

# BUILDING THE PRESTIGE OF A UNIVERSITY AS A TOOL TO ACHIEVE COMPETITIVENESS

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## ABSTRACT:

The study addresses the importance of a higher education institution's marketing management and brand and prestige building in relation to its applicants. The research employs a wide range of secondary data sources from around the world while mainly consisting of a case study conducted in the form of a survey. The objective is to determine homogenous groups of applicants based on how they perceive the reputation of a selected university/faculty and what their preferences are when choosing a study program. The results of the research are then used to verify whether the brand values defined by the faculty in question correspond with actual perception of its brand. Groups of applicants were determined using a K-means cluster analysis and subsequently tested for the applicants' preferences when choosing a university and their perceived associations to the selected faculty using an ANOVA. The results show 3 basic clusters of applicants and provide an overview of a possible approach to brand building in the context of universities. They can therefore serve as a model example fit for implementation in universities in Europe and even beyond, provided cultural dimensions and the specific environment are accounted for.

## KEY WORDS:

applicants, brand, case study, Czech Republic, marketing approach of universities, prestige, university reputation

## 1 Introduction

The field of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Czech Republic (and elsewhere) has been dealing with a shortage of incoming students, leading to higher competitive pressure not only among different schools but also among different faculties of the same school. Faculties are forced to manage their marketing in order to be attractive to their applicants while also making sure that the profile and quality of their graduates translate into academic prestige and reputation on the job market. That is why for the past four years the Faculty of Multimedia Communications (FMC) at Tomáš Baťa University in Zlín (hereinafter also TBU) has



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been conducting research focused on the applicants' preferences when choosing a study program and the perceived reputation of the faculty and the university as a whole. The results serve as a case study on the use of the marketing approach in a university setting, and a base for further research. It differs from other previously published studies in its choice of target group, undergraduate applicants. Many previously published findings focus on the building and perception of the brand as well as the reputation and image of HEIs. These findings rely on studies in which the target groups consisted of students, academic personnel or administrative employees as co-creators of the school's image and brand. However, they fail to address what factors affect a school's image among applicants (i.e., potential clients), how important the perceived 'quality' of the teaching staff is in the overall assessment of a school's image, what other factors should be taken into account by the marketing management team when appealing to the target group, etc. These doubts and knowledge gaps can certainly be a subject for further research, which is why the focus of this study is to present the results of research on applicants of a university based in the Czech Republic.

## 2 Applicability of Brand Building Principles in the Context of Universities

Universities dealing with the subject of brand building must unavoidably come to terms with the fact that this process has several parties involved – supervisory authorities that oversee the quality of education, award accreditation and provide funding, competition (other universities), community of experts and business professionals (professionals in the field, future employers of graduates, research partners and partners from the business sector), applicants, students and graduates. Previously published studies have mostly focused on university students, owing to two main reasons. The first one is the relatively easy involvement of this group in the research, the second reason being the fact that students are essentially a group of customers who are in close contact with the university and have experience with the services it provides.

The findings of Pinar et al. suggest that perceived quality of faculty, university reputation, emotional environment as well as brand loyalty are among the most important brand equity dimensions in developing a strong university brand.<sup>1</sup> Student loyalty is also touched upon in the study by Balaji et al., who believe that university brand knowledge and university brand prestige are two aspects that play a key role in student-university identification.<sup>2</sup> Yao et al. take a closer look at the effect of these factors on internal brand loyalty, complementing other researchers' findings with an interesting take on the matter. They find that campus diversity has positive effects on students' diversity awareness and social trust and no negative effects on the internal brand identification of these universities.<sup>3</sup> As for the question of diversification, Spry et al. support the notion, since in their proposal of a brand architecture model (which is based on the relationship of internal-external university-corporate identity) they stress the fact that all HEIs have their subbrands (departments, courses, study programs, faculties, etc.), making the pressure to differentiate and gain a competitive edge in an ever more saturated market even greater. The researchers also present four key findings: disconnect with the university identity and image, strong connect with the faculty identity and image, strong connect with the program identities and images and co-creation of the faculty identity and image.<sup>4</sup> Dimitrova et al. shed light on some of the marketing and branding aspects of the educational sector,

proposing their own conceptual model used to measure brand loyalty among students, which takes into account the following seven variables: brand associations, brand information dissemination and sufficiency, perceived quality, student experience, brand trust, student brand engagement and brand satisfaction.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, this model is centred around students, not applicants, whose experience with the brand, for example, cannot be assessed yet.

### Image

"University image" can be defined as the "public perception of a university"<sup>6</sup> or as a "sum of all convictions an individual has about a university".<sup>7</sup> Universities keep allocating more and more resources to manage their image and to improve it in the eyes of their stakeholders.<sup>8</sup> They realise that by maintaining a positive image, they can increase their competitiveness.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the unequivocal importance that maintaining a positive image has for a university, there is a lack of empirical research that would fully grasp the process of image management.<sup>10</sup> Some authors, however, do attempt to overcome this hurdle. De Sabando et al. emphasise the lack of consensus around the dimensions that together form the image construct, little clarity regarding the similarities and differences between image and reputation among different stakeholders and limited tools of measurement needed to analyse the perception of different stakeholders, as most reviewed studies limited their scope to only one group of stakeholders.<sup>11</sup> The findings of Iqbal et al. show that the image of a university has four constructing factors: quality, prestige, financial incentives and acceptance.<sup>12</sup> Quality is considered to be the strongest factor, followed by prestige. It refers to the accumulated consumer experience, including direct and indirect experience, related to the product or service.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, brand image had a positive effect on student satisfaction. This result is supported by earlier studies<sup>14</sup> that found a positive correlation.

The way the image of higher education is formed varies among different groups of stakeholders,<sup>15</sup> as they are influenced by different impulses, and the nature of their interest towards a higher education institution also varies. One action that might prove appealing to university marketing professionals is the analysis of the perception of different target groups and the subsequent identification of differences.<sup>16</sup>

1 PINAR, M. et al.: University Brand Equity: An Empirical Investigation of Its Dimensions. In *International Journal of Educational Management*, 2014, Vol. 28, No. 6, p. 617.

2 BALAJI, M., ROY, S. K., SADEQUE, S.: Antecedents and Consequences of University Brand Identification. In *Journal of Business Research*, 2016, Vol. 69, No. 8, p. 3025.

3 YAO, Q. Q. J. et al.: Does Diversity Hurt Students' Feeling of Oneness? A Study of the Relationships among Social Trust, University Internal Brand Identification, and Brand Citizenship Behaviors on Diversifying University Campuses. In *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 2019, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 220.

4 SPRY, L. et al.: Managing Higher Education Brands with an Emerging Brand Architecture. In *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 2018, Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 345.

5 DIMITROVA, T., DESEV, K.: Measurement Model of Brand Loyalty within the Higher Education Sector. In *Balkan Scientific Review*, 2020, Vol. 4, No. 8, p. 49.

6 ALESSANDRI, S. W., YANG, S. U., KINSEY, D. F.: An Integrative Approach to University Visual Identity and Reputation. In *Corporate Reputation Review*, 2006, Vol. 9, No. 4, p. 268.

7 DUARTE, P. O., ALVES, H. B., RAPOSO, M. B.: Understanding University Image: A Structural Equation Model Approach. In *International Review on Public and Nonprofit Marketing*, 2010, Vol. 7, No. 1, p. 34.

8 CURTIS, T., ABRATT, R., MINOR, W.: Corporate Brand Management in Higher Education: The Case of ERAU. In *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 2009, Vol. 18, No. 6, p. 409.

9 PARAMESWARAN, R., GLOWACKA, A. E.: University Image. In *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 1995, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 51.

10 AGHAZ, A., HASHEMI, A., SHARIFI ATASHGAH, M. S.: Factors Contributing to University Image: The Postgraduate Students' Points of View. In *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 2015, Vol. 25, No. 1, p. 122.

11 DE SABANDO, L. R. A., FORCADA, J., ZORRILLA, P.: The University Image: A Model of Overall Image and Stakeholder Perspectives. In *Cuadernos de Gestión*, 2018, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 80.

12 IQBAL, M. J., RASLI, A. B. M., IBN-E-HASSAN RASLI, A. B. M.: University Branding: A Myth or a Reality. In *Pakistan Journal of Commerce and Social Sciences*, 2012, Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 179.

13 YANG, Y., LIU, X., LI, J.: How Customer Experience Affects the Customer-Based Brand Equity for Tourism Destinations. In *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*, 2015, Vol. 30, No. 1, p. 105.

14 SCHLESINGER, W., CERVERA, A., PÉREZ-CABAÑERO, C.: Sticking with Your University: The Importance of Satisfaction, Trust, Image, and Shared Values. In *Studies in Higher Education*, 2016, Vol. 42, No. 12, p. 2188.

15 See: HITKA, M. et al.: Knowledge and Human Capital as Sustainable Competitive Advantage in Human Resource Management. In *Sustainability*, 2019, Vol. 11, No. 18, p. 1-18.

16 Compare to: AGHAZ, A., HASHEMI, A., SHARIFI ATASHGAH, M. S.: Factors Contributing to University Image: The Postgraduate Students' Points of View. In *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 2015, Vol. 25, No. 1, p. 109; MADLEŇÁK, R., ŠVADLENKA, L.: Acceptance of Internet Advertising by Users in The Czech Republic. In *E & M Ekonomické Management*, 2009, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 102.

## Reputation

Bakanauskas, and Šontaitė define “reputation” as the subjective and collective recognition of HEIs among all key stakeholders over a defined period,<sup>17</sup> taking into consideration their past behaviour, communication<sup>18</sup> and the potential to meet expectations compared to the competition. Another way to build university reputation, as seen by Aliami et al., is for the university or faculty to implement social responsibility activities, both internally and externally.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the importance of gaining and maintaining a good reputation with the stakeholders, it is still unclear how to build and effectively manage reputation. This topic still poses a challenge to universities.<sup>20</sup> While there are many reasons reputation building and management is a difficult task, two can be highlighted: a) heterogeneity of stakeholders and differences in expectations caused by this heterogeneity<sup>21</sup> and b) complexity resulting from diverse types of educational institutions.<sup>22</sup> Most studies carried out in the field of higher education consider the current empirical research as limited in relation to the parties involved in the process of reputation building.<sup>23</sup> Ali et al. point to the fact that the value of reputation is influenced by stakeholder group and the country of study.<sup>24</sup> On that account, some authors<sup>25</sup> attempt to bridge the gap by introducing an analysis with more than one stakeholder group.

## Preferences of Applicants in Selection Decision

As part of an effective brand building process, it is necessary to examine the deciding factors that determine an applicant’s choice of school. Ivy identifies seven distinct factors that students deem as important when choosing a post-graduate business school. These factors, in order of importance, are as follows: program (choice of majors, electives), prominence (reputation), price (tuition fees), prospectus (direct mail related promotions), people (interaction with the faculty, employees and other students), promotion (publicity and electronic marketing) and premiums (a mix of incentives that add special value).<sup>26</sup> Alternatively, Erdoğan and Ergun examine the factors that affect brand loyalty with regards to the university and the department the student belongs to. Their findings suggest that teaching staff, graduate career prospects and course performance had a positive effect on students’ attitude towards their department.<sup>27</sup>

- 17 BAKANAUSKAS, A., ŠONTAITĖ, M.: Measurement Model of Corporate Reputation at Higher Education Institutions: Customers’ Perspective. In *Organizacijų Vadyba: Sisteminių Tyrimai*, 2011, Vol. 59, p. 125.
- 18 HITKA, M. et al.: Sustainability in Marketing through Customer Relationship Management in a Telecommunication Company. In *Marketing and Management of Innovations*, 2019, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 199.
- 19 ALIAMI, A., SUBAGYO, S., NURHAJATI, D.: Building University Image and Reputation through Social Responsibility. In MITTAL, S., GUPTA, A. (eds.): *CSR and Sustainable Development: A Multinational Perspective: Society for Education & Research Development*. India: Haryan, 2015, p. 146.
- 20 Compare to: BAKANAUSKAS, A., ŠONTAITĖ, M.: Measurement Model of Corporate Reputation at Higher Education Institutions: Customers’ Perspective. In *Organizacijų Vadyba: Sisteminių Tyrimai*, 2011, Vol. 59, p. 126; VOLKWEIN, J. F., SWEITZER, K. V.: Institutional Prestige and Reputation among Research Universities and Liberal Arts Colleges. In *Research in Higher Education*, 2006, Vol. 47, No. 2, p. 144; WATKINS, B. A., GONZENBACH, W. J.: Assessing University Brand Personality through Logos: An Analysis of the Use of Academics and Athletics in University Branding. In *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 2013, Vol. 23, No. 1, p. 29.
- 21 VIDAVER-COHEN, D.: Reputation beyond the Rankings: A Conceptual Framework for Business School Research. In *Corporate Reputation Review*, 2007, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 300.
- 22 SUOMI, K.: Exploring the Dimensions of Brand Reputation in Higher Education. In *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 2014, Vol. 36, No. 6, p. 656.
- 23 Compare to: ALESSANDRI, S. W., YANG, S. U., KINSEY, D. F.: An Integrative Approach to University Visual Identity and Reputation. In *Corporate Reputation Review*, 2006, Vol. 9, No. 4, p. 267; NGUYEN, N., LEBLANC, G.: Image and Reputation of Higher Education Institutions in Students’ Retention Decisions. In *International Journal of Educational Management*, 2001, Vol. 15, No. 6, p. 303-311.
- 24 ALI, R. et al.: The Moderating Influences on the Relationship of Corporate Reputation with Its Antecedents and Consequences. In *Journal of Business Research*, 2015, Vol. 68, No. 5, p. 112.
- 25 See, for example: VERČIČ, A. T., VERČIČ, D., ŽNIDAR, K.: Exploring Academic Reputation – Is It a Multidimensional Construct? In *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 2016, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 173; VIDAVER-COHEN, D.: Reputation beyond the Rankings: A Conceptual Framework for Business School Research. In *Corporate Reputation Review*, 2007, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 298.
- 26 IVY, J.: A New Higher Education Marketing Mix: The 7Ps for MBA Marketing. In *International Journal of Educational Management*, 2008, Vol. 22, No. 4, p. 293.
- 27 ERDOĞMUŞ, R., ERGUN, S.: Understanding University Brand Loyalty: The Mediating Role of Attitudes towards the Department and University. In *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2016, Vol. 229, p. 147.

Other studies address the impact of facilities,<sup>28</sup> the importance of focusing on people (faculty, employees, other students, communities) and processes<sup>29</sup> (logistics of service providing) in the marketing of services<sup>30</sup> and the close link between market positioning and the concept of branding.<sup>31</sup> With regards to brand positioning, Gatfield et al.,<sup>32</sup> Gray et al.<sup>33</sup> and Mazzarol<sup>34</sup> identified academic environment, campus life, reputation and graduate career prospects as the main dimensions of higher education. As is the case with research on brand building, image and student loyalty, the majority of available studies are based on surveying the student target group, disregarding applicants.<sup>35</sup> Leworks with a sample of 500 students attending 5 private universities in Vietnam. He identifies five key factors – geographical location, prestige, facilities, attractiveness of the field and media.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, research carried out in Indonesia by Kusumawati et al. suggests that Indonesian high school graduates have different university preferences, seek advice from their family, friends and teachers and consider reputation and job prospects as important factors when selecting a public university.<sup>37</sup>

Garvanová presents a study carried out in December 2018 on a sample of 213 students of a Bulgarian university. Her findings show that reputation is one of the key factors that determines the behaviour of consumers of educational products and services and is among the leading predictors of increasing user base and achieving organisational growth.<sup>38</sup> Previously published studies from the Czech Republic<sup>39</sup> provide a view of key attributes of first-year students: better employment opportunities in the field and higher financial compensation, followed by interest in the field and program difficulty. The diversity of the applicants’ priorities in a Czech public higher education institution and in a particular study program, the effect of these priorities on the perceived prestige and other research knowledge gaps are the subject of a case study described below.

## Brand Building at the FMC of the TBU in Zlín

Since the former Czechoslovakia underwent a regime change in 1989, the number of students enrolled in HEIs has almost quadrupled, opening access to higher education to virtually all high school graduates who complete their state exam and show interest in continuing their education. Owing to shifts in the country’s population curve, higher education saw an end of an era of quantitative boom in 2014. More positive development is expected no sooner than around the year 2023, when high school graduate numbers should start rising again, and, realistically, high numbers (roughly 115,000 – 120,000) are expected as late as in the year 2028, albeit for probably only a limited amount of time.<sup>40</sup> This development is the reason why HEIs are

- 28 PRICE, I. et al.: The Impact of Facilities on Student Choice of University. In *Facilities*, 2003, Vol. 21, No. 10, p. 218.
- 29 MADLEŇÁK R. et al.: Analysis of Website Traffic Dependence on Use of Selected Internet Marketing Tools. In *Procedia Economics and Finance*, 2015, Vol. 23, p. 126.
- 30 See: COWELL, D. W.: *The Marketing of Services*. London: Heinemann, 1984.
- 31 NICHOLLS, J. et al.: Marketing Higher Education: The MBA Experience. In *International Journal of Educational Management*, 1995, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 36.
- 32 GATFIELD, T., BARKER, M., GRAHAM, P.: Measuring Communication Impact for University Advertising Materials. In *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 1999, Vol. 4, No. 2, p. 77.
- 33 GRAY, B. J., SHYAN FAM, K., LLANES, V. A.: Branding Universities in Asian Markets. In *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 2003, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 118.
- 34 MAZZAROL, T.: Critical Success Factors for International Education Marketing. In *International Journal of Educational Management*, 1998, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 170.
- 35 STASIAK-BETLEJEWSKA, R. et al.: Students’ Expectations in the Technical University Services Quality Assessment. In HOUŠKA, M., KREJČÍ, I., FLÉGL, M. (eds.): *Czech University Life Sciences Prague. Efficiency and Responsibility in Education. Conference Proceedings*. Prague: Czech University of Life Sciences, 2014, p. 770.
- 36 LE, H. Q.: Factors Affecting Students’ Decision to Select Private Universities in Vietnam. In *The Journal of Asian Finance, Economics and Business*, 2020, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 238.
- 37 KUSUMAWATI, A., YANAMANDRAM, V. K., PERERA, N.: University Marketing and Consumer Behaviour Concerns: The Shifting Preference of University Selection Criteria in Indonesia. In EAGAR, K. (ed.): *Centre for Health Service Development – CHSD. 33. Asian Studies Association of Australia 18<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference. Conference Proceedings*. South Australia: ASAA, 2010, p. 14.
- 38 GARVANOVÁ, M.: The Significance of Reputation in Choosing and Recommendation a University. In *Test Engineering and Management*, 2020, Vol. 83, No. 2, p. 8548.
- 39 See: FAJČÍKOVÁ, A., URBANCOVÁ, H.: Factors Influencing Students’ Motivation to Seek Higher Education – A Case Study at a State University in the Czech Republic. In *Sustainability*, 2019, Vol. 11, No. 17, p. 1-14; LIŽBETINOVÁ, L.: Motivation of Students to Choose Study at University. In *Mladá Věda*, 2017, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 50.
- 40 Compare to: ČODÁNY, Z. et al.: Entrepreneurship Motivation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in Terms of Pull and Push Factors. In *TEM JOURNAL – Technology Education Management Informatics*, 2021, Vol. 10, No. 1, p. 339; FİLA, M. et al.: Innovations for Business

starting to focus not only on the quality of education but on also on acquiring ‘good-quality’ applicants and students. With a population of approximately 10 million people, the Czech Republic is currently home to 26 public, 33 private and 2 state HEIs. The TBU is a public school, meaning it provides education to students with a regular study schedule for free. Funds in public schools are allocated to students and research using qualitative indicators, the availability of funding for marketing and promotion is therefore very limited. As the study program of Marketing Communications is gaining more popularity, more HEIs are adding it to their list of available programs. Currently, it can be studied at 4 private and 2 more public higher education institutions.

The inquiry presented in this study draws on research conducted at the FMC of TBU, a higher education institution with a strong (yet relatively short) tradition and position in the Czech Republic. The six faculties of TBU are currently home to 9,000 students. International students, who make up about 10% of TBU’s population and come from all around the world, help create an international environment. TBU has made significant achievements in research and development in the fields of polymer engineering, applied informatics and creative industries, which are represented mainly at the FMC. Its competitive advantage lies in the unique combination of study programs it offers, such as Multimedia & Design, Marketing Communications and Theory and Practice of Audio-visual Creation. Under the direction of an independent coach, the mission and the vision were identified and brand values were defined in 2019:

- Pride – I share the mission and the vision of the faculty and spread and defend its reputation. I am proud of the faculty’s achievements so far, the important figures associated with it and the openness to innovations.
- Open Communication and Friendly Environment – I share relevant information, provide constructive criticism and give others space to express their opinion.
- Sense of Belonging and Mutual Respect – I am mindful of the value of my colleagues (both employees and students) and their time and, together with them, I act in the faculty’s best interest.
- Professionalism and Cooperation – I take care of matters I have made myself accountable for in a timely manner, dutifully and competently, I discuss such matters only with those they concern, with a regard for their time constraints and competences. This includes course quality, teaching staff quality and international and interdisciplinary cooperation.
- Safe and Creative Good-Quality Environment – I protect academic freedom, co-create a space for creativity and fight discrimination. This includes suitable FMC equipment and spaces for teaching and research activities.

The FMC’s values are also reflected in the focus of the Marketing Communications study program. The program’s management constantly strives to make it a desirable, modern (given its relatively short-lived existence so far and the dynamic development of the field), dynamic and professional leader amongst its competition, with a friendly environment and an entertaining style of education. In accordance with the mission, vision and defined brand values, research aimed at applicants has been conducted at the faculty for the past four years. It is focused on finding out the applicants’ preferences when choosing a study program, the perceived reputation of the FMC and TBU and students’ associations to the FMC.

### 3 Methodology

The objective is to determine homogenous groups of applicants based on how they perceive the reputation of the university/faculty and what their preferences are when choosing a study program. The results of the research are then used to verify whether the brand values defined by the FMC correspond with how the faculty is actually perceived by its applicants. The objective is achieved by drawing on research conducted as a survey in the years 2016 – 2020. The respondents are applicants who took part in the entrance exams. The research sample size is 1,851 respondents (i.e., those who submitted a correctly filled-out questionnaire, with the return rate reaching 95%, as 43 respondents had to be excluded due to invalid responses), whose structure is

Management: Motivation and Barriers. In *Marketing and Management of Innovations*, 2020, Vol. 10, No. 4, p. 275.

described in more detail in Table 1. The research sample consists of 83% of full-time students (17% of part-time students). The questionnaire focused on finding out the preferences of applicants when selecting a study program, the perception of TBU and the FMC in terms of reputation, applicants’ views on the attributes of university prestige and their associations to the FMC. Most of the attributes used in the questionnaire were selected in accordance with the FMC’s brand values, while some were added based on other studies in the field.

Table 1: Structure of research sample

Gender		Survey year				Total	
		2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020		
Male	Count	152	208	118	138	616	
	% within survey year	35%	35%	30%	32%	33%	
Female	Count	281	393	269	292	1,235	
	% within survey year	65%	65%	70%	68%	67%	
Total		% within total	23%	33%	21%	23%	100%

Source: Own processing

The data was also tested for significant changes of applicants’ preferences when choosing a study program and their associations to the FMC over time by ANOVA, but no significant changes were identified. The entire sample was therefore fed into a K-means cluster analysis. The resulting clusters are presented in Table 2. The clusters were put together based on the perceived reputation of TBU and the FMC from the perspective of the public and the applicants themselves. The clusters were then analysed in detail using basic descriptive statistics in order to find significant differences in the selected attributes using an ANOVA test and a post hoc analysis – Tukey’s HSD test.

#### Research Hypotheses

**H1:** The cluster of applicants with the most positive perception of TBU and the FMC is statistically significantly different from other clusters in its preferences in the selection decisions that are related to the most important values of the FMC brand:

**H1.1:** pride represented by the attributes of prestige and important TBU figures;

**H1.2:** open communication, sense of belonging and mutual respected represented by the attribute of friendliness;

**H1.3:** professionalism and cooperation represented by the attributes of qualified academic personnel and cooperation with professionals in the field;

**H1.4:** a safe and creative environment represented by the attributes of personal development, science, equipment and facilities and opportunities abroad.

The next hypotheses serve to verify whether the perception of the FMC is in line with the defined values of the faculty. FMC values are examined by being associated to attribute pairs split into two groups by nature. The first group of ten attribute pairs has a predetermined polarity, where one of the pair is perceived negatively and the other positively, while for attribute pairs belonging to the second group it cannot be stated which of the pair is more or less desirable. In this case, the desired perception of the FMC tends to be somewhere in the middle, with a possible slight preference of one the attribute extremes (general vs. specialised, open for all vs. elitist, small vs. large, marketing-oriented vs. artistic, Czech vs. international). Given their unique nature, a separate hypothesis was set for each of the two groups.

**H2:** The cluster of applicants with the most positive perception of TBU and the FMC is statistically significantly different from at least one of the other clusters in a way that the most important values of the FMC brand are perceived more positively:

**H2.1:** The values of pride, professionalism and cooperation are represented by the following attributes: modern, desired, strong, successful, professional and aptly named.

**H2.2:** The values of open communication, friendly environment, sense of belonging and mutual respect are represented by the following attributes: friendly, fun, inspiring and dynamic.

**H2.3:** The value of a safe and creative good-quality environment is represented by the following attributes: modern, inspiring, dynamic.

**H3:** The cluster of applicants with the most positive perception of TBU and the FMC is statistically significantly different from at least one of the other clusters in their associations with the selected attribute pairs belonging to the second group (attribute pairs without a positive or negative extreme). These attributes pairs are open for all vs. elitist, large vs. small, general vs. specialised, marketing-oriented vs. artistic, Czech vs. international.

## 4 Results

The K-means cluster analysis was used to create the three clusters of respondents. Table 2 provides an overview of the rating that Clusters 1 – 3 assigned to the reputation of TBU and the FMC. The results show that the reputation of both TBU and the FMC is best rated by Cluster 1. Cluster 2 is a bit less positive about their reputation, whereas Cluster 3 sees the reputation of the FMC as good, but the reputation of the university as a whole is rated negatively.

Table 2: Final cluster centres

Variable	Cluster		
	1	2	3
TBU's reputation in YOUR mind	1.26	2.13	3.22
FMC's reputation in YOUR mind	1.07	1.89	1.43
TBU's reputation in PEOPLE's minds	1.41	2.23	3.89
FMC's reputation in PEOPLE's minds	1.24	2.12	1.68

Note: Reputation rating is on a scale of 1 – 5, from best to worst

Source: Own processing

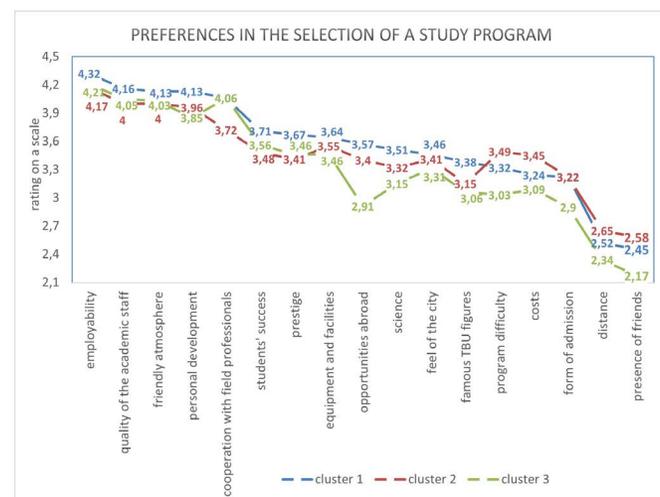


Figure 1: Preferences in selecting a study program

Note: The importance rating is on a scale of 1–5, from least important to most important.

Source: Own processing

Figure 1 illustrates preferences in the selection of a study program as seen by different clusters, sorted in the order of importance from the most important to the least important. As the graph shows, all clusters consider students' employability, quality of the academic staff and friendly atmosphere as the most important, only then followed by personal development, cooperation with field professionals and students' success.

ANOVA test determined significant differences in applicants' preferences in the selection of a study program within their assigned cluster at a significance level of 5%. Statistically significant differences in preferences were observed in the case of the following variables:

- employability (p=0.046);
- quality of academic staff (p=0.024);
- personal development (p=0.002);
- cooperation with field professionals (p=0.012);
- students' success (p=0.000);
- prestige (p=0.000);
- equipment and facilities (p=0.046);
- opportunities abroad (p=0.019);
- science (p=0.000);
- program difficulty (p=0.029);
- form of admission (p=0.003);
- distance (p=0.009).

To this end, the data was analysed using a Tukey's HSD post hoc test, which provides clarity on the actual relationships of significant differences among clusters in terms of applicants' preferences. Significant differences are identified at a significance level of 5% for applicants' preferences as follows:

- There are significant differences between Clusters 1 and 2, which are the two clusters with the highest perceived reputation of the faculty and university. Cluster 1 shows higher preferences in terms of students' success, employability, quality of academic staff, cooperation with field professionals (compared to Cluster 2), science, personal development, prestige (compared to Clusters 2 and 3) and opportunities abroad (compared to Cluster 3).
- Conversely, Cluster 3, which rates the reputation of the school fairly negatively, has significantly lower preferences (apart from those already mentioned) in terms of form of admission (compared to Clusters 1 and 2) and program difficulty (compared to Cluster 2).
- No statistically significant differences were found for the option of equipment and facilities, which means that Tukey's HSD test has proven the H0 statistical hypothesis, which states that respondents from all three clusters show an equal preference for equipment when selecting a study program.

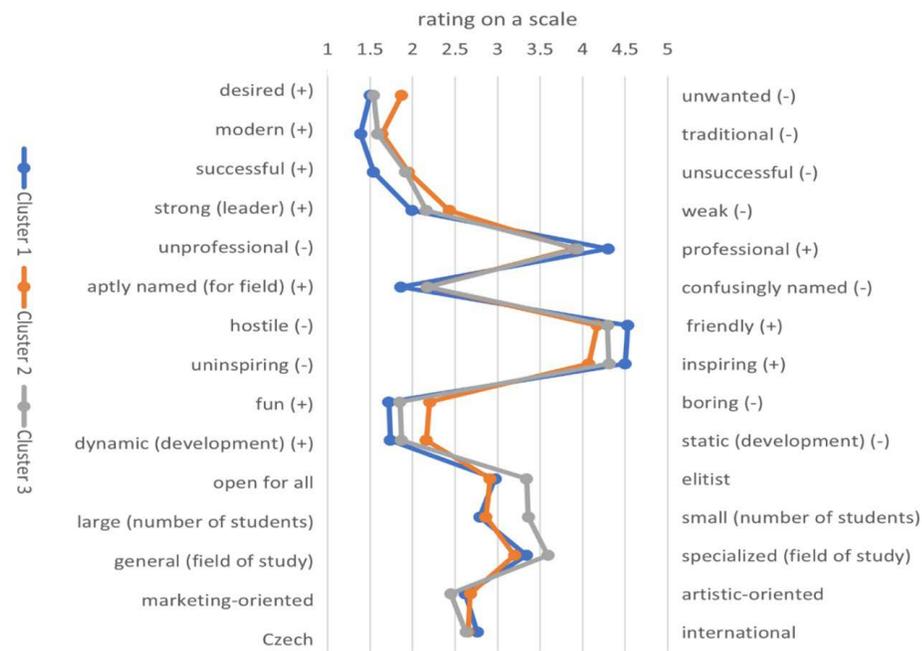


Figure 2: Polarity profile of applicants' associations to the FMC

Note: The (+) symbol signifies a positive extreme, while the (-) symbol signifies a negative extreme.

Source: Own processing

Figure 2 shows a graphic representation of the arithmetic mean values of associations to the FMC for each of the clusters, plotted on a five-point scale of two possible extremes. The resulting polarity profiles suggest that the perception of applicants corresponds to the values defined by the FMC and the Marketing Communications program. All clusters of applicants see the faculty as friendly, desired, modern and dynamic. The ANOVA test identified significant differences in all attributes except for marketing-oriented vs. artistic and Czech vs. international, which are statistically perceived on the same level in all three clusters (at a significance level of 5%). The Tukey's HSD test provided a more in-depth look at the relationships between the previously identified statistically significant differences in the cluster members' associations to the FMC. All the differences were confirmed to be significant at a significance level of 1%, except for the attribute pair of general vs. specialised, for which the associations of Cluster 2 were significantly different at a significance level of 5%. The specific relationships between significant differences are further discussed in the description of clusters that follows.

**Cluster 1 – Key Players/Conscientious and Ambitious Applicants (46.4%):** Cluster 1 members have a slightly higher incidence of women; age-wise, this group is made up of more applicants aged 21 and over, and part-time form of study is more prevalent than in other clusters. The most important aspects that this group of applicants considers when selecting a study program include employability, quality of academic staff, personal development opportunities, a friendly atmosphere and opportunities for cooperation with professionals in the field. The very prestige of the school and its equipment and facilities place only seventh and eighth in their importance ranking, respectively. Study program difficulty and form of admission are their third and fourth least important aspects. What they care about the least is whether their high school friends attend the same university. If we look at the differences in preferences compared to members of other clusters, we can see that they are more concerned about opportunities abroad, science, personal development, academic staff quality and prestige. Overall, their demands are the highest of all clusters. Cluster 1 members see the FMC as more modern, larger, more successful and less elitist than Cluster 3 does. Compared to Cluster 2, they rate the FMC as a stronger leader, more inspiring and more successful. Compared to both other clusters, Cluster 1

considers the FMC to be friendlier, more professional, more entertaining and more aptly named. Taking into consideration a potential communication plan aimed at attracting members of this cluster, it is important to focus on communicating the values that the FMC is based on, mainly by associating the FMC's characteristics and the general preferences of this cluster, where there is a clear synergy in such values as quality, personal development, cooperation with field professionals and leading position in the field and the faculty's success. The engagement of these values will have a real impact on the number of applicants in practice.

**Cluster 2 – Compromise Makers (44.2%):** This cluster has a slightly higher proportion of men, and, in terms of age, they have a higher incidence of applicants under 21 or over 30. Applicants of the part-time form of study are less represented than in Cluster 1. For the members of Cluster 2, employability and quality of academic staff are also the most important factors, although they tend to favour a friendly atmosphere more than others. They also care about personal development and cooperation with field professionals. They do not assign too much importance to prestige, though they are more concerned about equipment and facilities and the difficulty of the study program. Compared to other clusters, they have the lowest demands on employability, cooperation with field professionals and successful students. On the other hand, they show more concern when it comes to the costs and the difficulty of studying, the form of admission, distance from home and presence of friends at the school. Cluster 2 associates the FMC with a lower level of desirability than Clusters 1 and 3. It also sees it as more traditional, more open for all, larger and less specialised than the members of Cluster 3. Compared to Cluster 1, they see the FMC as less successful, entertaining, friendly, professional and aptly named. Communication activities directed towards applicants of this cluster have to provide more practical information about the school and the study program and the costs involved.

**Cluster 3 – Practical Pragmatics (9.4%):** An equally represented group in terms of gender, in which 21-year-olds to 30-year-olds are slightly over-represented and applicants over 30 are under-represented. Potential full-time students prevail. Overall, the members of Cluster 3 have slightly lower demands on most factors than their counterparts from other clusters. The main factors this group looks at when selecting a school include employability, cooperation with field professionals, quality of academic staff and a friendly atmosphere. Cluster 3 is less concerned about personal development, study program difficulty, form of admission and opportunities abroad. Cluster 3 representatives see the FMC as a more traditional school than Cluster 1 does. Compared to Clusters 1 and 2, they consider the faculty to be smaller, more elitist and more specialised. Cluster 3 members see the school as more inspiring along with Cluster 1 (as opposed to Cluster 2) but less successful, less friendly, more boring, less specialised and less aptly named than Cluster 1. Compared to Cluster 2, the school is more successful, friendly and entertaining. Communication directed at Cluster 3 is specific mainly in that the attributes that dominate among the two other clusters are sidelined, as more emphasis within marketing communications and message content needs to be put on showing examples of successful alumni and cooperation with industry players.

## 5 Verification of Hypotheses and Discussion

In order to verify the H1 hypothesis, an ANOVA and a Tukey's HSD test were carried out. Based on the results, the following can be said about FMC's brand values:

**H1.1** – Significant differences among clusters were confirmed in the question of the preference of prestige, with a significance level of 1% and 5% between Clusters 1 and 2 and between Clusters 1 and 3, respectively. Cluster 1 assigns much more importance to the prestige of the school and the faculty while also ranking the reputation of TBU and the FMC the most positively. The ANOVA test did not confirm any significant differences among the cluster in the case of famous TBU figures at a significance level of 5%. This suggests that TBU figures play an equally important role in all clusters of applicants during the selection process. Due to the fact that this attribute trails in the second half of preferences in order of importance, it can be inferred that its role is not as important for all applicants. Therefore, the H1.1 hypothesis has not been verified.

**H1.2** – A statistically significant difference in the preference of a friendly atmosphere among different clusters was not confirmed. Hence, the H1.2 hypothesis has been disproven. This attribute has been steadily ranked among the most important, with an equal preference from a statistical point of view. Given the fact that this value is intentionally supported and fostered at the FMC, the findings suggest that applicants are aware of this fact already in the selection stage.

**H1.3** – The preferences of Clusters 1 and 2 are significantly different at a significance level of 5% in quality of academic personnel, cooperation with professionals in the field, as well as other attributes that have to do with the quality of education (successful students and employability). Thus, the H1.3 hypothesis has been verified.

**H1.4** – The preference of personal development and science has a significantly higher level of importance in Cluster 1 compared to Clusters 2 and 3. Cluster 1 shows a significantly higher preference for opportunities abroad than Cluster 3 does. No significant differences among clusters were confirmed for the preference of facilities and equipment. The H1.4 hypothesis has not been verified.

The only value for which a significant difference was unambiguously confirmed in all its attributes is 'professionalism and cooperation', namely between Clusters 1 and 2, which represent the majority of respondents. Therefore, the H1 hypothesis has been rejected at a significance level of 5%. To verify the H2 hypothesis, the results of the ANOVA and Tukey's HSD test from:

**H2.1** – The FMC is considered a more desired, modern and successful faculty, whereas Clusters 1 and 3 see it as significantly more desired and stronger in comparison to Cluster 2 at a significance level of 1%. Cluster 1 considers the FMC as more modern, successful, professional and aptly named than Clusters 2 and 3 do at a significance level of 1%. The H2.1 hypothesis has therefore been verified.

**H2.2** – The FMC is generally considered to be a friendly, fun, inspiring and dynamic faculty (Figure 2). Cluster 1 sees the FMC as having a significantly friendlier atmosphere compared to Clusters 2 and 3 at a significance level of 1%. Cluster 2 sees the FMC as significantly less inspiring, fun, dynamic than Clusters 1 and 3 do ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). The H2.2 hypothesis has been verified.

**H2.3** – The FMC is generally perceived as a medium-sized faculty that is inspiring, modern, professional and dynamic. Comparing the clusters' associations to the FMC, it has been found that Cluster 1 see the FMC as significantly more modern and professional than other two clusters (=1%). Cluster 1 and 3 see the FMC as more statistically significantly inspiring and dynamic ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). The H2.3 hypothesis has been verified.

Looking at the differences in associations of members of different clusters allows us to verify the H2 hypothesis. In terms of the attribute open for all vs. elitist, FMC applicants rate it much more neutrally, although Cluster 3 is significantly more partial to see it as elitist, while also deeming it smaller and more specialised compared to the other clusters. The significant differences have not been confirmed within attributes of marketing-oriented vs. artistic and Czech vs. international. Therefore, the H3 hypothesis has been rejected.

It can therefore be stated that associations to the FMC of those applicants who perceive the reputation of the faculty and the university differently are also significantly different. What cannot be stated, however, is that groups that hold different views on the reputation of the faculty and the university would have significantly different preferences when selecting a study program. Only those preferences falling under the FMC's brand value of 'professionalism and cooperation' (quality of academic staff, students' success, employability, cooperation with professionals in the field) have shown statistically significant differences between Clusters 1 and 2. The most important aspects that FMC applicants take into consideration when applying are employability, quality of academic staff, friendly atmosphere, cooperation with professionals in the field and personal development. The findings of Pinar et al. show, among other things, that emotional environment is among the most important brand equity dimensions in developing a strong university brand,<sup>41</sup> which corresponds with the high preference of a friendly atmosphere in all clusters. The association of a

41 PINAR, M. et al.: University Brand Equity: An Empirical Investigation of Its Dimensions. In *International Journal of Educational Management*, 2014, Vol. 28, No. 6, p. 627.

friendly atmosphere to the FMC reaches its highest values in Cluster 1, which is also the group that rates the faculty most positively. Available research has mostly aimed at surveying samples of enrolled students, evidently demonstrating that preferences are very dependent on the location of the research (due to different systems of education and funding, different living standards and other attributes). According to Mirzaei et al., healthy universities in England are associated with such themes as opportunities and support services, while unhealthy brands mainly focus on facilities and cognitive benefits.<sup>42</sup> The preferences of TBU applicants show a clear focus towards attributes of the so-called healthy brands, whereas aspects such as the form and difficulty of admission and the study program, distance, costs and the presence of friends are rather unimportant in the selection process. The existence of Cluster 3, which has a different perception of the university as a whole and the faculty, gives even more credit to the conclusions of Yao et al.<sup>43</sup> and Spry et al.,<sup>44</sup> who point to the need to build so-called subbrands, leading to a competitive diversification of different faculties and departments. The members of this cluster think of the faculty as smaller and less desired yet still appealing to the applicants, whereas the reputation of the university is rated much more negatively.

## 6 Conclusion

The objective of this study was to determine homogenous groups of applicants based on how they perceive the reputation of a selected university/faculty and to analyse their view of the FMC's defined brand values as well as their preferences when selecting a study program. The results of the research were then used to verify whether the brand values defined by the faculty management corresponded with how the faculty's applicants actually perceived its brand. The groups that rated the reputation the most positively had significantly higher preferences with regards to qualitative attributes (students' success, employability, quality of academic staff, personal development, cooperation with field professionals, level of science, opportunities abroad) and, on the contrary, significantly lower preferences with regards to cognitive benefits (distance from home, form of admission, study program difficulty).

Thus, the results confirm the high importance of brand building and its positive image. For this reason, the university's marketing departments should work to formulate long-term communication goals and strategies based on stable values (qualities) and essences of their brand. Communication from universities to target groups of applicants and students should be consistent, using strong arguments and facts (e.g., low percentage of unemployed graduates) and also differing from competing universities in their values (in the case of FMC – a friendly, fun, inspiring and dynamic faculty). Universities/faculties that do not use this strategy will eventually have only students with a low interest in studying, students enrolled only for the purpose of obtaining 'student status' and thus also students who will also not spread a positive image, which may be key for further development and university success.

Most of the published empirical research in the higher education sector has limited interpretation in view of the different stakeholders that reputation building relates to. Nonetheless, reputation primarily represents a university's positive image towards the outside world, which is why it makes sense to analyse it in other groups, such as applicants (potential clients) and the general public in the region and beyond. This observation opens room for new research, expanding the current knowledge by focusing on these target groups. This research therefore fills a gap in the current knowledge and sets the groundwork for further research in this area by presenting findings with the target group of applicants and therefore featuring respondents who should be the main object of brand and reputation building activities. Previously published research with the target group of students only provides an internal and limited view of the perception of reputation and preferences. This

42 MIRZAEI, A. et al.: Brand Associations in the Higher Education Sector: The Difference between Shared and Owned Associations. In *Journal of Brand Management*, 2016, Vol. 23, No. 4, p. 430.

43 YAO, Q. Q. J. et al.: Does Diversity Hurt Students' Feeling of Oneness? A Study of the Relationships among Social Trust, University Internal Brand Identification, and Brand Citizenship Behaviors on Diversifying University Campuses. In *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 2019, Vol. 29, No. 2, p. 224.

44 SPRY, L. et al.: Managing Higher Education Brands with an Emerging Brand Architecture. In *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 2018, Vol. 28, No. 4, p. 343.

article illustrates with a case study how a university can have a practical approach to brand and reputation building not only as a whole but also at faculty level. It shows how important it is to pay attention to marketing planning, especially communication with stakeholders. These target groups (external and internal), their requirements and perceptions of university values should become part of continuous monitoring research. Based on the results, it is possible to set a communication strategy contributing to building a positive image and the prestige of the university, while still retaining the most important care for the qualitative parameters of the university (such as expertise, reputation and academic skills of teachers, technological background, innovative technologies, etc.).

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