University and place branding: The case of universities located in ECC (European Capital of Culture) cities

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UNIVERSITY AND PLACE BRANDING: THE CASE OF UNIVERSITIES LOCATED IN ECC (EUROPEAN CAPITAL OF CULTURE) CITIES

Abstract

In the globalising landscape of higher education more and more universities are going international. These universities are facing growing competition, especially in enrolling international students. International competition forces them to use marketing and especially branding activity. University branding requires that the higher education institutions clearly define their differentiating features. One of the most important differentiating features is the place where the institution is located. University and place branding should work together to help the potential students in their decisions to choose the place of their study. The ECC (European Capital of Culture) program which started in 1985 has helped many cities to identify their values and to develop their place branding activities. The study examines how the European Capital of Culture designation of the city helped the marketing activities of the universities located in these cities. The study attempts to explore to what extent universities located in ECCs used this special feature of their cities in their international marketing communication. The paper also attempts to analyse the effects the European Capital of Culture title could have on the international student enrolment activity of the concerned universities.

Keywords: University branding, place branding, European Capital of Culture, cross marketing, student enrolment

1. Introduction

Higher education has gone through significant changes during the past decades. With the coming of globalisation, all aspects of social and economic life have been affected. Growing competition and globalisation has forced universities in almost all countries to go international and offer their services not only to the local market but also to recruit potential students from abroad. One of the most characteristic changes witnessed in the higher education market in the past decades is the rapidly growing number of international students. While in 2001 there were only one million international students studying worldwide, their number has grown to 3.7 million by 2009. According to the estimation of UNESCO, by 2025 there will be 8 million international students studying abroad (Gomez-Ortueta, Dutschke, 2012).

Since English has become the lingua franca in almost all fields of science and professions, universities of English speaking countries, especially those of the US and the UK, have a leading advantage. Other universities, e.g. the European universities that are trying to keep pace, have built up their English teaching units and are 'trying harder' by using the marketing methods taken over from business. The key anchors of all marketing activity are the brands (Kotler, Keller, 2012). Branding of universities compared to branding of products and services is a rather different and unique activity. This paper tries to explore the branding activity of universities in general and especially of those European universities which are located in cities holding the title of European Capital of Culture.

2. University marketing and branding

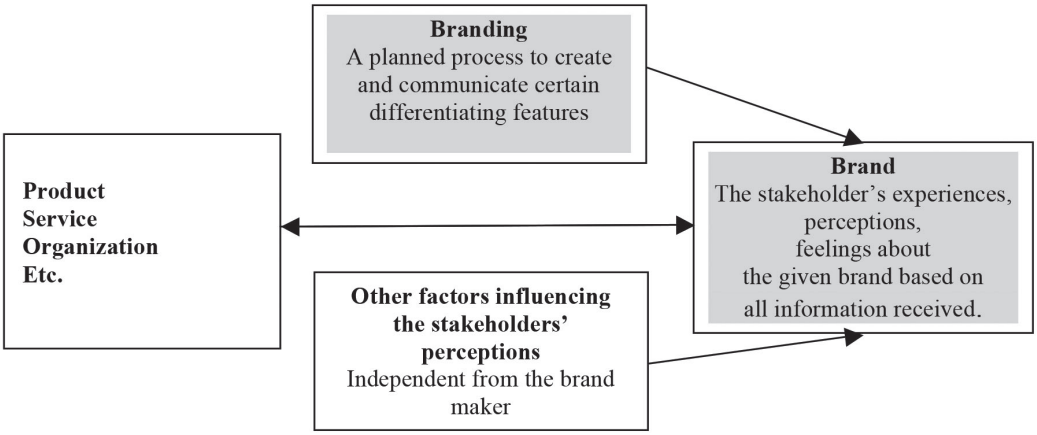
The growing competition – as mentioned before – has forced universities to use marketing methods taken from business in accessing their potential students and even more in the process of international recruiting. As a consequence, university marketing has also become the subject of scientific research. There are a great number of publications dealing with marketing in higher education (Hemsley-Brown, Oplatka, 2006; Maringe, Gibbs, 2009). Some of them relate to a particular field of marketing such as marketing planning (Maringe, Foskett, 2002), marketing models (Mazzarol, 1998), positioning and corporate identity (Melewar, Akel, 2005), international students' motivations, decision making processes (Mazzarol, Soutar, 2002; Maringe, Carter, 2007; Bohmann, 2010; Wilkins, Huisman, 2011), and even pricing, e.g. with the problem how to set the tuition fees in higher education (Rekettye, Rappai, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, real marketing, whether in the business or non-business field, requires a solid anchor to which all the marketing and communication activities can be linked and which serves as a factor of identity that defines the different activities of a given organization and distinguishes it from others. This anchor is the brand. Brands have been originally used for products and business organizations: as the dictionary of AMA (American Marketing Association) states, "A brand is a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers." The process of broadening the concept of marketing was recognizable also in the field of brands. Nowadays, brands are used to identify and differentiate not only products and services but profit and non-profit organizations, even persons, spaces, cities, and destinations.

Branding is a conscious, planned set of activities from the part of the organization to create and communicate the differentiating features of the product or organisation. If these activities are efficient, the target audient's (customers' and other stakeholders') experiences and perceptions towards the brand will reflect the purpose of the brand creating organization. It is worthwhile to mention that there are lots of other factors independent from the organization which may influence and alter these perceptions (Figure 1).

If growing competition and diminishing government funding in higher education has forced universities to apply marketing methods, then university branding should also be an obligatory part of their marketing activity. However, the literature concerning branding in higher education seems to be limited (Hemsley-Brown, Oplatka, 2006; Waeraas, Solbakk, 2008) although certain aspects of higher education branding have been explored, as for example, the emergence of brand identities (Lowrie, 2007), the image and reputation of old universities in the UK (Ivy, 2001), the image of the UK universities as perceived by the international students (Binsardi, Ekwulugo, 2003) or the role of websites in university branding (Chapleo - Durán, Díaz, 2011).

Figure 1 Branding is the process, the brand is the outcome



Source: Based on Árpád Papp-Váry (2013: 26)

There is, nonetheless, a growing concern about the problems of applying branding in HEIs (Higher Education Institutions), such as the contradictory needs of domestic and international students, their different perceptions during pre-enrolment versus during their studies (Parson, 2006), the relationship between successful branding and engagement (Blanton, 2007) or even how branding can be achieved globally (Cambridge, 2002). A university may be too complex to be identified by one brand or one identity definition, and it can also be questioned if general academic values have a place in branding processes (Waeraas, Solbakk, 2008). It seems appropriate to make further investigations whether higher education institutions have successfully developed brands and what common properties successful institutions share (Chapleo, 2005).

3. Universities and their locations

As all other institutions, every higher education institution has a name. This name contains the word 'university', 'college' or a synonym and one or more words to make the university identifiable. The other word or words refer in most cases to the *location* of the institution. (Sometimes the name contains also the main profile of the institution like Massachusetts Institute of Technology or Nanyang Technological University; in other cases the universities use the names of their founders or some other famous persons to differentiate them from others, such as Harvard University or Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek or Humbold University of Berlin.) Eight of the best ten universities in 2013 contain in their names also the name of the place (the city or the broader location) where they are located (Table 1).

Table 1 The best ten universities in 2013 (the name of the location is underlined)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)
University of Cambridge
Harvard University
University College London
University of Oxford
Imperial College London
Yale University
University of Chicago
Princeton University
California Institute of Technology

Source: U.S. News & World Report, World's Best Universities Top 400 (http://www.usnews.com/education/worlds-best-universities-rankings/top-400-universities-in-the-world)

If the location is so often part of the name it may be hypothesized that the image of the place and the image of the university have a smaller or greater im-

pact on each other. It is very similar to the notion of co-branding or cross-marketing used in the world of business. In business life, co-brands refer to the usage of two or more brands on one certain product and cross marketing refers to an agreement for mutual promotion between two companies (Ferrell and Hartline, 2005).
This paper intends to investigate how this co-operation between the two entities works in the case of universities located in ECC cities.

4. The Cultural Capital of Europe programme

According to the official website of the ECC programme, the European Capitals of Culture initiative was set up to reach the following goals:

- highlight the richness and diversity of European cultures,
- celebrate the cultural ties that link Europeans together,
- bring people from different European countries into contact with each other's culture and promote mutual understanding,
- foster the feeling of European citizenship.

In addition, studies have shown that the initiative is a valuable opportunity to:

- regenerate cities,
- give new vitality to their cultural life,
- raise their international profile, boost tourism and enhance their image in the eyes of their own inhabitants. (http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/capitals/european-capitals-of-culture_en.htm)

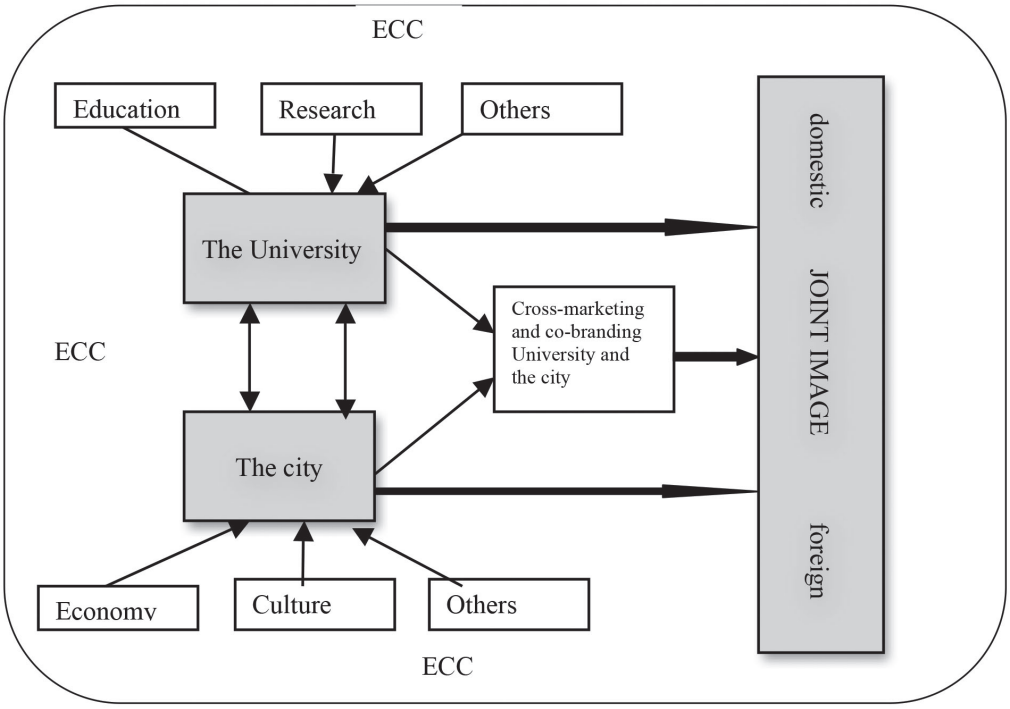
A broad literature can be found about the different impacts of the European Capital of Culture programme. Lots of research has been carried out on its economic impact (Herrero et al., 2006; Phythian, Sapsford, 2009), and how it stimulates the development of cultural economy (Palmer, 2004; Mittag, Oerters, 2009), of creative industry (Campbell, 2011) and also its effect on the image of the city (Richards & Wilson, 2004). Extensive research was conducted on its role as a catalyst for place branding (Valentina, 2005; Maheshwari et al., 2009) and how the ECC programme has resulted in urban regeneration (Garcia, 2004; O'Callaghan & Linehan, 2007; Gunay, 2010). Urban regeneration was even investigated from the scope of what role the arts programme of the ECC project plays in the urban regeneration process (Garcia, 2004). It has also been explored how the European identity is represented in the ECC programme (Aiello, Thurlow, 2006). In addition, researchers have identified the influence of the ECC programme on tourism (Hughes et al., 2003).
However, no extensive research has been made about the impact of the European Capital of Culture programme on the universities, or on the effects ECC plays in attracting international students to the university. A successful European Capital of Culture programme of a city can result in a successful place branding that can highly support the realization of the marketing objectives of a university located in that city. Close correlation can also be explored between the impact of a more and more internationalized university and the European Capital of Culture programme on the local economy. As seen among the aims of the European Capital of Culture programme, ECC should vitalize local economy – as does an international university through the spending of its local and foreign students.
The important role universities can play in the European Capital of Culture programme was highlighted by the foundation of the University Network of the European Capitals of Culture (www.uneecc.org). The assumption of the study is that the co-marketing should be executed according to the following model (Figure 2).

5. Researches

The rationale of this study is based on the partial results of two researches made on this subject:

- The first was made among the foreign students of Pécs University with the aim to find out what role the city Pécs and its CCE title played in their decision to select Pécs as the place of their education. In this research the degree seeking students and the Erasmus students were surveyed separately because of the assumption that they had a rather different set of motivations.
- The second research was carried out among the member universities of the University Network of the European Capitals of Culture with the objective to explore how these universities used the ECC title in their marketing activity with special emphasis on the recruitment of foreign students.

Figure 2 The marketing co-operation of the university and the city in the CCE surrounding



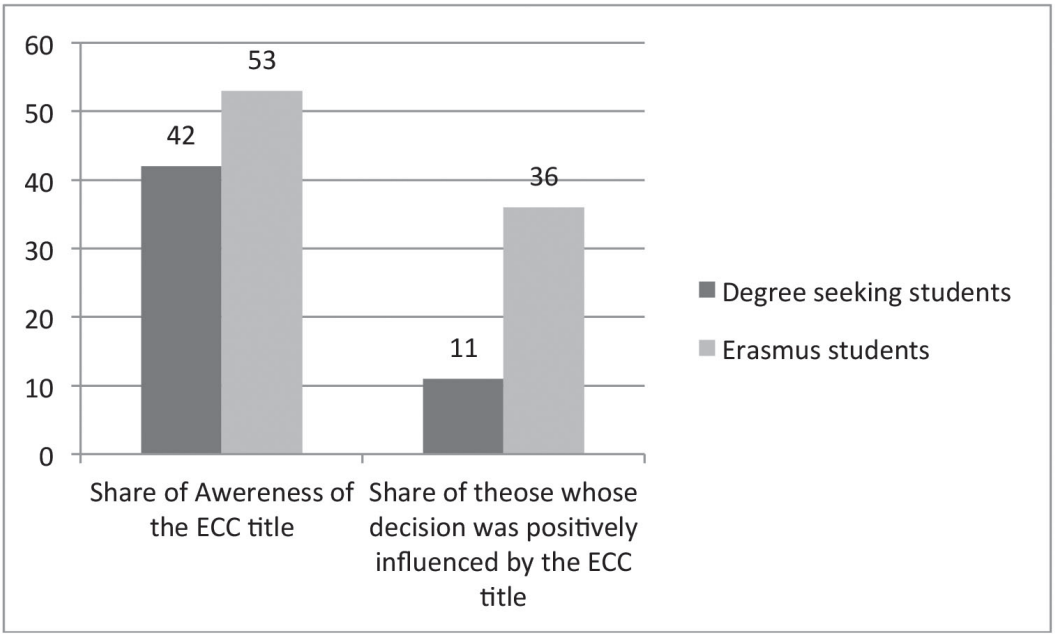
Source: Author

5.1 Research among the foreign students of the University of Pécs

In spring 2012 a survey was made among the degree-seeking international students of the University of Pécs. The survey used an online questionnaire which was completed by 213 foreign students. The aim of the survey was to discover their information channels and their motivations when choosing the University of Pécs for their studies. Two questions referred to the Pécs 2010 European Capital of Culture title. The results showed that 42 per cent of the degree-seeking international students had learnt about the Pécs European Capital of Culture title before they applied to the university. Only 28 per cent of these students have stated however that the Pécs European Capital of Culture designation positively affected their decision when choosing the University of Pécs for their studies.

In September 2012, a survey was carried out among the incoming Erasmus students of the University of Pécs. The methodology applied here was an online questionnaire. The research was carried out to explore the motivations of the incoming Erasmus students when choosing the University of Pécs for their studies. Among the many questions asked about their source of information and decision-making process there were some items in the survey with the aim to explore their knowledge about and attitude towards the ECC title of Pécs. 200 completed questionnaires served as the basis for the analysis. Incoming Erasmus students were asked whether they had any information about the University of Pécs being located in a city that bore the European Capital of Culture title. 47 per cent of the respondents learnt about the city's European Capital of Culture title before their applications while 53 per cent of the incoming Erasmus students had not heard about it. Afterwards, those students who gave the answer 'yes' were asked whether their knowledge about the Pécs 2010 ECC title had a positive effect on their university choice. 68 per cent of those respondents who had heard about the Pécs ECC title confirmed that their knowledge about the title had stimulated their choosing the University of Pécs for their Erasmus studies. The result for the two groups of students is illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3 Awareness and influence of the ECC title of Pécs in the two groups of foreign students at the University of Pécs (in %)



Source: Author

These results give a good basis to make the following assumptions:

- In the case of Pécs, the marketing of the ECC event by the city and the university as well as their cross-marketing proved to be rather weak, since it could reach only part one of their most important target market. This statement sounds even truer if one takes into consideration the fact that in these years more than 70% of the foreign students of the university came from Europe.
- Other parts of the research also prove two things: (1) location ranked only third among the motivating factors in selecting the place of education, especially in case of degree seeking students. The most important factor was the *selected field of study*; the second was the reputation and the *value of the degree* which was followed by the *attractiveness of the city* where the university was located. (2) The Erasmus students however placed greater attention on the location; they seemed to regard studying abroad as an excursion and a possibility to learn about foreign countries and cultures.

5.2. Research among the member universities of the University Network of the ECC

In 2012, a research was carried out among the member universities of the University Network of the European Capitals of Culture. It was based on an online questionnaire which was completed by thirteen universities from different European countries. The respondent universities were located in the following cities: Sibiu, Maribor, Pécs, Liverpool, Avignon, Luxemburg, Antwerp, Brugge, Graz, Vilnius, Essen, Krakow and Stavanger. The questionnaire was filled out by the following university representatives: pro-vice-chancellor (1), vice-rector for international relations (3), director of communications (2), head of PR department (1), head of international relations office (4), international relations officer (1) and co-ordinator for cultural activities (1).

The aim of the survey was to explore whether the universities used the cities' ECC title in their marketing communication; if yes, in which marketing communication tools the ECC title was referred to. Another objective was to explore the opinion of the responding universities about the importance of the ECC title for the decision of their Erasmus students

and the degree seeking students to choose their university. It was also interesting to find out whether these universities had ever investigated the role of the ECC title during the university selection process of the international students. When speaking about the ECC designation of a city it is crucial to define for how long a university should refer to it in its communication campaign.

Analysing the cities where the responding universities were located an interesting classification could be explored (Figure 4):

a. Well known places with active cultural life (famous for its cultural life)

Among the European Capitals of Culture there is a group of cities which are famous places with very active cultural lives and are visited by many tourists on a constant basis. The ECC designation did not help to increase the fame of the place (it was very well known already), nor did it increase the number of cultural activities taking place since there were always many different cultural events going on throughout the year. The ECC title seemed to be a reward for the ongoing cultural boost of these cities (and most probably for the best application of the certain year). The following cities can be placed into this category: Luxemburg, Avignon, Antwerp etc.

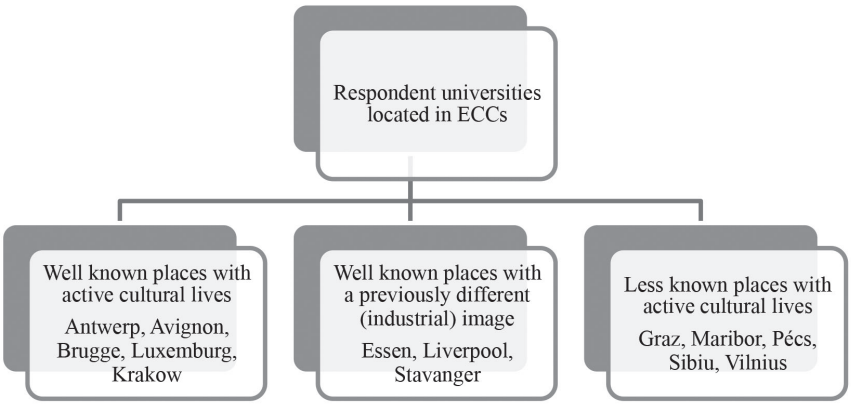
b. Well known places with a previously different (industrial) image

In the second category there are cities which used to have the image of an industrial city. These cities are also famous places in Europe – or worldwide, too. For some reason (mostly for economic reasons) these cities however would have liked to change this image and it was their main motivation when applying for the ECC title. The ECC designation could help these places to change the industrial image of the city to a culturally vibrant place image and to create a cultural industry there. From the list of the ECC cities, Liverpool, Essen and Marseilles etc. fall into this category.

c. Less known places with an active cultural life

Within the list of the ECC cities there are places that had a very small reputation before they were designated with the ECC title. The European Capital of Culture title was a huge asset for them to increase the awareness of the city. The ECC title could put the city on the map of Europe and help increase its EU-wide recognition. By raising their international profile the European Capital of Culture program boosted tourism and also helped to create a new cultural industry. In most cases it was based on building many new cultural facilities, too, of which these cities were short. The following cities can be placed into this category: Sibiu, Pécs, Maribor, Kosice, etc. Through the ECC programme these cities were given a huge opportunity for promoting their existence.

Figure 4 The classification of cities of the respondent universities



Source: Author

The research results clearly demonstrated that the majority of the respondent universities (11) used the ECC title in their marketing communication. The two universities which did not use the ECC designation were located in well know places famous for their cultural lives. It proved that the ECC title of the city was more important for promoting the universities located in less known places.

The received data made apparent that once the universities recognized the importance of promoting their cities' ECC title, the majority of them used it in both their international and domestic marketing communication. It can be stated that when a university realised the importance of the promotional value of the ECC title of its city, it used it in all student recruitment activity. They considered it as an added value of the university about which both the domestic and international students could talk.

Most of the respondent universities mentioned the ECC title in their leaflets (10 universities), 7 universities referred to it on their websites, 4 in social media appearances, 3 talked about it in their university films and one university mentioned it during every university presentation. What could clearly be seen from the research results is that universities from less known cities used all marketing communication tools to promote that the university was located in an ECC.

The received data proved that 67 per cent of the respondent universities thought that the Erasmus students found it crucial that the university is among the ECC while only 54 per cent of the universities were of the opinion that the degree-seeking international students found it important. It could be stated that the experience of the universities was that the European Capital of Culture title was more important for the decision-making process of the Erasmus students than for the degree-seeking students. Although the attractiveness of the city is also crucial for the degree-seeking students (as seen in the University of Pécs survey), their main motivation concerns were the field of studies and the value of the degree. The Erasmus students who stayed for a semester or a year seemed to prefer to enjoy the cultural attractiveness and cultural events of the cities more than the degree-seeking students.

The data clearly showed that although the universities had a definite opinion about the effect of the ECC title on the decision making process of the international students, the majority of the universities had never conducted a survey on this topic. It can be concluded however that universities from less known cities had surveyed their international students proving that those institutions which were located in less know places were much more eager to analyse the effect of the ECC title than those universities which were located in well-known cities. The majority of the respondent universities shared the opinion that it was worth promoting that the university was located in a European Capital of Culture one or two years before the ECC program year. The results of the survey clearly indicated that most universities believed that the ECC title of their cities should have been used in their marketing communication more than two years after the ECC programme year. One university was of the opinion that it should be communicated endlessly.

6. Conclusions

Based on the findings stated above, it seems fair to conclude that the competitiveness of a university is largely influenced by the competitiveness and attractions of the city where the university is located. Therefore, it is apparent that place branding is of high importance in the marketing activities of the university. Nevertheless, the marketing activity of the university should be in harmony with the marketing activities of its city. University cities should harmonize their tourism destination management activities with the aims of their universities – university cities should serve the needs of the potential foreign students of their universities.

In marketing activities the universities and their cities should work together more actively and more efficiently, as their common interest in co-branding requires it. An effective ECC can result in a more effective collaboration of the city and its university which can have a positive effect also on the international student recruitment. An attractive city can be a strong pull factor during the decision making process of the international students.

Upon the research results it can also be concluded that a European Capital of Culture title of a city is a unique distinguishing feature to speak about. Universities are working these days in a growing competition for both the domestic and international students. One of the main objectives of university branding is to communicate the cities' competitive advantages. Therefore in a growing competition it is a must:

- to distinguish the university from its competitors
- to use the ECC title consequently in all our marketing communication activities and tools, and
- to help students in making their choices.

The research has made apparent however, that international students looking for study abroad destinations for short term studies find the city's European Capital of Culture title more important than the degree-seeking students. Since the above mentioned research focused on exploring the international students' approach to the ECC title of the city during the decision making process and application period it would also be crucial to investigate what effect the city's ECC projects and achievements have on the international students during their studies.

Degree-seeking international students most likely come across the ECC investments and results of the city during their long stay there. Since one of the main and most effective marketing tools of a university in international student enrolment is the word of mouth it would be desirable to explore whether the ECC results have a positive impact on the students during their studies. Such a study may broaden the understanding of students' needs and satisfaction as well, as the base of a positive spread of word of mouth.

In addition, further research could be made on the role an internationalized university can play in the city's place branding development since it has been clearly proved that the marketing activities of the city and its universities should be harmonized in order to reach the maximum accomplishment of the desired marketing goals.

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Brendiranje sveučilišta i grada: Slučajevi sveučilišta koja se nalaze u europskim prijestolnicama kulture

Sažetak

U globalizirajućem okruženju višeg obrazovanja, sve više sveučilišta postaje međunarodno. Ova se sveučilišta suočavaju sa sve većom konkurencijom, osobito kod upisa međunarodnih studenata. Međunarodna konkurencija ih tjera da koriste marketing, a osobito aktivnost brendiranja. Brendiranje sveučilišta zahtijeva da ustanove višeg obrazovanja jasno definiraju značajke koje ih čine različitima. Jedna od najvažnijih takvih značajki je grad u kojem se ustanova nalazi. Sveučilište i brendiranje grada trebali bi zajedno djelovati kako bi pomogli potencijalnim studentima pri odabiru mjesta studiranja. Program Europska prijestolnica kulture koji je pokrenut 1985. godine mnogim je gradovima pomogao da definiraju svoje vrijednosti i razviju aktivnosti brendiranja svoga grada. Ova studija proučava način na koji je imenovanje nekog grada Europskom prijestolnicom kulture pomoglo marketinškim aktivnostima sveučilišta koja se nalaze u tim gradovima. Studija pokušava istražiti u kojoj su mjeri sveučilišta koja se nalaze u gradovima koji su bili Europska prijestolnica kulture iskoristila ovu posebnu značajku svoga grada u svojoj međunarodnoj marketinškoj komunikaciji. U radu se također analiziraju učinci koje bi titula Europske prijestolnice kulture mogla imati na aktivnosti upisa međunarodnih studenata na tim sveučilištima.

Ključne riječi: brendiranje sveučilišta, brendiranje grada, Europska prijestolnica kulture, *cross* marketing, upis studenata