THE IMAGE OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION, ITS STRUCTURE AND HIERARCHICAL LEVEL: THE CASE OF THE VILNIUS UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF ECONOMICS

Olga Mackelo, Greta Drūteikienė*

Vilnius University, Lithuania

Abstract. *The aim of higher education institutions has been recently broadening, which in turn fostered the competitiveness in attracting students, teachers and financing. Unmistakably, higher education institutions are able to attain these goals only via constant improvement of study quality. Nevertheless, the swelling scale of competition at the country's and international levels in the higher education sector highlights the image of a higher education institution as another considerable factor.*

This article presents a specified concept of the image of an organization. This concept is specified while considering the peculiarities of higher education institutions; based on it, the conception of a higher education institution's image is characterized, its main typologies are distinguished, a structural model and hierarchical levels are presented. The theoretical premises are supported by a student survey of the Faculty of Economics of Vilnius University, one of the most prestigious higher education institutions in Lithuania.

Keywords: *higher education institution, image, image structure*

Introduction

Science is valued as one of the major development-fostering factors of social and economic processes in today's knowledge society. The scientific-technical process, development of information technologies and their penetration into daily life demand complex decisions and command over a broader, higher-level knowledge from the members of society. The process of globalization augments these pressures on the national and international scale. Positive image in such conditions harvests an exceptional role in an education institution; it guarantees its survival, long-term success and stability. Nevertheless, the relatively new and unsettled concept of image, different approach to and interpretation of image in scientific literature and education peculiarities lead to considerable misunderstandings which in turn complicate the perception of the image of a higher education institution.

* Correcponding author.
  Faculty of Economics, Vilnius University, Saulėtekio Ave., LT-10223 Vilnius, Lithuania;
  e-mail: greta.druteikiene@ef.vu.lt

The aim of this article is to define the concept of the image of a higher education institution, to present its structural model and hierarchical levels, as well as the results of the performed empirical analysis.

The concept of the image of a higher education institution

The image of a higher education institution is not a prime subject in the scientific research, even though the general concept of image is widely analyzed, especially the image of organizations. Nevertheless, the academic institution is an organization that operates on the basis of education in respect to the sixth amendment of the higher education law of the Republic of Lithuania. Its second clause states: "... organizes studies, develops qualifications, which might be obtained after earning the higher education, carries out scientific research and (or) applies the results of scientific research, accumulates scientific knowledge, develops creative activities and culture, upholds the traditions of academic culture". Therefore, the image of a higher education institution in theory is the concept of the organization's image modified according to the specific features applicable to a higher education institution.

The direct translation of the term "image" can be a picture, view, reflection, likeness, figure. Nevertheless, from the scientific standpoint, the concept of image is derived from the Latin "imago" composed from "imitari" (*imitate*) and "aemulor" (*strive*) (Druteikiene, 2007).

Image can be characterized on the basis of three categories: 1) *image prototype*: image formation of a person, thing or action; 2) *image subject*: an individual or a group, which form a specific image in the eyes of the influence group; and 3) *image object:* an individual or a group in whose eyes the subjects form a specific image (Панасюк, 2008).

Commonly, image is described as an attitude regarding a specific object created in the mind of an individual or a group, based on all visually and verbally received information (Baker, 2001).

A broader explanation of image describes it as a "summation of ideas, feelings, comprehension and imagination of an organization from the perspective of an individual or a group, which is influenced by material and immaterial organizational elements, communication, personal and social values" (Druteikiene, 2007).

Certain categories, such as prototype, object and subject, can be specified while analysing the image of a higher education institution. An education institution, in the first case, is perceived ambivalently as an ideological and economic unit (Druteikiene et al., 2007). Such organizations are often performing on the economic basis, however, forming their image on ideological positions. Another significant feature is the multiple aspects of a higher education institution, which provide the ground for the formation of different images depending on the study programmes offered by a university, the size of its libraries, technical possibilities, sport programmes, scientific characteristics of the

faculties, personnel, opinions and evaluations presented in the media, etc. Each aspect of a higher education institution could be perceived as a separate image; their summation would constitute an overall image of a university. These components might be contradicting, and their weight might differ over time due to the changing environment (Arpan et al., 2003).

The objects of a higher education institution image are individuals or their groups in one way or another related to it. The interest groups of higher education institutions encompass the entire society as a direct or indirect consumer, since higher education is perceived as the foundation of the cultural and economic development in society. Nonetheless, we distinguish the main influence groups affected directly, such as potential and present students, their parents, personnel, scientists and scientific research institutions, partners, competitors, high schools, governmental institutions, business organizations and media (Dirks, 1998; Druteikiene et al., 2007; Stravinskiene, Zailskaite, 2008).

The subjects of the higher education institution image are the institution itself and the image "creators", usually represented by the interest groups. Image is usually created as a result of the interplay between two elements, as an integration of the information presented by the organization and the selected communication instruments. The important moment in this case is that a particular education institution is an integrated part of the higher education system, and its image is not absolute but related to the images of other higher education institutions (Druteikiene et al., 2007). Therefore, the entire higher education system could be considered as the image subject of a higher education institution.

Therefore, the concept of a higher education institution's image can be described as a combination of integrated images of the institution's components, each forming interpretations and a basis for emotional valuation based on received information as regards the object, while having direct or indirect relation to the higher education institution, its environment or higher education system.

The problem of image is not limited to the multiplicity of its concept. Commonly, in publications image is presented as a synonym of identity and reputation. These categories are close, but they are not equal.

The chosen and advocated operational philosophy is a major determining factor of organizational behaviour and chosen visual attributes. The concept of identity is composed of the symbolism, vision, mission, strategy and communication of the company. It denotes the specific features, which distinguish a particular organization from the others, describes its activities, production and services, value creation mechanism in the market (Roberts, 1998). The identity of an organization is the totality of the visual symbolism presented by the organization itself to be distinguished from others by society (Baker, 2001). One of the identity components of a higher education institution is reliability,

which reflects the conformity between what the organization proclaims of itself and de facto (Arpan et al., 2003). Influence groups form their image of the institution in respect to the information of this kind.

Reputation is a derived category of image, which is explained as a sum of values rendered on the organization by the influence groups in respect to its transmitted valuation and interpretation (Orzekauskas, Smaiziene, 2007). Several fundamental differences between these concepts are emphasized. First of all, it is their wide scope. Image encompasses valuation and content in regards of an organization, whereas reputation is a derived narrowing element with only the valuation dimension. The second difference between the concepts is their dynamism. Image is a short-term dimension, whereas reputation has a tendency to remain longer in the minds of individuals, thus ensuring their inclination during economic downturns.

A structural model of higher education institutions' image

Favourable image formation of a higher education institution depends on the clear understanding of what image is, as well as absorption of its structure. Scientists have created more than one structural model of this phenomenon (image) while taking into consideration the characteristics and types of organizational image. These models mostly depict various systemic image types based on the idea that the opinion on an organization arises from information about it, its activities, behaviour of the personnel, etc. Therefore, the image structure of the higher education institutions can be depicted using the organizational image structure; however, the peculiarities of academic activities and scientific system ought to be taken into account.

One of the models is Gee's (1998) image structure model. B. Gee in his theory (1998) presents four main structure levels of an image phenomenon: 1. Fundamental, which encompasses operational principles of the organization, philosophy, standards, strategies etc.; 2. Middle, related to various planning processes, work organization, assurance of personnel locality, favourable students' views of the university, provided services, teachers, etc. 3. External, which encompasses various elements (scientific research and achievements, ranking, type of the university (state or private) and its size, selection of study programmes) influencing the senses of an individual (smell, hearing, sight, emotions), management. 4. Immaterial, which is formed on the physical, emotional, cultural, educational and motivational levels affecting the object notion in respect to the institution.

I. Alyoshina (1998), differently from B. Gee (1998), presents her organizational image structure as a synthesis of opinions of different social groups about the organization. The author bases her theory on the premise that the perception of the same object can essentially differ depending on the psychological features, behaviour motives and cultural norms of an individual or a group. Therefore, the same organization might have several, often different, images. Consequently, the general image is perceived as a summation
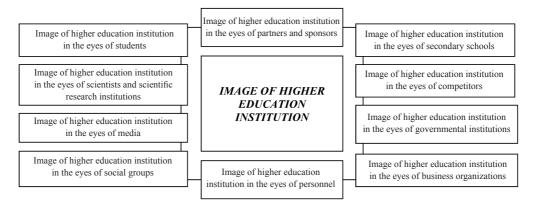
Image of higher education institution in the eyes of students	Image of higher education institution in the eyes of partners and sponsors	Image of higher education institution in the eyes of secondary schools

Image of higher education institution in the eyes of scientists and scientific research institutions	***IMAGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION***	Image of higher education institution in the eyes of competitors
Image of higher education institution in the eyes of media		Image of higher education institution in the eyes of governmental institutions
Image of higher education institution in the eyes of social groups	Image of higher education institution in the eyes of personnel	Image of higher education institution in the eyes of business organizations

FIG. 1. **Image model of higher education institutions as opinion synthesis of different social groups**

Source: modified Alyoshina's (1998) model.

of opinions of different interest groups. The premise of this scientist is highly important in the case of higher education institutions, since the activities of such organizations are highly dependent on social trust, the level of favourable valuation, prestige and reputation.

The main interest groups in this case encompass potential and present students, teaching, technical and administrative personnel, partners and sponsors, competitors, high schools; scientists and scientific research institutions, governmental institutions, business organizations, local and international social groups, media (Dirks, 1998; Druteikiene et al., 2007; Stravinskiene, Zailskaite, 2008).

Palacio et al. (2002) present the image structure of a higher education institution as a compendium of an institution's characteristics, which affects the emotional state of the influence groups. In this case, the general image is a result of a synthesis of cognitive and affective images. According to this researcher, the cognitive image consists of the conditions, courses, atmosphere, admission possibility, price, teaching staff, quality of education, student preparation level, practical and theoretical perspective, requirement level, orientation to students, distance of communication, distance between university and society, distance between university and business, the number of students, popularity, elite, traditions, innovativeness, prestige, style and reputation, whereas the affective image is based on the totality of emotions in respect to cognitive image elements. The affective image can be described as pleasant–unpleasant, boring–motivating, tense–free, gloomy–fun. This kind of presentation of an institution's image allows evaluating the satisfaction of direct consumers (students).

M. Tomilova (1998) offers one of the most detailed organizational image models. It is a complex system of different organization's evaluations based on its content. Considering the results of the research on the image of higher education institutions (Arpan et

al., 2003; Palacio et al., 2002; Kazoleas et al., 2001), the model presented by M. Tomilova (1998) is modified as hierarchical levels composed of separate organizational image models and a summation of elements typical of an academic institution.

Each hierarchical level affects the higher level next to it: the affecting factors determine the characteristics of particular components which determine the overall image of an organization. The core of the structural image model of a higher academic institution comprises nine components (Mackelo, 2009; Томилова, 1998):

academic service image as the basis of a higher academic institution. It encompasses the opinions of individuals regarding the perceived unique characteristics of this service. Such characteristics might include the images and demand for the offered study programmes and specializations, availability of exclusive study programmes, the quality of studies and scientific conditions, price, recognition and prestige of diplomas and research degrees;

student image, which acts as a connection between an academic institution and society. This category includes such elements as the style of the student life, social status, social and (or) political activeness, psychological characteristics, homogeneity of students as a social group; the overall level of education and a high professional level;

teachers' image as a connection between an academic institution and students, since teachers are the main actors in the process of creating academic service. This image is determined on the basis of teachers' competences, professionalism, communication skills, attentiveness, as well as physical, psychological, social-demographic, cultural and visual characteristics;

the image of governing bodies organizes the activities of an academic institution and their development strategies. The work, intentions, values and abilities of the university Board, Senate and administration members are valuated while taking into account their verbal and nonverbal communication peculiarities, social status, appearance and psychological characteristics;

internal image is analyzed as an opinion of the personnel and students regarding a higher academic institution, which is based on organizational culture and social-psychological climate. Internal image is a system of predominant attitudes and valuations, relations between teachers and students, administration and students, among personnel and among students;

visual image encompasses the valuation and comprehension of a higher education institution via visual components. The sources of information for this image are the title of the university, its emblem, anthem, flag, history, traditions, rituals, logotype, slogan, geographical location, its interior and exterior of buildings, visual characteristics of the personnel and students. This component of the overall image is highly influenced by the personal aesthetical taste, psychological and ethnic differences. It is also affected by such social phenomenon as fashion;

business image includes activity valuations of an academic institution as an economic subject. Such elements as the type and size of a university, achievements of separate faculties, admission grade, reputation, prestige, competitiveness, famous graduates, recognized scientists as staff members, performed scientific research, etc. are included in this component;

the image of a higher education as an external environment element of the academic institution, the general evaluation of the higher education system;

social image is presented as the peception of a higher academic institution, its economic, cultural and social role in society by society and various social groups. This category includes sport and artistic activities of an academic institution, since they present the organization as socially mature and active.

The above structural models of the image of higher academic institutions are rather diverse; however, they have a common reference. The further development of an academic institution, based on the image structural models, might become the formula of success. However, the choice of a particular model must reflect the present relation, social view, predominant trends, a possible connection to the private sector (business), etc. The importance of the component structure varies depending on the situation, cultural, political, economic business environment.

The image of the Vilnius University Faculty of Economics

Questionnaire is one of the most popular research methods (Druteikiene et al., 2007; Druteikiene et al., 2009; Miskinis et al., 2007; Nguen, LeBlanc, 2001). Therefore, the authors of this article have chosen a group questionnaire as a research method. The questionnaire comprised 59 questions; 54 of them were closed-ended and five open ended questions.

The research was carried out under the assumption that surveying the entire population was not cost-effective. Therefore, data in this research were obtained by the sampling method. The sample size calculator offered by the Creative Research System (www.surveysystem.com) was used to determine the right sample size needed for the study. The needed sample represented 255 students for the population of 6017 students of the Vilnius University Faculty of Economics with the confidence level of 5%.

Nevertheless, the assumption that the analyzed values might be perceived differently depending on the student's experiences, level of studies (bachelor, master, doctoral), mode of studies (full-time, part-time) and year of studies was taken into account. Therefore, the division of the sludy population into the mentioned groups was necessary; the nest sampling method was selected, which assured a good representation, reliability and objectiveness of the data.

Based on the selected sampling principle, students of the Vilnius University Faculty of Economics were divided into groups according to three main features: level of studies,

mode of studies, year of studies. Students were separated into 18 study groups since the University offers two main levels of studies (bachelor and master), which are divided into three modes of studies (full-time, part-time and part-time extramural), and studies can last up to five years. Each year students are further separated into academic groups. Data were collected from one academic group per year of studies, which was selected randomly.

The study was performed during the period 2008.12.01–2009.03.25; 365 questionnaires were distributes and 352 responses received, with 336 questionnaires correctly filled.

The authors of the article faced several difficulties while carrying out the survey. First of all, direct respondents (students), as well as indirect individuals (teachers) involved into the process of surveying (questionnaires were distributed during the lectures) expressed resistance and unwillingness to communicate with researchers. In addition, part of the surveys were not returned or filled incorrectly. A number of respondents did not answer open-ended questions or did not coherently reason their opinion.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using SPSS 16.0 statistical package for Windows (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). This research was carried out using descriptive statistical indices (mean values, standard deviation, frequencies, statistical significance, correlation coefficients, diagrams). Content analysis was used as an additional research method.

The image of the Vilnius University

The image of the Vilnius University is frequently selected as a research object. Scientists from this institution formed a research group in the year 2005 and performed four major studies on the image and quality of studies at the level of the University and separate faculties, including the Faculty of Economics. In the course of separate studies, scientists have found that the image of the Vilnius University in society is perceived more positively than among students. Furthermore, the declining satisfaction with studies was recorded after the first semester. The determined main image-forming factors were the qualification and professional experience of the academic staff; nevertheless, previous studies highlight the importance of information in the media, the quality of studies, the content of study programmes, and the students.

These surveys allow identifying four problematic zones (Miskinis et al., 2008):

- information and communication at the Vilnius University

Information reflects the internal communication quality of the organization and influences its internal image which determines the formation of the University image by society. Studies have shown that the introduction, information and promotion materials are valuated adversely. Information on the University activities, changes and other relevant questions received plenty of critics as well;

- the quality of studies at the Vilnius University

The quality improvement efforts and their results received an average grade from the Vilnius University students. After researching the students' judgement concerning their ability to participate in the process of improving the quality of studies, we have noted that criticism is mostly directed towards the ability of each individual student to officially state their opinion regarding the quality of teaching. On the other hand, the efforts to ensure the dialogue with students by the faculty leaders were evaluated quite positively. We could also note that before the research the prevailing presumption had been that the quality of teaching by older staff was higher compared to young teachers, but the research undoubtedly denied the presumption. Students do not give priority to older teachers, vice versa, they prefer younger teachers who are more professional. Most likely this choice is determined by the need to have a modern teaching content and innovative methods, which are limited at the moment;

- image and identification of the Vilnius University

The research showed that in the students' opinion the external image of Vilnius University is better than the external image in students' perception. This confirms the public opinion that the external image of Vilnius University is much better than its internal image.

Most favourably students evaluated the possibility to act on their own initiative, and most negatively was evaluated the possibility of joining the implementation of the University goals. A probable presumption is a weak expression of individuality in the University culture and the lack of psychological bounds between the organization and its members. On the other hand, the psychological ties of students with the faculties, expresses in the survey, are much stronger than the ones with the Vilnius University. This research has revealed that the qualification and professional experience of the teaching staff is an important factor in the University image and in its selection for studies over other universities. One third of the first-year students of the Vilnius University and one fifth of their parents demand additional public information regarding the qualification of the teaching staff in a particular faculty;

- gradual (through the years of studies) decrease in satisfaction with studies

After the first semester in the Vilnius University, a slight tendency of decreasing satisfaction becomes noticeable. Frequently freshmen provide the following sources of dissatisfaction: the organization of the teaching process (lack of books, heavy load, saltatory arrangement of classes); teaching, communication with teachers and administration; grading (occasional bias grading); personal stresses related to assignments and exams (fear, stress before assignments and exams; lack of time and fatigue; heavy load, tension, sleepless nights; several students stated health problems due to tension). A probable presumption is that support of a student is vital in the active adaptation period. Subsequently, it is necessary to indentify the qualitatively changing student's needs.

These surveys allowed identifying the main problematic zones; nevertheless, in order to determine the causes, a deeper insiqht is indispensable.

The image of the Vilnius University Faculty of Economics in the eyes of students

Furthermore, we should also take into account that perception and valuation are subjective, since commonly they are based on a predetermined position. Therefore, the authors of this article tried to analyze the anticipatory image of the faculty, the gap between those images and the affecting factors.

The research determined that the opinions of others affect the valuations of bachelor level students more than master level students; more than two thirds of bachelor students agreed with it. The master level students more often based their opinion on the study experience and information in the media. The valuations of full-time and part-time students were affected more often by others and the media, whereas part-time extramural students saw prestige and recognition as more important.

First, we analyzed the reasons why students chose to study at the Faculty of Economics. The results have shown that the main motives for choosing this faculty are the possibility of getting a good job after studies (33.6% of respondents) and a wish to obtain a wanted profession (26% of respondents); 25.6 % of all students have indicated that the advertized high quality of studies was the main factor of selecting this faculty. Nevertheless, we have discovered that the selection of studies and decision to study are rather strongly influenced by the surrounding people: 23.5% of all student respondents were encouraged to start studies by friends, parents, etc.

However, part of student respondents (10.1%) admitted studying only for the diploma. Such trend is derived from the perspective that the higher education diploma of any university and specialty secures better work opportunities, which in turn ensure a higher salary. Statistics confirms Lithuania having the highest number of students in the European Union. Every year, three fourths of high school graduates get admitted to the higher education institutions, and the numbers are growing each year; this in turn increases the number of unmotivated students. The higher education institution's valuations by these students can be perceived as conditional due to their perfunctory attitude towards the study process and its results. Nevertheless, among other selection criteria of a particular faculty, strive for knowledge, securing one's future, etc. were mentioned.

The preconceived image tends to change through the study process due to the reflection of personal experience on the valuation and the inside view of the process. The research results has shown that the preconceived image slumps down one level. Subsequently, the most common attitude of students from all categories towards the faculty is "more positive than negative" (42% of all respondents).

A comparison of the valuations by bachelor and master level respondents revealed a more positive valuation of the Faculty of Economics by master rather than by bachelor level students.

Analysis of the valuation of the Faculty of Economics image through the study modes of bachelor level students showed that the valuations by part-time extramural students were most positive and by part-time students most negative.

TABLE 1. **Valuation of the Faculty of Economics image by students in respect to the level and mode of studies**

Respondent group	Average of answers	Responses, %				
		Positive	Rather positive	Rather negative	Negative	No opinion
Bachelor level students	**3.85**	**30.0**	**35.2**	**25.3**	**9.1**	**0.4**
Full-time studies	3.58	15.2	46.8	19.0	19.0	0.0
Part-time studies	3.56	21.8	23.0	46.0	8.0	1.1
Part-time extramural studies	4.39	51.7	36.8	10.3	1.1	0.0
Master level students	**3.06**	**24.1**	**62.7**	**9.6**	**2.4**	**1.2**
Full-time studies	3.90	15.0	70.0	10.0	0.0	5.0
Part-time studies	4.27	27.8	72.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Part-time extramural studies	4.09	26.7	55.6	13.3	4.4	0.0

Source: Mackelo, 2009.

The master level students, through the perspective of the mode of study, showed a "rather positive" valuation from students of all three study modes. Nevertheless, as seen from Table 1, part-time extramural students, as compared to other groups, valuated the image of the faculty more negatively (the lowest average of the full-time students is explained through data discrepancies, since part of students only from this group did not have opinion on this question, and this answer was equal to the lowest ranking). The answers "rather negative" and "negative" among full-time students amount to 10.0%, among part-time students there are no such answers, and 17.7% of part-time extramural students selected the mentioned answers.

When comparing the valuations of bachelor and master level students, an interesting fact emerges: part-time extramural bachelor students show the most positive and part-time extramural master level students the most negative valuation of the faculty. A similar situation was observed with the part-time students.

The further analysis of the faculty image will include the differences of valuation as regards the year of studies. In the course of the research, we have noticed that the higher the course of the bachelor students, the lower the valuations are. For instance, 77% of first-year respondent students selected "positive" and "rather positive" valuations, and with each course this percentage decreased. Therefore, the least positive were the students in their last year of studies: their sum of "positive" and "rather positive" answers as compared with the first-year students decreased by 29.2%. The same trend was observed among full-time students and, to some extent, among master students.

Analysis of part-time bachelor students showed a "rather negative" trend regarding the faculty image independently of the year of studies. This answer was the most common. Nevertheless, contrary to the full-time students, no clear trend of valuations can be observed in different years of studies. Part-time first-year students gave the least positive valuations: the sum of "positive" and "rather positive" answers constituted only 35%. Second-year students were most positive, and the sum of their positive answers amounted to 52.5%.

There were no negative valuations among fist- and second-year master level part-time students. However, the tendency of decreasing positivity through the years of studies persisted. The positive valuation by second-year students compared with first-year students decreased by 11.1%.

The valuation analysis of part-time extramural bachelor students did not show trends of decreasing positivity with the years of studies. Fourth-year part-time extramural students were the most positive in respect of the image of the faculty: no negative answers were presented. Least positive were fifth-year part-time extramural student groups.

An interesting trend can be observed among part-time extramural master level students. Contrary to the full-time and part-time students, the faculty image valuations by part-time extramural students get more positive over the years of studies: 76.9% of first-year part-time extramural students gave "positive" and "rather positive" answers, whereas only 7.4% of second-year students responded in the same way.

The main factors determining the negative image of the faculty from the perspective of respondents were the irrelevant and obsolete subjects taught, out-of-date teaching material, programmes and methodology, teachers' unwillingness to communicate with students, lack of innovations. Nevertheless, teachers' competence and professionalism, the welcoming environment of the university, organization of studies and exams were evaluated positively.

Analysis revealed the negativity of non-working students as compared with working students. Besides, the weight of negative answers depended on the fact whether an individual had worked before or was working at the moment. Most positive were working students (30.9% of positive answers). The satisfaction of students who have worked before

and recently unemployed students was by 3.4% and 4.6% lower. Generally, the positive attitude of working and only recently unemployed students towards the faculty image could be explained by the assumption that if a student is not working he concentrates more on the process of studies and is more critical on it, whereas working students are more concentrated on their key activities. Nevertheless, work experience allows a better understanding of the theoretical material and its value in the working environment.

For a better understanding of students' attitude towards the Faculty of Economics, we tried to elucidate their image of the faculty through anticipated behaviour. In the course of the research, students were asked to answer the question: if there were a possibility to start their studies, would they choose to study at the Vilnius University Faculty of Economics again? The results have shown that 48.2% of students of the Faculty of Economics would not change their selection and 26.2% are most likely not to change their selection.

TABLE 2. **Students' attitude towards the Faculty of Economics expressed through their behaviour, %**

Respondent group	Would you choose studies at VU Faculty of Economics again?					Are you proud of being a VU Faculty of Economics student?				
	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No	Do not know	Yes	Rather yes	Rather no	No	Do not know
Overall valuation	**48.2**	**26.2**	**14.9**	**6.5**	**4.2**	**47.9**	**39.3**	**4.8**	**5.1**	**3.0**
Bachelor level students	**47.0**	**24.9**	**16.6**	**7.9**	**3.6**	**46.6**	**37.9**	**5.9**	**5.9**	**3.6**
Full-time studies	39.2	25.3	21.5	11.4	2.5	34.2	48.1	2.5	12.7	2.5
Part-time studies	33.3	28.7	21.8	10.3	5.7	39.1	41.4	12.6	5.7	1.1
Part-time extramural studies	67.8	20.7	6.9	2.3	2.3	65.5	25.3	2.3	4.6	2.3
Master level students	**51.8**	**30.1**	**9.6**	**2.4**	**6.0**	**51.8**	**43.4**	**1.2**	**2.4**	**1.2**
Full-time studies	55.0	25.0	15.0	0.0	5.0	65.0	35.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Part-time studies	50.0	27.8	5.6	0.0	16.7	44.4	55.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Part-time extramural studies	51.1	33.3	8.9	4.4	2.2	48.9	42.2	2.2	4.4	2.2

Source: Mackelo, 2009.

The assurance of a correct decision in choosing the Faculty of Economics for studying was the strongest among the part-time extramural bachelor level students (when

comparing all study modes): 67.8% of respondents from this group would chose to study at the Faculty of Economics again.

Another aspect of this research was the satisfaction with the Faculty of Economics student's status. The majority (87.2% , summing "yes" and "rather yes" answers) of all respondents were proud of being students of this faculty. The satisfaction was stronger among master level students.

Students were asked to compare the Faculty of Economics with other analogous institutions of Lithuania. The obtained data described the faculty as "one of the best" (52.7% of all respondents), and 12.2% of respondents regarded the faculty as the best among higher education institutions in Lithuania.

The majority of bachelor level students as compared to the master students, see the faculty as the best or one of the best (the difference 3.4% and 2.8%, respectively). The faculty is regarded as one of the best academic institutions by respondents of almost all modes of studies at the bachelor and master levels.

TABLE 3. **Student valuation of the Faculty of Economics in the context of other academic institutions, %**

Respondent group	The best	One of the best	Average	One of the worst	The worst	Do not know
Overall valuation	**12.2**	**52.7**	**27.1**	**2.1**	**0.3**	**5.7**
Bachelor level students	**13.0**	**53.4**	**26.1**	**2.8**	**0.4**	**4.3**
Full-time studies	12.7	49.4	30.4	3.8	1.3	2.5
Part-time studies	5.7	50.6	34.5	3.4	0.0	5.7
Part-time extramural studies	20.7	59.,8	13.8	1.1	0.0	4.6
Master level students	**9.6**	**50.6**	**30.1**	**0.0**	**0.0**	**9.6**
Full-time studies	20.0	45.0	25.0	0.0	0.0	10.0
Part-time studies	11.1	55.6	16.7	0.0	0.0	16.7
Part-time extramural studies	4.4	51.1	37.8	0.0	0.0	6.7

Source: Mackelo, 2009.

Analysis of scientific literature has revealed that some researchers while analyzing image often state a correlation among an organization and certain human characteristics. Therefore, in the course of the research students were asked to associate the faculty with certain characteristics in order to indentify the emotional image of the faculty. The respondents were presented with bipolar pairs of adjectives for evaluation, which were formed on the basis of the semantic differential method (rating scale from -3 to +3): prestigious–low-status, elite–ordinary, accessible–inaccessible, active–passive, friendly–unfriendly, attractive–unattractive, simple–complex, innovation-oriented–conservative,

interesting–boring, fun–gloomy, consistent–contradictory, dynamic –stabile, strong–week, pleasant–repulsing, reliable–unreliable. The profile of the semantic differential was calculated using the weighted means of these concepts.

The results of the survey showed that the strongest associations bachelor students have with respect to the Faculty of Economics are the following adjectives: prestigious (2.0 points), friendly (1.5 points), attractive (1.4 points), active (1.3 points), elite (1.2 points) and dynamic (1.1 points). Master-level students see the faculty as prestigious (1.8 points), accessible (1.5 points), attractive (1.5 points), reliable (1.4 points) and active (1.2 points). Practically, the bachelor and master level students' perceptions of the faculty coincide. The greatest differences are evident only as regards a few associations. Bachelor students see the faculty as more elite and consistent, while master-level students see it more as pleasant and reliable.

Full-time bachelor students perceive the Faculty of Economics as prestigious (1.8 points), friendly (1.2 points), active (1.1 points), less interesting (-0.1 points) and innovation-oriented (-0.2 points). The valuation of part-time students is similar. They distinguish such characteristics as prestigious (2.1 points), friendly (1.5 points), attractive (1.3 points) and also point out that the faculty is not interesting (-0.2 points) or innovation-oriented (-0.2 points). Bachelor-level part-time extramural students describe the faculty as prestigious (2.1 points), attractive (2.0 points) and friendly (1.8 points); they also note such characteristics as reliable (1.7 points), elite (1.5 points) and innovation-oriented (1.4 points).

The associations of master students, independently of the study mode, are very similar. They distinguish the same characteristics, with slight differences in valuations, and describe the Faculty of Economics as prestigious, accessible, attractive and reliable. Also, full-time students perceive the faculty as less fun (-0.2 point), and part-time students as less interesting (-0.2 point).

Conclusions

The relative novelty of image research, unclear concepts and sometimes different approach to it in scientific literature complicate the perception of a higher education institution's image. Most publications see this category as a multilevel process with the versatile and deep analysis of the market, social culture, psychological features of the interest groups, their sympathies and repulsions. Despite the existing conflict, image is perceived as a fundamental attribute of an academic institution in creating favourable conditions for its performance and development.

Results of the Vilnius University Faculty of Economics research confirm the basic trends discovered by the studies; for instance, the image of the faculty was valuated most favourably before starting the studies, when perspective students are not yet part of the internal interest group of the faculty. Their opinion deteriorates after admission and through the years of studies until graduation.

The positive preconceived attitude towards the Faculty of Economics, according to students' answers, is based on some essential factors, opinions and recommendations of friends, co-workers, parents, teachers, etc.; high admission requirements; information in the media; the overall image of the university, reputation, history; social recognition, high diploma recognition among employers.

The respondents valuate the Faculty of Economics quite positively; most of the surveyed characteristics were described positively. The valuation dispersion among student groups (bachelor and master level students, full-time, part-time and part-time extramural study modes) is trivial, the differences in valuations between characteristics reach only up to one point. Nevertheless, part-time extramural bachelor students have the most favourable image of the Vilnius University Faculty of Economics. This trend was discovered after analyzing all the valuation aspects of the faculty. This might be due to the fact that part-time extramural students, in comparison with other students, have the least contact with the academic institution. However, most of them are working and have a possibility to adapt the obtained information and immediately evaluate the quality of the service obtained from the Faculty of Economics.

REFERENCES

Arpan, L. M., Raney, A., Zivnushka, S. (2003). A cognitive approach to understanding university image. Corporate Communication: an International Journal, Vol. 8, No.2, pp. 97–113.

Baker, J. M. (2001). Marketing: critical perspectives on business and management, Vol. VI. London and New York: Routledge, 488 p.

Creative Research Systems. http://www.surveysystem.com

Gee, B. (1998). Creating a Million Dollar Image for Your Business. New York: PageMill Press, p. 220.

Dirks, A. L. (1998). Higher Education in Marketing Theory. http://webhost.bridgew.edu/adirks/ ald/papers/mktheor.htm

Drūteikienė, G., Gudonienė, V., Marčinskas, A. (2007). Aukštojo mokslo institucijų įvaizdis: šališki veiksniai. Informacijos mokslai, T. 40, p. 25–38.

Drūteikienė, G. (2007). Organizacijos įvaizdžio valdymas. Vilnius: VU leidykla, p. 99.

Drūteikienė, G., Marčinskas, A., Miškinis, A., Galinienė, B. (2009). The impact of study quality on the image of a higher education institution. Informacijos mokslai, T. 48, pp. 68–81.

Kazoleas D., Kim Y., Moffit M. A. (2001). Institutional image: a case study. Corporate Communications: an International Journal, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 205–216.

Mackelo, O. (2009). Studijų kokybės suvokimas: dėstytojų įvaizdis studentų perspektyvoje. Vilnius: VU, p. 98.

Miškinis, A., Galinienė, B., Marčinskas, A. (2007). Meeting student's expectations at Vilnius University. The 29th Annual EAIR Forum: Proceedings. Innsbruck, pp. 1–8.

Miškinis, A., Galinienė, B., Marčinskas, A., Drūteikienė, G. (2008). Education quality and university image. The 30th Annual EAIR Forum: Proceedings. Copenhagen, pp. 1–10.

Nguen, N., Leblanc, G. (2001). Image and reputation of higher education institutions in student's retentions decisions. International Journal of Educational Management, Vol. 15, pp. 303–311.

Oržekauskas, P., Šmaižienė, I. (2007). Public image and reputation management: retrospective and actualities. Viešoji politika ir administravimas, Nr. 19, pp. 90–97.

Palacio, A. B., Meneses, G. D., Perez Perez, P. J. (2002). The configuration of the university image and its relationship with the satisfaction of students. Journal of Education and Administration, Vol. 40, No. 5, pp. 486–505.

Roberts, J. K. (1998). Managing corporate image in a dynamic environment. Corporate Reputation Review, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp. 386–392.

Stravinskienė, J., Zailskaitė, J. (2008). Universitetinių aukštųjų mokyklų ryšiai su visuomene: sampratos raida ir ypatybės. Organizacijų vadyba: sisteminiai tyrimai, T. 47, p. 142–157.

Алёшина, И. (1998). Корпоративный имидж: стратегический аспект. Маркетинг в России и за рубежом, No. 1. http://www.cfin.ru/press/marketing/1998-1/04.shtml

Панасюк, А. (2008). Формирование имиджа: стратегия, психотехнологии, психотехники. Москва: Омега-Л, 266 с.

Томилова, М. (1998). Модель имиджа организации. Маркетинг в России и за рубежом, No.1. http://www.cfin.ru/press/marketing/1998-1/05.shtml