

# University Brand Attributes and the Degree of Their Significance from the Students' Point of View



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## ABSTRACT

Today, in the context of increasing competition in the educational services market, the formation of a strong brand of a higher educational institution is of particular importance. The present study investigates the degree of significance of individual university brand attributes from the point of view of modern Russian students. The main research question: "What attributes of the university brand do students pay the most attention to when choosing a higher education institution?" A total of 96 1st-year students participated in the study. A questionnaire was conducted to reveal students' overall attitude to the university brand and its individual attributes. The findings show that the degree of influence of a competitive university brand on a choice of modern Russian students is significantly high. The most meaningful attributes of the university brand, in the opinion of students, are high positions in the world ranking of universities, highly qualified professors, positive public opinion, enhanced international cooperation and successful graduates.

**Keywords:** university brand; educational services market; university brand attributes; brand image; reputation

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# Атрибуты бренда университета и степень их значимости с точки зрения студентов

## АННОТАЦИЯ

На сегодняшний день, в условиях обострения конкуренции на рынке образовательных услуг, формирование сильного бренда высшего учебного заведения приобретает особую значимость. Целью работы является исследование степени значимости отдельных атрибутов бренда вуза с точки зрения современных российских студентов. Главный исследовательский вопрос: «На какие атрибуты бренда вуза студенты обращают наибольшее внимание при выборе учебного заведения?» В исследовании приняли участие 96 студента 1-го курса. Для выявления отношения студентов к бренду вуза и его отдельным атрибутам был проведен социологический опрос. Полученные данные показывают, что степень влияния конкурентоспособного бренда вуза на выбор современного российского студента существенно высока. Наиболее значимыми атрибутами бренда университета, по мнению студентов, являются высокие позиции в мировом рейтинге вузов, высококвалифицированные преподаватели, позитивное общественное мнение, международное сотрудничество и успешные выпускники.

**Ключевые слова:** бренд университета; рынок образовательных услуг; атрибуты бренда университета; имидж бренда; репутация

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## Introduction

In the modern system of higher education there is a situation in which not only students compete for the opportunity to study at the most prestigious universities, but also the level of competition between universities is increasing both in the domestic and international markets. As a result, more and more universities are striving to develop a unique marketing strategy to create a distinct brand image in the eyes of future students (Chapleo, 2011; Valitov, 2014; Rauschnabel et al., 2016).

All higher education institutions have similar priorities, such as achieving a stable position in the educational services market, developing new areas of educational and scientific activities, expanding the range of services provided. The implementation of these objectives is possible only if the university has a positive image and a strong brand (Groshev & Yuriev, 2010).

The desire of Russian universities to increase the level of competitiveness in the global education market is evidenced by the participation of some of them in the project 5–100. The program was launched by the Russian Ministry of Education and Science based on the order of the President of the Russian Federa-

tion of May 7, 2012, No. 599 “On measures for the implementation of state policy in the education and science field” (2012)<sup>1</sup>. It aims to improve the prestige of Russian higher education and bring at least five Russian universities into the hundred best universities in the world according to the most authoritative world rankings. Such measures testify to the relevance of considering issues related to the creation of a competitive university brand.

My study aims to reveal the degree of significance of individual university brand attributes from the point of view of modern Russian students. We will be guided by the following research question: What attributes of the university brand do students pay the most attention to when choosing a higher education institution?

The objectives of the paper are as follows:

To identify the main brand attributes of a modern higher education institution based on a review of relevant literature

To reveal the general ideas of students about the concept of the university brand and its key attributes

<sup>1</sup> The order of the President of the Russian Federation of May 7, 2012 No. 599 “On measures for the implementation of state policy in the education and science field”. URL: <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/35263> (accessed on 05.10.2020).

To establish the most significant brand attributes of the university, from the students' point of view

To conclude the possibility of application of the results obtained to increase the level of attractiveness of the brand of a higher educational institution.

The interest in considering the issue of the most significant university brand attributes from the perspective of students is determined by the fact that they are the main stakeholders to focus on while creating a university brand. Students who have received a positive educational experience recommend their alma mater to prospective students and come back for other degrees. Moreover, successful alumni make donations to the university and act as a "living advertisement" (Panda et al., 2019).

The paper proceeds in the following sequence: the next section is the Literature review followed by the Methodology, Results and discussion and Conclusion.

## Literature review

The higher education sector is predominantly viewed as a service industry (Durvasula et al., 2011). Moreover, there are no objective parameters to evaluate university services (Panda et al., 2019). There is also an asymmetry of information between universities and their prospective students. Consumers can assess the quality of educational services only during or after consumption. It is difficult for students to understand whether their expectations will be met before the start of the educational process (Krishnan and Hartline, 2001; Panda et al., 2019).

Universities often share tangible information such as university rankings, alumni career trajectories, students' and staff's reviews on their websites (Eisenhardt, 1989). Nevertheless, the criteria for making decisions by future students go beyond the assessment of material indicators. Stakeholders pay particular attention to the brand image and reputation of the university (Kotler & Fox, 1995; Durvasula et al., 2011). This idea is reflected in the research of Tran et al. (2015). According to them, the university brand image is a combination of tangible (functional) and intangible (emotional) aspects. Tangible aspects include the infrastructure of the university, its location and admission costs. This information is usually available to prospective students. However, it does not always help them make an unambiguous decision. Therefore, potential consumers resort to assessing the brand image of the university. Nevertheless, the university brand image is a multidimensional construct that is difficult to measure.

University brand can be defined as a manifestation of the institution's features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to satisfy students' needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a particular type and level of higher education and help potential recruits make wise enrollment decisions (Nguyen et al., 2016).

Educational brands, as a rule, are formed historically; however, the process is greatly influenced by directed actions to form the competitiveness of an educational institution (Mikhailova & Shepel, 2015).

A unique brand image influences positively the university's reputation, which in turn can have a significant impact on a student's experience (Berry, 2000). Several researchers (e.g., Cretu & Brodie, 2007; Priporas & Kamenidou, 2011) perceive reputation as one of the key consequences of a good university brand image. Reputation is included in the number of factors influencing the decision of potential students. A combination of good brand image and sound reputation contributes to the enhanced level of student satisfaction, which will eventually result in positive word of mouth and increasing level of brand loyalty (Panda et al., 2019).

Most researchers (e.g., Ivanova et al., 2011; Bekker, 2012; Kapustina et al., 2017) agree that the university brand model is multicomponent, it includes several interpenetrating individual attributes – specific characteristics of the educational organisation.

According to Groshev and Yuriev (2010), the essential attributes of a brand of a higher education institution include the history of the university, popularity in professional circles and society; stability and prospects for professional development; demand for graduates in the national and international labour markets; qualitative composition and professionalism of the teaching staff; the territorial location of the university; form style; openness and integration of the educational institution into the external environment.

Casidy (2013) focuses on attributes such as quality of service, customer satisfaction and positive word of mouth. Merchant et al. (2015) highlights the impact of university heritage and reputation on the attitudes of prospective students.

Comprehending one of the most famous brand models proposed by L. de Cernatoni, Suomi et al. (2013) add to its six elements (brand vision, culture, positioning, personality, relationships, presentation) a seventh one – the location of the university. It is argued that a university can gain several benefits from a favourable geographic location.

Some Russian researchers identify human capital as the main attribute of the brand of a higher educational institution. In this case, human capital means highly qualified professors, smart students and graduates who have received a well-paid position (Bekker, 2012); rector, employees, students, universities-competitors and social media (Kaygorodova, 2012).

Valitov (2014) proposes a three-component university brand structure:

1) University attributes

Characteristics of the quality of the educational services provided (availability of state accreditation, international validation of programs)

Teaching staff (percentage of teachers with academic titles, PhD degree holders, and foreign professors)

Social and financial characteristics (the number of state-financed places, cost of education, scholarships, and grants)

Facilities of the university (location, classrooms arrangement and fitting with modern technical means, availability of dormitory, canteen).

2) The image of the university

Profit (diploma value, guaranteed employment)

Value (extensive history, graduates' achievements)

Conditions for personal creative development.

3) The value of the university brand.

Valitov, like Bekker and Kaygorodova, distinguishes people as a vital element of the university brand. According to him, universities gain fame and prestige through successful careers of their graduates and famous professors working in them.

University brand attributes can be unique to each institution. They can be influenced by the university's mission and key objectives. For instance, the People's Friendship University of Russia, which mission is "to unite people of different cultures by knowledge", highlights the following attributes of its brand: multi-nationality and international cooperation; faculty, researchers, students and alumni' input in the world community development; multi-profiled education and research; equal opportunities; commitment to studies, research and public activities<sup>2</sup>. These attributes show an orientation towards international cooperation and integration into the global educational community.

Overall, we can conclude that a university brand is an intangible category that is difficult to assess.

However, this concept is formed from several attributes that are easier to identify and evaluate.

Based on the literature review and our observations, we highlight the following university brand attributes: enhanced international cooperation, highly qualified professors, successful graduates, research activities, interesting and exciting non-curricular student life, material and technical base, high quality of education, location, extensive history, high position in the world ranking of universities, highly gifted students, public opinion and social media reputation.

## Methodology

As the primary research method, I applied the sociological survey. A questionnaire (Table 1) was distributed among 96 1st-year students of the Higher school of management of the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation during the introductory English seminars. Subsequently, the data were analysed using Microsoft Excel analysis tools. The target audience was 1st-year students since they are the ones who are closest to the moment of choosing an educational institution.

The survey contained two long-range questions, seven Likert-scale questions and one multiple choice question.

Other research methods which I used in the study included the analysis of relevant scientific literature on branding in higher education, identification of the key attributes of the university brand, synthesis, comparison, analogy, observations, systematisation, and categorisation of facts and concepts.

## Results and discussion

I formulated three main questions to carry out the research:

1. What do students understand by the term "university brand"?
2. What is the degree of influence of a competitive university brand on the choice of a modern student?
3. What determines the prestige of a university in the opinion of students? What are the attributes of a university brand that matter most?

I presented the findings of the research according to the questions in the survey. The first question was asked to reveal students' general ideas about the concept of the university brand to identify the level of understanding of this term. Despite the recommendation to give as the full answer as possible, one-word or short answers predominated. In most cases, the

<sup>2</sup> RUDN University brand book. 2017. URL: [http://fr.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about\\_rudn/rudn\\_bb\\_4final\\_eng.pdf](http://fr.rudn.ru/u/www/files/about_rudn/rudn_bb_4final_eng.pdf).

Table 1

**Questionnaire to reveal students' attitude to the university brand and its individual attributes**

Please help us find out about your preferences by taking a few moments to fill out this survey form.

1) What is meant by “university brand”? \_\_\_\_\_

2) To what extent do you agree with these statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Higher education in the modern world is a necessity					
I want to study only in a prestigious and high-ranking university					
Only after graduating from a prestigious university, I will be able to find a high-paying job					
The field of study does not matter if you are studying at a high-ranking university					
Studying at a high-ranking university helps to increase my self-esteem					
Only by studying at a prestigious university, I will be able to develop all my talents and capabilities					
The name of the university is the most important line on your resume					

3) What were you motivated by while choosing a university? \_\_\_\_\_

4) What determines the prestige of the university?

a. enhanced international cooperation b. highly qualified professors c. successful graduates d. research activities e. interesting and exciting non-curricular student life f. material and technical base	g. high quality of education h. location (big cities) i. extensive history j. high position in the world ranking of universities k. highly gifted students l. public opinion and social media reputation
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Thank you!

Source: Compiled by the author based on the research conducted.

answer was a set of word associations that the student had. Based on the responses received, a “cloud of words” which students associate with the concept of “university brand” was compiled (Figure 1). The size of words is in direct proportion to the frequency of use by students. The term “university brand” is most often associated with such concepts as “reputation”, “name”,

“fame”, “prestige”, “status”, “rank”, “value”, “popularity”, “recognizability, etc.

However, there were also more specific and extensive formulations such as “characteristics that distinguish the university from other educational institutions”, “a set of unique properties”, “value and significance in the eyes of consumers.”





Table 2

## Question 4. Results

Statements	Number of respondents	Strongly agree, %	Agree, %	Neutral, %	Disagree, %	Strongly disagree, %	Total, %
Statement 1	96	27	61	7	3	2	100
Statement 2	96	48	43	9	0	0	100
Statement 3	96	16	49	12	18	5	100
Statement 4	96	2	22	51	20	5	100
Statement 5	96	17	54	20	8	2	100
Statement 6	96	15	64	9	11	0	100
Statement 7	96	2	28	23	46	0	100

Source: compiled by the author based on the research conducted.

(1) “positions of the university in national and world rankings” (mentioned in 33 forms);

(2) “public opinion” (mentioned in 26 forms);

(3) “highly qualified, renowned professors” (mentioned in 25 forms);

(4) “location of the university” (mentioned in 19 forms);

(5) “famous and successful graduates” (mentioned in 18 forms);

(6) “content of educational programs” (mentioned in 10 forms).

In a single copy, there were such answers as “non-curricular student life”, “directions of scientific activity” and “friendly atmosphere”.

The fourth question was aimed at identifying the degree of significance of individual university brand attributes from the students’ point of view. However, now, to be more specific, the respondents were offered 12 options to choose from. Subsequently, four items selected by less than half of the respondents (“Research activities”, “Interesting and exciting non-curricular student life”, “High quality of education” and “Extensive history”) were excluded from consideration. Among the most popular options were “High position in the world ranking of universities” (specifically 92 per cent), “Highly qualified professors” (specifically 84 per cent), “Public opinion and social media reputation” (specifically 82 per cent) and “Enhanced international cooperation” (specifically 71 per cent) and “Successful graduates” (specifically 66 per cent).

Particular attention should be paid to attributes “High position in the world ranking of universities”,

“Highly qualified professors”, “Public opinion and social media reputation” and “Successful graduates” as they were both mentioned by students in answer to the third question and chosen by the majority of the respondents in the fourth question. Moreover, the three most significant characteristics of an educational institution for students remained unchanged in both questions.

When students were given multiple choices, attribute “Location”, chosen by slightly more than half of the respondents, lost its high importance. On the contrary, attribute “Enhanced international cooperation” was selected by the majority of respondents while answering the fourth question and was not mentioned at all when answering the third one. This attribute does not come to mind among the first, but it can be considered as an essential contribution to the formation of a positive reputation of the educational institution.

Attributes “High quality of education” and “Material and technical base” with the indices 60 per cent and 57 per cent have an average degree of significance from the students’ point of view.

Based on the results obtained, we can conclude the most significant aspects that should be paid attention to while forming a competitive university brand. Firstly, it is the position of the university in national and international rankings, which serve as a measure of the university’s prestige in the eyes of potential students. Secondly, the university should conduct a careful selection of the teaching staff, because the student has the closest interaction with these people throughout the educational process. Thirdly, particular attention

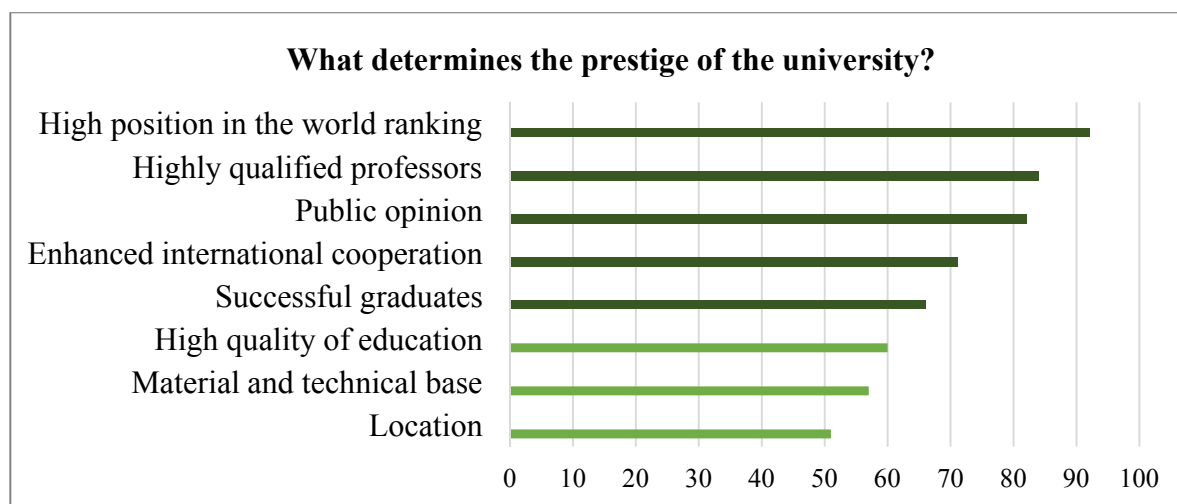


Figure 2. Question 3. Results in percentage

Source: compiled by the author based on the research conducted.

should be given to creating a positive image of the university in social networks and the Internet as a whole, since it is the primary source of information for young people. Expansion of international relations and improvement of the material and technical base are also important areas of activity of a modern higher educational institution.

By and large, students' ideas about the concept of a university brand are somewhat vague and abstract. Strong university brand in the mind of the student is identified with such intangible concepts as solid reputation, positive image, fame, prestige, status, rank, value, etc. In the opinion of students, the prestige of the university is predominantly determined by its high position in the world ranking of universities, highly qualified professors, favourable public opinion and enhanced international cooperation. These attributes are of the highest importance. Successful graduates, high quality of education, material and technical base and location of the university are also quite significant attributes of a competitive university brand.

## Conclusion

Thus, in the course of the study, we identified the individual attributes of the university brand. I noted the inconsistency and complexity of the measurability of this concept.

The high degree of influence of a competitive university brand on a choice of modern Russian students was revealed. The most significant attributes of the university brand, in the opinion of students, are high position in the world ranking of universities, highly qualified professors, positive public opinion and enhanced international cooperation.

It determines the most critical areas of activity of a modern higher educational institution, such as measures to increase the prestige of the university in the international market of educational services, careful selection of candidates for teaching staff positions, the formation of a positive image of the university in the social media and the expansion of international relations of the educational institution.

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