

## Strategies for the Development of Internal Marketing Orientation in the Private High Education Institutions in Albania

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### Abstract

*In the post-communist era, Albanian higher education system underwent a series of reforms, which included the privatization of higher education institutions. While this was generally heralded as a progressive move, policy makers could not anticipate the preparedness of the system to face cut-throat competition and the resultant insecurity. The aim of this paper is to identify strategies for the improvement and implementation of internal marketing communication across the Albanian private higher education sector in order to attract and retain its internal customers/ employees. It argues that internal marketing in general and organizational communication in particular are some of the most vital yet neglected areas of organizational development in the private higher education system of Albania. Changes are more likely to be accepted by the stakeholders if they are informed by the complex socio-cultural realities surrounding the system undergoing change.*

**Keywords:** higher education, privatization, internal marketing, communication, change management, Albania.

### 1. Introduction

For almost four decades, Albania has faced one of the most communist extreme dictatorships in Europe, characterized by total isolation. As a result the system of higher education in Albania was obsolete in methodology as well as in the information provided (Kume, 2010). In the post-communist era higher education system underwent a series of reforms, aiming at adapting to the new democratic system. One of these reforms was the liberalization of the Private Higher Education Institutions which resulted by a rapid increase in non-public Higher Education Institutions.

According to the Albanian Public Agency for Accreditation of Higher Education the number of Public Higher Education Institutions was fifteen while the Private Higher Education Institutions reached 47 as of end of year 2013. But private higher education sector is facing a great number of problems, and the system have to change in a variety of ways, including shifting of the focus from quantity to quality and, creating the opportunity for a qualitative education (Duro, 2009). Competition among non-public higher education institutions (NPHEI) in Albania is continuously increasing. As mentioned previously this is predominantly caused by the high number of these institutions. But there are several other forces that drive higher educational institutions to make necessary reforms such as: internationalization, globalization, the limited number of students coming from secondary schools, the economic crisis etc. All these factors push NPHEIs to seek out new organizational structures and types of internal marketing communication strategies. One of the most important factors that boost the internal communication strategies is a coordinated view between head offices and faculties, a good relationship among staff that would play a key role in managing the marketing communications of the whole university.

It is clear that any sustainable competitive advantage for universities is via the staff since the human capital is the most critical source of organizational capability. This paper proposes a set of best practices for the improvement and implementation of internal marketing communication strategies across the Albanian private higher education sector in order to attract and retain its internal customers/ employees.

### 2. Literature Review

The marketing of educational institutions is defined as "the analysis, planning, implementation and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with a target market to achieve

organizational objectives." (Kotler & Fox, 1985). Promoting a university brand and image is considered a key factor in relation to attracting new students. For this reason the conception of a client in the tertiary education sphere was one of the main topics in '90s (Schüller, & Chalupský, 2011). Other authors like Mupemhi & Mupemhi (2011) have stated that any sustainable competitive advantage for universities is via the staff. They have explored the internal marketing factors or initiatives which were employed by local universities to attract and retain its internal customers or employees. HR and reward strategies were found to be fundamental in attracting, motivating and retaining the staff. The university brand and identity are further explored by (Goonawardana & Hemsley-Brown, 2007) who focus on the cooperation between rectorate and faculties while forming a successful university brand. (Schüller & Rašticová, 2011) have analyzed the methods and styles of marketing communications universities and their faculties use when communicating with prospective students. They have identified some procedures which help to optimize the choice, combination and connection of elements and activities of the marketing communications mix in relation with prospective students. They recommend also that when planning their marketing strategies, higher education institutions should consider applying integrated marketing communications.

This latter should be implemented in two phases; the first is the creation of a university's own marketing mix, where the target group should be explored in detail to find out about its needs, wishes, and expectations. In the second phase a plan of marketing events has to be set up. These events are mutually interrelated and form a logical pattern. Friman & Arnoldina (2003) discussed the marketing tools for educational organization and to determine the market orientation stage of faculty at different organizational levels. The first level is the "managerial" level where managers such as principals or coordinators manage the educational institution's faculty on a daily basis. The second level is the professional one, where teachers carry out their professional duties. Oplatka (2009) argues that it is likely that a business model of marketing is inappropriate and needs to be replaced with a more educational approach that is based on non-profit enterprises which are more similar to HE institutions. He admits that marketing might still occur, but with the academic sector viewed as a public service rather than a private business, and the market role not so much as competition to possess market share but rather as a sharing of information to match educational resources to student needs. (Schüller, & Chalupský, 2011) have come to the conclusion that based on the strong competition caused by the high number of HEI, globalization, negative prognosis of demographic trends, austerity caused by the economic crisis, changes in university funding etc, universities are seeking out new organizational schemes. Here comes the role of internal marketing communication strategies between head offices and faculties. According to the authors good relationships among the staff play a key role in managing the marketing communications of the whole university. Wood (1999) has examined the trends in current and preferred methods of communication within tertiary organization. The study takes into account current communication theory and other factors such as the organizational culture and leadership style. Carlos & Rodrigues (2012) have analyzed the relationships between internal market orientation and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior and performance.

### 3. Research Methods

In the first stage this paper will identify the main problems of internal communication policies-mainly between the marketing department and the faculty, between the head offices and faculty and between academic staff itself- at private Albanian higher education institutions. On the basis of the interviews with persons in charge with marketing activities the research will concentrate on the issues related to co-operation between head offices and faculties. For this purpose the interviews will investigate the following areas:

- The main problems that have to be dealt with in terms of internal communications
- The place of marketing department in the organizational chart

The human capital is the most critical source of organizational capability. Therefore, any sustainable competitive advantage for universities is via the staff. The next part of the research will explore the internal marketing factors or initiatives which were employed by the private Albanian higher education institutions to attract and retain its internal employees. For this purpose in this stage the interviews will investigate the following areas:

- The degree of cooperation between the university management and faculty
- The motivational policies and programs that the private HEIs organize for their faculty. This will include the elements of the reward strategy which could be: Remuneration, Other Benefits, Work-Life Balance, Development and Career Opportunities, Performance and Recognition Programs.

In this research paper faculty and people responsible for marketing communications activities at nine different universities were interviewed by using open-ended questions. The individual interview method was used.

#### 4. Analysis of Responses

Question 1: The main problems that have to be dealt with in terms of internal communications

Most of the interviewees expressed a negative experience towards the appropriate involvement of academicians in the internal communication process of their institutions. But broadly they attached great importance to academicians' involvement in internal communication process. Others have admitted the lack of internal channels of communication. The relation rector - academic staff doesn't exist and the academic tasks come from the administrator –which in many cases is the owner of the university- who also is the person who appoints and dismisses the academic personnel. Also the academic structure doesn't seem to be solid and the distinction between administration and academic tasks in many cases is hard to be made. Because of the lack of a sufficient number of academic assistants or administration staff many tasks (both academic and admin) are left to the primary faculty which in the end results in an overload faculty.

Another problematic area is the relation between the academic staff and the supervisors, because the communication functions from top-bottom, so its holistic meaning or purpose is not fulfilled:

"The communication culture is poor. The way to improve this is for the staff to take some training and orientation sessions. There is no a planned communication plan, mostly it is a personal process than a planned one..."

Beside the negative side some interviewees (but a small part of them) reported that the planned communication does exist, through weekly meetings with the university principals and in which the information is shared.

Question 2: The involvement of academicians in marketing the institution and the place of marketing department in the organizational chart

Academicians do have some sort of involvement in the promotion of their institution and the recruitment of new students, mostly during open days. In this marketing event, high school students are exposed to the various academic programs and take information about university's facilities, the faculty, job opportunities, etc. Many academicians also reported that their universities do not have a marketing department but a professional person is in charge with marketing activities and PR. The PR/marketing person reports directly to the administrator. But in many cases this person accomplishes the owner's personal objectives which can be different from those of academic prospect. One of the academicians stated that:

"In general marketing activities are identified or equaled with the personal network of the owner..."

Question 3: The degree of cooperation between university principals/management and faculty

The answers here can be divided between positive and negative attitudes toward the collaboration and cooperation of the university management and the staff. In this context the professorate answers to the demands of PR/marketing person since professors are recruited and selected on a student oriented basis:

"The university uses a strong marketing campaign, especially social marketing where a solid cooperation with academic staff is used. In general the public relation office is collaborating strongly with the academic staff in terms of promoting the latter through the university's magazine or through publishing the academic staff's CVs on the official website."

But a small percentage of the interviewees reported a low coordination between the academic staff and the PR office. As one of the interviewees stated:

*"...many activities are communicated late and there is no a preliminary plan of activities. But when it comes to the participation in already designated marketing activities there is a strong will of staff participation in such activities."*

When it comes to the relations and collaboration between the principals and faculty, or the academic staff itself, most of the interviewees reported a problematic situation:

*"... the reasons for a non-satisfying communication level are factors such as jealousy and incapability, and for which the university faces difficulties in correcting them..."*

Another negative factor identified from the interviews is the high level of academic staff turnover.

Question 4: The motivational programs that the universities organize for their faculty

The questions focused on how these kinds of policies fitted into the organizational culture, the faculty opinions on the current remuneration structures, benefits, the balance of work and life, development and career opportunities and performance recognition. Apart from financial remuneration there are no many other motivational policies in the private HEIs. An important motivational policy resulted to be the participation of academic staff in scientific seminars where outside academic professors are invited so the staff has the possibility to exchange ideas. The participation in various academic conferences serves as a motivational tool; through it the academic staff has the opportunity to exchange ideas

with outside international specialists.

One of the interviewees reported that in recent years the academic staff is sent in other partner universities abroad as part of the staff exchange program and this is a strong factor to increase the external academic communications. But in general the interviewees have pointed out that a weak point: universities don't offer any internal grant or other stimulus for scientific research.

## 5. Discussion

With regards to the first question, a bad communication level is being reported from the interviewees between the head offices/administrators and the faculties. Therefore it is highly important for university's head offices or administrators and their faculties to find an appropriate organizational and communication style. The University's business plan can be well crafted but when bad internal communication exists the teaching and administration staff might not be aware of it. It is important for the internal communication process to be part of the organizational culture and entrenched in its values. In the end both the teaching and non-teaching staff must be socially and emotionally attached to the university and be associated with the success stories of all university's stakeholders.

In terms of second and third question a lot of answers relate to organizational and internal collaboration and coordination between the marketing department (or PR person ) and the academic staff, the collaboration between the academic staff itself or even between the universities head offices and the academic staff. In general the academic staff is willing to participate in marketing communications projects of their university, but in some cases many activities are communicated late and there is no a preliminary plan of activities. Even older students are participating in "open days" activities as part of the marketing communications projects, communicating their personal experiences to the new targeted students.

In terms of the forth question, the motivational tools play a key role in internal marketing communications of higher education institutions. From a range of motivational tools like: remuneration structures, benefits, the balance of work and life, development and career opportunities and performance recognition, the interviewees have reported that apart from the remuneration option another motivational policy used is the participation of academic staff in scientific seminars. This research result indicates and implies that it is advisable for universities to place more emphasis on non-financial motivational incentives and tools.

## 6. Conclusion

For the private HEIs in Albania is important to be able to understand the business mentality, local culture, students' needs and wants. Therefore integrated Management Information Systems (MIS), PR, advertising, sales promotion, personal selling should be emphasized and implemented. As a result the main problems that have to be dealt with are: not only recruiting but retaining by integrating internal marketing communications tools.

The place of marketing department in the organizational chart is a position that reports directly to the president, rector or general manager. Therefore their activities should be independent and concentrated on recruiting, selecting the most suitable students for their universities. In addition activities such as building the brand name, improving universities image and most importantly generating positive publicity should be conducted by the marketing department by directly reporting to the management. In doing so administration staff that is in charge of marketing and PR activities should heavily cooperate with faculty members who are competent in selected subjects theoretically to achieve reliable outcomes.

The Marketing and Communication Department should be responsible for overseeing the strategic direction and planning, coordination, and management for the university's marketing, public relations and strategic communication program. It is important to work with both the external and internal constituencies to strategically create and communicate the university's messages and ensure overall continuity of institutional brand consistency and image. Finally with latest advancements in technology like the internet, social networks etc. marketing department should implement their activities on viral marketing.

The main issue is to reach a consensus between the university and marketing department once the ideas are generated. Often times conflict of interest arises among the people who have diverse backgrounds. Therefore it appears to be somehow difficult to make a solid decision. In order to prevent or minimize conflicts it is advisable to strongly encourage weekly meetings with a solid agenda and followed by action steps. Considering the teaching load of faculty the assisting personnel seems to be not enough. Even the administration staff in many cases is not enough in number to boost the daily operational duties. This has caused many problems to the internal communication process among the

personnel in the private high education institutions.

Once the results have been achieved marketing department should be rewarded by providing them with field trips, vacations, performance based incentives, bonuses, employee of the month etc. This will be a very useful motivational program that need to be implemented. In addition flexible work-schedule always comes in handy to achieve great results. In summary problems seems to be short term profit-making rather long-term durable reputation building.

Many academicians might view the business model of marketing as inappropriate, however marketing in the HEIs context might occur, but with the university viewed as a public service rather than a private business and with a new meaning for the marketing; as that of sharing of information to match educational resources to student needs.

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