfaction of needs of certain consumers (especially on the related and supporting markets, in particular education market).

3. Results

To assess the modern graduates' competitiveness in the context of their competitiveness we conducted the field marketing research in the format of a

structured interview of 300 graduates, who graduated in the 2013/14, 2014/15, 2015/16 school years the state, municipal and private higher educational establishments on the territory of Krasnodar Krai. The working hypothesis is the following: *“Getting education in modern university is the basis of the professional competitiveness at the labor market, however, the education is to be improved through effective teaching the students the real skills in the frame of the multi-platform marketing concept of the perspective higher education”*.

The respondents' experience in employment after graduating had a number of characteristic features. The employment experience or working activity before going to University or while studying is not supposed by the modern higher education concept. 96% respondents had no employment experience before going to the university (98.3% had no working experience), such inactivity was present in the course of study (88.7% of the surveyed did not get any employment experience during studies, 94.3% got no experience to perform a labor function). Yet at the same time a part of the respondents expected such kind of activity from the university: 66% of the surveyed would like to get some employment experience in the course of study, and 59.3% wanted to participate in the labor activity while studying.

The majority of the respondents got a job on a residual basis after graduating, 77% managed to do it within 3 months after graduation, 28.3% from three up to six months, 44.7% followed the general trend of the regional market and got a job within 6-12 months after graduation, another 13.7% graduates took more than a year before they start their working activity.

Only 39.3% of the surveyed first got a job according to their diploma (that reflects the difficulties to forecast the labor resources conjuncture for 4-6 years prospect, but does not reflect educational process insufficiency), and in 3 years after graduation most of the respondents (77.7%) managed to change up to three jobs (that positively characterizes their mobility as an element of labor market competitiveness). At the moment of the survey 31.2% graduates got a job according to their diploma. The respondents' assessments of the professional competence sufficiency obtained in the university are the following; only 31.3% of the surveyed called the competence obtained in the university sufficient to get the first job, the main problems are in the command sphere (8.7% marked it as insufficient) and organizational competence (82%); as to the personal and professional competence it assessed a bit better (48% and 44.7% of the surveyed said they did not correspond to the employers' needs).

Let us note that if the university does not have training enterprises and it is impossible for the students to master real working functions while studying, it results in half-ready graduates having certain professional vocabulary but unable to perform their labor duties (that judging by the respondents' assessments about the terms for getting a job is a general trend on the Russian labor market).

The respondents assessed the competence effectiveness which forms competitiveness at the labor market during studies in the following way. The respondents' answers vividly and negatively reflect the real effectiveness of professional competence components mastering during studies at university. It should be noted that these assessments reflect rather high educational, professional and pedagogical level of the teachers who little involved in the realization of the applied labor functions but under lack of any system in the development of the higher education actually with only their own enthusiasm continue to seek for the reserves of the educational process effectiveness growth. While studying at university 94% of the surveyed mentioned their practice at the real enterprises and organizations, however, 90% mentioned the formality of this period of study, and 81% of the respondents had to look for the place for the pre-diploma practice by themselves, only 5% got the offer to get a job according to practice results (finalizing process of the higher education and allows the graduates to present the potential employer his/her competence).

During the educational process the respondents practically were not engaged in the additional professional education (94.7%), though after their starting their labor activity 78% marked this process organization (first of all due to the employers' directives on certain skills confirmed by certificates and diplomas). Professional training at the university assessed it as sufficient to the practical work placement 37.3% of the graduates, 11.3% positively assessed their obtained legal literacy, 18% - economic literacy, 24% - linguistic competence, 14% - work experience with modern information and telecommunication systems. 33.7% of the surveyed noted that the university education allowed them to find a prestigious job, 44.7% - well-paid job, 18.3 - stable one, 29.7% - perspective job.

The respondents assessed the separate aspects of their competitiveness at the labor market in the following way. 68.7% of the surveyed assessed their competitiveness at the labor market at the moment of their graduation as satisfactory, 7.7% were sure about importance of their personal competitiveness after they graduated from the university. Length of work became a positive moment for the 59.3% surveyed emphasizing the efficient level of competitiveness of the professional nature after gaining the practice experience of the labor function realization.

Among the factors forming the worker's competitiveness under modern conditions, the surveyed singled out their work experience (84.7%) and practically linearly connected with worker's professional level (88.3%), these factors together with a certain worker's personality, according to the respondents, the success of their work placement in their last job (correspondently 91.3% answers, 96% answers, 85,3% answers).

The respondents' expectations from their university study and their results are characterized in the following way. The respondents assessed their university education and their results assessed in a contradictory way. Thus, 84% in general are

happy with their higher education, though only 47.7% would recommend their university where they studied to their relatives (and only 33.7% - their specialty). 63% of the respondents confirmed the fact they obtained the competitiveness at the labor market after graduation, whereas only 45% emphasized that they had obtained the real competence while getting higher education.

84.7% of the surveyed considered their university a prestigious one (70.7% considered their academic major a prestigious one), though only 30.7% of the surveyed managed to work in their major, and only 25.3% managed to find a job quickly. Let us note that the respondents referred their experience of seeking a job to the least satisfied expectations (78% negative answers) and the work placement according to the university course results (79% of the surveyed noted this way to interact with the university is absent).

The respondents' social and economic status and their social demographic parameters are characterized in the following way. The respondents' salaries were characterized with rather competitive parameters to this or that extend coincide with average estimation of this indicator at the Krasnodar Krai regional labor market in the research period. This fact allows to characterize the 2014-2016 graduates competitiveness in a positive way. 57.3% of the respondents could start their labor activity as employed workers, 18% focused their efforts on self-employment, and 23% realized themselves in their family business.

To sum up, it is necessary to emphasize, that modern higher educational establishments both state and private continue to fulfill the educational function effectively, letting rather competitive, able to professional growth, able to develop both personally and in a team, graduates enter the regional market. An essential detail is that such development does not take place in University, but with graduates' first attempts to get a job under labor market competition. We think, modern universities can form and realize multi-platform marketing strategy where all concerned graduates can satisfy their expectations better by:

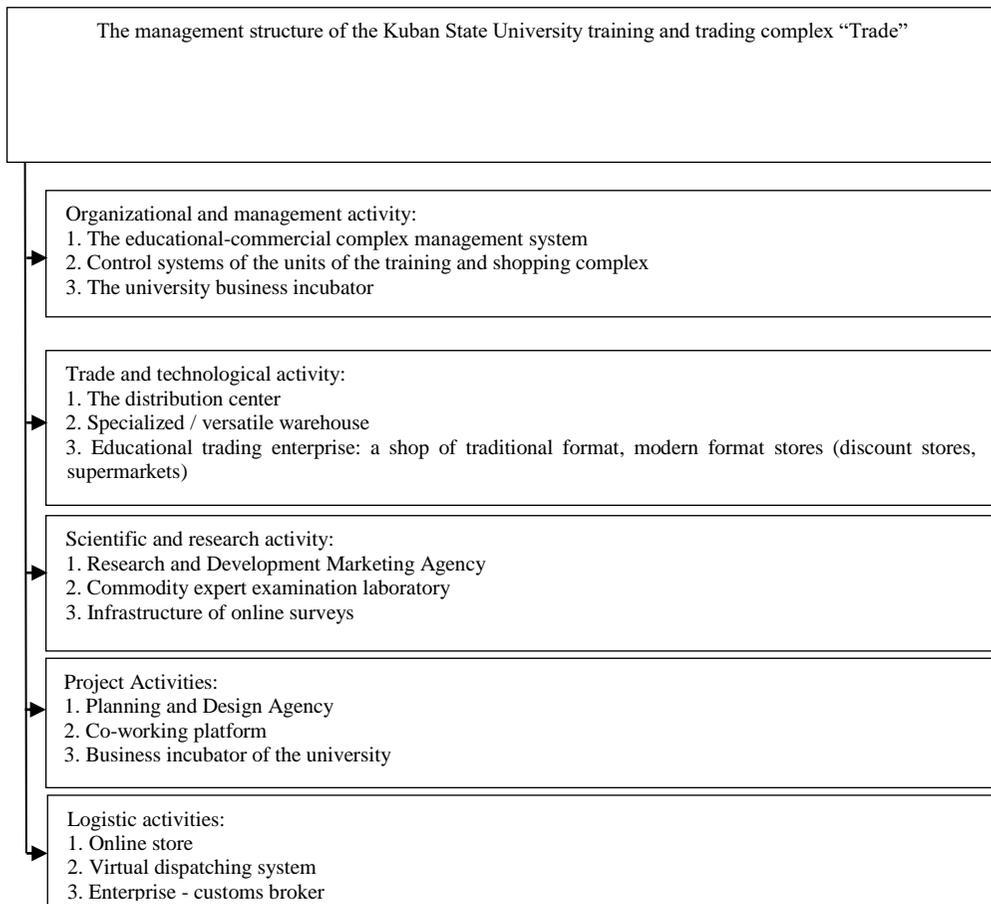
- students get initial experience to get a job and labor activity;
- universities will be able to strengthen their financial flows and sustainability on the basis of the training enterprises – diversified business-units;
- the state and social partners will get additional effect as the number of the graduates going on the trajectory to develop effectively and competitively will be reduced.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The Kuban State University Marketing and Trade Chair was taken as an example of the possibilities to implement the marketing strategy of the multi-platform development oriented on the systematic growth of the professional competitiveness of graduates. It is possible to implement the marketing concept of the multi-platform

development in relation to the Marketing and Trade Chair on the basis of creation and full-fledged functioning of the training and trading complex which is an institutional infrastructure where it is possible fully and qualitatively to achieve goals and norms of the Russian Federal State Educational Standard for Bachelor and Master Degrees in the subject area Trade.

Figure 1. *The proposed structure of the training and trading complex “Trade” as a part of the university educational and research and entrepreneurial platforms (author’s design)*



The composition of the training business-units in the training and trading complex structure is tentative and can be corrected and widen taking into account the real conjuncture of the economic processes in the Krasnodar Krai regional economy. The presented complex has a wide range of possibilities to interact with the educational, scientific and entrepreneurial structures of the university under consideration, and has considerable potential of the educational activity profit growth independent from

budget financing and budget tasks. At the same time it is possible to achieve the following system of results and effects:

1. The expected functioning results:

1.1. The entrepreneurial activity results: organization and development of the training and entrepreneurial structures of the modern formats which form additional financial income flows for the educational organization and having its own potential to obtain profit.

1.2. The educational activity results: creation and development of its own infrastructure able to provide the full-fledged practice and employment for the students doing Bachelor and Master Programs in the subject area Trade and related programs.

1.3. The scientific activity results: students' engagements to realize the applied projects having certain economic and commercial significance and formation of the real skills as a part of the professional competence of the future graduate.

2. Effects for the organizers and participants:

2.1. University: the creation of a modern infrastructure node to follow the Russian Federal Educational Standard norms and an additional center to obtain the profit.

2.2. The Faculty members: the possibility to test continuously the theoretical innovations in the real business process, additional opportunities for employment and getting income, the possibility to initiate the creation of new enterprisers and divisions.

2.3. The students: the possibility for a complex teaching in the course of the real economic activity of the complex of the specialized business entities, the opportunity to get the first job and to be employed according to one's qualification in the training and trading units of the university, the opportunity to initiate new enterprisers and divisions.

2.4. Regional economy: the creation of the node "Economy of Knowledge" oriented on the innovative concept of the regional competitiveness growth.

To sum up, we have to mention that the transition of the modern higher educational organizations to implement multi-platform marketing strategy to achieve real, but not declarative goals set in the modern educational standards as well as to achieve operational and strategic results in terms of the competitiveness of the Russian universities as nodes of the economy of knowledge oriented on the innovative concept of growth of the regional and national competitiveness, is inevitable.

Unfortunately, marketing stereotypes of thinking about the universities' functioning as specialized educational organizations prevents this concept from its practical introduction and restricts the Russian universities' management ability to percept and to be ready to modernize educational establishment structure. At the same time only financial autonomy and practical skills of the intellectual potential monetization are the perspective competitive advantages of the Russian Higher education, that, we are convinced, is quite competitive under modern economic realia and if a number of

marketing innovations is implemented, it can achieve a qualitatively new level to perform its basic function to train competitive nationally and globally professionals.

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