

INCORPORATING MARKET ORIENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the main issues surrounding the concept of market orientation applied in the context of higher education. Considering the important changes taking place in this sector, a strong willingness of universities to adopt marketing concepts can be noticed. The paper seeks to provide a retrospect on this process, starting with the incorporation of marketing in higher education, and moving on to its implementation, which has come to be known as market orientation. Following a stream of the most relevant literature in the field, we present definitions of the main concepts, and integrate them in the education context, with the purpose of establishing the relevance and importance of market orientation for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage and higher institutional performance. The paper does not aim at providing an exhaustive literature review, but rather at presenting the main elements that define a market orientation, and at supporting its implementation, by outlining the significant benefits that could follow. While theoretical by nature, this research contributes to the body of literature in the field, through closely examining the conceptualization and operationalization of market orientation, and also providing the fundamental components that define the concept and help its implementation. Furthermore, the paper provides practitioners with a number of suggested research directions, which could potentially help improve educational institutions' activity, while also contributing to a better understanding of the concept, and to building richer theories in the field of marketing education. Given that the marketing literature in Romania has mostly overlooked market orientation, both this paper, and all following research in this area will prove to be significant for education managers and researchers alike, promoting the importance and significance of relevant knowledge, and encouraging a wider acceptance of market orientation throughout the education sector.*

Keywords: education marketing; market orientation; higher education; customer orientation.

JEL classification: M31, I23

1. Introduction

Change is not a new word for higher education institutions or the academic environment. The higher education literature widely acknowledges the fact that universities today are faced with great challenges, and that their survival depends mostly on the way in which they choose to respond to environmental threats. Among these threats, competition between universities both for students, and for resources is believed to be one of the most important elements that led to a growing interest in marketing, and to a shift in the institutions' focus towards customers and the educational marketplace (Newman, 2002; Oplatka, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown,

2002; Flavián and Lozano, 2007). The initial reaction of universities to these changes was to adopt marketing theories and concepts which have been effective in the business world, with the scope of increasing institutional performance and gaining a competitive edge (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006). The student – customer – became the focal point, followed by the development of a customer-driven organizational culture.

Today most higher education institutions commonly acknowledge the need for the use of marketing, in order to survive and continue to face the challenges in the academic environment. Consequently, research on education marketing has been receiving increasing attention in recent years (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2007). For more than a decade, a primary area of research has been the study of market orientation (Flavián and Lozano, 2006), as a way for institutions to improve the student-university relationship. Basically, this construct reflects the degree to which the marketing concept has been implemented within an organization (Hammond, Webster and Harmon, 2006). Market orientation is believed to be linked to the opportunity of creating sustainable superior value for customers, in this way leading to a competitive advantage, and to higher institutional performance (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990; Narver and Slater, 1990). However, as shown by Hammond, Webster and Harmon (2006), levels of market orientation and levels of management emphasis on market orientation are alarmingly low within higher education institutions. Also, in spite of the extensive interest in this concept throughout the literature, education marketing literature in Romania seems to have overlooked market orientation. With few exceptions that apply a market orientation perspective to a university setting (Platis, 2009; Pitic and Drăgan, 2010), research fails to address the concept in terms of construct or ways in which it can be applied successfully as a strategy for educational institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a short literature review on market orientation, its emergence and development in higher education, and also on potential benefits that could be obtained by embracing the concept. We begin our discussion with the incorporation of marketing in the education sector, and then move on to show and how it came to be implemented within higher education institutions. In the final section we also suggest future directions for education practitioners to better understand the concept and the ways in which it can be implemented successfully.

2. Marketing in Higher Education

Literature on higher education marketing can be found to be rather extensive, focusing on various items that define the concept, starting with the educational marketplace and customer needs (Teixeira, Rosa and Amaral, 2004; Brown and Scott, 2006), and moving on to specific topics, such as the marketing mix and educational marketing strategies (Cowburn, 2005; Ho and Hung, 2008; Ivy, 2008), and even to controversial discussions over the current marketization of universities or over the function that students hold within the educational process (Bok, 2003; Molesworth, Scullion and Nixon, 2011). Nevertheless, the emergence and development of educational marketing were somewhat defined by an unclear start, as the concept was initially regarded with suspicion and doubt, both by academics, and by universities' management. Marketing was believed to be synonymous with sales and promotion, and these concepts did not belong to the values fostered by

the educational system.

One of the first supporters of educational marketing was Krachenberg (1972), who argued that universities are involved in marketing actions, even if they do not officially admit it. Starting with student recruitment and tax policy making, and on to putting together a research proposal, every action that the university undertakes, no matter who actually performs it or where exactly in the institution it is being done, is grounded on marketing components (Krachenberg, 1972). Litten (1980) further supports this idea, and argues that “marketing is a frame of mind in which questions are asked about the optimum relationship between an organization and its environment, or parts of its environment, and action is taken that is informed by the answers to those questions” (Litten, 1980: 41). The author proceeds on defining this concept, and discusses various aspects, which are specific to higher education:

- Marketing involves conventional activities, such as advertising, as well as an array of other actions, which he adds up under the label “institutional presentation”;
- Information generation through marketing research holds a key role;
- Marketing is concerned with the development and delivery of educational and auxiliary services for which there is desire or need, at a price and under financial circumstances that would permit the intended beneficiaries to take advantage of the services;
- The responsible feature needs to be fully integrated within marketing, so that institutions become concerned with providing students with educational programs that are both beneficial and rewarding;
- The concepts of “market segmentation”, “targeting” and “positioning” are major functions of marketing and market research, and if applied properly, could significantly contribute to the achievement of institutional goals.

Progressively, marketing has become an instrumental managerial function to the survival of a university in an increasing competitive environment, given that it is no longer enough for a higher education institution to be effective, it needs to also have an effective image for parents and other stakeholders (Oplatka, Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2002). As Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan (2010) show, marketing has witnessed a transition from a product-centric vertical view (Marketing 1.0) to being consumer-centric (Marketing 2.0), and is now entering a new stage of “human-centricity” (Marketing 3.0), trying to reach all stakeholders, by cultivating the values they consider to be important, like public service or sustainability.

The higher education literature promotes marketing as “the body of theory that holds practical tools to help tertiary educational institutions survive and even thrive in competitive environments” (Stachowski, 2011). But to be successful in this endeavor, higher education institutions must first focus their interest on consumers and stakeholders, and their respective needs and wants. As Kotler and Fox (1995: 5-6) so eloquently state, “marketing exists when people decide to satisfy their needs and wants through exchange”. Therefore, the very first step that higher education institutions must undertake is to become customer oriented, and let marketing be the means to ensure the exchanges between the institution and its publics, in response to their corresponding needs and wants (Motekaitienė and Juščius, 2008). The next section discusses the concept of market orientation, its construct and benefits, and also provides universities with the existing ways in which they can measure the degree of market orientation within their institutions.

3. Market Orientation – The Construct

Many managers today recognise that the ability to succeed in the marketplace requires more than just sales techniques (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010). By incorporating marketing into the school culture, higher education institutions are looking out for clever ways to adapt to their competitive environment and to overcome the challenges that it may present. The notion of market orientation derives from the marketing concept (Hampton et. al., 2009) and is defined as the implementation of the marketing concept within an organization (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990). It is widely adopted throughout the education literature by many authors, along with the terms “marketing orientation” or “customer orientation” (Siu and Wilson, 1998), to emphasize the shift in the institutions’ focus towards delivering value to their many constituents.

Kohli and Jaworski (1990) show that there has been a transition from the concept of “marketing orientation” to the one of “market orientation”, the latter appearing to be preferable in most writings. Presumably, according to the authors, this has happened based on the fact that the term “market orientation” focuses attention on “markets”, incorporating all the parties involved, including (but not limited to) customers and the forces affecting them, at the same time suggesting that embracing a market orientation is not exclusively a concern of the marketing function, but of the entire organization.

The marketing literature is replete with definitions and perspectives of market orientation (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010), the most frequently cited being the ones offered by Narver and Slater (1990) and Kohli and Jaworski (1990). According to the first two authors, “market orientation is the organization culture that most effectively and efficiently creates the necessary behaviors for the creation of superior value for buyers, and, thus, continuous superior performance for the business” (Narver and Slater, 1990: 21). The authors believe that this concept consists of three behavioral components – customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination, and two decision criteria – long-term focus and profitability. Kohli and Jaworski (1990) adopt an information-processing perspective (Ross, Grace and Shao, 2012), and argue that “market orientation is the organization-wide generation of marketing intelligence pertaining to current and future customer needs, dissemination of the intelligence across departments, and organization-wide responsiveness to it” (Kohli and Jaworski, 1990: 6).

These original attitudes towards market orientation went on to be integrated within the literature, giving shape to two different, but at the same time complementary perspectives of the concept. As shown by Avlonitis and Gounaris (1999), and Flavián and Lozano (2006), market orientation is defined on one hand from a philosophical point of view, as an organization’s “attitude”, and on the other hand, as a specific “behavior” of the organization. The complementary nature of these two perspectives comes from understanding that unless an institution has developed a certain attitude, the strategies intended to maximize its adaptation to the market cannot be designed. Also, the strategies designed to increase the degree of the institution’s adaptation to the market cannot be implemented, unless the preoccupation to do so is appreciated (Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1999: 1006). Therefore, the market orientation of a higher education institution is presented as a convergence of marketing and strategic management thinking (Binsardi and

Ekwulugo, 2003). It is a process that implies the analysis of external influences (competitors), generation of relevant information, coordination of the activity of all departments, but also the construction of a strategic answer to market opportunities, all with the intent of satisfying customers through continuous needs-assessment (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2007).

In conformity with the principles of marketing, market orientation emphasizes customers' interests, and therefore, aims at directing all the institution's activities towards meeting customers' needs (Voon, 2008; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010; Webster, Hammond and Rothwell, 2010), with the purpose of obtaining a competitive advantage, while also measuring the degree to which all this is being accomplished within the institution. However, there is more to market orientation than just customer orientation (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2007). It is grounded upon other specific components, as reflected in the original definitions of the concept.

Based on the arguments developed by Narver and Slater (1990), Modi and Mishra (2010) examined market orientation in the nonprofit sector and defined the concept as "the coordinated outward focus of an organization on its key stakeholders" (Modi and Mishra, 2010: 553), thus suggesting the need to expand an organization's actions towards other participants in the marketplace. According to the authors, the concept is grounded upon four equally important components, derived from the ones initially suggested by Narver and Slater (1990): beneficiary orientation, donor orientation, peer orientation and inter-functional coordination. Following this idea and focusing on higher education, Rivera-Camino and Molero Ayala (2010) show the need for a distinctive definition of this concept in the education sector, and focus on the employees' perspective. The authors consider market orientation to be "a competitive strategy or an organizational model, which is maintained by the recurring behavior of workers or routines" (Rivera-Camino and Molero Ayala, 2010: 127). Moreover, they expand the range of market orientation to include the following six components: student orientation, worker orientation, competitor orientation, company-donor orientation, environment orientation, and inter-functional coordination. Also considering higher education, Voon (2008) adopts a services perspective and offers a comprehensive definition of market orientation. Labeled "service-driven market orientation", it is defined as "the set of beliefs, behaviors, and cross-functional processes that seriously focuses on continuous and comprehensive understanding, disseminating, as well as satisfying the current and future needs of the target customers for service excellence" (Voon, 2008: 219).

Research on market orientation applied to higher education generally starts with the three components initially described by Narver and Slater (1990) – customer orientation, competition orientation and, respectively, inter-functional coordination. Some of the identified studies consider solely the above-mentioned components (Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2007; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010; Ross, Grace and Shao, 2012), while others seek to expand the domain of market orientation, to also include long-term orientation, performance orientation (Voon, 2008) and employee orientation (Siu and Wilson, 2008; Voon, 2008). While there is no general agreement throughout the literature about a single definition of market orientation or its usefulness and reliability (Rivera-Camino and Molero Ayala, 2010; Ross, Grace and Shao, 2012), studies overall admit that adopting a market orientation can offer a number of benefits for a higher education institution, and seek

to determine specific benefits, their antecedents or the existent link between the measured degree of market orientation and the possibility of achieving a competitive advantage.

3.1 Benefits of Implementing a Market Orientation

One of the most important benefits that comes with embracing a market orientation in higher education institutions is actually the one most emphasized by both Narver and Slater (1990) and Kohli, Jaworski and Kumar (1993), and that is increased performance for the institution. Studies by Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing (1998a, 1998b) and Hammond, Webster and Harmon (2006) show that a university's performance is indeed impacted by the degree of market orientation implemented within the institution. Their studies also reveal that applying the concept is, to a large extent, contingent on universities' management (Hammond, Webster and Harmon, 2006), but also that a higher degree of market orientation is positively correlated with the institution's ability to obtain non-government funding (Caruana, Ramaseshan and Ewing, 1998a,b).

Webster, Harmon and Rothwell (2010) suggest other significant benefits that could follow the implementation of a market orientation, by focusing the institution's marketing efforts towards students or potential employers. Among these improvement opportunities, they mention a potential increase in the enrollment within the institution, an increase in the retention rate of current students, an increase in future involvement from the alumni or establishing more partnerships with the business community. Concentrating on academics, Flavián and Lozano (2007) further show that market orientation can have a positive impact on teaching and research activities, and also on university extension activities – dissemination of knowledge and culture. A higher degree of market orientation has also been linked to customer-perceived service quality, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Voon, 2008).

However, higher education institutions still show relatively low levels of market orientation and low levels of management emphasis on market orientation (Hammond, Webster and Harmon, 2006). Siu and Wilson (1998) argue for the important role that university management plays in creating a marketing organizational culture, and support a greater and more active involvement in implementing a market orientation. Higher education institutions should take advantage and fully embrace market orientation, as they could be presented with significant opportunities to improve their activity and increase their performance.

3.2 Measuring Market Orientation in Higher Education Institutions

In the following, we seek to provide higher education institutions and their management with ways in which they can assess the existent degree of market orientation, as presented throughout the literature. By evaluating their current position, and knowing where they stand, they can take measures to improve specific components, and gain advantages in certain directions.

Research reviewed in this paper measures market orientation using the MKTOR (Narver and Slater, 1990) and MARKOR (Kohli, Jaworski and Kumar, 1993) scales, which are based on the components of market orientation identified by the authors. Correspondingly, MKTOR applies customer orientation, competitor orientation and inter-functional coordination, and MKTOR encloses information generation,

information dissemination and organizational responsiveness. Voon (2008) suggests a service perspective on the concept, and develops the SERVMO scale, to measure market orientation within higher education institutions. He builds his instrument on six components that define market orientation, respectively customer orientation, competitor orientation, inter-functional coordination, performance orientation, long-term orientation and employee orientation. Furthermore, the author strongly emphasizes the importance of considering other dimensions of the concept than just customer orientation, arguing for the important function of competitor and employee orientation within institutions. Ross, Grace and Shao (2012) support the idea that customer orientation does not always appear to be the most significant component of market orientation. Focusing on international recruitment departments, the authors note that their performance is mostly influenced by inter-functional orientation, which could significantly enhance the outcomes, if implemented properly.

4. Discussion and Future Research

The purpose of this paper was to highlight the importance of market orientation for educational institutions, by reviewing the most relevant literature in the field, and also to make a contribution to the marketing literature in Romania, by bringing forward the concept of market orientation applied to higher education, and pointing out a number of potential future research areas.

While research on market orientation applied to higher education in Romania is still developing, the international studies reviewed thus far show significant opportunities for educational institutions to improve their activity and performance by embracing this concept. Throughout this paper, the authors have shown that great benefits could be obtained by incorporating and implementing a market orientation in the university setting, and therefore argue for a greater attention paid to this concept. Higher education managers must accept that this can indeed turn out to be a time-consuming process (Siu and Wilson, 1998), and be open to dedicate their time and allocate resources in this direction. Identifying their publics' needs is a significant first step for any higher education institution, followed by precise measures and actions that will lead to satisfying the identified needs. Meeting students' expectations, together with a student-centered approach can become part of the institutional mission (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2010), while communicating the institution's identity, its purpose and priorities to all stakeholders. The final objective should be the implementation of a marketing organizational culture within the institution, through engaged employees, through carefully analyzing environmental trends, and implementing coherent strategies, based on the fundamental principles of marketing. Considering the great impact and potential benefits that a market orientation could offer to higher education institutions, we argue for a better understanding of the concept in this sector. Future studies could focus on establishing the dominant components of market orientation or identifying new dimensions of the concept and their antecedents. We support the authors who looked beyond customer orientation as the major component of market orientation, and agree that in order to be completely market oriented, it is imperative to examine the entire educational marketplace. In this sense, we agree with Akonkwa (2009) who suggests operationalizing the "stakeholder orientation" concept, in place of customer orientation.

Furthermore, given that market orientation is closely linked to institutional performance and strategy, being considered “the heart of modern marketing management and strategy” (Narver and Slater, 1990: 20), we believe it could be useful to analyze the relationships between these concepts, and how they influence one another. Research could focus on what components of market orientation most influence institutional performance or the implementation of strategy, and ultimately develop a model for a better understanding of these relationships.

There are many other topics that could be explored in connection to market orientation, including the internal environment, service quality matters, funding issues, competition etc. Each of these topics could add great value to both higher education theory and practice, and therefore, they should not be disregarded by future studies.

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