

MARKETING ORIENTATION IN UNIVERSITIES AS A FUNDAMENTAL RESOURCE FOR GAINING SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES

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Abstract: *The growing competition in higher education forces universities to adopt a marketing orientation as a strategic approach to enhance institutional performance and achieve sustainable competitive advantages. The paper presents the results of a study of the level of marketing orientation of universities in the Republic of Moldova, based on a survey of university leaders, rectors, vice-rectors and heads of marketing departments. The results show that respondents are aware of the importance of marketing to improve the image, attractiveness and success of the institution. The study points out the necessity to upgrade the internal marketing capabilities, increase the use of modern marketing tools and integrate marketing thinking into the institutional management. Such measures can contribute to enhancing the competitiveness and long-term sustainability of universities in the increasingly dynamic higher education sector.*

Keywords: *university marketing, higher education, competitiveness, sustainable competitive advantage*

Classification JEL: *M31, I23, L25*

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1. Introduction

The new context in which higher education institutions around the world operate requires university management based on the incorporation of marketing principles and practices, defined as a marketing orientation, which many authors have termed “market orientation” or “customer orientation.”

In the specialized scientific literature, the need for market orientation is sufficiently well-argued as a key strategic imperative for improving the performance of for-profit organizations and a strategic necessity for survival in hostile environments, where market turbulence and competitive rivalry are high, as a fundamental resource for creating sustainable competitive advantages in the effort to compete effectively (Crick, 2021; Lafferty & Hult, 2001; Van Raaij & Stoelhorst, 2008). Based on their analyses, Niculescu et al. (2013) defined marketing orientation as a cultural process within any organization for the consistent creation of superior value for the customer, based on market information. At the same time, they highlighted a series of advantages for commercial enterprises resulting from their market orientation, including: company profitability, it represents a more effective means of identifying customer needs, it ensures an increase in perceived value and customer loyalty, it creates effective means of gaining competitive advantages, it enables more effective innovation in the service sector, it

represents improved organizational commitment in the public sector, can ensure increased success for new products and improved partnerships with suppliers, can motivate employees to serve customers more effectively, and can help improve leadership capabilities and retain more profitable customers. Zebal and Goodwin (2012) also note the positive relationship between market orientation and performance by offering additional value to buyers, thereby creating a competitive advantage and better profitability.

2. Literature Review

Over the years, numerous studies in the fields of management and marketing have also highlighted the importance of developing a marketing orientation in nonprofit organizations. Thus, Voss and Voss (2000) addressed the issue of market orientation in the arts and culture sector; Wood et al. (2000) - in the health sector; Drummond et al. (2000) analyzed certain aspects related to the market orientation of a public service; Vázquez et al. (2002) analyzed the strategies used by various nonprofit organizations to orient their activities toward the market. In this context, numerous studies (Glaveli & Geormas, 2018; Khuwaja et al., 2019) have demonstrated that there is a positive impact of marketing orientation on the performance of public/nonprofit organizations, despite the fact that it is derived from for-profit organizations.

The cultural perspective on market orientation in higher education institutions is presented in the work by Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown (2007), “The incorporation of market orientation in the school culture. An essential aspect of school marketing” (p. 293), which defines it as a set of values and beliefs that prioritize the interests of clients, while simultaneously increasing the university’s awareness of the need to gather information about competitors and establish interdepartmental activities to meet customer needs, in order to gain a competitive advantage in a turbulent and competitive environment.” In another paper by the same authors, titled “Market orientation in universities” (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2010), the authors suggest the following three interrelated components of market orientation in universities:

1. Customer (student) orientation, which implies that faculties have a detailed understanding of the universities’ target markets and are capable of creating and delivering superior long-term value. This requires the continuous collection of information about the environment in which students live, the adoption of teaching methods to meet students’ specific needs, greater responsiveness to their interests and viewpoints, the implementation of innovations and improvements for current and future students, etc. Based on the above arguments, Alarcón-del-Amo et al. (2016) believe that universities can secure competitive advantages, including in terms of reputation, by adopting a proactive marketing approach toward all the stakeholders mentioned above.
2. Competition orientation, which implies that the higher education institution and faculty managers aim to fully understand the strengths and weaknesses of competing higher education institutions, their capabilities and potential, and to monitor developments at rival universities, etc., which can have a positive impact on the decision-making process. At the same time, Brandenburger and Nalebuff (1996) argue that for higher education, a shift from “competitor orientation” to “co-competitor orientation” would be more appropriate, insofar as the relationship with competitors in the field of higher education differs from that in the business sector, as universities are simultaneously inclined toward collaboration and the development of partnerships with other universities.

3. Cross-functional coordination, which requires a fundamental conviction shared by all members of the higher education institution, the engagement of all departments and subdivisions, and the entire university community to better serve the needs and expectations of students, for which full access to all information about the university's market environment (competitors, the community at large, etc.) is necessary.

In line with the concept of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, Abou-Warda (2014) proposed a model of sustainable market orientation. This model incorporates a social marketing approach that takes into account the well-being of society, including stakeholders (students, faculty, other categories of employees, the community, competitors, recruitment firms, and the media), an ecological/environmental orientation, an orientation toward innovation, and an approach to co-creating sustainable value, reflecting the role of higher education institutions in supporting value-creation processes for students.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that a marketing orientation must be adopted by universities in order to increase overall performance and gain a competitive advantage (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Ng, 2016), as it is considered an effective means of developing the student-university relationship due to the university's greater capacity to meet students' needs (Bakar et al., 2014; Voon, 2008) and, above all, their ability to enter the labor market more effectively (Clark et al., 2017). One way a university can increase its competitive advantage in the higher education market is to build a sustainable and attractive image in the eyes of applicants – to distinguish itself from other universities and make applicants want to be admitted.

Based on the analyzed specialized scientific literature, the definition of marketing orientation in universities can be proposed as a culture and specific behaviors shared by all university departments, manifested in a set of activities, methods, and techniques necessary for a deep understanding of the needs of current and prospective students, as well as those of other stakeholders and society as a whole, and finding ways to continuously adapt to their needs and requirements in an innovative and sustainable manner. In this context, and given the rapidly intensifying competition in the higher education services market at the global, regional, and local levels, universities must base their marketing policies on the presence of competition, their strengths and weaknesses relative to competing universities, and strategic and tactical decisions, the entire marketing toolkit, as well as marketing programs and plans, must simultaneously be oriented toward ensuring and developing competitive advantages and the university's overall competitiveness. Based on the above, it is considered that universities can succeed in achieving these outcomes by initiating and adopting market-oriented activities, which makes the implementation of a marketing orientation a proposal that university managers should consider. It is also natural that marketing orientation is only one of the factors that can lead to universities achieving these performance goals.

2. Methodology

In order to assess the marketing orientation of universities in the Republic of Moldova, an opinion survey was conducted among all universities in the country (19 in total at the time of the study) with a single follow-up, by requesting the completion of an online questionnaire, with respondents being individuals in leadership positions at all universities (rectors, vice-rectors, heads of marketing departments). This research involved transposing the questionnaire's questions onto an online platform and sending respondents the link to access it via email. Each email contained a message specifying the purpose of the research and a request to complete the

questionnaire by clicking the link included in the message. Email addresses were obtained by visiting the universities' websites using the Google search engine. The cover letter stated that the names of the universities and the individuals who completed the questionnaire would not be disclosed in subsequent publications. The questionnaire contained 34 items, with opinions measured using attitude scales (semantic differential, Likert scale).

3. Results and Discussion

It is worth noting that most universities attributed a very significant (63.2%) or significant (31.6%) role to university marketing activities in ensuring the institution's success, while a small proportion (5.3%) considered the impact to be minor (Fig. 1). This result demonstrates that in the Republic of Moldova, there is a strong awareness of the role of educational marketing in strengthening the image and attractiveness of universities.

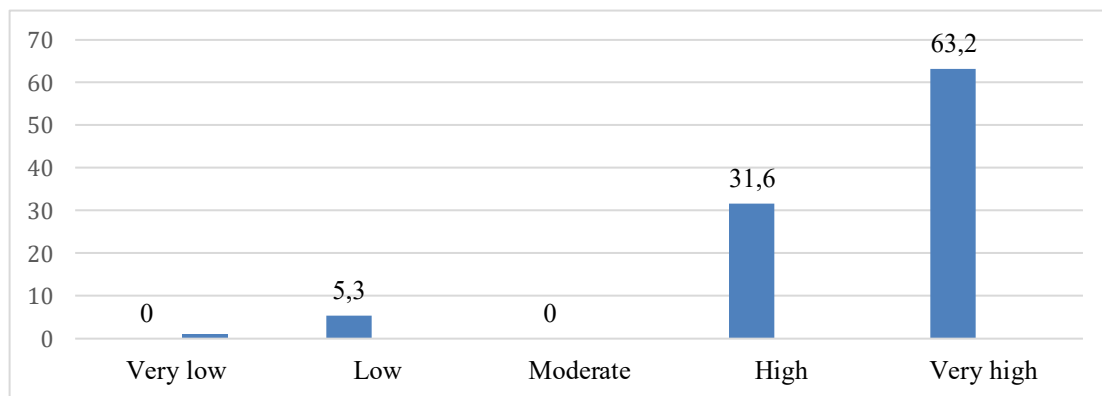


Figure 1. Universities' perceptions of the role of university marketing activities in ensuring institutional success

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

It is also essential for universities in the Republic of Moldova to recognize the importance of marketing as a factor in strengthening the university's image and increasing its appeal to prospective students. Thus, the majority of universities (68.4%) considered this to be very important, 26.3% considered it important, and 5.3% considered it neither important nor slightly important (Fig. 2)

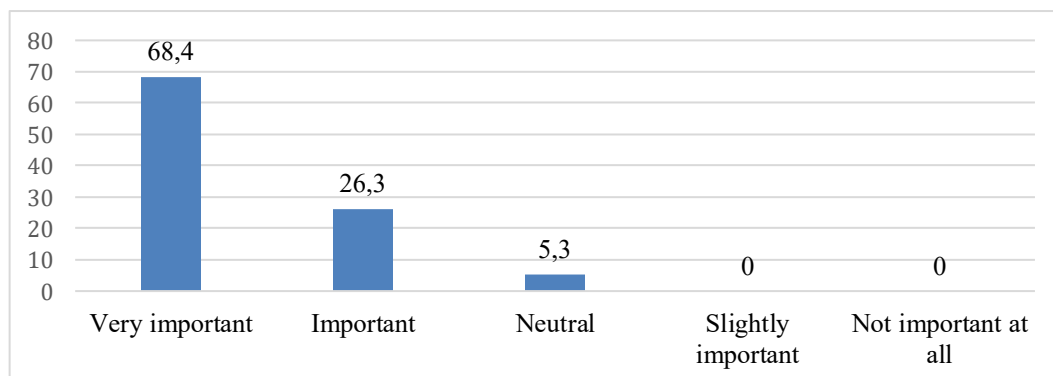


Figure 2. The importance of university marketing activities in strengthening the university's image and increasing its appeal

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

Regarding the frequency of marketing activities, the majority of universities (68.4%) indicated that they conduct marketing activities aimed at increasing their appeal to prospective full-time students, 21.1% do so only occasionally, and 10.5% - only during the period leading up to the admissions process (Fig. 3). The findings above indicate a high level of university involvement in marketing activities, but also a more fragmented approach, in the sense that these activities are organized primarily or exclusively during the admissions period.

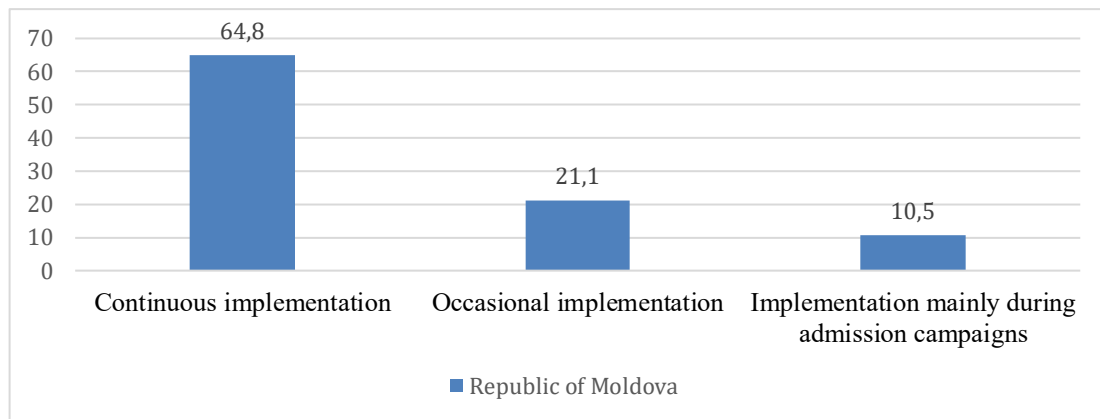


Figure 3. Frequency of marketing activities organized by universities in the Republic of Moldova to increase their appeal to prospective students

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

The same number of universities (68.4%) indicated that they also carry out marketing activities aimed at improving the university's image among the general public and prospective students on an ongoing basis, which reflects the universities' constant concern with enhancing institutional visibility. However, a significant percentage (31.6%) carry out such activities only occasionally, indicating the lack of a unified and continuous marketing strategy at a relatively large number of universities (Fig. 4).

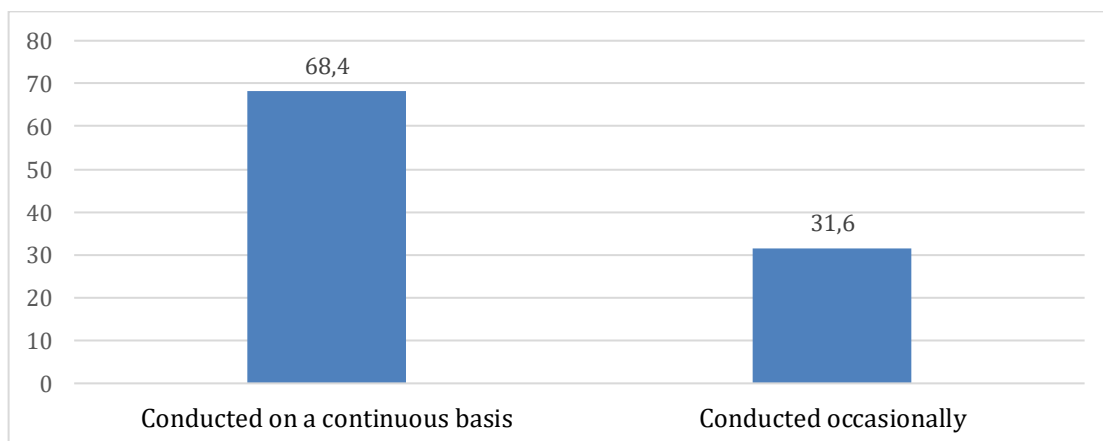


Figure 4. Level of involvement in university marketing activities aimed at promoting the institutional image

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

As noted above, a marketing orientation in university operations requires cross-functional coordination, which in turn requires a fundamental conviction shared by all members of the higher education institution - namely, the promotion of a marketing mindset (philosophy)

among all employees. In this context, it is worth noting that only 10.5% of universities identified the adoption of university marketing thinking as a philosophy as a priority, while the vast majority (89.5%) consider the practical application of the modern concept of university marketing to be more important, suggesting a pragmatic orientation focused on concrete solutions and tools, applied only by the responsible personnel within marketing departments, where such departments exist (Fig. 5). These results suggest the need for a shift in attitudes within universities through the adoption of an appropriate marketing philosophy among all staff and a shift in thinking from a product-oriented approach (academic programs) toward a more customer- and stakeholder-centered approach.

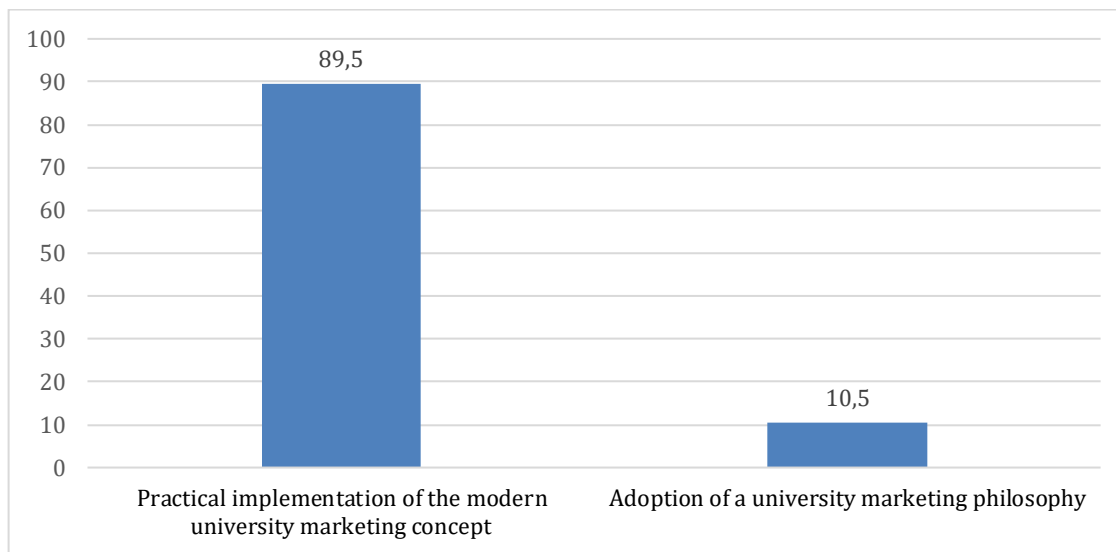


Figure 5. Aspects considered priorities in the implementation of university marketing in higher education institutions in the Republic of Moldova

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

University marketing activities can be organized both using the universities' own resources and through outsourcing, that is, by engaging entities specialized in providing marketing services and consulting. Thus, the research results showed that in these activities, only 36.8% of universities rely on their own staff, 57.9% rely on their own staff but also collaborate with marketing service providers, and 5.3% rely solely on specialized companies (Fig. 6). Although the data above demonstrate an openness on the part of universities to collaborate with specialized companies in the field, which generally possess a high level of professionalism in the field, they may have less knowledge regarding the content of the concept of university marketing, the behavior of internal and external clients in the field of higher education, as well as the internal marketing environment of universities. At the same time, the tendency toward outsourcing marketing services may also indicate a lack of sufficient marketing capabilities within universities.

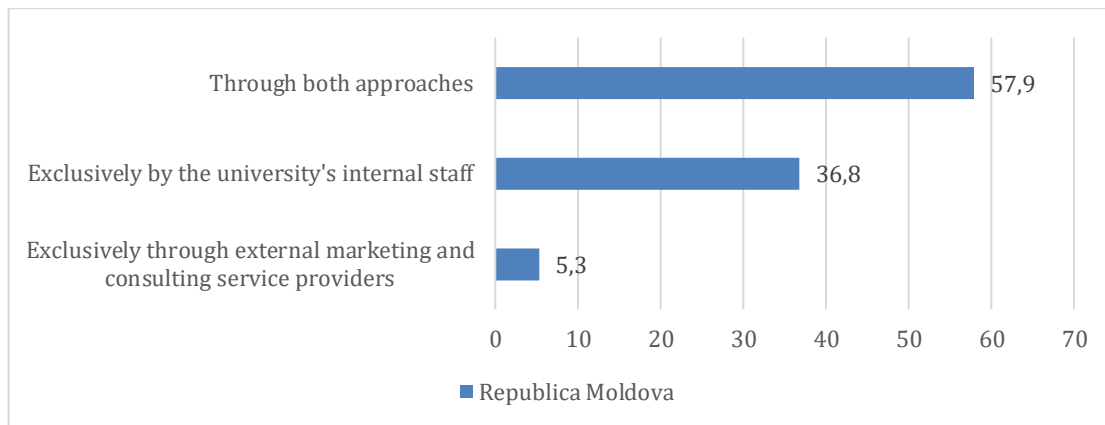


Figure 6. Methods of organizing marketing activities within universities

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

The data above also correlates with the presence of marketing departments within universities in the Republic of Moldova. Thus, only 47.4% of universities reported that they already have a specialized marketing department incorporated into the university’s organizational structure, with varying names and levels of autonomy; 21.1% intend to create one, and 31.6% of them do not have one at all (Fig. 7). This demonstrates that a fairly large number of universities do not, at least for the time being, have a formal structure dedicated to these activities.

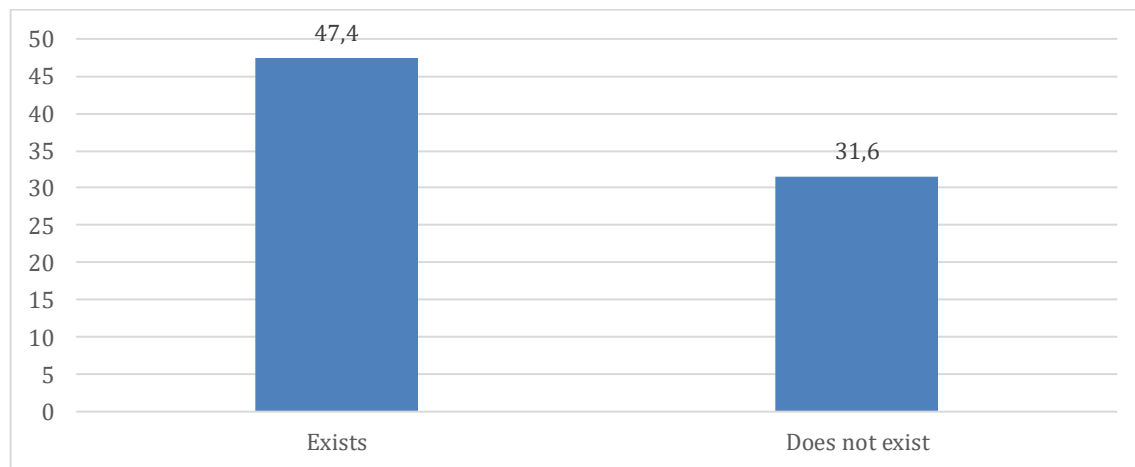


Figure 7. Establishment of a specialized marketing department within universities in the Republic of Moldova

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

The study also demonstrated that in the Republic of Moldova, the coordination of marketing activities falls largely to the university rector (52.6%), which indicates a strong centralization of strategic decisions. Some universities (21.1%) noted that this responsibility falls to a vice-rector, while 15.8% designated a head of the marketing department as the primary coordinator. At the same time, 10.5% of universities believe that marketing does not require formal coordination, leaving it to the discretion of those carrying it out. (Fig. 8) This distribution suggests a variety of governance models, but also indicates that, in many cases, university marketing remains an activity managed at the top management level rather than through specialized structures.

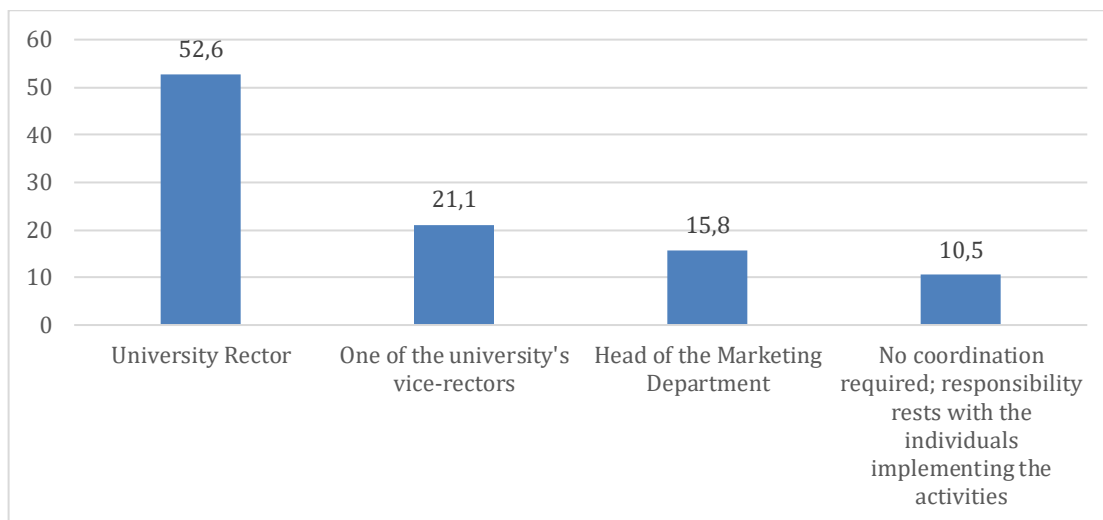


Figure 8. Responsibilities for coordinating marketing activities at universities in the Republic of Moldova

Source: prepared by the author based on the results of the research conducted

The marketing orientation of universities involves the development and implementation of relevant strategies so that higher education institutions can achieve their institutional goals, including those related to image, reputation, and attractiveness, as well as cope with the constant changes occurring in the environment in which they operate.

In this context, the studies conducted highlighted that the majority of universities (52.6%) indicated that they do not have a distinct marketing strategy, and that marketing activities are integrated into the university's strategic development plan; another 42.1% of universities indicated that a strategy exists, developed through the content of the university's strategic development plan; and only 5.3% indicated that there is a distinct marketing strategy, separate from other institutional strategic development documents (Fig. 9).

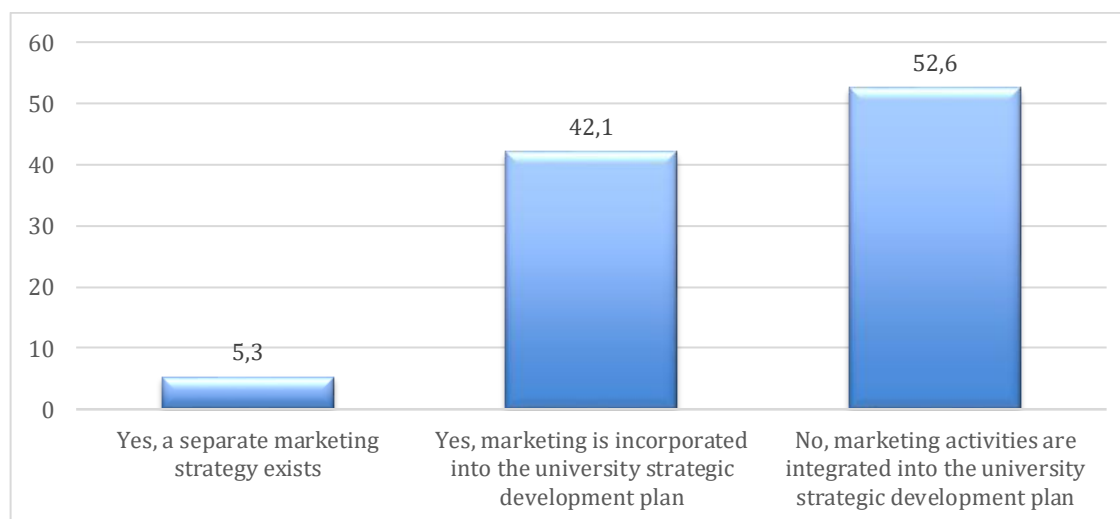


Figure 9. Alternatives for strategic marketing planning at universities in the Republic of Moldova

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

The above findings allow us to conclude that for universities in the Republic of Moldova, strategic university marketing is in its early stages and, as a rule, involves a series of activities designed to attract high school graduates, often using simple forms of traditional marketing, aimed at building and strengthening the best possible image of the universities and their study programs, as well as differentiating them from their main competing universities.

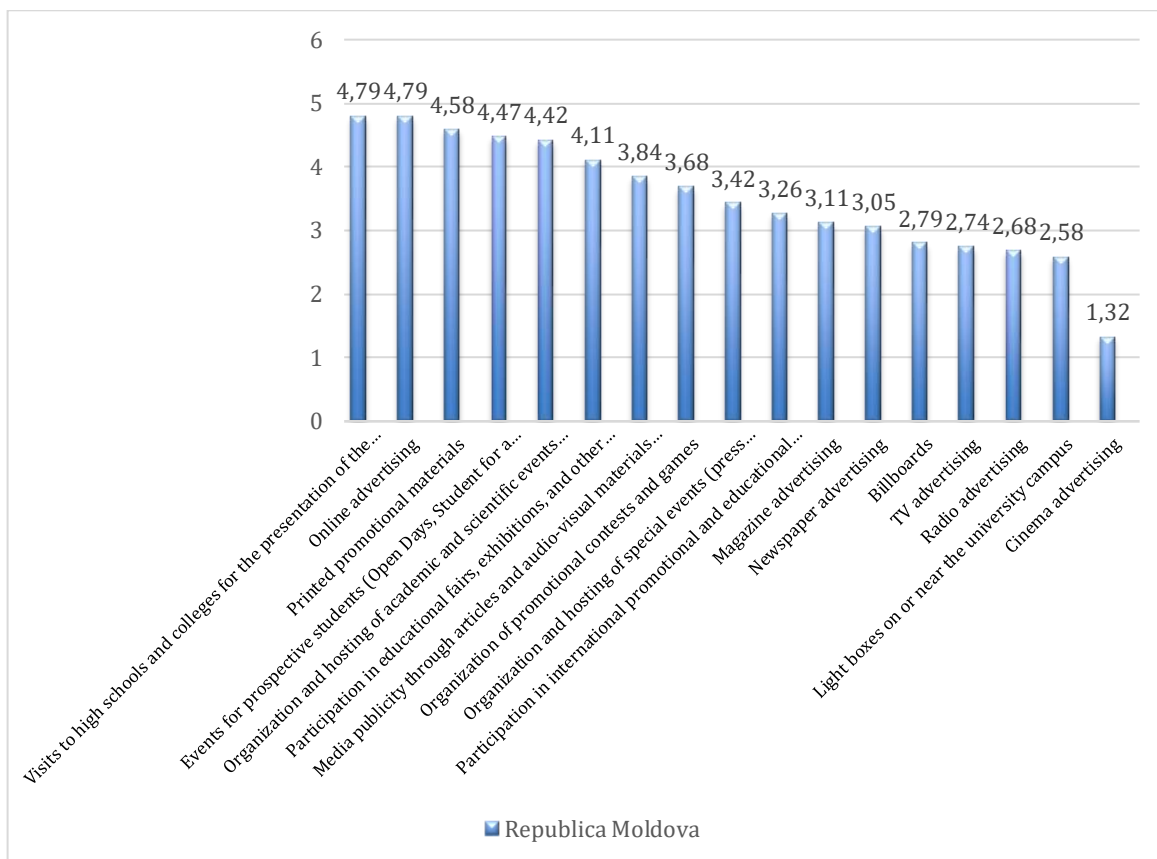


Figure 10. Tools and channels used by universities in the Republic of Moldova to promote their educational programs

Source: prepared by the authors based on the results of the research conducted

It is also worth noting that, in their marketing activities, universities are increasingly turning to a wide range of channels to promote their educational offerings and strengthen the university's image, with varying intensity depending on each institution's specific context. Thus, the most frequently used method proved to be visits to high schools and colleges, which allow for direct contact with potential applicants, scoring 4.79 on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 - least used - to 5 - most frequently used, followed by online advertising (online) - 4.79 (Fig. 10.). These are followed by printed materials (leaflets, brochures, posters, calendars, flyers) (4.58), a traditional channel still in use, and the organization of events dedicated to prospective students, such as "Open House" or "Be a Student for a Day" (4.47). Organizing and hosting academic events (congresses, conferences, seminars, forums) ranks at approximately the same level of importance (4.42), followed by participation in national fairs and exhibitions (4.11). In second place, but with consistent frequency, are the publication of articles and video/audio materials in the media (3.84), the organization of contests and promotional games (3.68), and the organization of special events (press conferences, official receptions) (3.42). The lowest values are observed for participation in international fairs and exhibitions (3.26), as well as for

traditional forms of advertising: in magazines (3.11), in newspapers (3.05), billboards (2.79), TV (2.74), radio (2.68), light boxes (2.58), and, obviously, movie theaters (1.32). This ranking shows that universities in the Republic of Moldova prioritize channels with a direct and immediate impact on the target audience - visits to high schools, events for prospective students, and online promotion - while traditional mass media advertising is used sporadically and plays a minor role in the current communication strategy.

5. Conclusions

Based on the literature review and the empirical research conducted, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding the role and implementation of marketing orientation in universities:

1. Marketing orientation is a key strategic imperative for improving the performance of for-profit organizations. At the same time, numerous studies in the fields of management and marketing have also highlighted the importance of developing a marketing orientation in nonprofit organizations, such as those in the arts and culture sector, the healthcare sector, the public services sector, etc., including higher education institutions.
2. A marketing orientation in university operations involves a combination of a focus on customers (students) and other stakeholders, a focus on competition, a focus on co-competitors, and a focus on cross-functional coordination within the institution.
3. Numerous studies have demonstrated that a marketing orientation must be adopted by universities in order to improve overall performance and gain a competitive advantage. Among the main benefits of a marketing orientation for universities are: a potential increase in enrollment rates and student retention rates, a positive impact on the research and teaching processes within universities, strong links to the quality of services perceived by students, student satisfaction and loyalty, word-of-mouth recommendations, perceived brand value, improved image and attractiveness of the university for prospective students, an effective means of developing the student-university relationship due to the university's greater ability to meet students' needs, and, above all, their ability to enter the labor market more effectively.
4. The research conducted has highlighted that universities in the Republic of Moldova have a strong awareness of the role of university marketing in strengthening the image and attractiveness of universities. At the same time, its practical implementation is in its early stages, requiring a strengthening of internal capacities to capitalize on the opportunities offered by modern marketing concepts, the diversification of marketing channels and tools used for institutional promotion and the promotion of study programs, with an emphasis on digital marketing tools, bringing about changes in attitudes within universities by adopting an appropriate marketing philosophy among all staff, and adopting marketing strategies and plans geared toward addressing institutional needs and achieving the proposed objectives.
5. Given the rapidly intensifying competition in the higher education services market at the global, regional, and local levels, universities must base their marketing policies on the presence of competition, their strengths and weaknesses relative to competing universities, and strategic and tactical decisions, the entire marketing toolkit, as well

as marketing programs and plans, must simultaneously be geared toward ensuring and developing competitive advantages and the overall competitiveness of the university.

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