

CUSTOMER JOURNEY OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS IN CHOOSING INTERNATIONAL BACHELOR'S PROGRAMMES

Case: Lahti University of Applied Sciences Ltd

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ABSTRACT

Today, marketisation or market mechanisms are playing an increasingly important role in higher education. Many educational institutions have become autonomous and compete with each other for students, profits, and ranks. Students are treated as customers and their mobility is considered as a way of internationalization of higher education. As of 2017, Finland started introducing tuition fees in higher education to non-EU/EEA students. This change puts Finnish universities in the education market where they have to build a new strategy to attract international students. Since Vietnamese students are one of the largest groups among international students in Finland, this thesis attempts to provide an insight into Vietnamese students' decision journey for the case company – Lahti UAS Ltd.

The thesis is written using a deductive reasoning approach and uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative methods are used for measuring the results received from a survey and qualitative methods are applied in analysing the answers received from interviews. Moreover, the study is supported by both primary and secondary sources of data. The primary data were gathered from interviews with Vietnamese IBU18K students at Lahti UAS and from a survey that was distributed online to Vietnamese students. The secondary sources were collected from reliable literature, such as official books, peer-reviewed articles in journals or periodicals and conference proceedings.

The findings from the empirical research show that Vietnamese students enter the decision journey around the time they attend high school and university. They seek information about studying abroad on Google and social media, and highly trust information provided by friends and relatives that already studied abroad. Based on the findings, recommendations on potential marketing activities are provided to the case company.

Keywords: customer decision journey, Vietnamese students, international study programme, marketisation of higher education, student as customer

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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter brings the reader into the whole picture of this thesis. Therefore, they can get familiar with the thesis background, its research questions, objectives, and possible limitations. The main theories used in this study are presented in the theoretical framework. After that, the research methods and data collection methods are explained. Finally, this chapter ends with the structure of this thesis.

1.1 Research Background

According to statistics from the Vietnam Foreign Training Department (MOET), in 2015, Vietnam has about 120,000 overseas students that account for 5% of the total number of Vietnamese students and 90% of them are self-sufficient (Hà 2016). At the cost of each student abroad at about \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year, the state and parents spend more than \$3 billion annually to cover the costs of studying abroad (HTVC 2017). However, regardless of the high cost, Vietnamese are investing more and more in the future of their children's education, letting their children study abroad so they can experience the international educational environment. In only 10 years from 2005 to 2015, the number of Vietnamese overseas students has seen a dramatic, ten-fold increase. (HTVC 2017.)

As Finnish universities provide various degree programs in English, Finland is a favorable destination for Vietnamese students when considering their study abroad. The number of degree students from Vietnam in Finland has significantly increased over the past few years. In 2015, there were 1913 Vietnamese students which makes them the second biggest group of international students in Finland (CIMO 2016). Most Vietnamese students are studying IT and business administration. Therefore, Vietnamese students are an ideal target group for the case company – Lahti University of Applied Sciences Ltd. Besides degree's programmes in Finnish, the case company offers a wide variety of both Bachelor's and Master's degree programs in English. Business Information Technology, International Business, and Nursing are offered in English for

Bachelor's Degree Programmes. The Master's Degree Programmes in English covers Environmental Technology, Urban Sustainability and, International Business Development (LAMK 2018). In order to provide the case company an accurate and detailed study in a limited time frame and resources, the thesis will concentrate only on the English Bachelor's Degree in International Businesses program. This focus will help to deliver a thorough understanding of how Vietnamese students choose their international bachelor program in International Business.

From 2015, the new Act on University of Applied Sciences (UAS) is applied by the Finnish Government. This new Act let the UAS acquire financial and administrative autonomy, therefore, they can enhance their own operation, adopt strategic business models and seek financial sources other than government subsidies (Turku AMK 2014). Following the flow of the education revolution, Lahti University of Applied Sciences has reformed itself by officially transforming to a legal person in the form of limited liability companies - Lahti University of Applied Sciences Ltd (hereafter Lahti UAS Ltd).

The Finnish parliament has passed a new regulation that imposes tuition fees from 1 August 2017 on non-European Union/European Economic Area (non-EU/EEA) students studying at higher education institutions in Finland (yle 2015). Higher education for non-EU/EEA students studying in Finland has started to be partially marketized and non-EU/EEA students have been considered as customers by the policy-makers and institutions. Universities, who do not traditionally consider education as service or a product has started creating their own student-as-customer approach.

The education market for Vietnamese students of Lahti UAS Ltd has changed significantly. First and foremost, free tuition for non-EU/EEA students no longer exists. Secondly, finance is one of the most important aspects considered by Vietnamese students when deciding to study abroad. Hence, it is necessary for the case company—Lahti UAS Ltd to build and implement a new marketing strategy to be able to better reach

their targeted customers and compete in a marketized higher education market.

Today, customer experience is the prominence of business strategy across industries worldwide. When thinking of customer experience, most companies think about touchpoints – any point of contact with customers. Only focusing on individual touchpoints will make companies miss the bigger and more important picture: the customer's end-to-end experience (Maechler, Neher & Park 2016, 132). The customer journey is comprehensively considered as an ideal starting point to understand business from the perspective of both the company and the customer. The author believes that shifting mindsets and the operation of Lahti UAS Ltd to a customer journey orientation is critical and transformational.

This study helps Lahti UAS Ltd to understand the initial phase of customer journey of Vietnamese students when they are aware of their needs in studying abroad and searching for information. Moreover, based on this research, Lahti UAS Ltd will find out how to better approach their target group and differ themselves from the competitors.

1.2 Thesis Objectives, Research Questions and Limitations

The thesis's purpose is to help the case company, Lahti UAS Ltd, to get better understandings of the customer journey of potential Vietnamese students. The focus will be how potential Vietnamese students approach international higher education. Vietnamese students have already studied English as a compulsory subject and that affects their future studies' plans abroad. Even though Vietnamese students are not a new target group of Lahti UAS Ltd, the fact that they will have to pay the tuition fees for their study in Finland changes the characteristics of this target group. Therefore, the findings of this research will help the case company with their new customer approach and marketing strategy.

From Lahti UAS' point of view, there are eight steps in the journey of international students. The first step is marketing and student recruitment

abroad and at home. The next step is applying to study at Lahti UAS. Next, international students go through the stage of selection and engaging. After that, students will get ready to move to Finland. The fifth step is arrival. The sixth step is integration to Lahti UAS and to Finland. The last two steps are practical training and employment, and graduation and replacement after graduation. (Viljanen 2018.) As its main purpose is to understand the decision journey of Vietnamese students in choosing overseas study, the thesis will focus only on the first two steps which are marketing and student recruitment abroad, and at home and applying to study at Lahti UAS.

Defining well-circumscribed research questions is very important at the beginning of the thesis process as the questions aim to bring the reader a better understanding of what the research is about and what the author wants to answer (Morrell & Carroll 2010, 54). In this thesis, the main research question is:

What are the most crucial criteria in the initial phases of decision-making journey of potential Vietnamese students when choosing a bachelor's degree program abroad?

It is usually not easy to provide a thorough answer for the main research question at once. For that reason, forming several sub-questions is an essential step to cover the whole area of the main research question (Thiel 2007, 107). Sub-questions of the research are presented below:

What attributes affect the target group in considering a bachelor's degree abroad?

Where does the targeted group search for information on an abroad bachelor's degree program?

What is good content for an abroad bachelor's degree program in an advertisement?

What attributes does the target group value the most in an abroad bachelor's degree programme in International Business?

The key role of customer journeys including multiple touch points is to help the case company hear the voice of its customers and to bring the marketer and the customer closer. Sub-questions in this research aim to find out where the case company should efficiently use their limited resources. Additionally, the attributes of the abroad bachelor's programmes and the Finnish study environment are under examination. A new marketing strategy needs this information so as to meet the demand of Vietnamese students.

No research can provide all the answers. All studies face limitations and it is the responsibility of the author to make the reader knowledgeable about these limitations. The awareness of the limitations avoids overstating the case when it comes to the recommendations and conclusion (Nicholas 2011, 214).

First of all, in order to provide a good view on the subject, the study only involves potential Vietnamese students and may not present credible information regarding other nationalities. As the targets of the case company are potential Vietnamese students, the results and suggestions for the case company – Lahti UAS Ltd may not be suitable for other institutions in the education industry whose customers do not fit this target group. The second limitation is that Lahti UAS study programmes, will not be fully described except for the international ones. Although marketing to Finnish and other foreign students is also needed, due to the time and resource restraints, the focus group is potential Vietnamese students. Moreover, growth in study abroad has increased vigorously recently and the findings of this research may therefore not be applicable after few years. However, this study contributes valid information to the case company and helps them to build a better marketing plan by having better understandings of the customer journey.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

The thesis helps Lahti UAS Ltd have a better approach to potential Vietnamese students by focusing on the customer journey of the target group. The research is based on education marketing theories, which will build a foundation and a deeper understanding of the topic. The theories are connected to the topic of the study and provide invaluable knowledge for the reader so that they are able to comprehend the whole topic and its background.

The theoretical framework is assembled from three chapters, and together all these chapters constitute a consistent foundation, which underlays the topic of the thesis.

The first theory chapter discusses the topic of the customer journey and customer behaviour. It explains the currently well-known Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Aristotle's Seven Causes of Human Action which provides guidance for mapping out and affecting the customer journey. The decision-making process of targeted customers is also included. The second theory chapter introduces the concept of marketing education and student-as-customer approach. The third theory chapter presents the characteristics of potential Vietnamese students and their connection to the various sources of information on higher education abroad.

1.4 Research Methodology and Data Collection

The first and foremost step to proceed a research procedure is to determine which research approach should be used to study the topic. Research approaches are designs and processes for research that extend the stages from comprehensive assumptions to detailed methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Creswell 2009, 257). Research approaches can be categorized into two basic types: deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning starts from one or more general statements also known as premises and comes to a specific conclusion through logical argument. Inductive reasoning begins with

specific observations or sensory experiences and then establishes a general conclusion from them (Walliman 2011, 214). As seen in Figure 1, the author will implement the deductive approach in this thesis.

The next pivotal step in the thesis process is to decide the research method that will be applied to collect, record and analyse the data. There are two types of research method and their output data are classified as quantitative and qualitative.

A quantitative method is an approach for testing objective theories by examining the relationship between variables. It is concerned with quantifying data by asking questions such as 'how many', 'how long' or 'the degree to which' and generalizing results from a sample of the population of interest. Researcher adopts various tools, most commonly surveys, to collect numerical data and conduct statistical analysis. (MacDonald 2011, 327.)

The qualitative method is concerned with a quality of information and seeks to acquire a knowledge of the fundamental reasons and incentives for actions and establish how people illustrate their experiences and the world around them. Qualitative methods bring understanding into the background of a question, developing ideas and hypotheses. They are broadly accompanied by the evaluation of social dimensions. Moreover, qualitative methods provide outcomes that are often rich and detailed, giving objectives and perceptions to inform the research. One downside of the qualitative methods is that they are not able to point out how many of the target population feel or think the way as quantitative methods are able to. (MacDonald 2011, 329.)

As the Figure 1 presents, the author uses both qualitative and quantitative research method for the study. The qualitative method fits the type of this research because this research is founded on data from few detailed interviews that approach the topic by few profound points of views. Additionally, a quantitative method is also implemented in order to be able

to answer the main question and sub-questions in this study by conducting a survey among a target segment.

After deciding the proper method for the study, it is time to begin collecting the data. Data collection is a very crucial step in implementing a research. The collected data empowers the research to be carried out and it assists the researcher in searching for information and developing an idea about the research topic. In this thesis, the primary data is collected from an online survey. The purpose of the survey is to learn which channels of information are the ones that potential Vietnamese students have the best access to and trust the most. The other source of primary data is interviews with some IBU18K Vietnamese students who have already studied at Lahti UAS and who consider about getting a higher education abroad. There are four interviews three of which were conducted via Skype and one interview was done via email. Interview questions are open-ended so that interviewees are able to answer freely. The secondary data which is another essential source of information for this study is gathered from articles, literature and from Internet-based sources.



FIGURE 1: Research Methods of this Thesis

To conclude, this research is carried out with a deductive approach and both quantitative and qualitative research methods are applied. Data is collected from primary and secondary sources as both literature and surveys are conducted as sources of the study.

1.5 Thesis Structure

The below figure demonstrates the thesis structure, and thereafter the synopsis of each chapter will be presented.

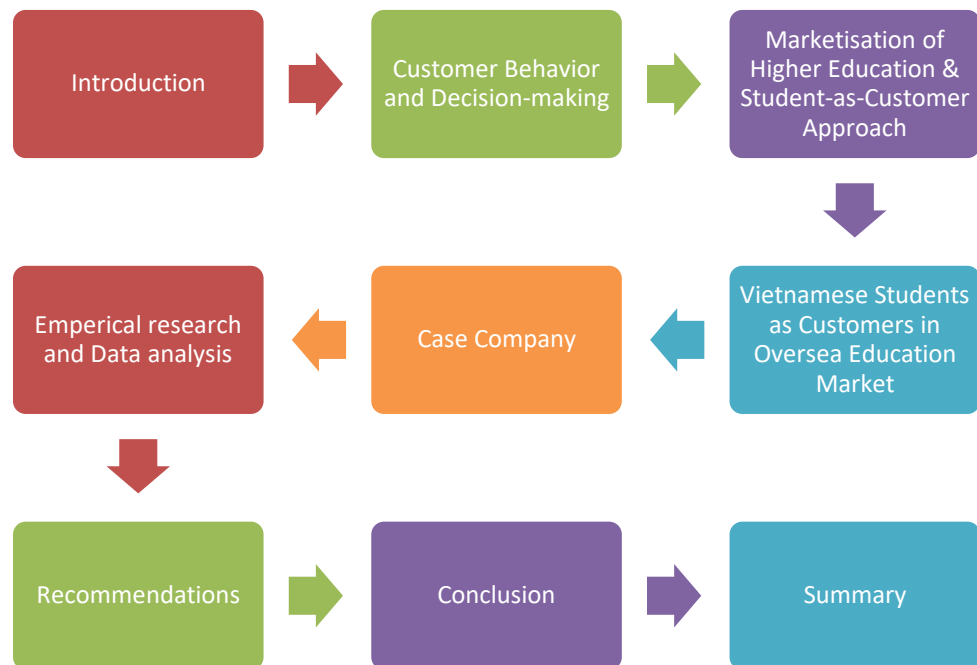


FIGURE 2: Thesis Structure

First, the thesis starts with an introduction chapter whose purpose is to help the reader understand the importance of the examined topic. Moreover, the introduction shows the background information, research objectives, question, and limitations. Then the pivotal theories, the research methods implemented in this study, the data collection methods are presented. Lastly, the introduction describes the whole structure of the thesis in detail.

From the second chapter, the thesis can be broken down into two main parts: the theoretical part and the empirical part. The theoretical part covers the vital theories for this study. The empirical part shows the results obtained from the interviews and then a marketing strategy for the Bachelor Degree Program at Lahti UAS will be built. The theory part consists of chapters two, three and four.

Chapter two starts the theory part with explaining the basics of consumer behaviour theory and then discussing the customer journey models. Chapter three introduces the concept of marketisation of higher education and student-as-customer approach. Chapter four explains the Vietnamese students as customer approach in the oversea education market.

Chapter five introduces the background, organizational structure and current marketing situation of the case company – Lahti UAS Ltd. Chapter six is the empirical research and data analysis. It includes the explanation of the research process and the data collection methodology and then the data is analysed. The next chapter interprets the findings of the empirical research and gives recommendations to the case company about potential marketing activities.

Chapter eight gives the conclusion of the thesis by answering all the sub-questions and the main research question. It also discusses the validity and reliability of the thesis and gives suggestions for further research. Chapter nine closes the thesis by summarising all the other chapters.

2 CUSTOMER BEHAVIOUR AND DECISION MAKING

Understanding customer behaviour is essential for productive marketing, assisting companies in identifying potential customers to target, and design and communicate appealing offerings. Every factor of the marketing strategy benefits from comprehending the customer, and with the fast speed of change in consumer markets nowadays this is only going to become more crucial (Priest, Carter & Statt 2013, 136). As Wilkie writes in his Consumer Behaviour book, consumer behaviour can be defined as “the mental, emotional and physical activities that people engage in when selecting, purchasing, using and disposing of products and services so as to satisfy needs and desires” (Wilkie 1994, 267).

2.1 Needs and Actions

In order to succeed, every company frequently has to find the answer to the question “What do my customers actually need? What prompts them to really take action and buy once a genuine or perceived need is identified?” That is why it is mission-critical to know the customer by understanding the basics of their needs and causes of their actions.

2.1.1 Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

The most fundamental concept of marketing is that of human needs. A need is defined as basic human requirements or a condition in which something is inevitable. (Kotler & Kevin 2012, 9-10.) People may have various needs that can be categorized into three main groups: physical, social, and individual needs. Physical needs are the needs for food, clothing, warmth, and safety. Social needs include belonging and affection. Lastly, individual needs consist of knowledge and self-expression. Marketers are not able to affect these needs because they are a basic part of the human makeup (Kotler & Amstrong 2012, 6). Therefore, studying human needs theories is an imminent psychological approach to customer-centric marketing.

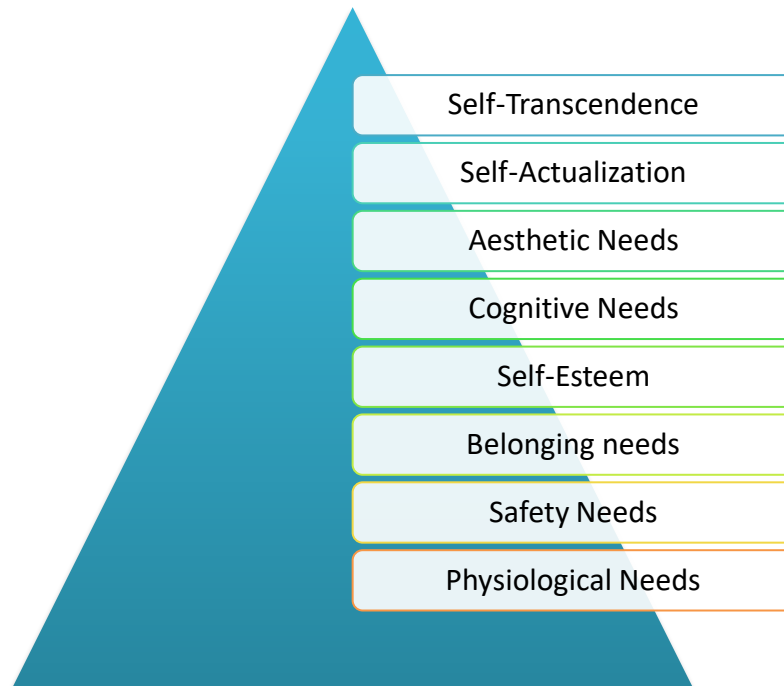


FIGURE 3: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Based on A Theory of Motivation (Maslow 1943) and subsequent additions by Maslow and Viktor Frankl

Abraham Maslow, a reputable American psychologist, introduced the Hierarchy of Needs which originally consisted of five stages: physiological needs, safety needs, community and belonging, esteem and self-actualization (Maslow 1943, 165). The most fundamental need of human is for physical survival such as oxygen, food, and water which are inevitable to maintain life. When the physiological needs are met, the focal point ordinarily moves to safety needs, which consists of health, family, financial security and so on. After that, an individual will concentrate on the need for love and belonging. These needs are typically related to family, romantic relationships and friendships. The fourth stage in the Hierarchy of Needs is self-esteem, containing self-confidence, acceptance from others, and personal achievement. Self-esteem needs are similar to the love and belonging needs in the way that they are very emotional and occur in both our conscious and subconscious minds. According to the original version,

self-actualization is placed at the top of the hierarchy. It is the capability of a person to meet their full potential and the essential factors of self-actualization may differ from person to person. (Kendra 2017, 74.)

Later in his life, Maslow extended his own hierarchy by amending three more stages: cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and self-transcendence, bringing the total number of stages to eight. Cognitive needs and aesthetic needs are placed between self-esteem and self-actualization stages and self-transcendence is the highest stage in the hierarchy. (Senez 2011.) Cognitive needs are related to the knowledge, curiosity, understanding, and desire for meaning and predictability. Aesthetic needs are the acknowledgment and exploration of beauty, balance, form and so on. At the top of the hierarchy, self-transcendence is the significant aspect which transcends beyond the individual such as mystical experiences, sexual experiences and the pursuit of science. (McLeod 2017.)

Maslow initially argued that people get motivated to obtain certain needs and that some needs are more important and need to be fulfilled before others (Maslow 1943). However, he later confessed that his former statement may have given “the false impression that a need must be satisfied 100 percent before the next need emerges” and concluded that the fulfilment of a needs is not an all-or-none phenomenon (Maslow 1954). Maslow continuously improved his own theory depended on the idea of a *hierarchy of needs* over several decades (Maslow 1943; 1968; 1987). Maslow perceived that the structure of the hierarchy might be pliable based on outside environment or individual characteristics.

Maslow’s theory of human needs is mostly based on a Western perspective of the individual as an autonomous and independent identity, their decision only depends on personal aspiration and relationships. Bounding to the Western world, Maslow’s model does not thoroughly describe cultural distinction within the hierarchy of needs. Many Asian cultures appreciate the welfare of the group the most. Apparently, the hierarchy must be applied differently in an Asian context,

where social relationships and interpersonal contacts interactions are more appreciated, on average than self-actualization needs. Therefore, marketers should acknowledge the differences in the needs' priorities when using Maslow's model for their market research and marketing strategy. (Senez 2011.)

2.1.2 Aristotle's Seven Causes of Human Action

A powerful call to action is among the most crucial factors of any marketing communication. Therefore, in order to achieve the best results and maximizing return on investment, marketers should associate their marketing call to action with one of the seven causes of human action explained by Aristotle thousands of years ago.

Aristotle said in his book Rhetoric:

Consequently, all actions that are not due to a man himself are due either to chance or to nature or to compulsion. All actions that are due to a man himself and caused by himself are due either to habit or to rational or irrational craving. Thus, every action must be due to one or other of seven causes: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reasoning, anger, or appetite. (Aristotle 350 B.C.E.)

Aristotle argued that there are seven causes of actions, they are: chance, nature, compulsion, habit, reason, anger/passion, and appetite/desire.

Chance events influence people all the time and although some does not affect a person's decision so much, a number of others compel them to act or otherwise drive them into action. In Rhetoric (Aristotle 350 B.C.E.), Aristotle stated that in order to surpass the uncertainty of chance, people have to build a good set of situations to counterbalance the randomness. What can be applied to the world of marketing is that companies must assure that customers understand what they want them to do and leave no room for confusion. This concept points out that company should only launch well-documented and researched strategies. They are not completely secured to make their marketing campaign successful, but by

being detailed and organized, they have already abstracted some of the influence out of chance's capability to hinder their plans. (Brown 2017, 78.)

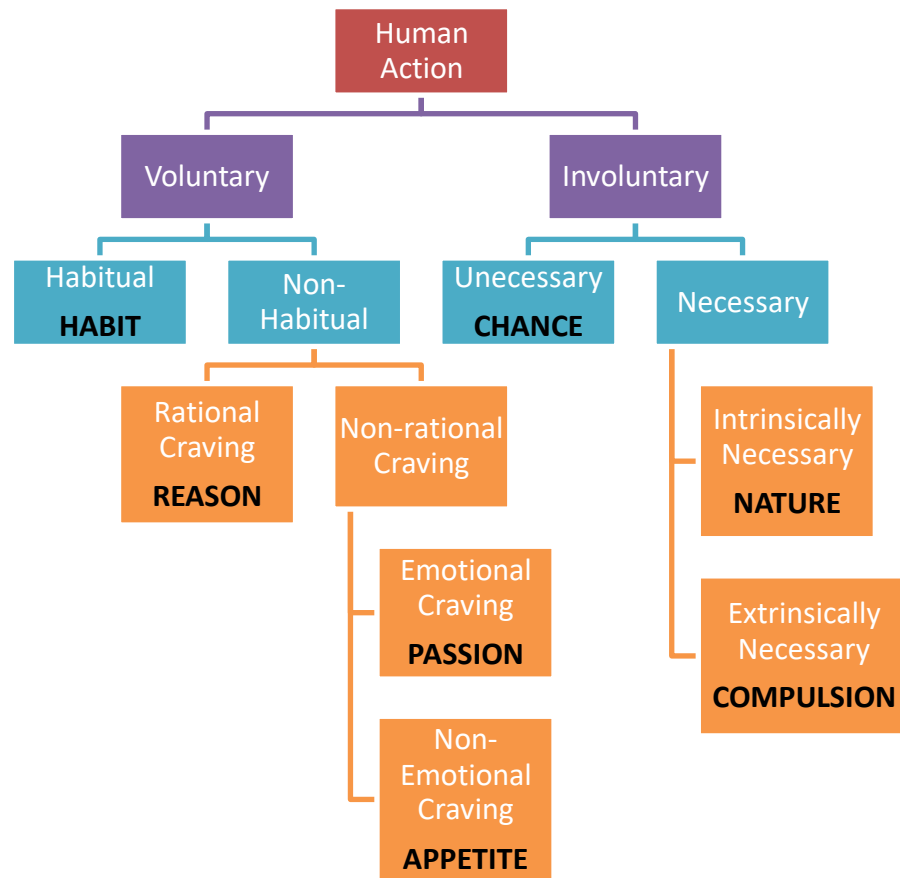


FIGURE 4: Aristotle's Seven Causes of Human Action (Aristotle 350 B.C.E)

Natural forces are those coming from the human body such as the craving for nourishment, known as thirst and hunger as well as other forces such as to reproduce (Aristotle 350 B.C.E). It is crucial for marketers to understand human nature and environmental nature so that they are able to encourage their customers to take action. Customers make their decision based on their nature, therefore, marketers should associate the marketing strategy with these natures and obtain comprehensive understanding of their core demographic before launching any marketing programs. (Brown 2017, 81.)

Compulsion happens when people feel that they have to do something despite the fact that they may not wish to act that way. Aristotle stated “Those things happen through compulsion which take place contrary to the desire or reason of the doer, yet through his own agency.” (Aristotle 350 B.C.E.) As people nowadays live in a very fast-paced digital world, compulsion generates a considerable amount of actions. As a result, marketers have been attempting to make it convenient for customers to act on their impulses. Social media campaigns are a perfect example of marketers capitalizing on human compulsion. Companies advertise their products throughout various social media channels so that customers are always aware of new product availability or discount information. (Gunelius 2014.)

Habit is something that people do regularly and often without thinking (MacMillan Dictionary). Aristotle stated: “Acts are done from habit which men do because they have often done them before.” (Aristotle 350 B.C.E) Majority of human habitual nature is subconscious, however, it is a crucial aspect in how and when people take action. If companies set and persistently meet the expectations of their customers, they will be able to strongly build customer’s trust in their brand (Gunelius 2014). Moreover, habit is particularly important for retention marketing plans. When companies have already acquired a certain number of customers, they should not change the way in which they connect to their own customers. If marketers want to make changes, they should implement them slowly and gently and only after they have already delivered their customers what they want. (Brown 2017, 115.)

Aristotle stated that logical and reasoned action are to designated ends, obtaining something that delivers personal goals. He additionally pointed out that when people do something in a way that they consider to be rational then they also suppose that it is good. (Aristotle 350 B.C.E.) Reason can be rational or irrational for customers. The former connects to the lower stages of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs while the latter is relevant to the higher stages of needs. Customers’ needs in higher stages

compel marketers to broaden perceived reasons for customers to make decisions. Moreover, reason can be valuably applied to the marketing concept of value proposition. If customers believe that one product is the best, they will be more willing to purchase it. Marketers must also attract customers' emotions because perceived reasons usually come from emotional response. (Gunelius 2014.)

The next cause of human actions according to Aristotle is anger, also interpreted as passion. Anger or passion is an extreme emotion of human existence (Aristotle 350 B.C.E). Since this thesis emphasizes on marketing concepts instead of psychology, the writer applies the passion interpretation as the sixth cause of human actions. Customers love to be inspired by their emotions. Marketers should make their customers passionate about promoting their company and products so that they are able to gain loyal customers. So many exceptional advertising campaigns are dependent only on emotions. Brands like Coca-Cola utilize raw human emotion to build connection and loyalty. (Brown 2017, 132.)

Last but not least, desire plays an important role in the cause of human actions. According to Aristotle, desire is defined as "the cause of all actions that appear pleasant" (Aristotle 350 B.C.E). Desire is about emotion, a way of life, a personal interest, or some other intangible (and usually subconscious) target or craving (Brown 2017). Applying this concept to marketing, companies should find out customers' desire and convince them to believe that they are offering them what they want. Many great marketing strategies build a profound sense of aspiration and demand that capitalizes on this core concept. Conveying messages, listening to customers and creating the right position for products and services will help companies enable their customers to fulfil their desires.

Customers' lifestyle, their buying preference, the way they collect information and occupy their time might vary from time to time, however, their fundamental psychological needs and philosophical causes of action are the frameworks that companies can always rely on. Maslow's

Hierarchy of Needs and Aristotle's Seven Causes of Actions are powerful tools for marketers to outperform in their competition and gain the customers' minds and hearts.

2.2 Consumer Buying Decision Process

Impulse buying i.e. buying without any intention or without being affected by any external factors rarely happens in real life. Every time that customers purchase goods, they had already been interacting with multiple brands, from the very beginning of consideration to the moment of payment. This whole process that consumers go through is defined as Consumer Buying Decision Process (Quin 2014). Understanding this journey helps companies acknowledge more about how and why consumers choose a typical brand, and therefore, create their own strategy to turn leads into real customers and maintain the customers' loyalty.

Consumer buying decision process is first acknowledged and emphasized by the marketing funnel model. Because of the fast-changing means of communications from traditional media to social media and many other factors, the actual route of consumer buying decision process has shifted significantly over the years. It has become less linear and more cyclical and there are various new touch points that have taken over the long-established transactions (Pierre 2015). In 2009, McKensey introduced a consumer decision journey which instead of being linear, presents the process in a circular model. This model has been applied more and more by companies recently (Court, et al. 2009).

2.2.1 Marketing Funnel

The marketing funnel is a visualization for explaining the process of making potential leads to become customers, as comprehended from a marketing point of view. The concept is that, like a funnel, companies cast an extensive net to obtain as many leads as they can, and then gradually

cultivate soon-to-be customers through the buying decision, narrowing down these potential customers in each level of the funnel (White Lee 2014).

It's crucial to acknowledge there are different versions of the funnel. Some have many levels or steps while others have just a few, with distinctive labels and conducts applied by the companies and consumers for each. In the diagram (Figure 5), the author presents the most popular and applicable funnel levels, concepts, and conducts so this information is beneficial to as many readers as possible.

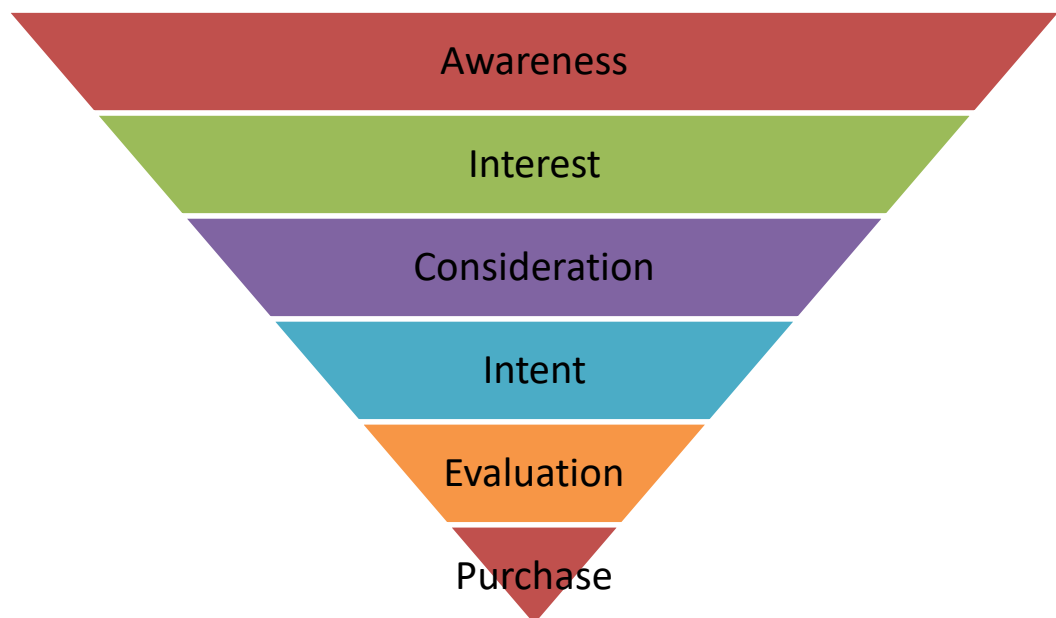


FIGURE 5: Marketing Funnel (White Lee 2014)

Awareness: Companies put a lot of effort to hit the whole group of promising customers in the beginning. This step includes inducing customers to acknowledge the product by the use of persuasive marketing, PR, advertising, and other communication methods. After this stage, companies provoke a lead by obtaining customer information which is then placed in a lead management system to foster further down the funnel. (Singh 2017.)

Interest: After being produced, leads continue to the interest level, in which they know more about the company, its products, and any beneficial

facts and research it publishes. This is a big chance for companies to enhance a connection with the leads and show its positioning in the market. (White Lee 2014.)

Consideration: In this level, leads have been transformed into qualified leads and are considered as highly potential customers. Companies can deliver potentials more facts and news about products and propose through email subscription, while persisting to provide them with case studies, free trials, targeted content, and so on. (White Lee 2014.)

Intent: In order to be in this level, potential leads have to show that they are responsive to buy a brand's product. Companies can achieve this information through survey, or tracking the cart order on the website. This is a chance for companies to make a good impression to the leads. (Singh 2017.)

Evaluation: At this stage, leads are finally deciding whether or not to get a company's product or services. Normally, sales and marketing tightly cooperate to foster the decision-making process and persuade the leads that their product is the best option. (Singh 2017.)

Purchase: This is the final level in the marketing funnel, in which a lead has decided to purchase and turns into a customer. From this point, sales is in charge of the transaction. If the lead has a good experience, they can choose this brand next time and the funnel starts again. (Hinson 2016.)

Many professionals say that the marketing funnel is no longer applicable since the purchase process is not linear anymore. Leads can start the funnel at different levels. Occasionally this occurs because customers are already familiar the brand and see that they will choose that brand, so they immediately enter the intent level. This can also occur because customers have learned about the product themselves and enter right away at the interest or consideration level. (Bonchek & France 2014, 203.)

One substitute to the marketing funnel is McKinsey's consumer decision journey which makes use of a circular design to demonstrate how the

purchase process nourishes itself and to emphasize pivots or touch points. The author will justify it in details in 2.2.3. Another approach to this marketing funnel is to flip it and turn it into customer experience funnel which will be explained in 2.2.2.

2.2.2 Customer Experience Funnel

The Customer Experience Funnel is created based on the idea of flipping the marketing funnel. It has quickly become a popular application for sales, marketing, and customer service. This funnel lays out the method of making customers become supporters, which as a result, re-nourish the highest level of the marketing funnel by controlling leads generation. (Vajre 2017.)

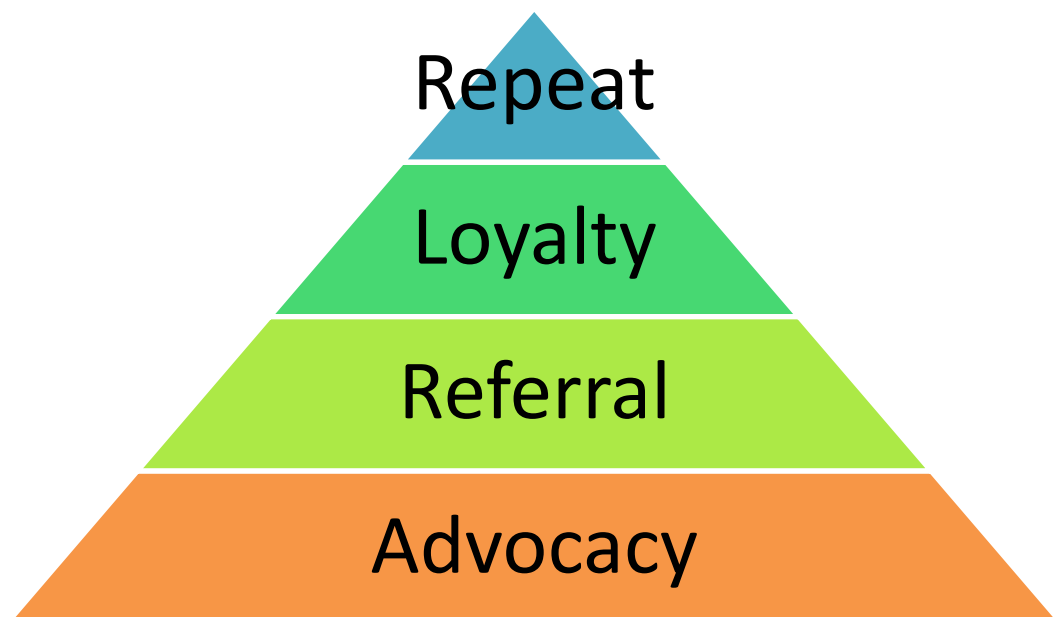


FIGURE 6: Customer Experience Funnel (White Lee 2014)

Repeat: The next step after a customer has bought the product is to turn them into a repeat customer. This involves enhancing retention and cultivating customers to make more and greater purchases. Companies move on with the last level of funnel conducts to stimulate consumers' repeat actions.

Loyalty: In this level, customers establish in their mind a favourite brand, starting to label themselves with it and embody its products. Engagement becomes key here, and companies can help prosper this relationship of customers to a brand through community growth and outreach.

Referral: Customers are more prone to supply business referrals and recommend a brand to their friends and families once they are loyal to a brand.

Advocacy: Making customers become supporters is the final progression for prospering ongoing customers. Tagging or posting products on social media, writing more articles to review products, and so on can help create more new leads for the company's marketing funnel. A company can also use online influencers to make an external review of their products. Additionally, companies should strive to flourish their communities to provide greater service for their supporters, ask them to take part in case studies or involve them in consumer-generated content on social media (Jaffe 2010).

The final aims are to boost purchases' size and number and to attract more awareness and referrals to provide for the marketing funnel.

2.2.3 Consumer Decision Journey

The Consumer Decision Journey is a business framework unfolded by McKinsey & Co. It illustrates the buy decision process of a consumer. According to the Consumer Decision Journey, the consumer goes through four stages in a cyclical process including initial consideration, active evaluation or the practice of exploring soon-to-be purchases, closure i.e. the moment of purchases, and finally the post-purchases when consumers experience the products they bought. Each stage depicts a promising marketing realm in which companies strive for the consumer's purchase and loyalty. (Court, et al. 2009.)

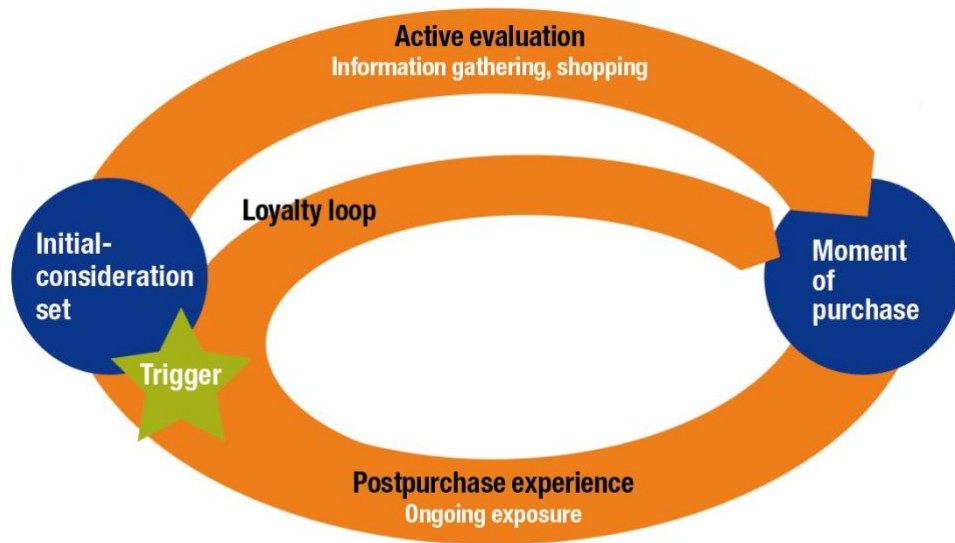


FIGURE 7: Customer Decision Journey (Court, et al 2009)

A. Initial-consideration:

When the customers initially perceive the thought of purchasing a product, they will establish a primary group of brands to consider purchasing because they have already heard about them from multiple sources and they can even tell their names. Brands that apply the initial consideration phase are three times more likely to be purchased than brands that do not apply it which means brand awareness is inevitable. (Cundari 2015, 46.)

The company should know what the consumer is experiencing as she or he first starts the connection with their brand, whether it is through the website, social media, or even in person. The company has to acknowledge the consumers' emotional, rational and subconscious determinants that create the buying experience, and how it can be enhanced. (Plimsoll 2017.)

B. Active evaluation:

After the initial-consideration phase, consumers now gauge all the possible options and the pros & cons for each of them. Consumers are researching information and browsing around to make a preliminary buying decision. They might read reviews online, ask for recommendations

from family and friends, go to the store to try out products, and many other ways. This stage creates benefits for both the companies and the customers. Companies have the chance to take part in the consideration set and even displaces other companies in the initial consideration phase. Big brands are no longer able to count up on their strong position in the market. With expanded online and social existence, companies are broadening the number of touch points with the consumer—thus boosting their power over the buying decision of customers in this phase. (Cundari 2015, 47.)

C. Closure:

At this point, the potential lead decides to go for one particular brand, goes to the stores and finally makes their purchase. Companies are still able to affect the purchase. This can be done through in-store marketing and influence of store salesmen.

D. Post-purchase:

After the purchase, the consumers evolve expectations dependent on their experience that will influence their next purchase journey. This constitutes the circular character of the journey. In this stage, companies aim to nurture customer loyalty, which will attract repeat buying transactions and word-of-mouth marketing. Similarly, if the consumer is unhappy with their buying decision, they will turn to be an adverse influence on the buying decisions, not only for the buyers but also for their friends and family. For example, they might post a bad review on a well-known website, which will be available to innumerable potential consumers in the active evaluation stage. (Court, et al. 2009.)

3 MARKETISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE STUDENT-AS-CUSTOMER APPROACH

In this chapter, the author will discuss how marketing fits into education sector and the student-as-customer approach. The author uses several sources from different studies that were dated back to the 1980s to introduce the foundation and the movement of the marketisation of higher education.

Since the early 1980s, many countries have proposed and applied market mechanisms in education (Waslander, Pater & Weide 2010, 89). Finland is not an exception. During the 1990s, Finnish government implemented some techniques such as decentralisation which means shifting the accountability for obligatory education to the cities and schools by eradicating reserved fund and managerialism in which principals are considered as business managers, have a powerful position in their institutions and are totally in charge of their business to the municipality. (Johannesson, Lindblad & Simola 2002.) As anticipated, this movement of government that advocates marketisation leads to an interpretation of the student as a customer.

3.1 Marketisation of Higher Education

Applying market mechanisms to the education sector has given increase to intense controversies in both scientific and political circles. On one hand, most previous studies of research literature in this field have deduced that the influences of market mechanisms on education are small. On the other hand, many argues that the changes to the society can only be seen in the long run and the effects can be varied based on different areas, types of students, types of schools, etc. (Waslander, Pater & Weide 2010.) However, marketizing the education sector is becoming a more and more common practice among governments around the world. Therefore, it is worth mentioning and explaining how the market

mechanism in education works and how it can affect the choices of parents as well as the pupils.

3.1.1 The Understanding of Marketisation

In the economic approach, a market is defined as a means of social regulations by which the supply and demand for a service or goods are ensured to be equal through the price mechanism. Consumers select between different available options on account of which are the best fit for them considering availability, price, and quality. It is usually observed that arranging economic relations on these factors depicts the finest application of society's resources. Markets offer not only better static efficiency (the proportion of outputs to inputs constantly in time) but also better dynamic efficiency (maintaining a greater rate of progress over time through a process and product modernisation and excellent control of resources) than any other possible choice. Especially, markets are completely opposed to command economies, in which both quantities and prices are managed by the government. (Gingrich 2015.)

According to Brown in his book *The march of the market* (Brown 2011), a true market regarding student education would have six principle characteristics. First and foremost, institutions have to be legally autonomous. Secondly, there should be no or very little regulation of market entry. As a result, a lot of market competition have been involved from 'for profit' or private suppliers. The next characteristic is that the government does not impose any supervisory limits on the fees charged or the total students enrolled. In the fourth place, the expense of teaching should be met completely through tuition fees that would come close to average expenses. Next, the taxpayer does not have to subsidise for the education since the expenses of education are met from consumers' i.e. students and their families own resources. Last but not least, consumers would determine what, where and how to study depended on accurate, trustworthy and approachable information about the availability, price, and quantity of courses, programmes and suppliers.

The previous paragraph mentions the characteristics of education market in general, the question is how we can acknowledge the marketisation of higher education in particular. It is worth differentiating marketisation from 'privatisation', the entering of private capital, ownership, and impact into what may have already been openly purchased and financed activities and entities. (Parry 1990.) In theory, marketisation and privatisation are different, and actually, the term 'quasi-markets' has been invented to depict the arrangement of the services' supply on market boundaries where very little or no private financing is included, the public financing of scholastic study being a perfect illustration (Grand 1991). In reality, nevertheless, marketisation will often draw in some extent of privatisation. This indicates that marketisation and privatisation have the same root. There are four crucial indicators that help in recognizing marketisation in higher education: institutional autonomy, institutional competition, price and information (Brown, 2011).

3.1.2 Institutional Autonomy

University autonomy was announced in the Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education also known as Bologna Declaration with a remark to the 1988 Magna Charta Universitatum, which declared:

The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power. (Rectors of European University 1987.)

An autonomous institution is granted permission to make a decision on its administrative and organisational structure, determine its priorities, control its budget, recruit its employees and allow its students to entry, select the subjects and means of its teaching and research - or at least several of these rights. The level of autonomy is often declared in national legislation. It might be limited to universities or it might be offered to all higher

education institutions. In the more marketised systems, institutions are able to have an extensive level of autonomy in most or all of these regards. In others, the institutions may either not be legitimately autonomous or they may be autonomous but still be dependent on many means of authority, for instance over the establishment of new courses or programmes. In some Continental European organisations, personnel stay civil servants hired by the education ministry. Additionally, restrictions resume over such issues as bearing over retained money from one financial year to the next. (King 2015.)

3.1.3 Institutional Competition

Expanded globalisation and international trade have currently concentrated on the consideration of institutional competition. In nowadays arguments, institutional competition is usually interpreted as competition between governments over tax revenues, and it is defended that institutional competition leads to the reduction of the finances required to maintain welfare states. (Höijer 2008.)

The concern here is the number of competition between institutions for pupils, profit, and rank. Consecutively, this indicates four market perquisites. The first requirement is respective freedom of market entry, with governance being employed to promote competition and offer primary consumer protection rather than to restrain competition that could jeopardise standards. Secondly, the absolute feasibility of student choice: students have a legitimate choice of what, where and how to learn. This is not only a duty of system policy in general but also be an issue of locations and finance. An example of the geographical matter is that students may have more difficulties in travelling to study in bigger countries. Regarding finance, if there is an inadequate public aid for the expenses of study and living costs, many students will be restrained to study at a local institution. In the third place, institutional finance shall be connected to the amount of registrations, offering institutions with stimulus to recruit. Finally, externally dictated restrictions on the amount or classification of students that

particular institutions can register should be decreased. (Brown, 2011.) All in all, these prerequisites constitute circumstances for absolute competition among institutions, which is augmented by competition on price which will be explained in the following section.

3.1.4 Price

Regarding price in marketized education sector, there are various variables of price in marketised education sector including if whether is a tuition fee, whether the fee compensate a considerable distribution of the expenses of provision, whether institutions are capable of imposing a price that they like. Moreover, the price factor depends on whether there are either commands or correlated circumstances. For instance, in the United Kingdom, institutions which want to impose the full allowed fee have to propose scholarship and hand in a broad cooperation strategy to a particular regulator. The final factor that affects the price is whether and to what extent the tuition is subsidised, for instance through the opportunity of an income contingent repayment and whether living costs of students are subsidised in any means.

3.1.5 Information

The question here is whether students are able to approach information that helps them in their selection of institutions and programmes and whether they adopt it. This drives to the more comprehensive question of how quality can be guaranteed in a marketised education sector. In accordance with market theory, quality is taken care of automatically because consumers adopt the accessible information to choose the product or service that fits them the best. As a result, suppliers cannot survive in the business if they do not offer goods or service that suit their consumers. In higher education, the challenge is that the product is not apparent and the chances for repeat purchases are restricted. (Cave, Dodsworth & Thompson 1992.)

Undoubtedly, this does not prevent either government departments or commercial publishers from generating information to lead funders and students in the name of university and colleges rankings. There is an enormous and far-reaching literature on this issue, actually so large that no one can have read everything that has been written by any chance. According to (Dill & Soo 2005), it appears that there are several major restrictions on league tables and rankings as instructions to quality.

Firstly, the transparency, particularly in how scores or indicators are measured is inadequate. In the second place, a focal point on input indicators such as teachers and student qualifications, financing and how institutions carry out those inputs can make a big difference. The next limitation is an impulse to concentrate on full-time, undergraduate supplies and institutions with the sacrifice of postgraduate, specialist, small and prevalently part-time suppliers. Another big restriction on rankings and league tables is the ranking of institutions in the case that they all had the identical resources as well as student intakes. In most cases, the generation of the perception that some institutions are more excellent than others when in a divergent, mass structure there cannot be only one opinion of quality or only one best university. Undeniably, university rankings enhance the position of institutions that are already well-known, highly reputable and well-funded in the market, at the loss of those that may be pursuing to establish prestige by showing up to the demands of employers and students. Moreover, university rankings augment the propensity to consider higher education as a consumable product rather than a chance to be experienced. Finally, stimulated to gameplay, institutions strengthen another market trend, that of exploiting their resources to enhance their attractiveness as an alternative to exploiting them to enhance quality. To put it briefly, rankings fail to represent universities and colleges' work in pursuance of advertising newspapers. (Brown 2006.)

In conclusion, the marketisation of higher education is an intricate process, with every large-scale system placing itself in between the market and

non-market extremes. So far, the market for education has been unsuccessful in many different aspects to ensure an effective distribution of resources and supply quality education through competition. Not only the market for education is incomplete because of the distinction in the education's quality but also the social request for education stays unaddressed to a great extent. Hence, the characteristics of competition in the education market are not identified by efficiency-based competition instead, it is identified by selection-based competition. (Collini 2018.) Additionally, market promotion emphasises distinction among society and institutions. However, there is an apparent international movement towards bringing in better competition, consisting of price competition, into the supplies of student education and, as a quasi-market, into a provision of academic research. In spite of being a fortress of public subsidy for a non-market system, the Nordic nations are starting to bring in some market characteristics. (Brown 2011.)

3.2 Student-As-Customer Approach

When the education sector is marketised, it tries to reconstruct the relationship between students and academics along the model of a customer and service provider. With the fast development of globalisation and changes in the education policies of various countries, universities have been taken pleasure both in prospering their specificity and showcasing immense diversity, with strong mission statements of their own. During that process, they have come to fight against each other for students and for resources in which students are the carriers of resources for the universities). Correspondingly, students have been established precisely as customers. With the introduction of tuition fees carried directly by students, the perception of student-as-customer has been intensified. Students are the carriers of huge resources and are being bolstered to think cautiously about the university in which they might study. They also take part in the service delivery process and obtain service through

educational programmes with the result of broadening their knowledge and achieving a degree. (Barnett 2011.)

3.2.1 Characteristics of Student as Customer Approach

As the education is marketised, the student acquires some of the characteristics of a customer. The students are not merely consumers of a monopoly business: there is competition between institutions and the students have the right to shop around. Additionally, the students must be personally committed to their own higher education. Eventually, the students have to teach themselves. Their studying has to be their own studying. It is not only that no one is able to carry out the learning for the students. It is the more constructive aspect that any knowledge of the initial type indicated by the concept of university will be specific to the individual student. The network, the awareness, the implication, the comprehension involved, the opportunity that it exposes, the inventive world that it leads to all these will be exclusive to a student as a person. (Barnett 2011.)

One of the most important influences of students becoming consumers has been the clear connection of education to jobs. Before, students might have sought out their preferred high school subject in college, being confident in the knowledge that the degree itself would ensure a job. Today, they cautiously select a programme or an education strongly connected to a high-paying job after they graduate (Gibbs 2008).

As a customer, the student is supposed to perform as the personification of market tensions on an otherwise archaic and passive university. Due to the philosophy of marketisation, the customer is always right, the university should listen to them. The student might embrace a 'commodified' perspective of their learning with an eye to the short term. (Gibbs 2008). The student comes to the opinion that their higher education can be purchased much like any other service or products and exempts themselves from much, if any, engagement in the character of the experience. The so-called commodification of higher education can

cause the declination of responsibility on the part of the student. Therefore, the concept of student-as-consumer of a common service encounters a lot of challenges.

Consumers have rights which need to be safeguarded. They have to be promoted to buy and consume more and ultimately they have to be socialised with materialistic values which establish a larger premium on the influential value of things. Consumerism and the consumer metaphor are used rather freely in higher education. Students and future students in higher education are less safeguarded and even less properly informed about service quality to instruct their participation, buying and evaluation decisions. University rankings reports that students are supposed to use for making comparisons and assessing institutional supplies are infamously unreliable and likely to depend on obscured, hard-to-quantify and culturally restrained notions. (Cremonini, Westerheijden & Enders 2008.)

3.2.2 Student Satisfaction

From a business point of view, the customer is everything since they are the ones who buy products or services and thus guarantee business growth and expedience. The complete health of the companies is gauged on the extent to which the customers are satisfied. It is believed that satisfied customers will assure repeat and new business through word of mouth advertising, and will stay loyal to the company even in spite of tough competition on aspects such as price. Even though data is occasionally contradictory, the importance of evidence appears to indicate that customer satisfaction is undoubtedly connected to business performance indexes such as revenues, sales and share margins (Wiele, Boselie & Hesselink 2002). Regarding total quality management, it has been debated that the single perspective of quality that counts is that of the customer (Gerson 1994).

Total quality management is basically an organisational concept concentrated on a constant enhancement of service or products with a

fundamental purpose to satisfy the customer (Palaprom, Janpen & Pong 2005). Methods that are created to get an understanding of how the customer assesses organisational services or products evolve into an essential component of the organisational culture dependent on three principle concepts of constant enhancement, continuous employee training, and customer satisfaction. This additionally connects to another crucial point of service quality. The connection between customer satisfaction, service quality, and repeat purchase practices has been the topic of many studies and the common agreement of findings from such studies indicates a straightforward connection between these approaches (La & Yi 2004). Regularly, service quality is the discrepancy between performances and quality expectations (Berry, Zeithaml & Parasuraman 1996). When performance is greater than expectation, service quality is considered to be high. On the opposite, when performance is less than what was expected, then quality is said to be poor. The influence of these two situations on customer satisfaction is thus quite simple to decide. The customer alone turns into the centre of the business operation. In higher education, as well as in business in general, the connection between student retention and customer satisfaction, graduation and progression have been built.

Models of quality promoting in higher education that are dependent on student evaluation demonstrate an increasing significance of student as customer in the education sector. Nevertheless, it can also be questioned that the increasing focus on students could diminish the function of the staff in examining the value of what they do. In most cases, peer reviews are not taken seriously and are usually used for administrative rather than for quality enhancement aims. The growth in student complaints of university courses, teaching methods and services recently has led to the increasing customer culture in higher education. Currently, it is theorised that because students feel more accountable for payment of tuition fees, that they have a more powerful voice in how they are taught, how they are evaluated and the general quality of the services they are entitled to on campus. (Coughlan 2009.)

However, it goes without saying that students have many different learning styles and will react differently to identical types of guidance. Some students will be fairly satisfied with lecture delivery styles while others will be more comfortable with teaching methods that reflect a more classroom-based mindset. As a result, hoping that students will behave the same and positively to the outcomes of education in spite of the best attempts of the teacher is pretty short-sighted. Putting the student at the centre of decision making in higher education is a powerful reasoning for the democratisation of higher education, for better responsibility and for improving quality. (Barnett 2011.)

4 VIETNAMESE STUDENTS AS CUSTOMERS IN THE OVERSEA EDUCATION MARKET

Around ten years recently, oversea education trends grew robustly in Vietnam. According to statistics from HSBC report - The Value of Education. Springboard for success (HSBC 2014), ranked Vietnam 8th among the top 10 countries that have the largest number of students studying abroad.

According to Vietnamese International Education Cooperation Department, in 2014, there were approximately 120.000 Vietnamese citizens studying abroad. This number increased around five percent compared to the previous year. The most popular host country is Australia (in 2013, there were 26.015 Vietnamese students in Australia while this number increased to 27.550 students in 2014). Vietnamese students are in almost every country all over the world such as USA, Japan, and EU countries. Only ten percent of Vietnamese students have scholarships for their oversea education, ninety percent of them are privately funded. This means Vietnamese parents are willing to spend huge amounts of money on overseas study compared to the average per capita income.

Due to the fast expansion, Vietnam study abroad education market is becoming an attraction for many international universities to recruit students from. This chapter will examine Vietnamese students' decision-making process and some factors that influence their destination choice.

4.1 Vietnamese Student Decision Making Process

Selecting a study destination is believed to be a high-involvement decision because students frequently are very critical and cautious when making this decision (Binsardi & Ekwulugo 2003). In the decision-making process of higher education, a student experiences four stages when selecting a study place. In this section, the Vietnamese student decision-making process will be analyzed based on the customer decision journey that is explained in chapter 2.

4.2 Initial Consideration

First and foremost, the student acknowledges his or her demand for overseas education. This is the same as the initial consideration phase in customer decision journey mentioned in chapter 2. The student determines whether or not to study outside of the country. This demand perception stage is often provoked by an unsatisfactory education system of the student's home country (Tran 2016).

Mazzarol and Soutar in their research refer to the factors that provoke the demand for overseas education in student's home country as push factors shown in Figure 8 (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002). According to (Tran 2016), the three strongest push factors are the poor quality of education in Vietnam, avoidance of bad practices in Vietnamese education, and seeking immigration opportunities. Other factors that push Vietnamese students towards studying abroad are the unavailability of desired programmes, competitive entry to Vietnamese universities, and being asked to study abroad by family.

Pull factors from the desire of students themselves are also very important. Some pull factors that influence Vietnamese students the most are improving chances of employment internationally, improving foreign language competence and obtaining international experiences. Some other pull factors such as pursuing foreign educational values, experiencing foreign cultures and establishing relationships with international friends are also highly considered by Vietnamese students when choosing the countries for their overseas education. The research shows that Vietnamese students are 'pulled' more than 'pushed' to study abroad. (Tran 2016.)

4.3 Active Evaluation

In the second stage, the student starts to gather information about potential host countries and determines where to go for their higher education. The student often has a list of criteria for her/himself. After that,

the student compares her/his criteria to the characteristics of the potential host countries. The aspects that suit the criteria and can be applied to draw the student to choose the host country are defined as pull factors from host country showed in Figure 8 (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002).

It appeared that Vietnamese students are strongly affected by aspects related to the socio-economic status of the host countries such as safety level, living standards, living cost, a welcoming environment for international students in the host country, aspects related to policies and practicalities including network of friends or relatives, part-time job policies for international students, post-graduation employment or immigration policies in the host country, visa procedures to enter the host country, and familiarity of the language of the host country. Vietnamese students' selection was very minimally affected by the closeness of the host country to Vietnam. (Tran 2016.)

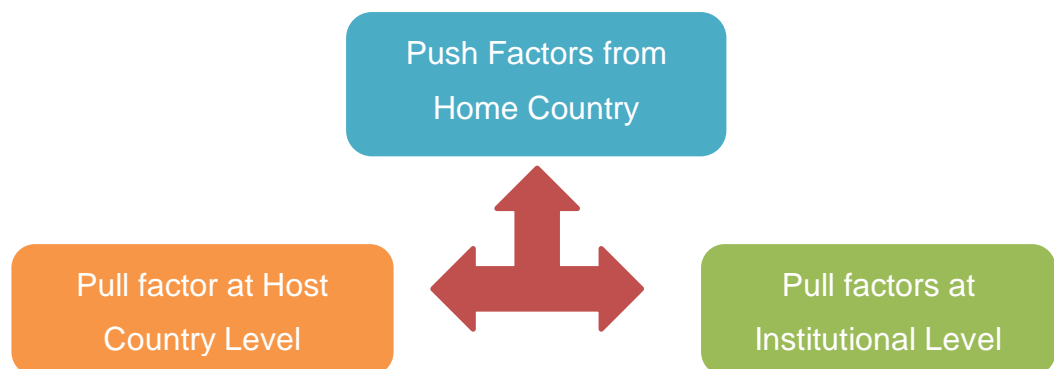


FIGURE 8: Abroad study decision making based on push-pull factor theory from (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002)

In the third stage, the student gathers information about potential host universities and determines what she or he wants to pursue. Again, the procedure through which the student experience so as to make the decision is similar to the second stage. The factors in the host institution that engage the student towards it are defined as pull factors from the host institution (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002). The second and third stages are

identical to the active-evaluation phase in customer decision journey in chapter 2.

Vietnamese students are very strongly affected by aspects related to the friendliness of the host institution environment to international students such as facilities and infrastructure, tuition fees for international students, scholarship opportunities for international students, presence of many other international students, support services for international students, and convenient location. Vietnamese students' selections are also strongly affected by the linkage of an institution with Vietnam i.e. admission criteria for international students, relationship with the current/former university, and the presence of a representative office of the institution in Vietnam. The opinions of influential stakeholders such as recommendations of teachers, friends, family members, advertisement strategies, local employers' preference of the degree granted by the institution and international students' experience with the institution can also influence Vietnamese students to some extent. Among all the influencing factors from the host institution, the reputation of the institution which covers availability of the desired program, university reputation/ranking, qualified teaching staff, and graduates' employment rates are considered as the least influential factor to their choices. (Tran 2016.)

4.4 Closure and Post Purchase

After the third stage, as in the closure phase of the customer decision journey, students will make their final decision about where to study and in which institution. Then, the student will undergo the study period in the host institution and establish their point of view about the institution, whether they will carry on their study and recommend or advise against their institution to other potential students. As a result, it is crucial for higher education institutions to understand expectations of their students and attempt to guarantee those expectations.

5 CASE COMPANY

This chapter introduces Lahti UAS Ltd regarding their background information including organisation structures, mission and vision and their current English study programmes. The author also describes the current marketing situation of Lahti UAS Ltd by reviewing the social media channels that they are using in order to have a better approach to Vietnamese students.

5.1 Background Information of Lahti UAS Ltd

Lahti UAS, established in 1992, is an international higher education institution that offers various branches of learning, located in the city of Lahti, approximately 100 kilometres away from Helsinki - the capital city. Lahti UAS is one of 24 universities of applied sciences in Finland, and has been educating around 5,000 Bachelor's or Master's Degree students in addition to approximately 1,000 students who are accomplishing open courses. Lahti UAS is home to around 400 foreign degree students and hosts around 200 exchange students every year. Internationality is considered as one of the strongest characteristics of Lahti UAS. (Lahti UAS 2018c.)

Lahti UAS has a variety of high quality Bachelor's and Master's Degree Programmes in technology, business and hospitality, social and health care and design. Currently, there are around 5,000 Bachelor's or Master's Degree students and 400 employees at Lahti UAS. However, only international programmes will be discussed in this chapter since the main topic of the thesis is about Vietnamese students choosing international bachelor degrees. (Lahti UAS 2018d.)

5.1.1 Organizational Structure

On 1 January 2015, Lahti UAS was incorporated as a limited company. Saimaa University of Applied Sciences (Saimaa UAS), Lappeenranta University of Technology (LUT), and Lahti University of

Applied Sciences have founded a corporate group including three autonomous institutions. On 1 January 2018, Lahti UAS Ltd united with the LUT Group. In this merger, LUT is the parent company and Lahti UAS and Saimaa UAS are its subsidiaries. The aim of the LUT Group is to bring benefits for all parties through cooperation. The group's development strategy will concentrate on recruiting international student and education export, new education routes, and having a strong influence on industries.

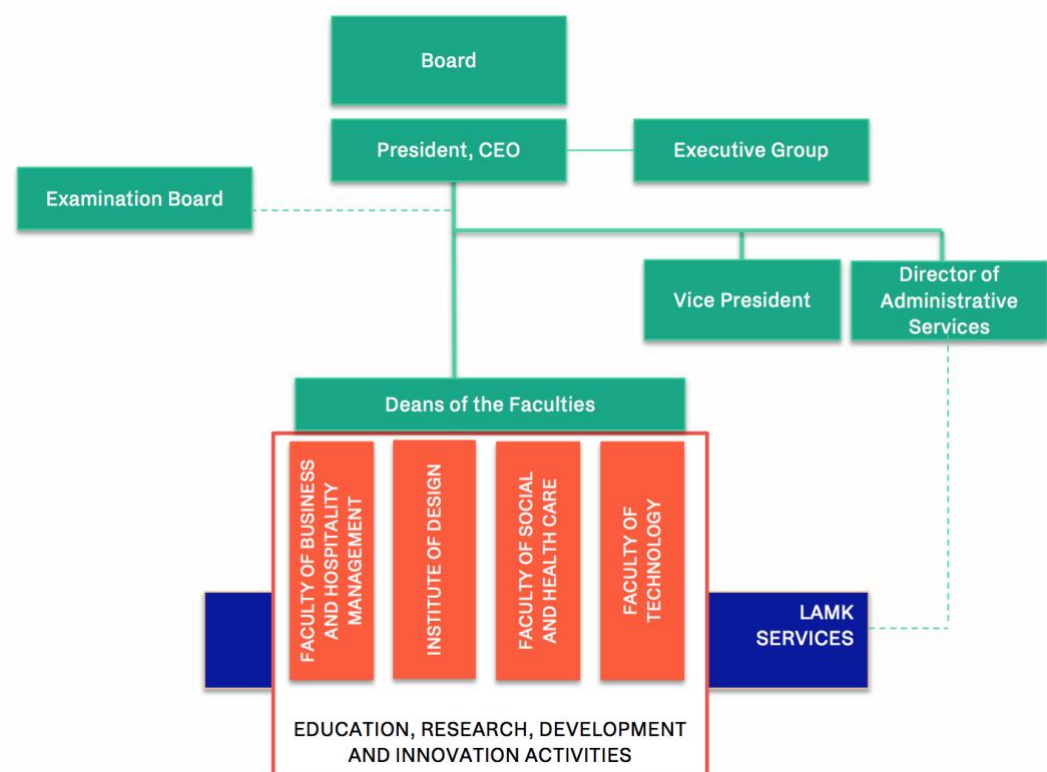


FIGURE 9: Lahti UAS Ltd Organizational Chart 1.2.2018 (Lahti UAS 2018f)

The President who is also the CEO of Lahti UAS Ltd is DSc (Econ.) Turo Kilpeläinen. The operational organisation of Lahti UAS includes profit units which are depended on faculties, and the supporting services. The dean is in charge of each faculty. Lahti UAS services offer assistance and expertise to the entire organisation and are accountable for Study services, Management services, RDI support services, HR and finance services, and Learning environment and campus services. (Lahti UAS

2018f). The organization structure of Lahti UAS Ltd is represented in Figure 9.

5.1.2 Vision, Values and Profiling

The vision of Lahti UAS Ltd is to build an insightful, exploratory and influential university in 2020. The company's main goal is to cultivate a highly attractive and diverse higher education assemble of international position and excellent quality. Lahti UAS Ltd's strategy concentrates on improving educational routes, internationalisation and economic influence. Lahti UAS Ltd lists joy, insight, and meaningfulness as their values - the joy of exploring together, insightful learning experiences, and meaningful work, expertise, and success. (Lahti UAS 2018b.)

The profile of Lahti UAS Ltd is dependent on their target fields and the approach of entrepreneurship. Digitalisation and internationalisation are means for them to recreate their competence capital, both in the organisation and in the local region altogether. Test platforms, ecosystems, and remark environments promote the entrepreneurship, competitiveness, and era of new business in the Lahti region. (Lahti UAS 2018b.)

There are five main perspectives in the profiling of Lahti UAS Ltd which are design, smart business, well-being and regenerative growth, circular economy solutions, and entrepreneurship (Lahti UAS 2018b). First and foremost, through the design mindset, Lahti UAS assists in enhancing circular economy, economic competitiveness, and well-being. Three main points in design philosophy are visualisation of information and structures through information design, co-design approach to services and functioning environments, and user-centred approach in industrial design. Regarding smart business, Lahti UAS Ltd assists in enhancing competitiveness and productivity by establishing new designs for organisations and businesses. Digital business, tourism, and management as well as locally and globally responsible business are key points in smart business. In the third perspective of their profiling, Lahti UAS Ltd. wants to

advance well-being and regional growth by cultivating competence capital, functional models and processes together with working life. Key themes in this perspective are well-being from physical activity and nature, well-being technology and intelligent self-management of health, social inclusion and development of services and abilities in the health and social care sector. Through the circular economy solutions, Lahti UAS Ltd will be able to generate innovations and business opportunities for the economy by integrating powerful technology and capabilities. At Lahti UAS Ltd, entrepreneurship is seen as an encompassing mindset and means of doing things. It implies pinpointing and creating the most of chances and having the capability to turn ideas into action and finally cultural, social, economic as well as societal value. (Lahti UAS 2018b.)

5.1.3 International Education Service

Lahti UAS Ltd has agreements with more than 190 institutions around the world which guarantees mobility for both Lahti UAS students and employees. In addition to their international partners, Lahti UAS Ltd establishes classes and projects to bring opportunities to internationalisation (Lahti UAS 2018a). Each year, around 20% of Lahti UAS students obtain international experience overseas by spending a semester either carrying out an internship or studying at a partner institution. Moreover, Lahti UAS' 400 international degree students, 200 exchange students and many visiting lecturers worldwide contribute to a genuinely international studying environment at Lahti UAS. There are various events organised all around the school year. For example, the International Food Festival is where international students make foods from their home countries for others to try. (Lahti UAS 2018a.)

Lahti UAS Ltd is an active participant in the area of international education services. The educational competency is built on the worldwide known Finnish education system, as all teachers have expertise and latest knowledge both in their focus fields as well as in pedagogy. Globalisation

is a crucial part of everyday activities, and Lahti UAS Ltd.'s specialists are used to working in multicultural environments.

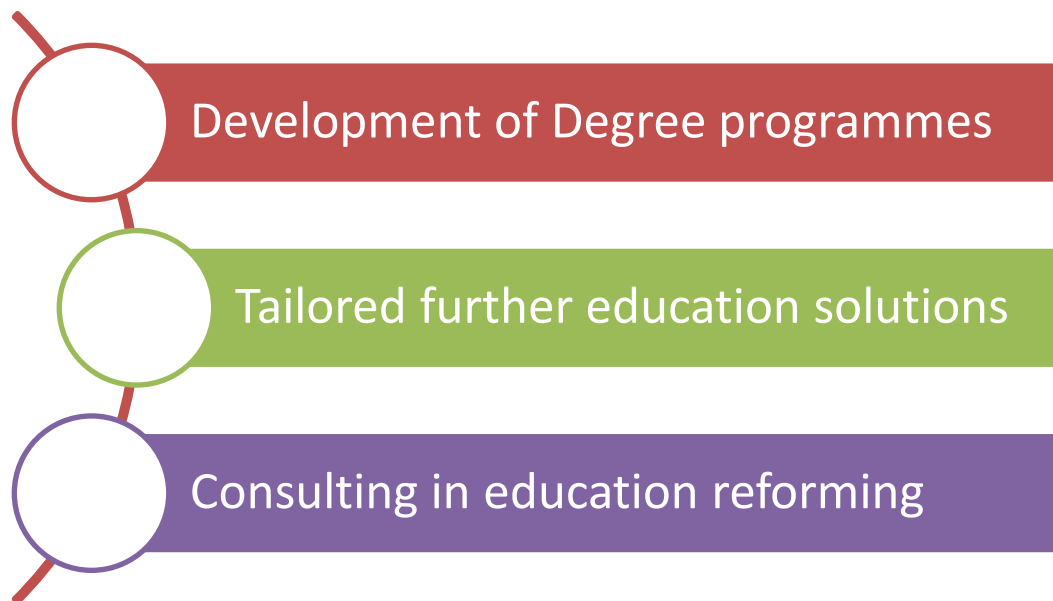


FIGURE 10: Some global education services of Lahti UAS Ltd (Lahti UAS 2018a)

Besides three bachelor and two master degree programmes which are taught completely in English, Lahti UAS Ltd supplies many different types of international education services. The services consist of, for instance, tailored further education solutions, development of degree programmes, and consulting in education reforming which are illustrated in Figure 10. (Lahti UAS 2018a.)

5.2 Current Marketing Situation

From autumn 2017, along with other universities of applied sciences and universities in Finland, Lahti UAS has started charging tuition fees from international students who are from outside the European Union and Electronic Travel Authority countries such as Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein. Tuition fees do not affect Finnish students or any international student who has already been in their studies before 2017. The amount of fees depends on each institution (Opintopolku 2017). Lahti

UAS' fees are 7.900 euros per year in bachelor degree's programmes and 8.900 euros per year in master degree's programmes. Nevertheless, every foreign freshman will receive a scholarship that covers 50 percent of the tuition fee. (Kangas 2017.) Since education has no longer be free, Lahti UAS needs a new approach to the international students.

Currently, Lahti UAS has its name displayed on a broad range of various social media platforms. In addition to the main official website, their brands are advertised on seven other social networking sites, which are Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, and Instagram. Lahti UAS Ltd's brand is promoted through these channels to its various students and potential students and staff.

On its Facebook page, Lahti UAS has around 4.500 followers and 4.600 likes (April 2018). Most of the followers are international students studying full time at Lahti UAS. This is the biggest social media channel that Lahti UAS has, and their Facebook page was created in 2010. However, the name of the Facebook page and most of their Facebook posts are in Finnish, which can make international students feel harder to follow. In terms of size, LinkedIn is the second largest social media channel of Lahti UAS. The LinkedIn account has approximately 3.756 alumni and 5.955 followers with a small distribution of its audience being international degree students. Regarding Twitter, Lahti UAS has 2106 followers (April 2018) and it is the third biggest social channel of Lahti UAS. Similarly to the Facebook page, Lahti UAS' Twitter account communicates mostly in Finnish. There are more than 3.190 tweets posted on it so far and the majority of its audience is Finnish.

Created in 2009, Lahti UAS' YouTube account has 116 subscribers with 132 videos uploaded so far (April 2018). YouTube is the main channel to advertise Lahti UAS in forms of video. There are 11 videos in English which accounts for around 8 percent of the total number of video uploads. Lahti UAS joined Flickr network in 2012 and up until April 2018, it has 32 followers with a substantial number of around 698 photos uploaded onto

Flickr. The final social media channel is Lahti UAS' Instagram with around 2.250 followers (April 2018). It has over 1.056 posts and this is a dynamic channel which is getting more popular over time. Examining the accomplishment of Lahti UAS' attempts on certain social media channels will help to discover insights that will lead to recommendations for the development of Lahti UAS' brand to international students.

6 EMPIRICAL RESEARCH AND DATA ANALYSIS

This chapter familiarises readers with the empirical research conducted for the thesis and analyses the results obtained from the research. First, the applied research methods and survey design are explained and then the results are displayed and analysed. The empirical part comprises of interviews with the IBU18K Vietnamese students who have been studying at Lahti UAS for nearly a semester and a survey conducted among the potential Vietnamese students that might be interested in studying in Finland in general and at Lahti UAS in particular. Results obtained from the interviews of the IBU18K Vietnamese students will be used as an important information source. The interview questions and answers can be found in the appendix. The second part of the empirical research was a survey for the Vietnamese students. The results of the survey are displayed and analysed in this chapter.

6.1 Design and Formulation of the Empirical Research

Empirical research only depends on observation or experience, usually without expected regard for theory and system. It is data-based research, drawing conclusions which are able to be validated by observation or experiment. Empirical research is suitable when evidence is desired that certain variables influence other variables in some way. Proof collected through empirical studies or experiments is nowadays seen as the most effective assistance possible for a given hypothesis (Kothari 2004, 37).

As mentioned in chapter 1, there are two feasible research methods: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is gauging amounts or quantities. Qualitative research is involved with qualitative phenomena and it concentrates on uncovering desires and motives (Kothari 2004, 54). In this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied as the researcher interviewed IBU18K Vietnamese students at Lahti UAS and conducted a survey among Vietnamese students.

The first part of the empirical research was conducted by interviewing the IBU18K Vietnamese students at Lahti UAS. There are four interviews in total, one was done via email and three were done via Skype. The interview questions are about the students' opinions towards their own decision of studying abroad, the Finnish education in general and Lahti UAS in particular. The purpose was to obtain a better understanding about the Vietnamese students who choose to study at Lahti UAS especially after the tuition fees were introduced. The second part of the empirical research was done via a survey and it was the fundamental source of primary data. Interview questions are displayed in appendix 1. The aim of the survey was to figure out which factors affect Vietnamese students the most and which channels they use for researching overseas study information. The purpose is to understand the target group and with the help of the survey to create a marketing strategy for the case company.

As this thesis focuses on the Vietnamese students as customers of Lahti UAS Ltd, the survey was conducted only among Vietnamese students. The survey was distributed on several Facebook groups in which Vietnamese students search for overseas education the most. The language of the survey was in English since the thesis focuses on the potential Vietnamese students that are able to study abroad in English. The survey consists of six multiple-choice questions, thirteen rating questions and four questions that can be filled in freely. All the questions of the survey can be found in the appendix 2.

6.2 Data Collection

This chapter explains detailed information about the data collection stage of the thesis. Figure 11 demonstrates the different steps of the data collection.

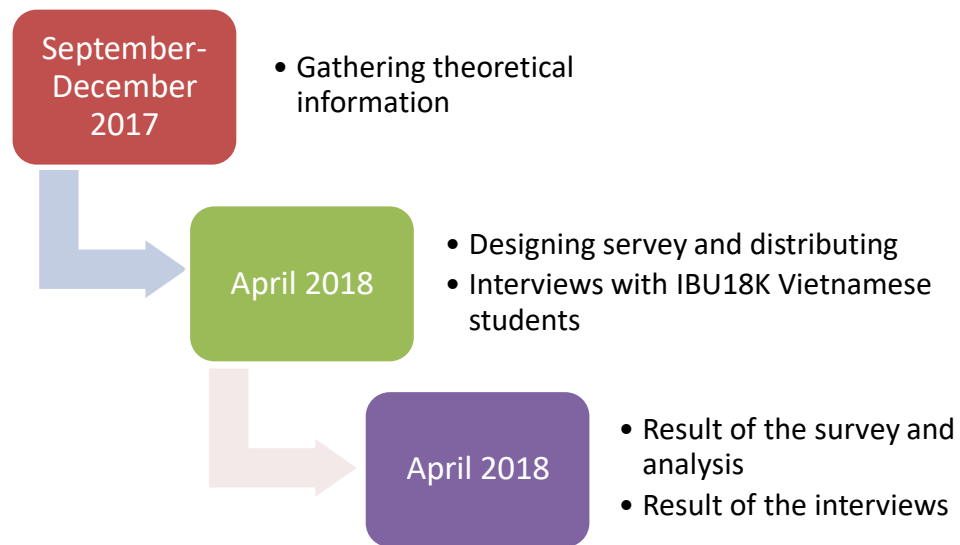


FIGURE 11: Data collection process

In the autumn of 2017, the author started writing the thesis. At first, the author gathered theory and knowledge about customer decision journey, marketisation of higher education and the student as customer approach. After the theoretical information was gathered, it was time to design and form interviews for IBU18K Vietnamese students. The researcher received the contacts information of IBU18K Vietnamese students from Lahti UAS' Degree Programme Coordinator - Ms. Marja Viljanen. Three interviews by Skype and one interview via email were done in April 2018. The interviews were in Vietnamese and were recorded as audio files. At the same time as the interviews, the survey for Vietnamese students was formulated. The survey was distributed on 26th April 2018 and it was open for three days. The survey was created with TypeForm and a link to the survey was distributed on several Facebook pages which are for students who are interested in studying abroad.

Altogether there were 47 responses, which was sufficient for analysing the results. The next section explains and analyses the interviews and data collected via survey.

6.3 Data Analysis

This chapter analyses the information and data obtained from empirical research. At first, the researcher went through the interview questions and analysed the interviewees' answers. The second part of data analysis is presenting the results of the survey and analysing the findings.

6.3.1 Interview Analysis

The interview consists of eight questions, aiming to get a deeper understanding of the many different factors that affect Vietnamese students in choosing their study at Lahti UAS. This interview targets IBU18K Vietnamese students who have already been studying at Lahti UAS and are charged for tuition fees. There are three interviews that were conducted via Skyped and one via email. The interviews via Skype were in Vietnamese and were recorded. Then the author transcribed the audio into text and later translated it into English. The answer received via email was in English and therefore used directly in this chapter. Interviewees' age range is from 20 to 23 years old. There were both male and female as interviewees.

The first question is finding out when the Vietnamese students realise that they want to study abroad. This question will help the case company know the age range of their target group.

Interviewee 1: "I realised that I want to study abroad around 2 years ago when I was studying at a university in Vietnam. I didn't like the education environment that I had at my university, that's why I started looking for information about studying abroad."

Interviewee 2: "I started to look for opportunities to study abroad around 1 year ago. Before, I had never thought of studying abroad, but when I started working at a company in

Vietnam, I realised that I want to work in a more international environment. That's the turning point in my thinking."

Interviewee 3: *"When I was studying at university, the education environment did not excite me and the programmes were too theoretical. I also realised that the degree that I would get in Vietnam is not widely recognised internationally."*

Interviewee 4: *"I decided to study abroad when I was in high school."*

According to the answers of the interviewees, it appears that they started looking for opportunities to study abroad they were around 16 – 22 years old and they were already in a Vietnamese university. Vietnamese education and working environment are the main reasons for them to decide to study abroad.

The second question is to discover which channels the interviewee used for searching for information about studying abroad. This question will provide the case company with information about which the effective means of communication are when trying to reach Vietnamese students.

Interviewee 1: *"I searched for information online and asked my friends who have already been studying in Finland. I was also provided information by the abroad study consultant service company."*

Interviewee 2: *"I searched for information in some Facebook groups that are for Vietnamese students applying for higher education in Finland. My uncle who is living in Finland also provided me with a lot of information. Additionally, the abroad study consultant service company gave me information as well."*

Interviewee 3: *"I have my relatives living in Finland so I received a lot of information from them. My other main*

information sources are Google and Finnish university websites.”

Interviewee 4: *“I searched for studying abroad information on studyabroad.vn.”*

Three of the interviewees have friends or relatives that are already living in Finland. For them, it is the most trustworthy source of information that they got. Moreover, university websites, Facebook groups or websites of Vietnamese students with the same interest in studying abroad are also the useful and main channels that they used for looking for information.

The third question aims to find out what makes interviewees interested in Finnish education. With this information, the case company is able to know which aspects of Finnish education Vietnamese students value the most so that they can focus their programmes on those values more and can emphasize those values in their marketing campaign.

Interviewee 1: *“The tuition fee in Finland is not as high as other countries such as UAS, Australia and Finland is a European country.”*

Interviewee 2: *“Finnish education is rated as one of the best education in the world. Finnish universities offer scholarships.”*

Interviewee 3: *“I looked at the curriculum of several universities in Finland and I saw that they have more applied science subjects than theoretical subjects and it doesn’t take long to get to the practical courses that I can instantly relate myself to. Unlike in Vietnam, where it took me 2 years of theoretical subjects to get into something practical. In addition, the tuition fee is not high compared to many other countries.”*

Interviewee 4: *“Tuition fee is not high and Finland is ranked the 1st over the world in term of educational system.”*

There are several aspects of Finnish education that interviewees value such as good reputation, practical curriculum, low tuition fees and offering scholarships. Among those factors, low tuition fees appears to attract the interviewees the most.

The fourth question is to find out how, from whom or from which channels the interviewees heard about Lahti UAS. This question helps the case company figure out which marketing channels are the most effective so that they can focus more on the marketing channels that they already have or reach out to new marketing channels.

Interviewee 1: *“I knew Lahti UAS through my friends.”*

Interviewee 2: *“I heard about Lahti UAS while searching on the internet and through my relatives.”*

Interviewee 3: *“While I was searching on the internet, I found the list of Finnish universities of applied sciences and I visited the website of Lahti UAS. I noticed that Lahti UAS has a Facebook page but most of its posts are in Finnish so I could not get much information out of it. I was also interested in watching some videos about the university’s facilities and the experience of students who are studying there but I could not find any.”*

Interviewee 4: *“I have a friend studying at LAMK.”*

According to the interviewees, they found out about Lahti UAS from their friends, relatives and while actively searching for information about Finnish universities on the internet. This implies that word of mouth marketing or personal recommendation is highly trusted by the interviewees. Lahti UAS’ website is a good source of information and good marketing channels. However, the social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube do not have a good coverage among the interviewees because they are mostly in Finnish and are not active in updating information.

The question “Which criteria did you consider when choosing a university in Finland? How did you compare Lahti UAS with any other Finnish universities?” is asked in order to discover the competitive advantages of Lahti UAS in the interviewees’ perspective. The answer to this question will help the case company in articulating the benefits that they provide for Vietnamese students that is better than the competition and reinforce that message in every communication to Vietnamese students.

Interviewee 1: “I chose Lahti UAS firstly because the tuition fee is moderate and the scholarship is up to 50%. Secondly, the city of Lahti is not too small and it is close to Helsinki, therefore, it will be more convenient for me to find a job in the future.”

Interviewee 2: “Lahti UAS is near the capital city unlike many other universities which are in remote areas where there are not many people so I will feel sad or the area up north where the weather can be too extreme for me in the winter. Moreover, I like practical classes more than theoretical classes, that's why I chose a university of applied science rather than a university.”

Interviewee 3: “Actually, when I applied for the spring semester, only Lahti UAS and University of Jyväskylä were recruiting students. The University of Jyväskylä required IELTS certificate and I do not have that certificate yet, so I chose Lahti UAS.”

Interviewee 4: “Area, opportunity, weather. I compared tuition fee, living life, weather. Lahti is located in the South of Finland with higher temperature in winter, as well as Lahti is also a city that is really near the capital of Finland – Helsinki, which will bring me more opportunities in the future.”

From the answer of interviewees, the competitive advantages of Lahti UAS are location, more application periods and simpler application process. By knowing which aspects make them stand out in the competition, the case company is able to emphasise those aspects when communicating with Vietnamese students.

In the sixth question, the author asked interviewees who influence them the most in their decision to study abroad. This question helps the case company effectively expand their marketing channels to whom their potential students listen to and trust the most.

Interviewee 1: *“The person that influences me the most is my mother. She supported me the whole time during my application to Lahti UAS.”*

Interviewee 2: *“My previous boss used to study abroad. Many of my friends are studying abroad also. This inspired me to go study abroad as well.”*

Interviewee 3: *“I decided all by myself and I was not influenced by anybody.”*

Interviewee 4: *“Myself and my family.”*

Since interviewee 2 and interviewee 3 already finished university in Vietnam and had a job before, they are more independent in their own decision. They are inspired by their friends and acquaintances but not influenced by anybody. Interviewees 1 and 4 are younger and more influenced by their families. Lahti UAS can develop a marketing channel to target Vietnamese parents who are considering letting their children study abroad.

The next question is to find out how interviewees react to the introduction of tuition fees for international students in Finland. Knowing this information helps Lahti UAS in understanding the impact of tuition fees on

Vietnamese students so as to adjust their marketing strategy for targeting the future students.

Interviewee 1: *“The introduction of a tuition fee did not affect me much. Compared to other countries such as UAS or UK, the tuition fee in Finland is still much cheaper.”*

Interviewee 2: *“Tuition fee does not affect my decision. The introduction of tuition fee happened before I knew about opportunities to study abroad in Finland.”*

Interviewee 3: *“The tuition fee in Finland is still much cheaper than in many other countries so it really does not affect me at all.”*

Interviewee 4: *“A little bit. For me, the most important thing is that what I can learn during university life as well as my satisfaction without depression that I choose the right place to enjoy my life.”*

Three out of four interviewees are not at all affected by the introduction of a tuition fee since the education quality over the price is one of the highest among the countries that they know. One interviewee said that she is a bit affected but she still chose Finland because she values the knowledge and experiences. From all the answers, it appears that tuition fees do not have a big influence on IBU18K students. This helps the case company focus more on the values that they can deliver the tuition fee that the students have to pay.

The last question is to find out whether there was any information that the interviewees could not find about Lahti UAS before they arrived. This question helps the case company know what kind of information the students need and therefore improve their means of communication.

Interviewee 1: *“I could not find the curriculum or list of subjects that I will study at Lahti UAS. I would love to know about it*

before so that I could have a better preparation and shorter time for adjustment when I arrived.”

Interviewee 2: “I could not find more details of the different majors that Lahti UAS offers for international students.”

Interviewee 3: “I want to see the facilities of Lahti UAS such as classrooms, library and so on. Lahti UAS has a big school, nice library, and classroom and they should show them to potential students. I also want to watch some videos about the experience of Vietnamese students who have already studied at Lahti UAS.”

Interviewee 4: “Actually there is nothing that I could not find about Lahti UAS.”

According to the interviewees, they want to know more about the curriculum of their future study, pictures of school facilities and videos about Vietnamese students' experience in Lahti UAS. With this information, the case company understands what the Vietnamese students want, what information to provide and add to their communication channels.

6.3.2 Data Analysis of the Survey

The survey aims to answer the question “What are the most crucial criteria in the initial phases of decision-making journey of potential Vietnamese students when choosing a bachelor’s degree program abroad?” by targeting Vietnamese students who did study, are studying or have intention to study abroad to understand the process they went through or are going through when deciding to study abroad.

The first two questions in the survey covered the demographics of the respondents. The first question was to ask about the age of the respondent. The oldest respondent is 36 years old and the youngest is 16 years old. Most respondents were from the age group between 18 and 22.

The second biggest age group was above 22 years old and out 48 respondents, 6 were under 18 years old. Lahti UAS does not restrain age on people who want to acquire a degree. Therefore, there is no age limit for this survey and this sample of respondents represents the target group well because it has a good coverage of both high school students (under 18), university students (18 to 22) and people out of university/having a job (over 23).

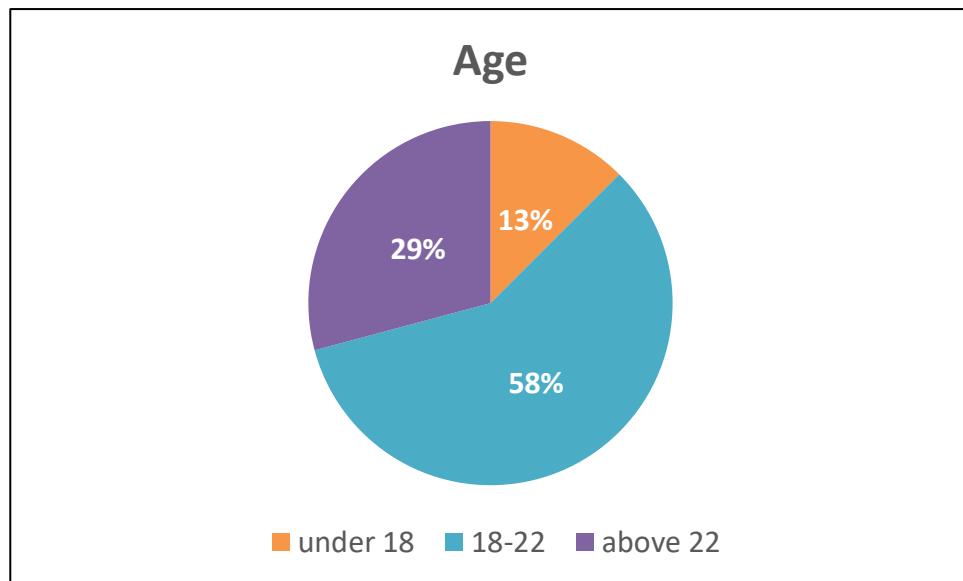


FIGURE 12: Age distribution of respondents

The second question was to ask about the gender of the respondent. Among 48 respondents, 31 are female, 16 are male and 1 is other. As an educational institution, the case company does not have a gender preference and both female and male are considered as potential students. As both female and male respondents participated in the survey, the results are legitimate for the case company and both genders' points of view are taken into account. The following figure demonstrates the distribution between genders.

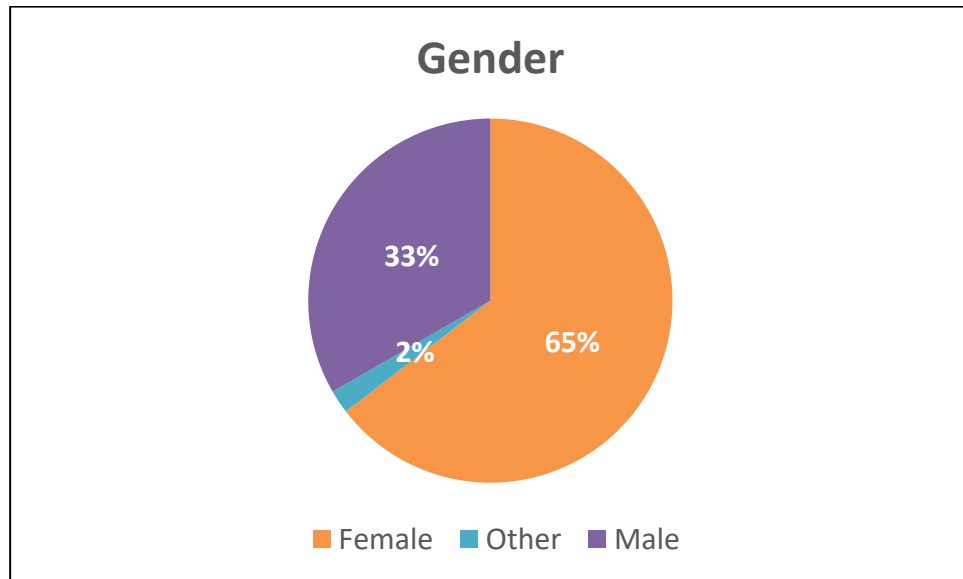


FIGURE 13: Gender distribution of respondents

After knowing the demographics of the respondents, it was time to ask about when the respondent recognised their needs to study abroad. This question can help the case company know the age range of the Vietnamese group that they should target. The respondent could select from six different options and choose the one that fits their period when they realised their desire to study abroad. From the results, most of the respondents (24 over 48) acknowledged their need to study abroad when they were in high school. 9 respondents said that they realised their need to study abroad when they were in university and eight respondents realised it when they were in secondary school. Four people replied that they were too small to remember, two people answered that primary school is the time they noticed their need to study abroad. Only one respondent said that they acknowledged their need when they already had a job. The result that can be seen from the answers is that most of the Vietnamese students entered their initial-consideration phase when they were in high school (from 14 to 17 years old). For that reason, it is the most effective if Lahti UAS targets their marketing campaign on this group of Vietnamese students.

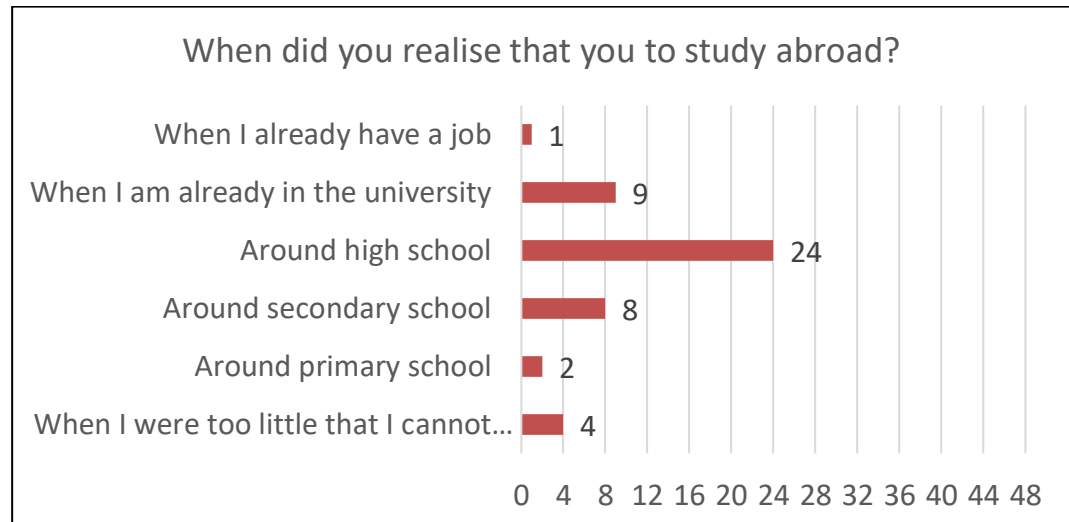


FIGURE 14: Age when Vietnamese students realised their need to study abroad

The fourth question was about the influence of other people on the respondent's intention to study abroad. The aim of this question was to find out other potential groups that the case company should consider to market to in order to better communicate with Vietnamese students through multiple approaches. For this question, the respondent had to rate how her or his parents, friends, relatives and teachers or mentors influence her or him in deciding to study abroad. The rating scale is from one to five where one is a very little influence and five is a very big influence. The mean was calculated for each group of people (see Figure 15) and the people that were selected as the biggest influence are parents and friends. Relatives have a moderate influence on respondents and teachers or mentors do not have much influence on them. This result shows that Vietnamese students' decision to study abroad is largely affected by their parents and their friends since parents are the ones who support them financially and friends are the ones who motivate them to study abroad. Similarly to the answers received in the interviews that the author conducted before, two students said that they wanted to study abroad because their friends have already been studying abroad.

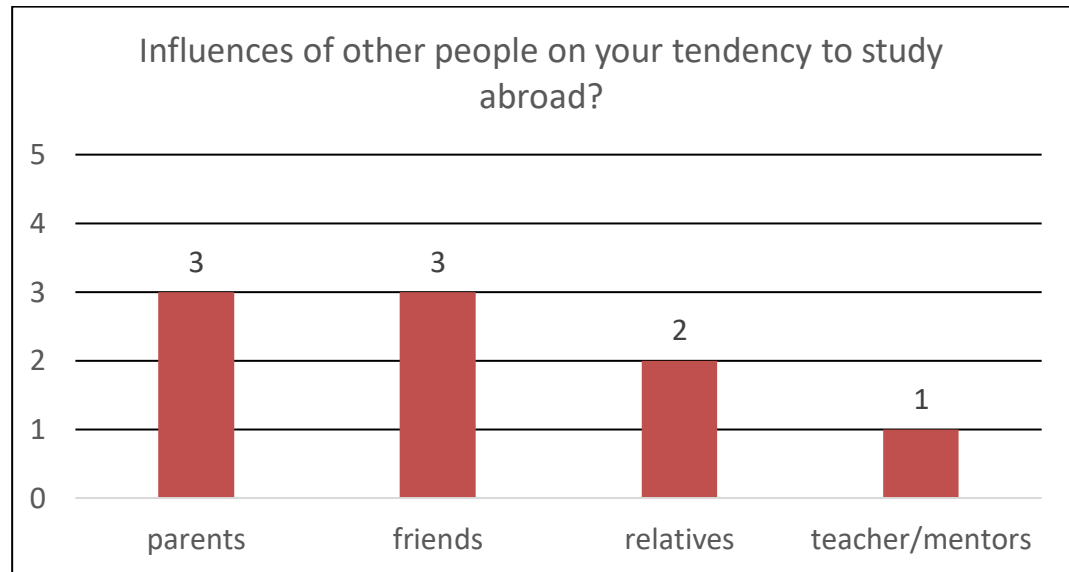


FIGURE 15: Other people influences on Vietnamese students' tendency to study abroad

Besides having rated the people that influenced their tendency to study abroad, respondents could write if there were any other factors that affect their decision. Factors that the respondents mentioned in their answers were political problems, equality in society, issues of the education in Vietnam and desire to travel around the world. Knowing the push factors of Vietnamese students in choosing an overseas education helps the case company have a deeper understanding of their target customers and thus to approach them better.

After obtaining information about when Vietnamese students realised their needs to study abroad and who affects their decision, it was crucial to find out which channels they search for information about studying abroad. During this initial consideration phase of Vietnamese students, it is important for Lahti UAS to advertise their name through those channels that are popular among Vietnamese students. The fifth question required the respondents to choose one or several options, which were the channels that they looked for the overseas education information. 36 respondents said they were searching for information on Google and social media. 30 respondents answered that they were asking their friends, relatives who already studied abroad. 25 replied that they got

information from the abroad study consultant centre. 17 chose education exhibition. Only 4 people said that they used other channels that were not covered by the questions. It can be seen from the result that Vietnamese students find information on many different channels but the most popular one is Google and social media and asking from friends and relatives who already studied abroad. This shows that digital marketing and word of mouth are effective marketing strategies for the case company.

Also, it is worth noting that Vietnamese students are willing to pay an abroad study consultant centre to provide them with the information of various universities and their comparison. Therefore, Lahti UAS can connect to some abroad study consultant centres to provide a detailed information about their school. The result of this question is displayed in the figure below.

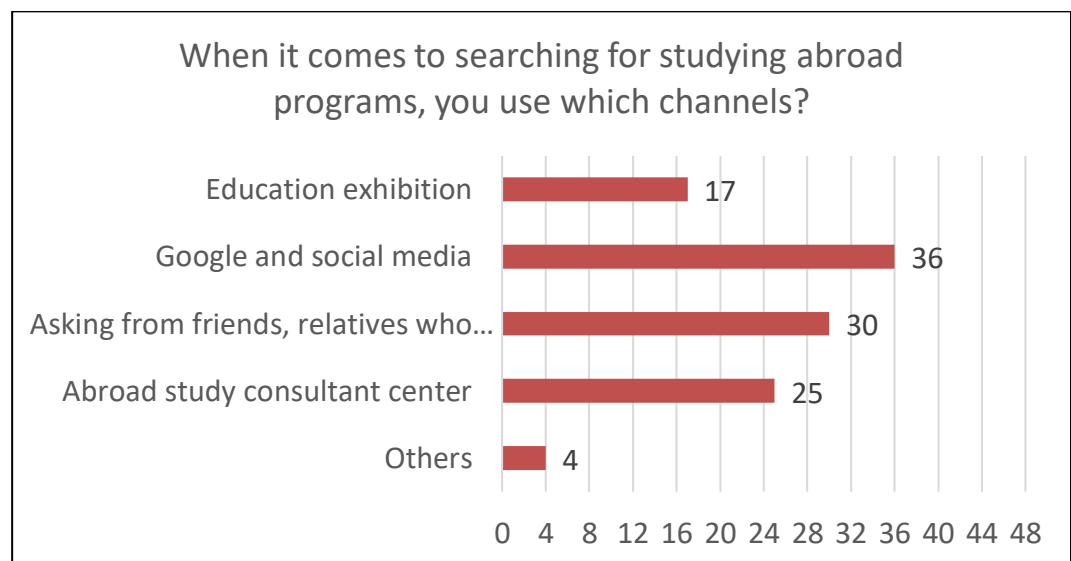


FIGURE 16: Channels that Vietnamese students use for searching information about studying abroad

The sixth question in the survey was concerning the social media channels the respondent uses when searching for studying abroad programmes. This question is useful for the case company since social media plays an important role in digital marketing and is a very efficient way to reach the audience, especially millennials (Thomas 2015). Moreover, in the previous

question, the result showed that Vietnamese students mostly found information about studying abroad on social media. This question was to figure out which social media channels are mainly used among Vietnamese students and which social media channels Lahti UAS should focus their marketing on in order to reach Vietnamese students. Respondents could select more than one option. According to the result, most Vietnamese students use Facebook when searching for studying abroad information. The second most popular social media channel is Google+, followed by other channels such as blogs and Vietnamese social media platforms. LinkedIn comes in the fourth place, followed by Instagram. There were only 2 people who chose Twitter. From the result of this question which is shown in Figure 17, Lahti UAS should focus their marketing activities on Facebook, Google+ and different blogs.

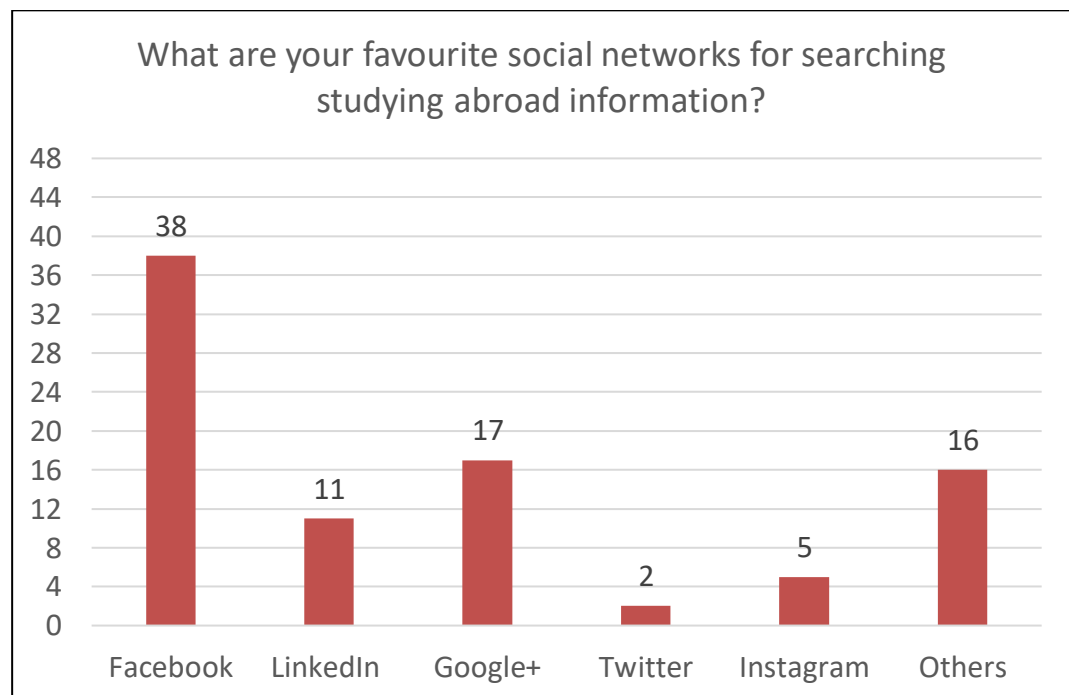


FIGURE 17: Social media channels that Vietnamese students used when searching studying abroad information

The next question in the survey was to ask about the which criteria that the respondent values the most when choosing a university abroad. Obtaining this information helps the case company have deeper knowledge about

the active evaluation phase of Vietnamese students in their decision journey. In this question, respondent had to rate the importance of the country, the city where they will study, the tuition fees, the size of the university, scholarship, application process, the Vietnamese community in that area, and university rankings when considering a university abroad. The rating scale is from one to five where one is not at all important and five is very important. All the criteria were calculated based on their mean. The result pointed out that tuition fees and scholarship are the most important criteria for them when choosing a university abroad. The country where they want to study and the convenience of the application process were in the second places, followed by city, size of university and rankings which were in the third places. Vietnamese community did not appear to be an important criterion when considering an overseas university. From the result, Lahti UAS is able to highlight their competitive advantages including reasonable tuition fees, attractive scholarship, being located in Finland whose education system is ranked the top in the world as well as a simple and clear application process in the communication to the Vietnamese students. The mean of each criterion is shown in the below figure.

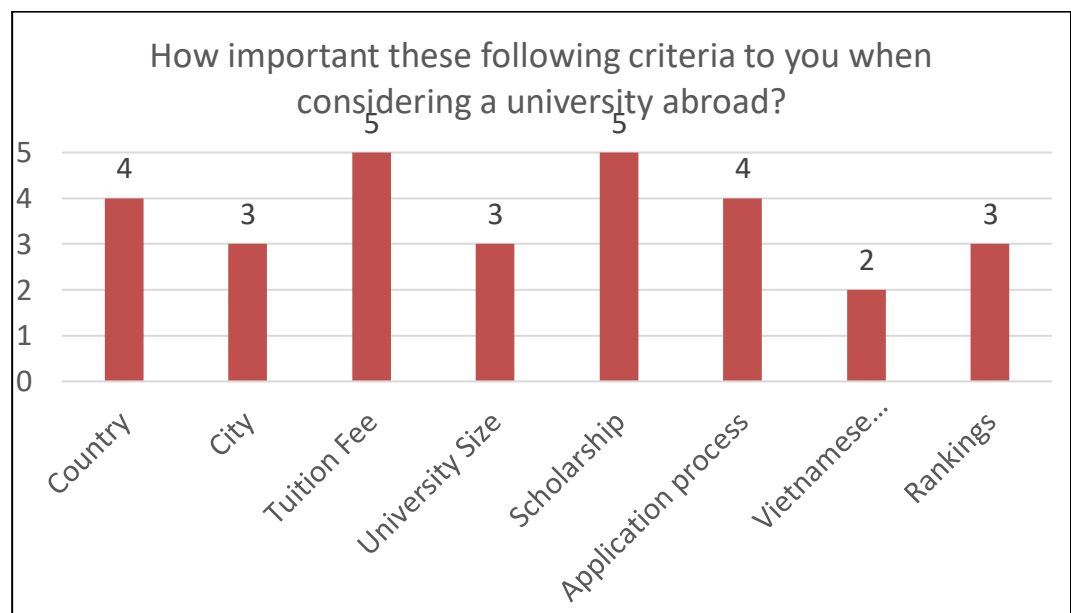


FIGURE 18: Criteria Vietnamese students value the most when choosing a university abroad

The eighth question asked respondents about what made them interested in Finnish education in general. This question will help Lahti UAS understand the pull factors of the host country, Finland, that affect the choice of Vietnamese students. As a result, the case company can use those factors as their strengths and emphasise this in their message to Vietnamese students. This is an open-ended question which respondents could freely type in their answer. Some of the respondents said that Finnish education is high quality and is ranked at the top of the worldwide education. A very common answer is Finnish universities provides degrees in English so that their degree is accepted worldwide. Respondents also said that the Finnish education values creativity, team work and equality. Moreover, respondents mentioned the living quality as well as the job opportunities that they are able to get after graduation. Finland has a system of universities of applied sciences where students can have practical knowledge more than theoretical one, that is why many Vietnamese students still decided to get a bachelor degree in Finland after completing a university in Vietnam in the same field of study.

The ninth question asked respondents about the effect of Finnish tuition fee introduction on their decision in choosing a Finnish institution. In this question, the respondent rated from 1 to 10 where 1 is not affected at all and 10 is really affected. The result of this question was calculated based on the mean of all the ratings that the respondents gave. The respondents rated the influence of the tuition fee introduction on their decision 8 over 10. This result means that Vietnamese students were quite negative about the tuition fee introduction since free education had been the main reason for many Vietnamese students chose to study in Finland before. By acknowledging this challenge, the case company is able to adjust their marketing strategy that they have been using so far to target Vietnamese students.

The next question was to ask how the respondent knew about Lahti UAS if they have heard of it before. This question was dedicated to the case company and helped them know their brand awareness among

Vietnamese students. Unless the respondent had never heard of Lahti UAS before, the respondent could choose as many options as many fitted their answer. Out of 48 respondents, 7 said that they had never heard of Lahti UAS until the survey. Among the ones who knew about Lahti UAS already, 25 people replied that they knew Lahti UAS through their friends and relatives, 20 people answered that they heard about Lahti UAS from social media, 10 people said that they knew about Lahti UAS by browsing the website, 8 people knew Lahti UAS from conferences or education exhibition. There were 7 people said they knew Lahti UAS through some other channels such as blogs or abroad study consultant centres. This survey was distributed on the Facebook group of Vietnamese students who are interested in or have already studied in some foreign countries include Finland and it appears that Lahti UAS is acknowledged by many Vietnamese students. Vietnamese students knew Lahti UAS mostly from their friends and relatives and from social media. With this information, the case company can focus more on word of mouth and social media marketing activities when targeting Vietnamese students. The result of this question is illustrated below.

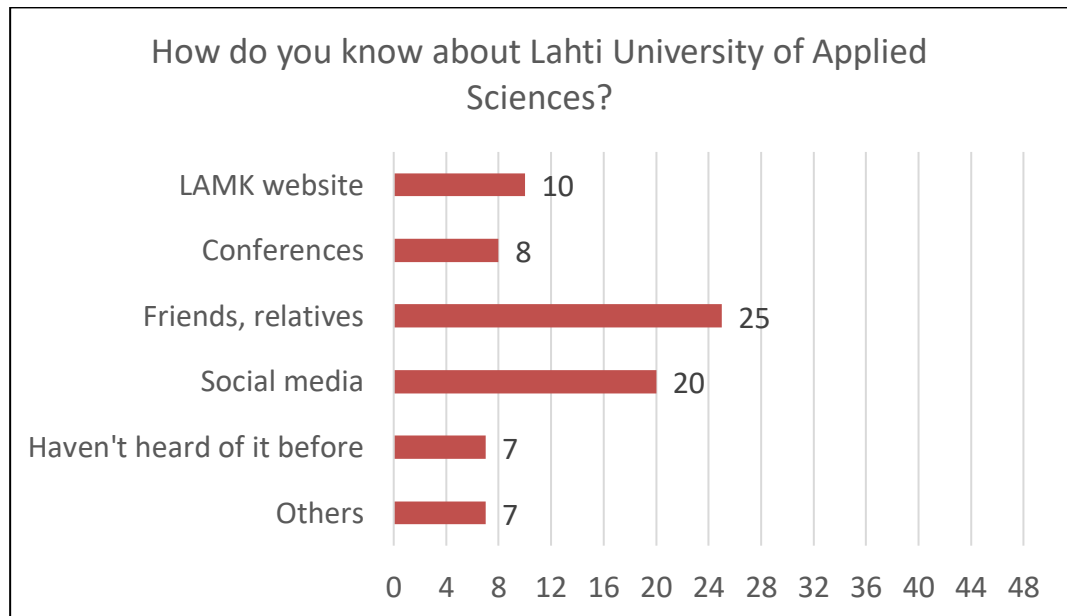


FIGURE 19: Channels where Vietnamese students heard about Lahti UAS

The last two questions were for people who already knew, who already studied or who are considering to study at Lahti UAS. The purpose of this question was to find out if there is any information that the respondent could not find or wish to know more about Lahti UAS. This information will assist the case company in knowing how to better provide with information to Vietnamese students in order to attract them more. According to the answers received, there were 5 respondents said that they could not find all the information they wanted to know about Lahti UAS. This information included careers after graduation, the time when application results start to be sent and information about the study plan. Acknowledging what Vietnamese students want to know more about, the case company is able to add this information to their communication to Vietnamese students.

7 RECOMMENDATION

Since both the theoretical research and empirical research are completed, it is time to make some recommendations for the case company. The recommendations are based on the case company's situation, the Vietnamese students' opinion received from the interviews and the survey and the author's perspective. The following chapters are going through two initial phases in customer decision journey which are the initial consideration phase and the active evaluation phase and how Vietnamese students can be reached in each phase via different marketing channels.

7.1 Reaching Vietnamese Students During the Initial Consideration Phase

The initial consideration is the first phase in the customer decision journey. As mentioned in chapter two, the companies that enter this phase have a better chance to turn leads into customers. Therefore, Lahti UAS should get involved as soon as they can when the Vietnamese students realise their need to study abroad. In this phase, the case company can publish several articles about Finnish education in general and Lahti UAS' programmes in particular. Writing articles which include meta tags and are shared widely on various social media channels such as Facebook and Google+ will increase a lot the visibility for Lahti UAS. Moreover, the case company should encourage Vietnamese students and alumni of Lahti UAS to share their experience that they had while studying there. According to the result of the empirical research, Vietnamese students got a lot of their information about studying abroad from their friends and relatives, meaning they really value the real experience of the students who already studied there.

Currently, the case company's social media channels are overwhelming with their Finnish language content. It is strongly recommended that Lahti UAS puts more effort to convey their information in English so that Vietnamese students are able to understand what activities the university

has. Additionally, Lahti UAS can create some easy-to-share content like infographics or top-ten lists that highlight the strengths of their education system as well as extracurricular activities.

7.2 Reaching Vietnamese Students During the Active Evaluation Phase

After raising the awareness of Vietnamese students about Finnish education in general and Lahti UAS in particular, it is time for Lahti UAS to enter the active evaluation phase and prove their value to Vietnamese students. In this phase, the case company should concentrate on attracting Vietnamese students by showcasing their strongest competitive advantages such as reasonable tuition fees, high scholarship and high-quality education system. The case company can organise a contest for Vietnamese students at Lahti UAS to create videos about their experiences when studying there. This would not only showcase exciting events for the current students but would also be a very effective marketing tool for targeting potential Vietnamese students.

Moreover, Lahti UAS can organise some online conferences where they can directly present their programmes and have a chance to interact with Vietnamese students. The case company can also use sharable tools, like eBooks, to provide valuable and practical information to Vietnamese students.

8 CONCLUSION

This chapter brings together the information collected during the empirical research and the findings of this thesis. The first subchapter gives the answers to research questions. The answers to research questions are also presented in this chapter. The second subchapter focuses on the reliability and validity of this study. This chapter finishes with a suggestion for further research.

8.1 Answers to Research Questions

The research in this thesis was conducted in order to discover the information about the initial phase of Vietnamese students' decision journey in choosing a bachelor's degree abroad. The sub-questions are answered first since they play a supporting role in answering the main question.

Sub-questions:

What attributes affect the target group in considering a bachelor's degree abroad?

There are both push factors which come from the students' side and pull factors which are from the host country and host institution's side that affect the Vietnamese students in considering a bachelor's degree abroad. The push factors comprise of the people and the environment around Vietnamese students. People that influence Vietnamese students the most are their parents and their friends. Parents emotionally and financially support the overseas education of Vietnamese students while friends play an important role in motivating them to study abroad. The pull factors that attract Vietnamese students in studying abroad are higher education quality, high rankings of the education or institutions worldwide, international degrees that are widely accepted, freedom and equality, practical knowledge, and developing soft skills.

Where does the targeted group search for information on an abroad bachelor's degree program?

Vietnamese students mostly search for information about studying abroad on Google and social media. They also trust the information which is shared by their friends and relatives who have already studied abroad. Facebook, Google+, and personal blogs are the most popular social media that Vietnamese students use to search for study abroad information. In addition, many Vietnamese students use the service from abroad study consultant companies and go to some education exhibition for information about the education overseas.

What is good content for an abroad bachelor's degree program in an advertisement?

According to the findings of the interviews and survey, Vietnamese students want to know about the study plan, scholarship information, curriculum as well as the career opportunities after graduation. Moreover, experiences of Vietnamese alumni and pictures and video about the facilities of the institution are desired.

What attributes the targeted group value the most in an abroad bachelor's degree programme in International Business?

Attributes that Vietnamese students value the most are the quality of the education over tuition fee and scholarship. They also value the environment and the living quality of the country where they will study. Moreover, Vietnamese students want to obtain a degree that is valid and accepted worldwide from a reputable education system.

Main research question:

What are the most crucial criteria in the initial phases of decision-making journey of potential Vietnamese students when choosing a bachelor's degree program abroad?

Most of the Vietnamese students realised their intention to study for a bachelor's degree abroad around high school and university. It is the moment when the decision journey starts. From the interviews and the survey that were conducted in the empirical research, there are several push and pull factors that influence Vietnamese students in their initial consideration. Push factors include people and environment among Vietnamese students. Parents and friends are two group of people that affect Vietnamese students in choosing international bachelor degrees' programmes the most. Environment push factors are political problems, education quality and lack of innovation. Some pull factors are high-quality education, internationally accepted degrees, freedom and equality in society and traveling experiences.

When it comes to searching for information in the active evaluation phase, Google and social media are the most popular channels among Vietnamese students. It is worth to notice that Vietnamese students value and trust the information that they received from friends and relatives who already studied to lived abroad and especially the country that they want to study. The fast growth of abroad study consultant service companies is playing a more important role in providing Vietnamese students with overseas education information. Facebook, Google+, and personal blogs are the social media channels that Vietnamese students use the most in searching for information about studying abroad. Good content on social media such as personal experience and video blogs on YouTube can also effectively influence Vietnamese students when comparing different schools.

Regarding the host institutions, Vietnamese value the education quality over tuition fees and scholarship the most. The environment of the host country and the convenience of the application process are also crucial attributes when Vietnamese students decide where to study and at which university.

8.2 Validity and Reliability

Reliability is concerned with which data collection methods or analysis process will generate consistent findings. It can be evaluated by asking whether the measures produce the same result on other occasions, similar observations will be approached by other observers and there is transparency in how perception was created from the raw data. (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2008) Validity is used to decide whether research measures what it was meant to measure and to approximate the accuracy of the findings (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009).

The fundamental purpose of research is to discover answers to all research questions. The goals of this research were achieved as the answers to all the research questions including main question and sub-questions were revealed. The source of information used for this thesis was collected both from primary and secondary sources. Primary data was collected during the empirical research phase with the help of interviews and survey. There were four interviews in total with Vietnamese IBU18K students who just started their course in Spring 2018 and after the introduction of tuition fees. One interview was done via email and three other interviews were conducted via Skype and were recorded in Vietnamese, and then transcribed and translated into English. The survey was distributed among the Vietnamese students who have studied or are considering studying abroad which are the target group that the case company wants to focus on. The number of respondents was 48, which is enough to draw some conclusions about the decision journey of Vietnamese students in choosing international degree's programmes. From the results of the empirical research, the findings certainly answer the main research question of this thesis. Secondary sources were gathered from literature, such as official books, peer-reviewed articles in journal or periodical and conference proceedings which explained the topic related to the research questions. Therefore, the research is considered to be valid.

The author discloses the methodology research and how to gather data thoroughly and in detail. The research is completed with the case company and its acquired and potential target customers. Therefore, the results of the research are consistent. Both interviews and survey were conducted to answer the research question. There were open-ended questions in both the interviews and the survey which brings a deeper understanding of the target group as well as limit the risk of subjectivity or bias. Moreover, the survey is created using an online platform, which keeps the respondents' attention and makes them more open to the questions. With all the aspects mentioned above, the author believes that this research is completely reliable.

8.3 Suggestion on Further Research

The thesis' purpose was to find out crucial criteria in two initial phases of Vietnamese students' decision journey in choosing international bachelor degree's programmes. Further research could be expanded to deeper examine the later phases of the Vietnamese students' decision journey which are closure and post-purchase i.e. getting results from the entrance exam and finally moving to Finland. These two last stages play an important role in keeping the students' satisfaction and recommendation to other Vietnamese students.

Moreover, this research only focused on reaching students from Vietnam. In order to help Lahti UAS have a complete marketing strategy to reach international students in general, further research on students from other countries such as China and Russia is suggested. A broader research would be appealing and provide useful information for the case company.

9 SUMMARY

This thesis aims to provide an insight into the Vietnamese students' decision journey in choosing an international bachelor's degree programme. The information is useful and necessary for the case company because Vietnamese students are one of the largest groups of the international students in Lahti UAS and introduction of tuition fees affected their decision quite a lot. There are several attributes in the initial phases of decision journey that the case company can make use of to acquire more Vietnamese students. This thesis examined the initial consideration and active evaluation phase in the Vietnamese students' decision journey to have a better approach to this customer group.

This thesis was written based on deductive reasoning. In the beginning, the author explained the fundamental concepts of customer behaviour and decision making. After that, marketisation of higher education and the student as customer approach was discussed. Followed by two theoretical parts, chapter four wrote about Vietnamese students as customers in oversea education market based on the push-pull factor theory and customer decision journey.

Chapter five introduced the background information, organisation structure, vision, values, and their international education service of the case company Lahti UAS Ltd. The company's current marketing situation was also analysed in this chapter. Empirical research and its analysis were discussed in chapter six. In order to collect data for the research, interviews via Skype and email as well as an online survey were conducted. The interviews and survey gave a deeper understanding of Vietnamese students' decision journey to the case company. Social media and word of mouth are two most effective marketing activities for approaching Vietnamese students.

In chapter seven, the author interpreted the findings of the empirical research and gave recommendations for potential marketing activities that the case company should apply. The final part of the thesis was to answer

the main research question and all the sub-questions that came up in the introduction. Validity and reliability were discussed and the author mentioned how further research can be expanded. This thesis achieves all the goals that were established and is considered to be truly valid and reliable.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questions

1. When did you decide that you want to study abroad?
2. Which channels did you use for searching information about studying abroad?
3. What makes you interested in Finnish education in general?
4. How did you find out about LAMK?
5. Which criteria did you consider when choosing a university in Finland? How did you compare LAMK with any other Finnish universities?
6. Who affected/ influenced you the most in your decision?
7. How did tuition fee affect your decision?
8. Were there any information that you could not search for when you were in Vietnam about LAMK?

Appendix 2. Survey

1 → First, let get to know each other. How old are you?*

Type your answer here...

2 → And you are?*



A Male

B Female

C Other

3 → When did you realise that you wanna study abroad?*

A When I were too little that I cannot remember

B Around primary school

C Around secondary school

D Around high school

E When I am already in the university

F When I already have a job

4 → Influences of other people on your tendency to study abroad

a. Your parents?*



b. Your friends?*

classmates, social friends or even boy/girlfriend



c. Relatives?*



d. Teachers/mentors?*



e. Other? Please specify

5 → When it comes to searching for studying abroad programs, you use which channels?*

Choose as many as you like

A Abroad study consultant center aka Trung tâm tư vấn du học

B Asking from friends, relatives who have already studied abroad

C Google and social media

D Education exhibition (Triển lãm du học)

E Others

6 → What are your favourite social networks for searching educational information?*

Choose as many as you like



A Facebook



B LinkedIn



C Google+



D Twitter



E Instagram



F Other

7 → How important these following criteria to you when considering a university abroad?

a. Country*



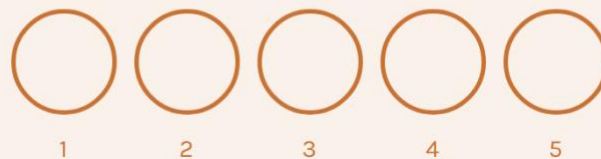
b. City*



c. Tuitions fee*



d. Size of the university*



e. Scholarship*



7 → How important these following criteria to you when considering a university abroad?

f. Application process*



g. Vietnamese community in that area*



h. Rankings



i. Any other criteria?

8 → What makes you interested in Finnish education in general?*

Type your answer here...

SHIFT + ENTER to make a line break

9 → How does the fact that there is a tuition fee for non-EU students in Finland affects your consideration to choose a Finnish university? *



10 → How do you know about Lahti University of Applied Sciences (LAMK)*

Choose as many as you like

A Never heard of it before till this survey

B Social media

C Friends, relatives

D Conferences

E LAMK website

F Others

11 → Is there any information about LAMK that you want know but cannot find? *

Y Yes

N No

12 → If yes? then what information?

Type your answer here...
