Marketing communication channels and their use in student recruitment at Laurea University of Applied Sciences

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The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the opinions and images that student applicants have of Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and to examine the factors which affect their decision to apply to Laurea. The study aims to uncover the most effective marketing channels of Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and to determine how they could be further improved from the viewpoint of student recruitment.

The study was carried out as a quantitative research study, with a questionnaire form distributed to applicants along with the entrance examination invitations which needed to be completed and returned for entrance examinations in autumn 2012. The questions were planned in cooperation with the marketing department of Laurea UAS. A total of 4161 forms were sent and 1776 applicants returned the form, resulting in a response rate of 43%. The responses were then entered into PASW statistical analysis software for further analysis.

The theoretical section of the thesis discusses marketing in general, and introduces the marketing mix. Marketing communications are also reviewed, and different marketing communications channels introduced.

The results of the study show that the new applicants' main source of information was the Laurea website, which was quite expected given the popularity of internet. Another important information channel was the traditional applicants' guide book, which is available in both electronic and physical form, and is distributed to secondary level schools. Word of mouth was also a significant information channel, which is also difficult to affect through marketing. Positively influencing the experiences of past and present students is vital in to the creation of a good image, as well as marketing through social media and following the latest trends in social marketing.

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1   Introduction

In Finland Universities are funded by the government, with the main method of funding determined by the number of students eventually graduating from their study programmes. The current situation with the universities has highlighted the importance of new applicants to the schools. Deciding factors for students when choosing the university where to apply vary and the importance of bringing all available information about the study units and the benefits of any specific university is crucial, as the competition is high. As competition grows and universities are even ranked on their success in terms of future employment opportunities and innovative learning methods, the fact that the number of new applicants is not necessarily increasing is making the competition harder. A new challenge to the field is also the fact that new entry places to the universities are fewer than in previous years. In 2013 in total more than 1600 entry places were cut, thus making competition even tougher. (Blencowe 2013)

Marketing is the only visible tool that reaches new applicants and therefore the importance of finding those right channels to deliver the message to the right public is vital. Universities are also competing with other universities by designing new innovative ways of teaching, building more functional premises and campuses, offering opportunities to study degrees abroad through partnerships with foreign universities, but all this effort will be useless if the message is not reaching the target market. The purpose of this research for Laurea University of Applied Sciences is to identify the most appropriate channels to reach the applicants and also to select the most effective of the current marketing channels used to attract new applicants. (Opetus- ja Kulttuuriministeriö 2013)

1.1   Purpose of the thesis

The purpose of this of this thesis is to find out the applicants' views and image of Laurea University of Applied Sciences, and what affected their decision to apply for Laurea. In addition, the research aims to find out what are the most effective marketing channels of Laurea for the new applicants, or which were the ones that reached them. This information can be then used to develop the marketing strategy further based on the answers of the actual applicants.

This study was assigned to us by the marketing department of Laurea University of Applied Sciences, to be used in planning the marketing strategy for year 2013.

1.2   Research approach

The research aims to first gather demographical data of the applicants in order to determine the typical age, gender and other characteristics of an applicant, and second and most important to determine which marketing communication channels used by Laurea are reaching the new applicants the best, and how they could be improved.

The research was carried out as a quantitative research by sending a questionnaire to roughly 4000 recipients, all of whom have applied to Laurea in 2012. The result has then been inserted into PASW statistics which is a program for statistics analyzing. With the help of PASW we can analyze the correlations between answers, such as which marketing channel has best reached which age group, and so forth.

1.3   Theoretical approach

The theoretical background used to support the research is to study marketing communications and its use in the marketing of Laurea. We will discuss the marketing communications tools that are available, discuss which are the ones that should be concentrated on, and what exactly is the objective of marketing communications.

First the theory part of the thesis introduces marketing in general. Strategic marketing planning, marketing mix and 4P theories are explained as they create a framework for organization's marketing. Since promotion is one of the "Ps", it was important to introduce 4P theory before getting on marketing communication in more detail. Second part of the study is about marketing communication in more detail.

The theories explained in this thesis are basic marketing theories that are used in a business environment. However these same theories are used in the marketing of organizations such as the Laurea University of applied science. The education they provide being the product.

2   Theoretical background

2.1   Marketing

Marketing highlights the business function of dealing with customers. At simplest, marketing is managing profitable customer relationships. The goal of successful marketing is to gain new customers and to maintain and grow existing customers. To do this the company needs to define its marketing objectives and goals, know what its segments are and defend its position in the market. Marketing is a wide and versatile term, which includes many dimensions of

business activities. (Kotler & Armstrong 2006, 5.) Overall marketing should support and contribute to the company's strategy. (Baines–Fill–Page 2008, 180.)

2.2 Market segmentation

Market consists of large number of individual customers who varies in their needs, preferences and buying behavior and the amount that they consume. When performing segmentation, the total market is divided into different customer groups. Each customer group has its own characteristics and potential customers are put into the specific group according to their unique needs. (Kotler & Armstrong 2006, 163.) Marketing segmentations is not useful tool to only indicate which markets to target, but it will also indicate the less profitable groups that they should not put effort on targeting. Market segmentation can be done on the basis of geographic, demographic, psychological, and behavioral variables. (Chopra 2012, 243-244.)

2.2.1 Types of segmentation

When a company divides their customers into geographical units, target markets can be divided by nations, regions, countries, cities or neighborhoods. A company can localize its products and marketing strategies to fit the needs of a specific region. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 411.)

The most popular way of segmenting the market is the demographic way. It divides the market into groups based on their age, family, gender, income, education, religion etc. This way it is easy to measure customer behavior. It is especially easy to segment the markets by age, as consumer needs and wants change with the age. (Kotler–Armstrong-Wong-Saunders 2008, 413.) Markets divided by lifestyle, social class or personality characteristics is called psychographic segmentation. A person's buying behavior, which products they buy may reflect to their lifestyle. For example, a want to show off ones social class. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong-Saunders 2008, 415.)

Behavioral segmentation divides consumers into groups based on their knowledge, attitudes, use or response towards a certain product. Some variables the consumers are seeking may be brand loyalty, usage rate or benefits. This part is believed to be the best starting point for building market segments. (Kotler–Armstrong-Wong-Saunders 2008, 415.)

2.3   Market targeting

When a company has decided its segments, the next step is to choose which of those to enter. Target market is a special consumer population. A company must evaluate which one of the segments can bring it the most advantage, and which of them are the most profitable and valuable for the company. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 156-157.)
Target marketing can be carried out at several levels. Companies can target very broadly (undifferentiated marketing), very narrowly (micromarketing), or somewhere in between (differentiated or concentrated marketing). (Kotler & Armstrong 2006, 178.)

2.4   Market positioning

After choosing the segments and where to target the marketing, there is a need to concentrate on positioning. It means how to differentiate the company's product from competitors in the consumers' minds. It is crucially important to develop a unique market position for a product. Consumers of today are overloaded with information about products and services. If there is a product representing exactly the same idea as competitors', the consumer has no reason to purchase the product. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 157.)

The most important thing in market positioning is to figure out how to differentiate the product from competing brands. For example an individual name can separate the product from other similar ones. (Lahtinen & Isoviita 1999, 136). If a company succeeds in finding a way to win the consumer's purchase decision, it gives a big advantage in the competition. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 157.)

2.5   Marketing mix

Marketing mix consists of tools that all have an impact on the final result of the success of product sales. Neil H. Borden used the term marketing mix in his teaching already in the late 1940's, and the term popularized in 1964 after Bordens article "The Concept of the Marketing Mix". (NetMBA.com 2002-2007.)

The tools in marketing mix help marketers implement marketing strategies and influence the demand for its products. In the product based idea there are four variables: product, price, place and promotion. When a marketing mix is related to services, there are three extra Ps: process, people and physical evidence. (Jobber 2004, 16.)

In this study, the marketing mix is explained because promotion is a one of the four P's and therefore it is important to introduce the whole theory before concentrating on marketing communication more thoroughly.

2.5.1   4Ps: Product

Product can be defined in many different ways. When talking about marketing, product is the physical product that is tangible or the service that the company is offering. Overall products include physical objects, services, events, persons, places, ideas or mixes of these entities. (Anttila & Iltanen 1993, 21)

A product is a key for the marketing mix and a main element of the market offering. (Kotler & Armstrong 2006, 199). Reason why products are bought is the benefit that consumer is expecting to gain from it. Needs of a consumer can be divided into three different categories; experimental needs, symbolic needs and functional needs.(Anttila & Iltanen 1993, 22). According to Lahtinen & Isoviita a person has 15 basic needs, which are partly fulfilled by consuming products and services. These needs are hunger, honor, appreciation, sexual interaction, straightness, and revenge, citizenship, avoiding emergency, social interaction, independency, curiosity, family and social appreciation. (Lahtinen & Isoviita 1999, 22.) Product and service designers need to plan their outputs in order to satisfy some of those basic needs. In today's markets the lifeline of a product is getting shorter. Therefore it is crucial to keep developing the products and services offered, so that the needs of consumers can be met and solutions to consumer problems can be provided. (Anttila & Iltanen 1993, 21)

2.5.2   4Ps: Price

Some decades ago price was the most influential factor affecting the product choice. Later other factors have gained more important roles in the buyer's behavior. It is good to bear in mind that price is the only element which produces revenue in the marketing mix. Therefore pricing must be controlled and considered carefully. Pricing must also cooperate with product design, distribution and promotion decisions. (Kotler & Armstrong 2006, 263.) Examining and evaluating prices regularly is the key to success. Companies should be brave enough to revise their prices to meet the current markets and also brave enough to admit that the prices currently in place may not bring the best possible results to the company. (Tracy 2004.)

2.5.3   4Ps: Place

Place means the availability of the product and service sold. The products, which have been produced, must also be made available for the customers. This path is called a supply chain or a distribution channel. The right channel needs to be selected carefully and purposefully in order to gain maximum effectiveness. The company must analyze what the target consumer is willing to do in order to obtain the product. It is also important to define what the customer requires from the channel. For example, if the product can be obtained nearby, the price is higher and vice versa. Therefore, there must be a balance between consumer needs and price preferences. Consumers often accept lower service level in exchange for lower prices. (Kotler & Armstrong 2006, 299.)

2.5.4   4Ps: Promotion

Marketing is not just developing an innovative product, pricing it attractively and making it available for customers. The product must also be made known for the potential customers. Marketing communication is therefore a vital – and most visible - part of the marketing mix.

Promotion includes the actions company is taking to get their product known in the market. It is said that a product is completed when customers know it exists, knows its quality and features, reacts to it positively, and buys it. Without knowledge there cannot be any demand and it is said that product only exists when customer knows it exists. Promotion enables product awareness and positive attitudes, and it results in buying decisions. (Anttila & Iltanen 1993, 231)

Marketing communications can be divided into four categories: public relations (PR), sales promotion, personal selling and advertising. Usually several promotional tools are used simultaneously. (Baines–Fill–Page 2008, 17.) While personal selling and sales promotions focuses mainly on selling the actual product company has, advertising is the tool that aims to create a positive in eyes of consumer about the product, service or the company. In addition, advertising is mainly used to attract new potential customers while public relations main function is to maintain the existing consumers and prevent the image of the company. (Vuokko 2003, 168-278). Over the years these four tools have gotten company from direct marketing, sponsorships, and internal marketing. (Anttila & Iltanen 1993, 236) Marketing communication will be stressed in more detail in the following chapter.

3   Marketing communications

Now that the marketing mix with the 4Ps has been introduced in this thesis, it is time to focus on the fourth "P"; promotion in more detail. Promotion is the most visible and concrete way to tell about the product or the company to potential customers and interest groups. Therefore it is crucial that a company chooses the right marketing communication channels.

Marketing communications, regardless of the media used, consist on strategies and activities used in reaching the target market with the desired marketing messages. Marketing communications are always goal-driven and there is always a purpose behind every action taken. The goal is to create a change in knowledge or consumers attitude, or to generate a buying decision in the targeted consumer. The purpose of marketing communication is to interact with potential customers and have a positive impact directly or indirectly on the commodities or services sold. (Anttila & Iltanen 1993, 232)

3.1   Communications mix

To develop a product for the markets is not enough for a company to succeed. These days the target audience demands much more. After the product has been created and proposed to one or more of the segmented markets, the marketing tools for each segment need to be decided. Different segments may be reached through different communications channels. (Buratto–Grosset–Viscolani 2005.)

Marketing communications can be done two ways: through personal communications or mass communications. When trying to convey a message to the consumers through personal communication, the message is directed to a specific audience. In mass communications the message is directed to a broad audience and it may reach all the publics and individuals. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 5-6.)

Communicating customer value and building up customer relationships is a vital aspect of the business processes. There is a large variety of communication instruments for a company to communicate with the stakeholders and target audience. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 691). These are explained in the following chapters.

3.1.1   Advertising

Advertising is the most common and most known form of non-personal communication where the ideas, goods and services are brought out through mass media. Virtually any medium can be used for advertising; most commonly this kind of media includes newspapers, television,

radio, cinema and magazines. There are four important aspects to take into account when planning advertising. First there needs to be advertising objectives for the campaign. There can be two different objectives: advertising can either remind the customers of existing products or services - this is mostly maintaining the customer relationship. It can also inform the target audience of a new product or service. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 737-738.)

The second phase is to set advertising budget for each product. The market share has an influence in the amount of advertising needed. The stage in the product life cycle also needs to be taken into consideration, as normally new products need a bigger budget to increase awareness among customers. Also competition has an impact on how well the brand is noticed in the markets - and leads to frequency of advertising which raises the costs as well. Also, differentiation of products from competitors helps the advertising costs. If the products are similar, they may need heavier advertising systems. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 739-740.)

The third point is developing an advertising strategy. There are two main aspects: creating advertising messages and selecting the media. In today's world there are numerous choices for advertising and it can be expensive, therefore it is important to create an interesting and creative message to place in the media. It should be meaningful, believable and distinctive. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 742-744.)

After selecting the message, marketing management needs to select the media where to advertise. As it was stated before, the possibilities for advertising are numerous. It is important to choose the right media for the product. For example, with a product which needs to be demonstrated it is better to have a campaign on television than on the radio. Marketers must also think about reach and frequency, meaning how many people will be affected by the ad in the target market, and how many times the person in the target market is exposed to the ad. The timing of the campaign (season or regular) is also a very important aspect in achieving the best results from advertising. For example, there is no point in advertising winter products in the beginning of summer. (Kotler –Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 747-753.)

The fourth and final point is evaluation of the advertising campaign. Advertisers can have pre-evaluations to find out the feelings and perceptions of the ad from target audience. Post-evaluations come later and find out if a product has increased its awareness and knowledge on the markets. These two measurements are called the communication effect of the ad. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 753.)

3.1.2 Sales promotions

Sales promotions are essentially another way to advertise. Sales promotions cover a wide range of activities with the intention to provide a short-term increase in sales. These promotions are normally limited to a specific time and place and try to provoke people to immediate purchase behavior. For example, using free 'taster' samplers in supermarkets is one form of sales promotion. (Blythe 2006, 236.)

There are different kinds of promotions targeted to different audiences. Consumer promotions include for example coupons, money-off and premiums. Trade promotions are directed to retailers. They are offered with a special price, discounts or gifts. (Kotler–Armstrong –Wong–Saunders 2008, 799-800.) 18

3.1.3 Sponsorship

Sponsorship is a financial-based activity between a company and a sponsee. Sponsorship should not be confused with advertising. Advertising is considered a quantitative medium, whereas sponsorship is considered a qualitative medium. It promotes a company in association with the sponsee. The most famous way of sponsoring is through sports events. A company wants to gain publicity and awareness, and spread a positive message of itself or its product and a sponsorship is sometimes a very effective and cost-friendly way to get noticed in the markets. In a community a company can further its social responsibility through different kinds of sponsorships such as between a school and a firm. (Jobber 2004, 607-610.)

3.1.4 Public relations

Public relations – PR – is about creating favorable images of the company in the minds of the consumers. It is often associated with creating an event that brings the company or products to the public attention, but in fact PR is a whole lot more and uses variable tools and techniques. PR is more concerned with the long-term reputation of the company rather than short-term marketing. (Blythe 2006, 130.)

The public relations department works for keeping a good relationship with all audiences, publics and stakeholders. It represents the whole company at all times. PR tries to create a good corporate image for the company in a long-term and help to achieve the marketing objectives. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 291.)

PR departments organize press conferences and release news to maintain a positive image of the company or gives speeches to increase company publicity. Written, audiovisual and corporate-identity materials are a good marketing tool for influencing target markets and finally creating public service activities like raising funds is a show of goodwill from the company. Usually handling incoming criticism or complaints is also a job for the PR department. (Blythe 2006, 130.)

The PR has various strengths such as representing a company as a "good citizen" which leads to a good reputation for the business. It also advices the company in a case of a crisis and it works for heading off the bad reputation. PR handles also the audiences which are more difficult to reach through other communication tools. These can be for example opinion leaders or investors. PR is also more cost effective and often more believable than other communication tools. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 292-294.)

PR also faces some weaknesses as it may suffer from a lack of control when it comes to news releases by the press. If a story from PR department does not have enough news value it may not be published. Journalists act as gatekeepers in this situation. The effectiveness of the PR is hard to measure as well. PR professionals do not measure their success in financial terms whereas marketers often do. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 293-295.)

3.1.5   Direct marketing

Direct marketing is one of the communication channels where a company reaches an individual customer directly opposed to an intermediary. The objective of direct marketing is to obtain an immediate response from a customer, and at the same time build or maintain a customer relationship. It has undergone a huge growth during last decade. Advertising techniques can include text messaging, email, interactive consumer websites, online display ads, fliers, catalog distribution, promotional letters, and outdoor advertising. (Kotler & Armstrong 2004, 467)

Reaching the markets through direct marketing tools costs less than for example advertising and is very efficient and speedy. It is also easy for marketers to make adjustments on prices and programs in direct marketing. Reaching customers that would not be reached through other channels is also easier to do via direct marketing. In online communications it takes only one second to reach customers in other countries and this gives a big advantage for marketers to extend their business. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 825-826.)

3.1.6 Forms of direct marketing

There are several forms to use direct marketing. All of them reach a consumer directly but via different channels.

Direct mail

Direct mail includes advertising circulars, catalogs, free-trial CDs, pre-approved credit card applications etc. Bulk mailings are a particularly popular method of promotion for businesses operating in the financial services, home computer, food, travel and tourism industries. Electronic catalogues have become more popular due to advances in technology. Also it is less costly and provides more space for marketing products or services. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 830-831.)

Telephone Marketing

Telephone marketing also called telemarketing and it uses telephone to sell products or services to the customers. Telemarketing does not happen only between business and a customer but nowadays also B2B (business to business) marketing happens via telephone. This is also convenient as customers do not need to move to the shop to buy, they are reached where ever they are. Telemarketers are often very aggressive in their sales pitches due to their provision based salaries and as a result some consumers react to telemarketing very negatively. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 831.)

Trade Fairs and Exhibitions

Trade fairs or exhibitions are one of the oldest communication tools. They are arranged events or places where people working in the same sector gather together to talk about trade, introduce their products and services, exchange ideas and to buy and to sell products. It is the only activity bringing all the competitors, buyers and sellers into the same setting. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 440.)

Direct-response Television Marketing (infomercials)

Direct-response television marketing happens via television where products or services are marketed via commercials and programs. Usually it involves a free phone number where customers can call and get more information and purchase the product or service directly. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 833-834.)

Online marketing (e-communications)

Online marketing had a big growth during the last ten years. As the Internet is the place for business nowadays, many companies market their products and services over the Internet. It is also a good place for building customer relationships. Internet is convenient and speedy for customers and companies, and information is found easily. The online marketing happens B2C (business to consumers), B2B (business to business), C2C (consumer to consumer) and C2B (consumer to business). (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 839.)

Most commonly used tool in direct marketing is sending marketing related messages through email. Reason behind the popularity of email marketing is the fact that it does not cost much to design, test and it reaches a large number of consumers. It also provides the marketer to work around the clock and does not tie to any time restrictions and the responses are easy to measure. The other side is that email marketing can be resented as unwanted mail or spam. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 828-830.)

Another common form of online marketing is creating a website. It needs to be attractive for a customer and made the way that a customer stays around and visits it often. Having an attractive website is a must these days. One type of website is corporate website. This type of website offers information about a company and its products and services. They are made more for spreading goodwill than selling products. It is a good way to inform customers of the events or new products coming or to let the audience make questions and comments to the company. Another type is to create a marketing website. These are made to get the customer closer to a purchase process. They may include catalogue, shopping tips, and coupons which make a purchase more convenient and attractive. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 850.)

Online marketing world is in constant change. Just over the past few years social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter have become hugely popular, and now they also provide opportunities for direct marketers to communicate directly with customers by creating content to which customers can respond. Another new way of advertising is search-related ads which is form of advertising through search engines. Advertisers pay for their placement among other relative listings in search engines. Whenever a potential customer enters a relevant search term, ads are listed to customers depending on their already-indicated search criteria. Marketers can also optimize the usage of search engines to try and maximize the traffic in their sites.

Other forms of online advertising are different kinds of commercial messages in Internet. The best known of these are banners. They are ads which appear in the website trying to attract a surfer to click the ad. It will take a person to a different website and that is when the ad has

succeeded. Pop-ups are separate windows appearing to the screen. Nowadays it is possible for a web surfer to block the pop-ups but marketers have designed a new version, pop-unders which appear behind a page a surfer is viewing. Interstitials are ads which appear on the screen while loading a new page. They are separate windows displaying a product or service. (Kotler–Armstrong–Wong–Saunders 2008, 854.)

Marketing in the Internet has many benefits for customers and also companies. For customers it is a convenient way of shopping and receiving information. Also overall costs are lower. For companies the biggest advantage is a reduction in investments. Companies can also interact with customers directly and not through intermediaries. Distribution improves and customer relationship building opportunities grows. It is also a great opportunity to find new markets. (Jobber 2004, 579.)

The limitations of Internet marketing for customers are a lack of flexibility in information they can get via Internet. There is no personal customer service online. Also consumers need to have an access to technology and make investments by buying a computer and Internet access. For companies the limitations are high costs in starting the Internet marketing. There is a need for updating the systems and marketing regularly and be alert all the time. (Jobber 2004, 579.)

Personal Selling

Personal selling is a two-way personal communication which normally involves face-to-face interaction between the sales person and a customer. When the actual selling process happens, the seller can identify the specific needs of the specific customer and tailor-made a service or product for these needs. Personal selling happens especially in B2B (business to business) situations.

The goal of the personal selling is to find the people who are interested in the product and teach and demonstrate them about it. Also building up relationships, guiding in purchase process and provide after-sales service are forms of personal selling. In other words the main objective is not just to sell the product or service but to give a good customer service and gain customer satisfaction. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 465-466.)

Word of mouth

Word of mouth means an informal marketing what customers make for the company. Customers share their opinions about their experiences of the products and services to other people. It can be both negative and positive depending on customer's experience. Nowadays

consumers also interact via Internet and especially in the social media. This has increased the meaning of word of mouth. Some researchers have argued that WOM may have most influence on consumer's buying behavior of all the communications tools. (Feng-Papatla 2011).

3.2 Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC)

Traditionally marketing is thought to be different communications channels used separately. In integrated marketing they are one flow of information. All the marketing instruments are combined and this creates consistency between the different tools and messages. IMC has extra value compared to traditional way of marketing. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 8.)

Integrated marketing communication – IMC – is made up of seven levels. Vertical objectives integration means that organization's communication is in line with its marketing objectives. Horizontal integration implies that communication activities are in line with the other functions of the organization. Communication mix integration is about the different communication tools giving out the same consistent message. Marketing mix integration means that the decisions concerning price, place, and product are consistent with other promotion decisions. Creative design integration means that the creative design of the product fits the positioning. Internal/external integration signifies that every department works toward the planned outcome with the same strategy. The last of the seven levels is financial integration. It is about making sure that the budget is the as efficient as it can be. (Holm 2006, 23-33.)

From a customer point of view, IMC is just one form of marketing. To be able to succeed in IMC, an organization must plan its communications mix very carefully. They need to create a coherent and consistent plan that creates synergy which leads to an increase of the effectiveness of the instruments. All the departments of the company which are involved in marketing activities need to communicate with each other and work together to create and maintain successful IMC. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 8 - 9.)

If and when IMC has been carefully planned and implemented, it can give many benefits to the organization. Their competitive advantage increases, sales and profits grow and time and money are saved. (Pelsmacker–Geuens–Van den Bergh 2007, 8 - 9.)

4   Theoretical framework and discussion

All the marketing tools described in the theoretical background are the tools available to companies to bring the wanted message to the desired target market. The marketing tools chosen by a company depends on many deciding factors such as the audience, product, current trends in the market and financial restrictions. In the case of Universities of applied sciences the target audience is clear; the new applicants and therefore building a marketing strategy to reach that audience is linked to the current trends. In a company such as Laurea that operates in the market with several competitors the marketing strategy needs to be clear from the beginning and well implemented to the operations thus all activities done inside and outside needs to be streamlined with the image of Laurea and the message needs to be clear.

Current trends:

Online marketing

Product:

Education

Brand image:

Word of mouth
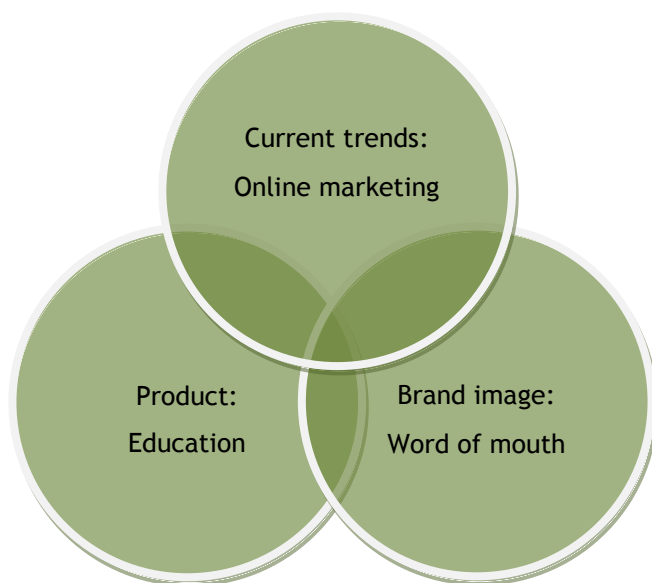
Figure 1: Theoretical framework

5   Research approach

5.1   Quantitative vs. qualitative research

Before explaining the research method used, it is good to explain the difference between the two options, and what made us come to the decision of which to use.

As the research was conducted as a survey, the decision had to be made between a quantitative and qualitative research. The names give us some hint of what they might be about, but a simple way to define them is as follows: qualitative research describes the characteristics of people and events, without comparing them in terms of measurements.

Quantitative research, as the name suggests, deals with quantities or measurements and amounts. (Thomas 2003, 1)

From these two choices, the one to most efficiently suit the needs was quantitative research, because the idea was to get as many results as possible, where the habits of large masses could be identified.

5.2   The execution

The research was carried out by sending out a questionnaire to people who applied to Laurea University of Applied Sciences in autumn 2012 (excluding applicants living abroad, and some late notices), consisting of roughly 4100 people. The advantage of using a questionnaire to gather information is that it is an efficient way of collecting a vast research material when a large number of people can be asked the same questions. This also makes it a fast and efficient way, when compared to interviews for instance. (Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2009, 108)

The questionnaire itself was an A4-sized paper with two pages of questions, with a total of 11 questions. Should it have been longer than that, there would have been a greater temptation to leave the questionnaire unanswered. At first, the respondent is asked some background questions, which help to categorize them later, so that the tendencies of a specific group of people can be identified. The latter part consisted of the questions that were to be researched, including a five-point Likert scale for closer analysis. The questionnaire form was included in the same letter as the entrance examination invitations, and the recipients were asked to fill it out and take it with them to the exam. To encourage people to return the questionnaire, an incentive was added to the end: if you wrote down your email-address, you would have a chance to win a pair of movie tickets. The reason this incentive was included was the uncertainty if people would be eager to fill it out otherwise. However, the response percentage turned out to be 43%, which was greatly above that expected. This high response percentage was probably due to the way the questionnaire was presented, as nowhere in the form did it say it was optional, and perhaps some people felt it was a vital part of the application process. This of course was not intentional, but rather a late observation.

The research questions were planned in cooperation with Laurea marketing department to be such that would help in marketing and student recruitment in future. The original questionnaire was sent only in Finnish, but for the purpose of this thesis has been translated into English for the appendices section.

5.3   Validity and reliability

The amount of responses was surprisingly high: of all 4161 forms sent, a total of 1776 people returned the questionnaire, resulting in a response percentage of 43%. Of all these responses, a randomly chosen 853 were analyzed using PASW statistics software. This results in a sample of 20,5% of the population, which is a very comprehensive one and should grant reliable results.

Reliability, in terms of how honest the respondents were with their answers, and how much thought they put into them, is always questionable. For example, in question number 7 "Where did you find information on Laurea? On a scale of 1-5, assess the importance of the information channel" people understood the question differently. In many responses, it was obvious the respondent had not received information on Laurea through the channel in question, yet they evaluated its importance. This resulted in numerous marks on the lowest score on the scale, meaning "not at all important". This communication error distorts the results to some extent, and it should be noted.

Should a new survey be conducted on the same topic, more emphasis should be put on formulating the questions, so that they are unambiguous. It should be clearly stated that the respondent should not evaluate the channel, if he/she has not received information through it.

6   Empirical study

6.1   Background statistics

Gender distribution showed a majority of female applicants, as 77,3% of the applicants were women. Social science, beauty care and nursing were female dominated, with 91,5%, 98,4% and 91,5% of the applicants being female. Only male dominated degree programme was computing, where 68% of the applicants were male. Other degree programmes were more evenly matched, although as most applicants in total were female, so were the populations of the rest of the programmes.

65,6% of the applicants belonged to ages 18-22 years old, the rest being from there to up to 54 years old. 90% of the applicants were under 33 years old. This suggests that Laurea is not only a school for those straight out of secondary education, and a great portion of its applicants have some years of work experience, or experience from other schools as well.

A total of 75% stated that Laurea was their primary choice of school, and 24% said they had not applied for other universities of applied sciences besides Laurea. The ones who did mentioned Metropolia and Haaga-Helia the most, making them Laurea's biggest competitors.

Most of the applicants, 62,5%, had high school as their highest completed degree. The next largest group, or 32,3% had vocational school. A minority of applicants had completed another university of applied sciences or university, 4,5% and 0,7% respectively.

Out of the seven units of Laurea, Leppävaara and Tikkurila were the most popular, as for both had a share of about 30% of the applicants. The rest five units had about 10% each, for they are a lot smaller than these two. The total amount exceeds 100% because some applicants have applied for more than just one unit.

6.2   Research questions

The following questions were the main questions, or the ones to be studied and analyzed. First, the applicants were asked which factors had the most influence when they decided to apply for Laurea, and to evaluate the importance of those factors. They were also asked to rate the factors on a scale of 1 to 5, 1 meaning "not at all important" and 5 "very important".

6.3   Factors affecting applicants' decision to apply for Laurea

6.3.1   Location

The following figure explains the importance the applicants felt the location of the unit had on their decision for applying. It got rated as the most important factor, with 37,2% rating it very important and 33,7% important. Which of the seven units of Laurea was in question had no great influence on the ratings. Lohja had the greatest ratings, with 47% rating its location as very important. Leppävaara and Porvoo units shared the lowest ratings, with 28% of applicants rating it very important. In the rest of the units the share fluctuated between 30% and 40%. This suggests the units of Laurea are well situated, and even the ones that are located outside the metropolitan area are still reached effortlessly.
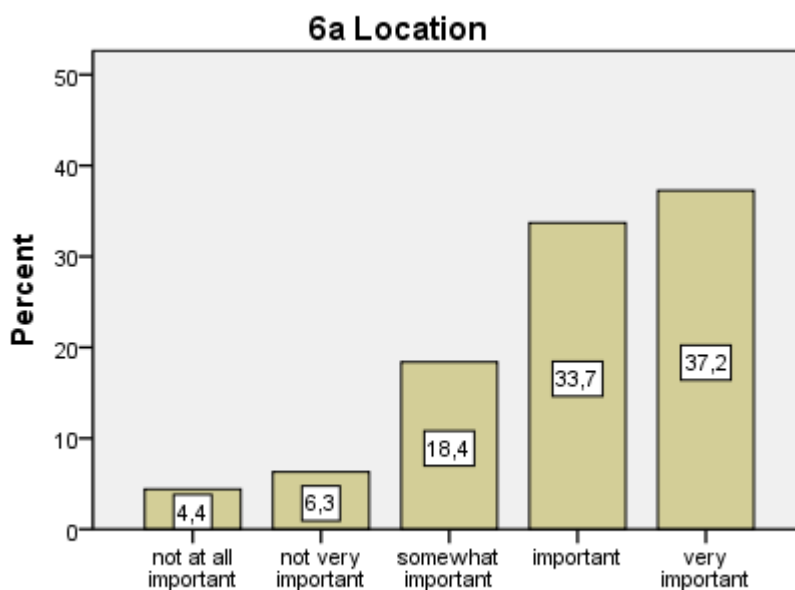
6a Location

Figure 2: Location

6.3.2 Reputation

Next up was how much of an effect Laurea's reputation had on the decision. This did not hold the same amount of importance as location, as only about one tenth stated is was a very important factor. Most votes were on somewhat important and important, making reputation still a meaningful factor in the applicants' minds.
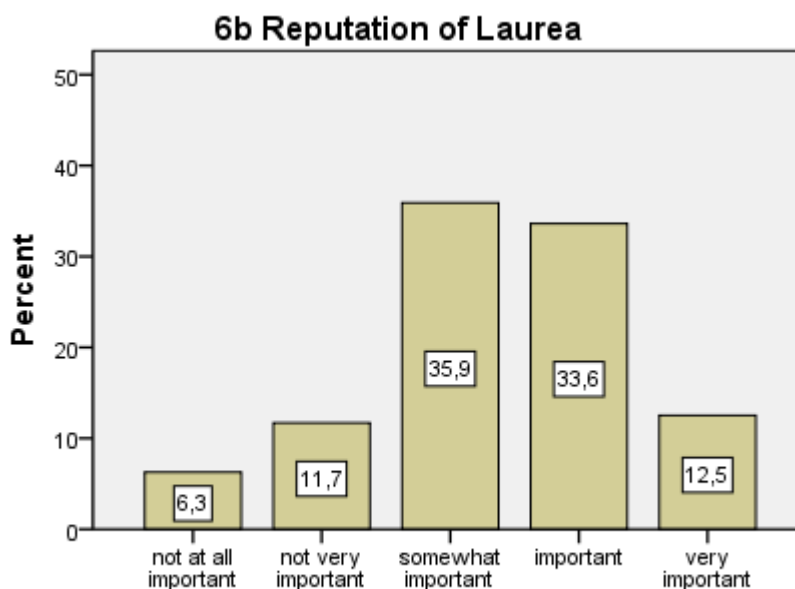
6b Reputation of Laurea

Figure 3: Reputation

6.3.3 Speciality of the degree programme

This question was asked to find out if the applicant felt that the degree programme they applied for was special or different when compared to others. There were distinctive differences in results between different degree programmes. Among those applicants who applied for degree programmes which are not offered at other universities of applied sciences, the scores were higher. This included degree programme criminal sanctions (rikosseuraamusalan koulutusohjelma), where a total of 75,7% percent said its speciality was a very important factor, degree programme in security (turvallisuusalan koulutusohjelma) and degree programme in beauty care (kauneudenhoitoalan koulutusohjelma) where 53,7% and 53,1% said so respectively. The lowest score was in degree programme in business (liiketalouden koulutusohjelma) where only 10,5% said it was a very important factor, and 43,4% giving a score of 3, or "somewhat important".
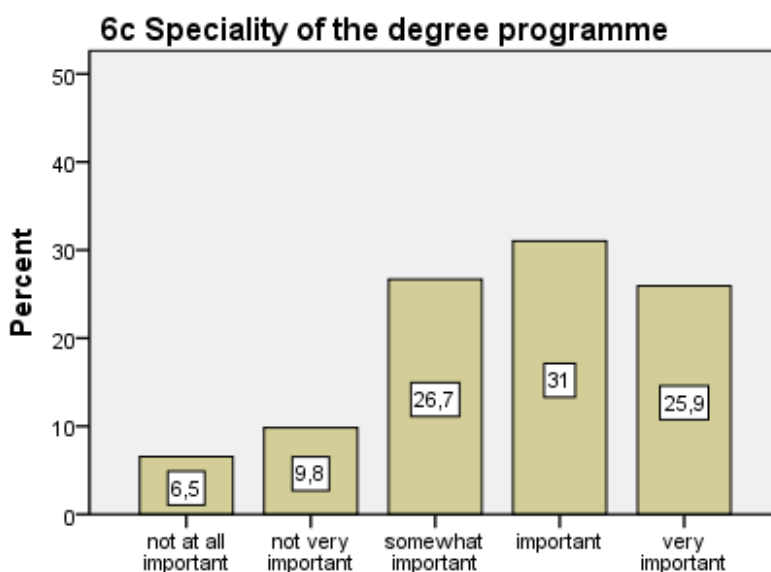
Figure 4: Speciality

6.3.4 Recommendations by others

The applicants were then asked how other people's recommendations for the choice of school affected them, and the emphasis was put on the recommendations by parents and by friends. Both were asked separately, but generated similar results. As shown in the figures below, friends' recommendations had more significance than those of parents', but they were still quite a minor factor. Only a handful of applicants felt the recommendations by others were important.
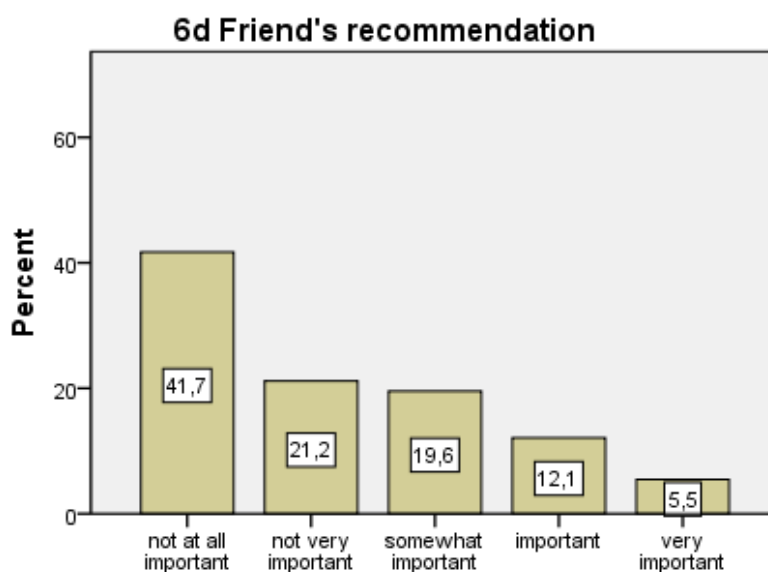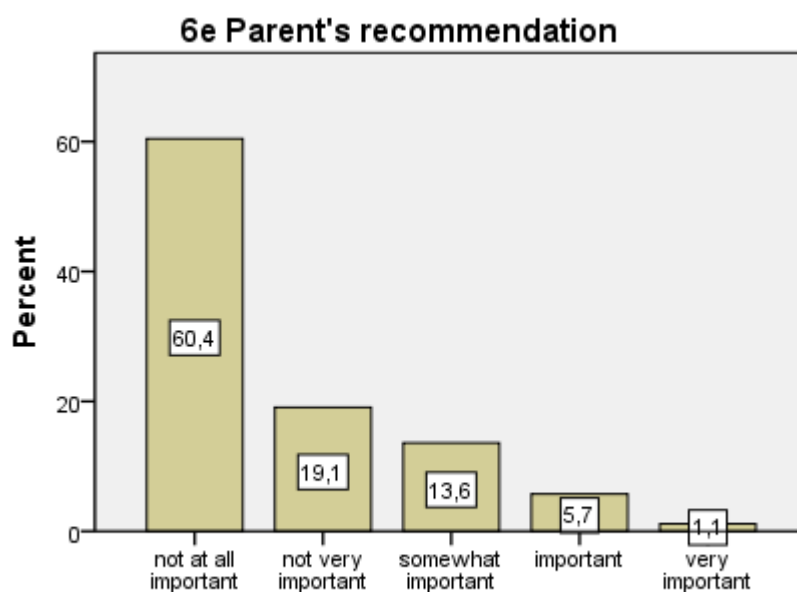
Figure 5: Friend's recommendation

Figure 6: Parent's recommendation

6.3.5   Other reasons

This question provided results mainly from two opposite ends. 32,5% said other reasons were not at all important, when 45,8% said they were very important. However, this is a question that should have been left blank if the applicant felt there were no other pressing reasons, yet many felt obliged to answer with a score of 1. Applicants who gave the highest score gave

reasons like that the degree programme they applied for was their own field. These are the kind of people who are determined in what they want to study and have a ready set objective, rather than just picking a degree by random. Others mentioned that Laurea has flexible studying possibilities, their previous experience with Laurea was good, and some even mentioned they chose Laurea because of its "good web pages".
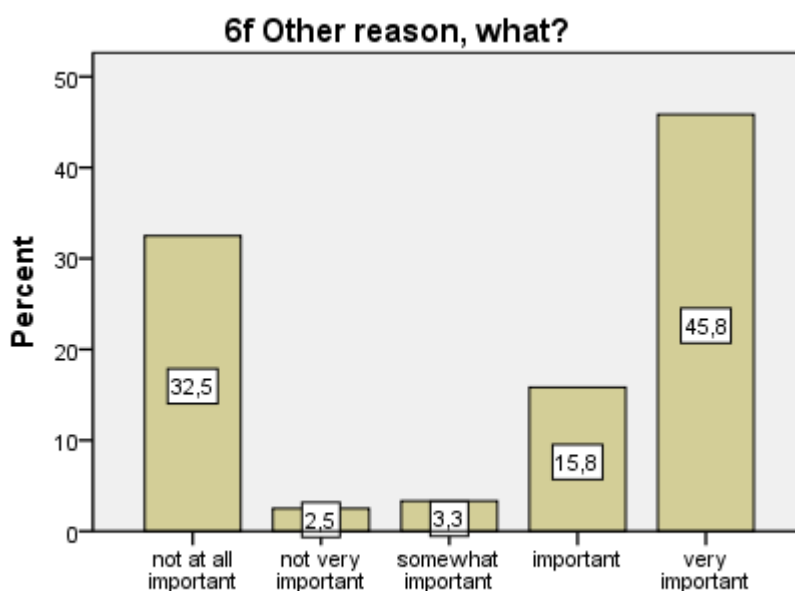
Figure 7: Other reasons

6.4   Information channels used

In this next set of questions the applicant was asked to list the information channels through which they received information on Laurea, and then rate their importance on a scale of 1 to 5. This question was understood in at least two different ways, when some applicants clearly rated all the information channels mentioned, even though they did not use them or even had no idea what they were. This will distort the results somewhat, which shows as a great amount of the lowest score of 1, or not at all important, given for some information channels. This should rather be interpreted as "I did not receive information through this channel" rather than labeling it as a non-important information channel when used.

This interpretation problem became evident at the latest when the applicants were asked to rate the importance of the Laurea SHOWROOM event. It received a lot of scores of 1, even though later the applicant usually revealed they had not heard of Laurea SHOWROOM.

6.4.1 Laurea web pages

The web pages of Laurea were in a high regard. A total of 63,4% of the applicants had not only used this information channel, but also regarded it as a very important channel. This suggests that a lot of emphasis should be put on the layout and usability of the web pages, as they seem to be the main information channel new applicants use when gathering information on the university.
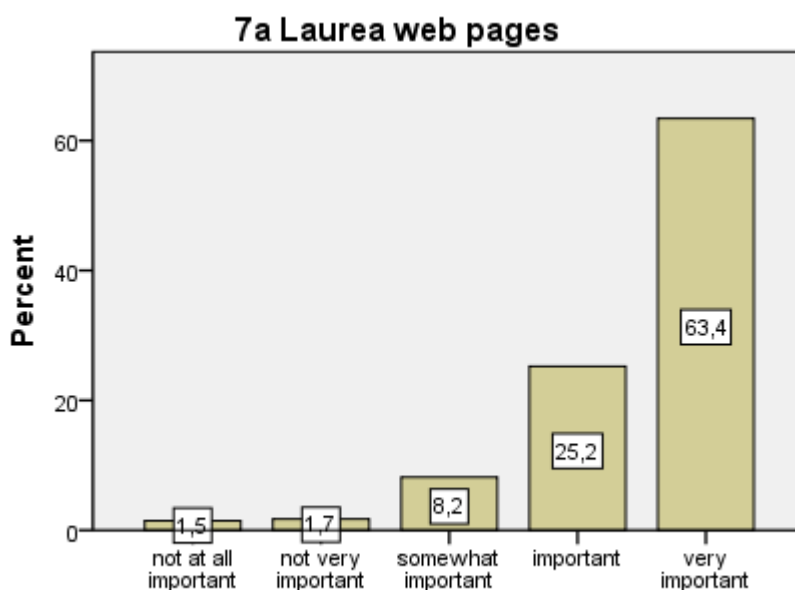

Figure 8: Laurea web pages

6.4.2 Other web pages

The importance of other web pages was deemed much lower than that of Laurea's own web pages. 33,5% of the applicants said other web pages were not at all important. However, we have to remember that the lowest "not at all important" section in this set of questions might not give correct results. If the results were to follow the normal distribution, then the most popular answer was "somewhat important" with 21,3% of the total. There was a good 16,5% who still regarded other websites as very important sources of information, and the most mentioned ones were amk-haku.fi, koulutusnetti.fi, ammattinetti.fi, opintoluotsi.fi and studentum.fi.

6.4.3 School visits

A school visit is an event where a small group of Laurea students go to a school, typically a high school or a vocational school, to give a presentational lecture on Laurea where they tell what you can study at Laurea, and answer the other students' questions.

The importance of school visits was not deemed high, as a majority of 56,4% said they were not at all important. This was probably due to the fact that only a handful of schools get to have a school visit, and a great part of this 56,4% is those who did not even have one. It should still be noted that almost one tenth or 8,6% of the applicants felt the school visits played a very important role in their application.
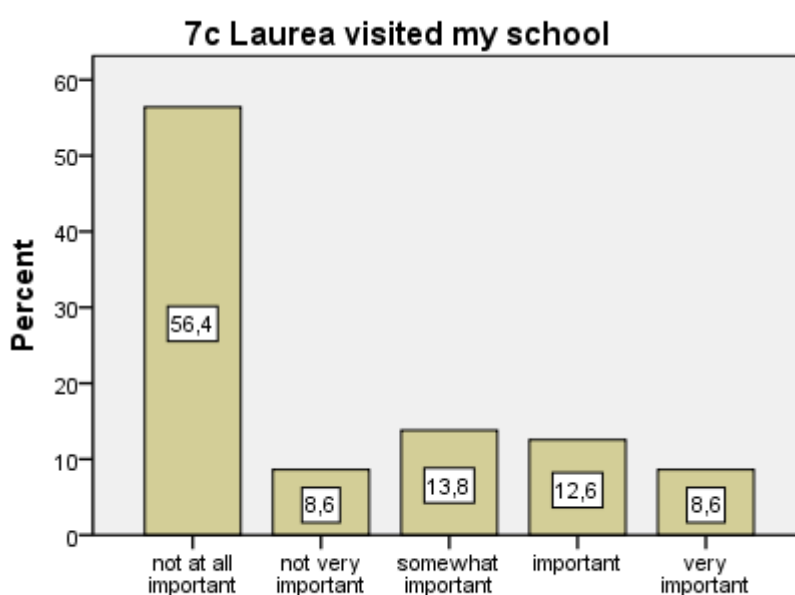
Figure 9: Laurea visited my school

6.4.4 Student advisors

Most applicants felt the student advisor's role was not at all important. Here 41,5% either did not seek the advisor's help, or felt the help of the student advisor was not at all important concerning their choice of application. There is still a fair amount of people, or a total of 45,3%, who say the student advisor was in a somewhat to very important role.
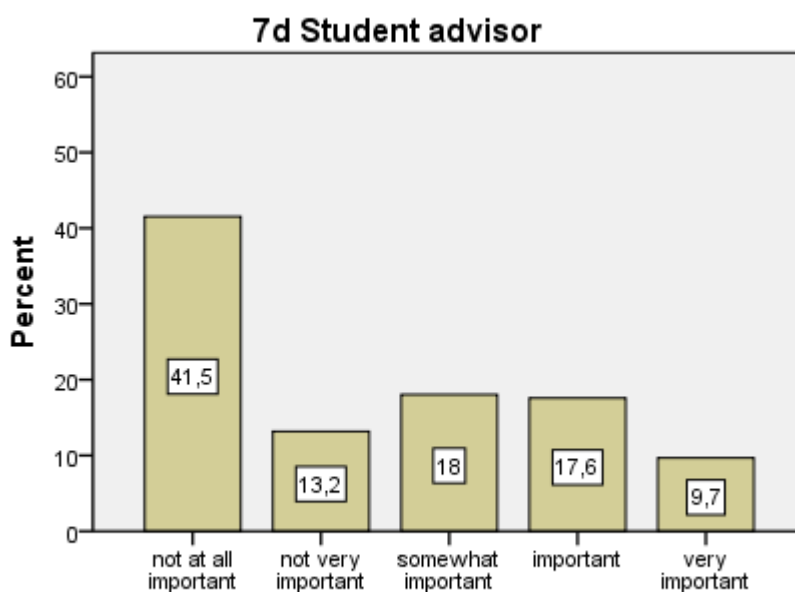
Figure 10: Student advisor

6.4.5 Applicant's guide books

Applicant's guide books enjoy a wide popularity among the applicants. A total of 72% said the guide books were from somewhat to very important when deciding on where to apply. Along with the Laurea web pages, the applicant's guide books are the other most important marketing channel among new applicants, and this should be kept in mind when planning marketing, and the content of those guide books.
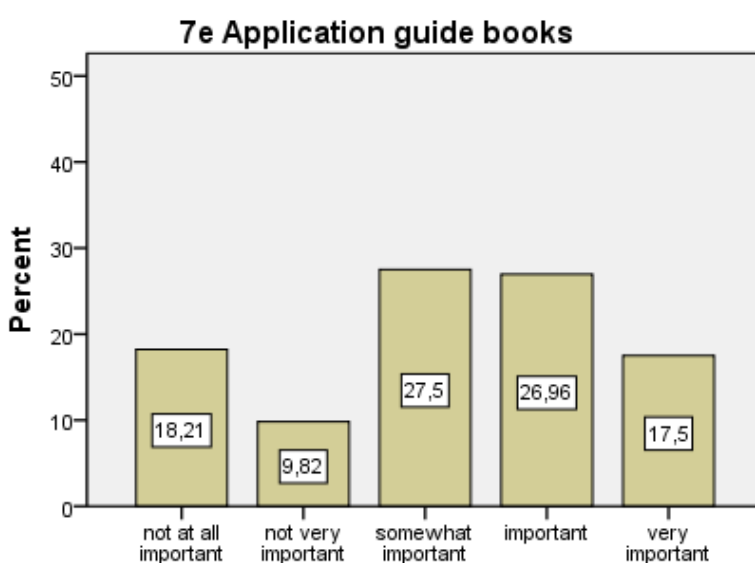

Figure 11: Applicant's guide books

6.4.6 Friends

Most applicants, or 50%, felt the information received from friends was somewhat important or important. These friends can be those who are currently or have before studied at Laurea, or friends who have heard about Laurea from elsewhere and have then spread the word to the applicant. This suggests that word of mouth is still a noteworthy medium, which is something that is greatly affected by the image and reputation of Laurea.
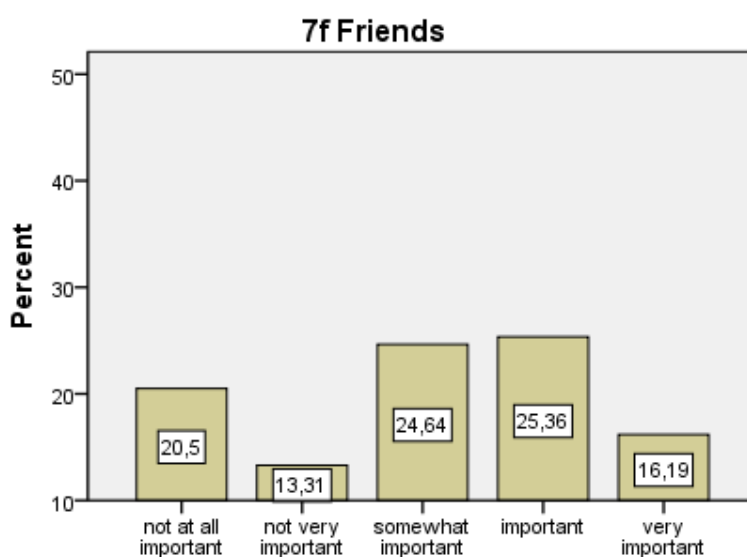

Figure 12: Friends

6.4.7 Laurea SHOWROOM

Laurea SHOWROOM was a marketing event taking place in February 2012, in which a part of Laurea's activities were taken for 30 days into Kampin Keskus, a busy shopping centre in the middle of the capital. This was a unique opportunity for the current students to try something different, and for the potential students to get to know Laurea.

When the new applicants were asked about the importance of Laurea SHOWROOM, a total of 74,7% said it was not at all important. This, however, is not an accurate score, as a majority of the applicants had not even heard of the event but still gave this question a score, which was not intended. This question should have been rethought, as it seemed somewhat ambiguous. Later in the questionnaire, however, the applicants were asked if they had actually heard of the event, which made it possible with the help of crosstabulation to leave out the ones that had only given a random score. This question revealed that 87,5% of the

applicants did not know of Laurea SHOWROOM. Now the question can be analyzed looking only at the people who were familiar with the event.

34,5% of people aware of Laurea SHOWROOM said it was a not at all important information channel, and about 20% said it was not very important. These two lowest categories comprise 55,2% of the population. Only 12,1% said it was a very important channel.

This suggests that Laurea SHOWROOM was more of an event for the current students of Laurea, and more of an advertisement, than it was an event for recruiting new students.

The table below shows the scores divided into two categories: those who had heard of Laurea SHOWROOM and those who had no clue of the event. Thus, the scores under category "No" should be paid no attention to.

7g Laurea Showroom * 11. Have you heard of Laurea SHOWROOM? Crosstabulation

% within 11. Have you heard of Laurea SHOWROOM?

		11. Have you heard of Laurea Showroom?		Total
		Yes	No	
7g Laurea Showroom	not at all impt.	34,5%	82,9%	74,7%
	not very impt.	20,7%	5,6%	8,1%
	somewhat impt.	19,0%	10,5%	11,9%
	important	13,8%	,3%	2,6%
	very impt.	12,1%	,7%	2,6%
Total		100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

Figure 13: Laurea SHOWROOM

6.4.8   Studia fair

Here again, the majority of respondents probably did not attend the Studia fair, and therefore the lowest scores can be ignored, or interpreted as "I did not attend". Of the remaining 47,6% who did attend the fair, only a minority felt it was an important information channel.
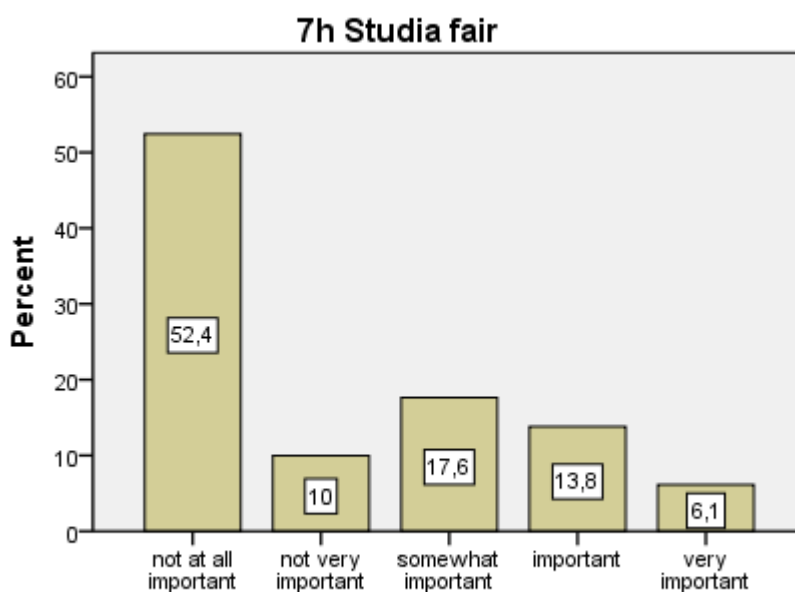
7h Studia fair

Figure 14: Studia fair

6.4.9 Other

As the range of information channels listed was rather comprehensive, not many other channels were mentioned. Some that were mentioned were newspaper adverts, employment centers and profession councelors.

6.5 Laurea's web pages on information about applying

Last, the applicants were asked if they found enough information concerning applying on the Laurea web pages, and if not, what was it they did not find. Here a great majority of 91,8% said the web pages covered all their needs, and only a handful saw them inadequate.

Those who answered no, said they could not find information on the pre-tasks of the entrance examination, examples of the entrance examinations of previous years, admittance requirements and if previous work experience has an effect on the studies, among others.

The home pages also received negative feedback on their conveyance or ease of use. Even among the respondents who gave a yes (Yes, I found enough information), people said the information on the web pages was sometimes hard to find, and the layout was not quite self-explanatory or easy to use. This of course is a difficult task with the amount of information with all the different degrees. However, the clarity of the web pages is something that should

be put a great emphasis on, because as we learned earlier, the web pages were the most used and most important information channel for new students.
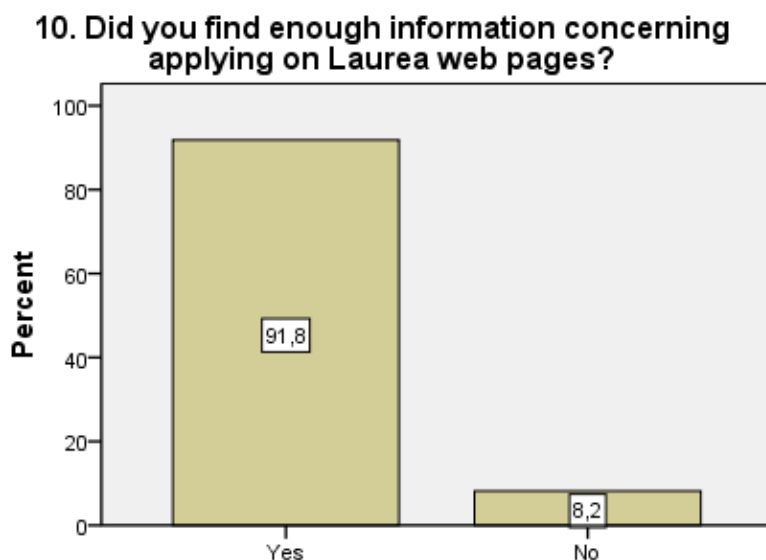

Figure 15: Enough information

7   Conclusions and recommendations

The study suggests that the most important information channel for new students to acquire information about Laurea, are its web pages. People tend use the information acquirement tool which is most conveniently at hand; the Internet is now available for mobile phone use in every municipality in Finland (Liikenne- ja viestintäministeriö, 2012), 66,5% of Finns between 16-34 years of age uses internet on their phones regularly, and a total of 95% of students in Finland use internet daily (Tilastokeskus, 2012) it can be seen as one of the most available information sources.

As seen in our study, the web pages of Laurea were the main source of information for new students, and regarded as the most important one as well. This suggests that emphasis should be put on developing the web pages of Laurea; the layout is important, as most of the negative criticism was about how easy the information was to find. The web pages should be evaluated with different control groups, who would assess how easily they find what they are looking for. If a website is difficult to navigate, a visitor can easily leave the page, which ultimately leads to one less applicant.

The second most important information channel were the more traditional applicant's guide books, which are information booklets which contain all the degree programmes with

introductions, as well as the principles for student selection. It is available as both electronic and physical versions. The physical versions are available at the student affairs office, and they are available at secondary level schools as well, as they are annually distributed by the marketing department. It would be a fertile idea to create a more uniform look for the information channels of Laurea by combining the web pages and applicant's guide; the layout of the applicant's information section could be the same as the applicant's guide, so the new students would have a familiar feel to it, whichever channel they choose to use.

The third most used information channel was friends and acquaintances, or word of mouth. When deciding what and where to study next, especially in the case of younger people or those who just graduated from high school, there is a greater tendency to ask around for other people's experiences and recommendations. When it comes to experience, there is not really a specific marketing channel to target. It stems from the reputation of the school and experiences of current and past students, which are only affected by the actual standards and practices of the school. This is where the importance of the actual product is highlighted. In Laurea's case the product being the education provided needs to meet the expectations of students for them to pass around a positive image of Laurea and to be able to recommend the school to their friends. Word of mouth being the third most used information channel emphasis should be also put in social networks and current trends in marketing. The interaction nowadays happening increasingly via internet and social media indicates that more and more of the target audience can be reach thru social media tools such as facebook, twitter, foresquare, etc. Creating a strong brand image in the social media can bring Laurea closer to the target audience. Useful tool that Laurea could implement thru their webpage or facebook page could be to provide a live chat during the application period, where new applicants could chat live with the school's student office representative and ask relevant questions regarding the study programs, application procedures campuses etc. This would give Laurea and competitive advantage with regards to their competitors as none of the other universities of applied sciences are not doing anything like that at the moment and this way they could also bring a new innovative service to the market.

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List of figures

Appendices

Appendix 1: Entrance examination survey 2012

Gender: □ Female   □ Male

Age:_____

1. Which degree did you apply for in Laurea?

   _____

2. Which unit did you apply for?
   - ☐ Leppävaara
   - ☐ Tikkurila
   - ☐ Otaniemi
   - ☐ Porvoo
   - ☐ Hyvinkää
   - ☐ Kerava
   - ☐ Lohja

3. Was the degree you applied for in Laurea your primary choice?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No

4. Did you apply for other universities of applied sciences, which ones?

   _____

   _____

5. Which former degrees do you have?
   - ☐ High school
   - ☐ Vocational school, degree in: _____
   - ☐ University of applied sciences, degree in: _____
   - ☐ University, degree in: _____
   - ☐ Other, which? _____

6. On a scale of 1-5, how important were the following factors when applying for Laurea (1=not at all important, 5=very important)

		1	2	3	4	5
☐	Location	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Reputation of Laurea	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Specialty of the degree	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Friend's recommendation	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Parent's recommendation	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Other,	1	2	3	4	5

which: _____

7. From where did you receive information on Laurea? On a scale of 1-5, rate the importance of those information channels (1= not at all important, 5= very important)

		1	2	3	4	5
☐	Laurea's website, www.laurea.fi	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Other websites,	1	2	3	4	5

which? _____

☐	Laurea visited my school	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Student advisors	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Application guide books	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Friends	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Laurea SHOWROOM	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Studia fair	1	2	3	4	5
☐	Other event,	1	2	3	4	5

which? _____

☐	Other,	1	2	3	4	5

which: _____

8. Did you find enough information concerning applying on the Laurea website?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No. What would you like to have more information on?

   _____

   _____

9. Have you heard of Laurea SHOWROOM?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

Would you like to take part in drawings for a pair of movie tickets?

   ☐ Yes, my e-mail address is:_____
   ☐ No

Thank you for your answers!
Return the filled form when you arrive to the entrance examinations