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**CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS FOR STUDYING UNIVERSITY  
IMAGE AND ITS FORMATION IN CURRENT CONTEXT**

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*Abstract*

The article deals with the conceptual foundations for studying the image of higher education institutions and ways of forming their image. Urgency of our research is determined by the increase in the number of learning services offered, universities themselves, and the competition in the market for these services. The study of the image and its influence is conditioned by the interest of universities in increasing their competitiveness in the educational market, the effective positioning of the provided educational programs to attract potential consumers. A modern university needs to be able to withstand competition in light of increasing aspirations of young people for higher vocational education, improvement of their professional competence. This study allows us to analyze the influence of the factors forming the university image on the public opinion of consumers. The activity of the university and its management structures following on from the results of the image research allows making effective management decisions aimed at building a favorable and positive image.

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**Keywords:** Image; higher education institution, the university image, learning service, formation of the university image.



## 1. Introduction

Today, higher education institutions, undoubtedly, play one of the main roles in successful and effective development of society. The modern Russian system of higher vocational education is undergoing systematic reforms, which consist in adoption of new federal state educational standards, introduction of a competency-based approach that allows assessing the competency of graduates in the most appropriate manner. The university should be able to use all its organizational, pedagogical, material-and-technical capabilities to train highly professional and competitive specialists who will further form the social and professional structure of society. In these conditions, higher education institutions have much work to be done to attract the most prepared and gifted entrants, and the positive university image has a significant role in this process. If the university has a favorable image, it will be able to compete more easily in the market of learning services, to get a greater number of consumers and successfully solve problems of graduate employability. This factors has stepped up competition and rivalry between university to attract students, resources and prestigious teaching staff, leading many universities to perceive a need to build a solid favourable image and reputation among their stakeholders, these being factors of differentiation that influence their affective responses and behaviour vis-à-vis the institution (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Belanger, Mount, & Wilson, 2002; Drydakakis, 2015)

## 2. Problem Statement

So, there is a need for investigation of the concept "university image" and the process of its formation.

First, let us look at the history of the term "image". A general definition of "image" is the impression that a person, organization, or product is presented to the public. The very concept of image comes from Latin *imago* – appearance, identity - and means the concept or character projected to the public, as by a person or institution, and having some emotional and psychological impact on the target audience for distribution of goods and services or advertising, etc.

In the sociology dictionary, image is considered as a whole, qualitative representation of the object that suitably exists and is reproduced in a mass or individual consciousness. Image arises and changes as a result of perception and concomitant selection of information about the object coming from the external environment through the network of acting stereotypes (Abercrombie, 2002)

It was American economist Kenneth Boulding (1956) who first introduced the term "image" for scientific use. In 1956, he formulated the following definition of "image" in his work "The Image. Knowledge in Life and Society": "a behavioral stereotype, which is based not on real facts but on prestige, opinions, illusions that people create about themselves, on mythological ideas of the past, on imaginary view of the future can influence both the actions of individuals or groups and the behavior of entire nations".

Further, the concept "image" is actively being used in the categorical apparatus of science "Public Relations", and later become ingrained in science, social and political life.

Feofanov (1974) was one of the first in our country, who introduced the concept "image" in the domestic literature. In his work "USA: Advertising and Society" he considers the image as a main means of psychological impact of the advertiser on the consumer.

Also, among the researchers of image and image-making, we should name E. V. Grishunina, E. I. Manyakina, F. A. Kuzin, E. V. Egorova-Gantman, B. G. Ushakov, A. Yu. Panasyuk, V. M. Shepel et al. (Korolko, 2018).

### **3. Research Questions**

Image includes a set of all evaluations and impressions that are formed in a deliberate or random way, and stable or illusory features of the object. The process of image formation is influenced by many diverse factors and sides, which subsequently become an effective tool for achieving the specific goal.

These are the main subjects of image formation:

- a) recipients — those who perceive image-forming information;
- b) senders — those who are the source of image-forming information;
- c) carries of the image — those with respect to whom the image is formed.

For our country, “the university image” is a relatively new concept, in Russia it was emerged in the mid-1990s. Factors that contributed to the introduction of this concept into public practice were such phenomena as increased demand for higher education, emergence of paid learning services, and commercial universities. In addition, the image has become an integral part of any educational organization, which direct its activity at building a positive image in the market economy conditions to establish effective and long-term relationships with the target audience (Aktamov, 2012).

Modern universities offer a variety of educational services, classified by the forms and directions of educational programs, terms of training, cost and quality of the services offered. The confluence of all these factors forms a certain image in the minds of recipients or consumers of educational services. Learning services belong to such category of services, which are the most intangible for their consumers. Educational service receivers include, first of all, applicants and their parents, people wishing to get a higher or second higher education, specialists planning to take refresher courses or top up their qualifications, etc. However, potential consumers can not assess the content of learning services before their receiving. And so they have to focus on the image and reputation of the university, public opinion on the quality of educational services offered.

The university image in Danilenko’s (2003) perception, for example, includes several components; among the key ones we can highlight the awareness and reputation of the education institution, its competitive status, the system of reactions to consumer requests, the prestige of the provided educational programs, the innovation potential, the university's advertisement etc.

Higher education has a significant impact on the professional structure of the population. However, obtaining a higher education does not always guarantee a graduate of a university the acquisition of a cherished profession. Also, an important factor influencing the change in professional intentions is the incorrect choice of the specialty, which forces them to receive additional education. The spectrum of higher educational institutions has significantly expanded in connection with the emergence of non-state institutions and branches of state universities. However, increasing their number often not only does not make it easier to choose for the entrant, but, on the contrary, complicates it (Fomitskaya, 2012).

In the opinion of Lafuente-Ruiz-de-Sabando, Zorrilla and Forcada (2014), the review of research of image reveals a strong consensus for considering university image as a multidimensional concept, but the

diversity of dimensions proposed by the authors is huge. The labels used by the different authors to refer to the dimensions they consider in their proposals are very varied, although the differences do not stem just from the terminology, but also appear in the definitions of said terminology. These divergences do not only seem to lie in the different interests that the various stakeholders might have, because they are also observed in approaches taken by works adopting the perspective of one and the same stakeholder. So, the reviewed literature reveals that there is no consensus among researchers with regard to the dimensions that comprise university image and more investigation is required to advance knowledge concerning facets that delimit the construct.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

We understand the university image in terms of conceptual definition as a representation of the university in the individual or public consciousness based on the formed opinion about this organization that arose either as a result of direct contact with the university or following on from information about this institution received from other sources. Among the characteristics of the university we should note real, i.e. corresponding to up-to-date picture, and artificial — created by communicative sources.

The university image is a complex category; so, Moiseeva (2009) singles out eight components, which we conditionally unite into several groups.

The first group relates to the image of the learning service provided by the university. The most important factors here are the level of satisfaction of students and employers, mechanisms for analyzing the quality of services provided, people's vision of the relatively unique features that an educational service or institution has. This component also includes additional services or attributes that provide the university with the opportunity to have market exclusivity.

The second group is focused on the image of learning services. This component involves social status, lifestyle and socio-psychological characteristics of consumers.

The third group includes the internal image of the organization, which is formed from the image of the university administration (rector, scientific and academic councils), the image of the faculty, students and staff. The internal image of the university is based on the views of teachers and students about their institution. The most important factors in the image formation in terms of this component are corporate culture of the organization, socio-psychological climate within the educational institution, inner monitoring of the activities of the university and its structural subdivisions, satisfaction with the quality of the education received.

The next group is represented by the university's social image, i.e. the views of a wide range of the public about the social functions and role of the university in the economic, social, political and cultural life of the region and society as a whole.

The fifth group focuses on the visual image, which involves the organization's corporate symbols, its awareness, visual identity that contains information about the interior of buildings, auditoriums, the appearance of staff and students, the site of the university, its representation in the media.

And, finally, the last group forms a business image of the educational institution, within the framework of which the university appears as a subject of business activity. It is also advisable to consider the impact of the university on the socio-economic development of the region in terms of this component.

## 5. Research Methods

The study of the university image is aimed at identifying the educational institution in the public opinion, first of all, in the opinion of consumers. As the methodological basis for studying the university image we can use a system analysis that allows considering the university as a unity of interrelated elements, which important task is to make positive impact on the consumers or target audience. Based on the complex system analysis, it is possible to draw conclusions about the sustainability of the image, the levels of positive or, conversely, negative attitudes toward the university, competitiveness of learning services provision and education in compliance to various criteria. Quantitative methods are widely used to assess the university image; its main advantage is the ability to compare data using a formalized toolbox and statistical analysis. Among the main methods, we can single out surveys, such as questionnaire with the use of electronic communicative technologies, interview, content analysis, etc. Quantitative methods allow comparing various parameters and elements of the image based on the results obtained, and then making the appropriate decisions to build a positive image of the university. Qualitative methods, such as SWOT analysis and focus group method, provide an opportunity to analyze the internal forces and resources of the educational organization, to study a wide range of opinions on the university image, to identify emotional and rational aspects of its perception, as well as sources and grounds for such perception (Badmatsyrenov & Kombaev, 2013)

## 6. Findings

Thus, we should note that there is a need to study in a comprehensive manner the main factors of the university image formation. Most often among them the researches name the quality of education; the assessment of educational and special programs; the prestige of the university and its faculties; the qualification of the teaching staff; the employment opportunities of graduates; the convenience of infrastructure; the level of students' preparedness for practical activities, etc. Also there are the following attracting or, conversely, repulsive characteristics of the university image, such as the cost of educating, the availability of dormitories and libraries, the convenience of the university location, the academic program. The opinions of students, applicants, members of their families, friends and the media are the important sources of forming the university image.

The data of sociological research "School students' educational strategies and professional intentions of the university students (on materials of the Republic of Buryatia)" demonstrate the sustainability of the aspiration of graduates in Buryatia to continue their education in higher educational institutions, and this striving is strategically associated with the orientations toward gaining access to higher incomes and the demand for the profession. At the same time, most of the graduates demonstrate a desire to get higher education outside of the republic, although can be noted differences in indicators of residence, income and ethnicity (Badmatsyrenov, Badmatsyrenova, & Dorzhieva, 2014, pp. 64-70).

In order to study the motives for choosing a specialty, professional intentions, and migration attitudes of students after graduation from a higher educational institution, a questionnaire survey was conducted in which took part 502 students who are studying at the full-time department from all faculties and institutes of the Buryat State University (BSU).

Professional intentions of students largely depend on the motivation for choosing a specialty and university. According to the survey, for a third students of BSU the decisive factor in choosing a university is the desire to get exactly the specialty that they are currently studying (29.9%). It can be assumed that for this group of students will be characterized by high motivation to obtain professional knowledge and further work on the specialty. The transition to the Unified State Exam opened wide opportunities for admission to universities that are located outside the republic, at a considerable distance from their place of residence. Nevertheless, a fifth of the respondents entered the BSU, since they did not want to leave far from home (20.3%). For 18.3% of students, the choice in favor of BSU was due to the high quality of education at the university, 10.2% of students believe that it is prestigious to study at BSU. Most of all, when choosing a university, students were guided by the desire to receive this specialty: Oriental Institute (48.6%), the Faculty of Chemistry (36.8%), the Faculty of Philology (36.7%), the Faculty of Medicine (36.2%), the pedagogical Institute (34,1%) (Dorzhiyeva, 2013).

## 7. Conclusion

As a result, the positive and favorable image of the university allows increasing its competitive advantages, and attracting by that a wide range of consumers, as well as providing the opportunities for further effective development of the educational institution.

We plan to create a concept (strategy) that justifies a new scientific direction in the field of improving the efficiency of the functioning of an educational institution, by defining the organizational and pedagogical components of the process; substantiation and development of mechanisms for the transformation and intensification of the multi-dimensional practice of the university. The strategy of forming an image will serve as a benchmark for improving the activities of the university. Investigated tools for creating an image of an educational organization can serve as a scientific and methodological tool for solving the problems of positioning a university, taking into account regional conditions, determined both by socio-pedagogical and cultural-educational specifics, and by the real capabilities of the Buryat State University.

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