

UNIVERSITY BRANDING IN AZERBAIJAN: EMPIRICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' CHOICES FOR EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Under the intense global and national competition, Azerbaijani universities began branding initiatives to position and differentiate themselves to be the first choice of students. In recent years, both state and private universities in Azerbaijan have been implementing branding and rebranding strategies to attract more students and distinguish themselves in a crowded higher education market. University branding is a recent concept to Azerbaijan, so lacks academic and empirical studies in regard to the impact on Azerbaijani students' university selection choices. The aim of this article is to present exploratory research using survey data collected from four private and public universities in Azerbaijan. It compares criteria used by university students when selecting a particular university from among those that they made application and their views of the university they attended. The study reveals that there are a variety of criteria that Azerbaijani students consider when applying for university. However, there is both economically and statistically significance of the existence of active students clubs/unions in a university as important criteria that influence students first choice for university selection. The study also showed that mostly friends/family, and to a lesser extent, university visits play important role in obtaining information about a university among Azerbaijani students. The research findings should be useful for higher education institutions to review and enhance branding strategies that promote their international positioning and help the sustainable development of Azerbaijan universities. As it is the first research conducted in this field in a dynamic country like Azerbaijan, it should also interest foreign higher education institutions that wish to recruit Azerbaijani students.

Keywords: *branding, name recognition, university, university selection*

1. INTRODUCTION

As result of changes in an educational environment, shrinking financial support from governments, pressure by competitors and decline in university-going population, universities started increasingly using marketing and branding strategies that mainly was adopted by an organization from the for-profit sector. (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007; Stephenson & Yerger, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2015). Based on mainstream reports, there is also an indication of the increase in marketing and branding budget of universities (Chapleo, 2014).

Historically, university branding has been done for different purposes. To Joseph et al. (2012) university branding is used to create “awareness among prospective students and their parents; or target donors, professors, business leaders, alumni, and elected officials with branded messages”. University branding is also used to improve higher education institutions international ranking (Bunzel, 2007). To Paden and Stell (2006), some universities brand themselves to improve their name awareness, others aimed at creating an entirely new image. To Kurz et al, (2008), among the various approaches to university branding with the foremost common being educational quality, high profile athletics, convenience, co-branding and/or distinctive programs or majors.

The intense global and national competition made it inevitable for Azerbaijani universities to start branding initiatives to position and differentiate themselves in order to be the first choice of students. Because more students mean a better financial condition to realize educational and academic projects. Main sources of public universities revenues come from tuition fees and government funds. Depending on scores gained from national university entry exam, students (with a higher score) get state aid that covers their tuition fees and those with lower score have to pay tuition fee by themselves (parents or another source). However, the tuition fee is the biggest source of revenue among private universities in Azerbaijan.

Both public and private universities in Azerbaijani have recently been implementing branding and rebranding strategies to attract more students and distinguish themselves in a crowded higher education market. After the implementation of the Bologna Accord in Azerbaijan this process became intense. Most of the barriers faced by Azerbaijani students were eliminated with the Bologna Accord and a new gate opened for their mobility across the European continent. Azerbaijani higher education institutions realized that they have to deal with European competitors in parallel with national ones.

There are many different approaches and motives to university branding that are based on studies mainly in western countries. University branding is a new concept to Azerbaijan. It lacks empirical and academic studies in regard to university branding in Azerbaijan and their impact on Azerbaijani students' university selection choices. This study is conducted to explore which criteria are important to students in Azerbaijan when selecting a university. In this regard, this study is undertaken to clarify how current students at the universities gained information about the universities they considered; and whether there are certain factors that are significantly important than others for students' first choice for university.

2. DEFINING BRAND AND ITS BENEFITS FOR UNIVERSITIES

There are numerous perspectives and approaches to the brand concept. To Keller and Lehmann (2003) brands are a name and most valuable asset of the company that influences customers, and sign of service or a product that differentiate from others. Kapferer (2004) considers the brand as a system of three poles including products and service, brand concept (value proposition), and brand name and symbols. The American Marketing Association (1960) defines a brand as “a name, term, sign, symbol, design or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition.” All these definitions help us to understand the meaning and purpose of a brand. However, one of the well-defined explanations of the brand in the higher education institutions was given by Temple (2006). To Temple (2006) ‘the brand emerges as a function of how well the institution performs in meeting the needs of its clients: it is the result of effective marketing’ (p. 17). To McNally and Speak (2002) consumer’s feelings and perceptions about the institutions is the higher education brand. Pinar et al. (2013) mention that in order to ensure sustainability in higher education institutions many universities gradually shift the promotional landscape from traditional tools to branding.

Brands can simplify decision and reduce the risk for a consumer (Suri and Monroe, 2003). Brands can also help consumers as a signal of a certain level of quality (Erdem, 1998). To Simms and Trott (2006), brands largely appeal at the emotional level via key association and symbolic image. Balmer and Gray (2003), identify the value of the corporate brand on its ability to differentiate itself in the mind of stakeholders. Berry and Lampo (2004) found out

that brandings are very successful in the differentiation of companies in labor-intensive services. According to the study at both private and public conducted by Joseph et al (2012) universities in southern United States in regard to understanding student's choice of an educational education institutions demonstrates that dissemination of information about a university mainly happens by word of mouth from friends/family, university representatives, and /or high school counselor The same study also reveals that amenities/ facilities play more important role as a factor of selection for university.

According to Sevier (2007, p.46), strong brand means “more and better students, more full and fuller paying students, more students will persist, more strategic partners” for the university. A successful university branding campaigns result in better students qualifications and increased admission application (LipmanHearner cited in Joseph et al., 2012). To Moore (2010), increased faculty recruitment and retention rates for professors and students are also benefits of successful university branding.

Most of the existing approaches and theories to branding are rooted from studies of commercial products and services. Therefore, there is a limited study of university branding. Previous studies in university branding demonstrate that it is a complex process and there is not a single approach to be implemented for success. To Balmer et al. (2007), there is a difference on corporate branding in regard to relationship between university and students in comparison to relations in the for-profit sector. Students are not just customers; moreover, they are “life-long organizational members of a corporate brand community.” (Balmer et al. 2007, p. 357). Balmer also suggests that approach to branding within higher education institutions is tend to be more student and stakeholder-oriented. Studies on positioning of international education brands conducted by Gray et al. (2003) presented that adaptation branding strategies are more effective in the Asian markets. The study of Jevons (2006) proposes a need for clarification of universities brand meaning and their differentiation from others. To Watkins and Gonzenbach (2013) success of branding in an institution is influenced by its external stakeholder. In this regard, essential to attain differentiation among competitors there is a need for understanding and managing the brand perception of all stakeholders (Davies & Chun, 2008). To Duesterhaus and Duesterhaus (2014) students may not see the university rankings that used by an institution to signal assurance of quality as meaningful in selecting a suitable college. Emotional attributes play important role when students evaluate a potential university (Duesterhaus and Duesterhaus, 2014). This study underlines the need for the development of relationships and the emotional connection that students seek.

There is a consensus in regard to understanding institutional branding and great value of clearly developing and communicating the brand for universities. (Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana, 2007). However, studies also suggest that the complexity of university branding does not allow direct implementation of traditional branding approaches in higher education institutions (Whisman, 2009) and there is a struggle among universities to develop and implement branding strategies (Curtis *et al*, 2009).

3. EXAMPLES OF RECENT UNIVERSITY BRANDING IN AZERBAIJAN

There are a few examples of university branding and rebranding in Azerbaijan. One of the strong university branding initiatives was conducted by Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC). In 2016, Azerbaijan State University of Economics began using a different color and a new logo and new abbreviation of its name (UNEC, 2016). Azerbaijan

State University of Economics started to use: UNEC as a trademark. In regard to the new branding initiative, the university wanted to create a new brand of the university that better reflected its high-quality education and services, and so make its employees and students proud of being associated with it. As a part of the branding initiatives, UNEC created a new mission, vision and set of values. UNEC's branding aimed to position itself as the number one profiled economics university in the region to attract more students and better faculty. In this regard, UNEC launched a recruiting campaign to attract young and foreign-educated Azerbaijani professors and lecturers to the University to improve its image in public. Hence, more than 200 hundred young Azerbaijani with foreign education has since been employed as faculty staff and administrative officers at UNEC. University branding was also aimed at ranking in the international ranking institutions. In 2017, UNEC has entered the list of top 150-200 best universities in Emerging Europe and Central Asia ranking of QS. UNEC's vision is to be among the 500 best universities in the world on its 100th anniversary in 2030. Branding process at UNEC is also aimed to contribute to Azerbaijan's global competitiveness and support the sustainable development of Azerbaijan. In this regard, Muradov and Bagirzade (2016, p. 18-41) mentioned that competitive higher education institutions and advance education infrastructure has a positive impact on a country's competitiveness in the global market UNEC offers full bachelor, master, and doctoral programs in four languages: Azerbaijani, English, Turkish and Russian (UNEC, 2017).

ADA University was established as an Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan in 2006. In 2014 it transformed into a university by decree of the Azerbaijan President and began to brand itself as ADA University. When the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy was established, it was aimed to train Azerbaijani diplomats. However, soon it expanded its education programs and services to other fields. At the moment, ADA University offers bachelor and master programs under four schools, including the School of Public and International Affairs, School of Business, School of Education, and School of Information Technologies and Engineering. ADA University aims to be the developer of a productive research climate and to stimulate a forum for innovative ideas in Azerbaijan. Its brand positioning can be explained as “an innovative model of learning, a unique setting for collaborative research in a variety of fields – already making ADA University a center of learning in an increasingly strategic geopolitical region of which Azerbaijan is central. ” (ADA University, 2018). The language of instruction is English at ADA University.

One of the early branding approaches to higher education institutions in Azerbaijan was adapted by Khazar University. Khazar University was established in 1991 in Baku and is considered as the first private university in Azerbaijan. Khazar University offers a wide variety of programs from humanities to biomedical engineering. Khazar University aims to position itself as a leading university in Azerbaijan. Academic credit system to measure and assess students' work and effort during their study programs, first time, implemented by Khazar University in Azerbaijan (Khazar University, 2018)

There is one more Azerbaijani university that has previously started a rebranding campaign. It is Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University which was previously named as Azerbaijan State Oil Academy. The university underwent a serious rebranding campaign in 2016. The university's new logo and name abbreviation introduced to the public same year. The aim of the university rebranding was to make the university main destination for study programs in different fields of industry, particularly in the oil and gas sector (ASOIU, 2018).

4. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Research data is collected through online anonymous survey among 377 students of four universities – Azerbaijan State University of Economics (UNEC), ADA University, Azerbaijan State Oil and Industry University (ASOIU), and Khazar University. One private university included since less than 10% of total students enrolled in private universities in Azerbaijan (Ministry of Education, 2018). A number of correspondents from the private university are consistent with the approximate ratio of students enrolled at private and public universities. Among the survey participants, 203 or 53.8% are female and 174 or 46.2% are males.

In the survey, students have reflected their view on “good university” according to 25 indicators. The answer choices change between 0 (not important at all) and 4 (very important). Main descriptive values about the responses of students for each given indicator are tabulated in table 1, below. Brief analytical results display that students of the target universities consider most of the given indicator as very important criteria of “a good university”. In most cases, the mean response value is very close or greater than 3. In this context, *p values* show the level of significance for each indicator. Note that when *p-value* is less than 5%, the null hypothesis of “not important at all” is rejected and vice versa.

According to table 1, the *p-value* is less than 1% for the majority and 5% for some remaining indicators. However, the *p-value* is greater than 5%, but less than 10% for low cost education, faculty/student ratio, small class size indicators which show less importance of these criterias for students.

Indicators	No. of observations	Mean	Std. deviation	T-statistic	P-value
Facilities	370	3.322	0.908	3.657	$p < 0.01$
Latest technologies	370	3.466	0.889	3.898	$p < 0.01$
Reputation of university	372	3.473	0.854	2.321	$p < 0.05$
Low cost education	363	2.467	1.382	1.784	$p < 0.1$
Scholarship opportunity	370	3.151	1.142	2.759	$p < 0.01$
Quality education	375	3.826	0.579	6.6	$p < 0.01$
Intrenational accreditation of university diploma	371	3.697	0.698	5.299	$p < 0.01$
Friendly environment	368	3.144	0.978	3.214	$p < 0.01$
Avaiablity of financial aid (state sponsored)	371	3.2	1.186	2.696	$p < 0.01$
Location of university	368	2.918	1.066	2.736	$p < 0.01$
Faculty – student interaction	375	3.297	0.975	3.379	$p < 0.01$
Acceptance rate	368	2.558	1.174	2.182	$p < 0.05$
Student services	371	3.184	1.033	3.079	$p < 0.01$
Name recognition/University Image	373	3.387	0.919	3.685	$p < 0.01$
Living accommodation / housing	367	1.418	1.342	1.057	$p > 0.1$

Size of university	372	2.539	1.094	2.321	$p < 0.05$
University – industry relations	373	3.621	0.768	4.713	$p < 0.01$
Faculty / student ratio	369	2.144	1.194	1.794	$p < 0.1$
Small class size	370	2.306	1.232	1.871	$p < 0.1$
Employment opportunity after graduation	369	3.388	1.026	3.303	$p < 0.01$
Double degree diplomas	367	3	1.173	2.557	$p < 0.05$
Study in foreign language	373	3.685	0.762	4.834	$p < 0.01$
Existence of active student clubs / unions	368	2.855	1.223	2.334	$p < 0.05$
Career planning center for students	371	3.303	1.024	3.225	$p < 0.01$
Social conditions for students (student organizations, sport clubs, etc.)	370	2.954	1.155	2.558	$p < 0.05$

Source: Author's own completion according to survey data

Table 1: Main descriptive statistics of responses for each indicator

The students consider a wide variety of criteria such as quality education, study in foreign language, university-industry relations, name recognition/university image, faculty-student interaction, international accreditation of university diploma, university reputation, latest technologies, career planning center for students, employment opportunity after graduation, and existence of active student clubs/unions for students as important for a good university. However, it should be considered that consideration criteria for a good university may always not be as same as criteria or factors which affects students' university selection decision.

In the survey, it was also revealed that most of the students (67%) reported obtained information about the university by friends/family. To a lesser degree, students (11%) answered that their visit to university was the main source of information about a university.

5. MODEL BUILDING

To investigate the issue beyond brief descriptive statistics, an attempt was made to build the empirical model of factors which affects students' university selection decision. For this purpose, respondents are asked to mention whether the current enrolled university was their first choice or not in the university selection list. Thus, being "the first choice" means to be the best university in a student mind. Therefore, the following base probabilistic model is built for the estimation stage:

$$Choice_i = \delta_0 + \sum_{i=1}^k \mu_i * \Psi_i + \theta_i$$

Whether, $Choice_i$ is a dummy variable, equals 1 if the enrolled university was his/her first choice in a time of university selection, and 0 otherwise. i denote i -th observation. δ_0 is the constant term. Ψ_i include some selected indicators discussed above. μ_i stand for the coefficient of each selected indicator while θ_i is the error term.

For robustness of results, specified the same model is estimated by Ordinary Least Squares (OLS), Probit, and Logit estimation methods.

6. EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Table 2 displays empirical results from OLS as well as Probit, and Logit binary choice estimation methods. Indicators are selected after examining various model specifications. Because some indicators given in table 1 are very close to each other, symptoms of multicollinearity problem are detected. That is why some indicators with insignificant effect are removed from the model.

Results from all three estimation methods support each other. Findings reveal statistically and mostly the economically insignificant effect of small class size, international accreditation of university diploma, quality education, state sponsored financial aid, faculty/student ratio, the reputation of the university, name recognition and availability of housing/dormitories over the first choice of prospective students in a time of university selection (*p value* > 0.1).

Surprisingly, results in the negative significant impact of employment opportunity after graduation (*p value* < 0.1) and existence of double degree programs (*p value* < 0.05) over the first choice while making the university selection decision. There may be several reasons for employment opportunity after graduation to be deemed insignificant. In the first scenario, it may possibly be related to a misunderstanding of this criteria. It may also signal poor perception of the university's role in helping and consulting students to match their dream job in the labour market. In the second scenario, students may possibly not have any desire and or expectation from the university in assisting them with employability after graduation. It may be linked with decades-long traditional component of Azerbaijani culture. Insignificant of double degree programs for students may be related to the perception of higher cost for such programs in Azerbaijan. Therefore, certain limited group of students may consider these factors significant while making university selection.

The impact of low cost education indicator is found to be parabolic with a weak significant slope. Slope parameter of *Low cost education*² is statistically significant in OLS (*p value* < 0.05) and Logit (*p value* < 0.1) while insignificant according to Probit results (*p value* > 0.1). This is plausible. Thus, a candidate chooses firstly low cost or free education programs while applying. Especially for those who consider low cost education as relatively very important indicator prone to follow this behavior mostly.

Table 2: Empirical results

Indicators	Coefficients		
	OLS	Probit	Logit
Small class size	0.036	0.152	0.268
Double degree diplomas	-0.054**	-0.256***	-0.449***
International accreditation of university diploma	0.048	0.217	0.362
Employment opportunity after graduation	-0.041*	-0.187*	-0.306*
Quality education	-0.020	-0.056	-0.105
Availability of financial aid (state sponsored)	0.021	0.094	0.165

Existence of active student clubs / unions	0.039**	0.161**	0.296**
Faculty / student ratio	0.0002	0.002	-0.008
Low cost education	0.057	0.219	0.310
<i>Low cost education</i> ²	-0.026**	-0.100	-0.159*
Reputation of university	0.017	0.055	0.115
Name recognition/University Image	0.031	0.139	0.226
Living accommodation / housing	-0.034*	-0.146*	-0.261**
C	0.683***	0.440	0.790***
<i>No of obs.</i>	<i>345</i>	<i>345</i>	<i>345</i>
<i>R-squared</i>	<i>0.107</i>	<i>0.116</i>	<i>0.115</i>

Note: *, **, and *** show the level of significance at 10%, 5%, and 1%, respectively.

Maybe, the most valuable contribution of this paper is finding very important, economically and statistically significant impact (*p value* < 0.05) of the existence of active student clubs in the target universities which plays a prominent role in the first choice of candidates who consider that as an important indicator of a “good university”.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study showed that students in Azerbaijan consider a wide variety of criteria when they apply for a university. However, these considerations may not directly be reflected in their actual behavior in regard to their first choice for university. For example, quality education, study in foreign language, university-industry relations, name recognition/university image, faculty-student interaction, international accreditation of university diploma, university reputation, latest technologies, career planning center for students, employment opportunity after graduation, and existence of active student clubs/unions for students are important considerations for students and they may be critical branding factors in the student's search for a good university. However, active student clubs/unions is an important selection criteria for students' first choice and yet surprising factor in this study.

Our study suggests that the existence of active student clubs/unions for students may be important selection criteria to Azerbaijani students when they choose among university alternatives while other considerations are also presented. In this regard existence of active student clubs/unions in case of Azerbaijan may be more critical factor when it comes to students' first choice for higher education institutions meanwhile branding efforts may be critical in student's search process for a university.

The study revealed that although university branding initiatives may shape image of university and increase awareness about a university, friends/family of potential students, university visits and high schools play a greater role on dissemination of information about a university in Azerbaijan. Successful university branding campaigns in Azerbaijan should focus on the target groups of prospective students' family and friends, and organize impressive open campus days for prospective students and their parents.

It should also be noted that universities in Azerbaijan differ by size, program offerings, cost, location, and reputation. This study conducted among the four private and public universities situated in the capital of Azerbaijan and importance of selection criteria might have differed if the students surveyed attended the universities that situated in the regions. Since it is first research of its kind conducted in Azerbaijan, it may provide a framework for further researches to use larger student samples and involve regional universities.

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