Teofana Dimitrova[1]
Lyubomir Stoychev[2]
Kiril Desev[3]

MARKETING COMMUNICATION PRACTICES IN BULGARIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

*This study presents the results from the second end-stage of a project on the topic of "Marketing Communication and Developing Competitive Advantages in Higher Education", financed by the "Scientific Research" fund at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" for the period 2017-2018. **The main goal** of the conducted empirical research is describing and comparing communication practices and activities by the Bulgarian state higher schools and universities in relation to their target groups – candidate students, current students and employers. **The object** of study are the public higher schools and universities operating on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. **The subject** of study is the marketing communication as a factor in building competitive advantages by Bulgarian higher schools and universities. Questionnaires were prepared and distributed online among experts in the statistical units in order to solve the posed research problems. Among the significant conclusions derived from the results are that surprisingly larger high schools rarely have their written communication strategy and medium and smaller ones seem to be more engaged with active strategic marketing communication planning; only 1/3 of higher schools are trying to track and evaluate the impact of marketing communication in changing their reputation what should be one of their long-term communication goals if planned effectively.*
JEL: M31; L22

1. Introduction

A number of researches around the world are dedicated to marketing communication in higher education. For instance, D. Schüller and V. Chalupský in "Marketing Communication Management in Higher Education" analyse how marketing communication activities are managed at public universities and their economics faculties in the Czech Republic. They reach the conclusion that many Czech universities do not have a systematic management procedure for marketing communication planning and control. Furthermore, there are several areas in the marketing communication management of higher educational

---

[1] *Teofana Dimitrova, Ph.D, Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", Bulgaria.*
[2] *Lyubomir Stoychev, Ph.D, Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", Bulgaria.*
[3] *Kiril Desev, Ph.D, Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", Bulgaria*

institutions which should be substantially improved upon (Schüller and Chalupský, 2012). L. Youngah focuses on a specific target group in relation to the universities' marketing efforts – future students' parents. She explores how university communication influenced parents' attitude and reputation perception. Through in-depth interviews with 29 parents, Youngah makes a conclusion that a university's strong organizational identity and culture, communicated through the internal stakeholders' experience can significantly influence prospective parents' favourable cognitive and behavioural intentions (Youngah, 2019). Other authors focus on analysis and evaluation of the meaning and emphasis of integrated marketing communication upon higher educational institutions (Horrigan, 2007; Edmiston, 2009; Popovic, 2015; Smedescu, Ivanov and Truth, 2016; Harjadi and Fatmasari, 2017).

In Bulgaria, the problem of marketing communication (as part of marketing efforts) in higher schools and universities (HSU) is scarcely researched. This is in part due to the system of higher education (SHE) in Bulgaria which is sometimes defined as bureaucratic, exceptionally sluggish, closed, etc. However, the subject is certainly intriguing and contemporary when factoring in the necessity to overcome communication barriers between HSU and interested parties (stakeholders, target groups). The transition from planned to market economy turned SHE from centralized to highly accessible and market-oriented. At the very beginning, HSU marketing was not the focus of attention and could be described as more sporadic, undecided and random. Furthermore, some higher schools calmly followed the worn path of timelessness, leaning on past accomplishments, i.e. they were confident in the traditional preference of candidate students. But the realization did come. Whether the process went on too slowly and why the system finally "awakened" are questions which can be the centre of later researches. What is clear is that in the reality of 51 active (accredited) public universities and other higher schools, Bulgarian higher education institutions cannot remain passive and wait for the old times to make a comeback. They naturally realized the necessity of accepting a new different logic of regulation which is expressed in preaching and professing the so-called marketing concept at all stages and in all directions.

This current study presents the results from a conducted research which sought answers to questions such as:

- *Do HSUs have planned communication strategy* (on an all-university and/or faculty level)? And if they do, is *that strategy publicly accessible; who developed it; are communication activities of the different faculties synchronized* by an all-university supervisor?

- *Do HSUs employ an authorized person (team) dealing with marketing communication* in all its complexity?

- *Do HSUs employ a designated communicator* (PR, media expert, contactor, etc.) with mass media?

- *Do HSUs conduct monitoring on their marketing communication and what evaluators do they use* in order to evaluate their communication activities?

- *With what intensity do HSUs spread information* to their target groups?

- *What are the most important communication channels* that HSUs use in their attempts to reach their target groups?

- *What are the expected results of the HSUs' communication activity*?

1.1. System of higher education in Bulgaria

The system of higher education in Bulgaria is defined by the impact of the so-called managed competition which effectively means the state's interference in the overall functioning of the public service market, such as:

- Control over the admission of students and doctoral candidate;

- Determining the type and number of prioritized professional profiles and protected majors in state higher schools;

- Laying out the nature of effectiveness of state subsidy (Law for higher education in Bulgaria, Art. 90 and Art. 91);

- Normative obligation of higher schools and education to be accredited to the National Agency for evaluating and accreditation under a unified criterion system, etc.

In other words, the academic autonomy of higher schools which the state warrants (under the Law of higher education under Art. 8) can be qualified as partial – a circumstance which significantly narrows the scope of successful application of the traditional marketing approach in relation to such an *unorthodox* market. Naturally, here must be pointed out some of the arguments *in support* of the state's interference in the administration of higher schools because the continuing existence of such interference is beneficial (Dimitrova, 2018):

- *The presence of outside effects related to the development of higher schools*. Investments (specifically – state subsidies) in higher education enable such positive effects with decisive importance in the socio-economic development of the basics of knowledge.

- *Providing equal access to higher education*, regardless of ideologies, religion and political doctrines and not allowing discrimination based on gender, age, race, ethnical or social background, nationality or any other privileges.

- *Providing care for the quality of training* of specialists with higher degrees. The state's vision to warrant and constantly improve the quality of higher education is materialized through the realization of the adopted "Strategy for development of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria for the period 2014-2020"; the functioning of the specifically created National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA); the adopted amendments to the Law for higher education and Law for development of the academic personnel; normative required implementation of an internal system for evaluation and control maintenance and the academic personnel in higher schools; the developed rating system for HSU in the country, etc.

- *Supporting "non-profitable" sciences.* The market is impartial to some sciences which are not "profitable". Physics, Chemistry, Biology, et al., despite their indirect application in the "useful" production activities (gaining profit) are effectively not the focus of private investment interests (seeking profit). The state remains the "naturally existing" defender of non-profitable (protected) sciences.

- *Correcting the markets' asymmetricity.* Besides everything else, the state turns into a corrective of the infamous "asymmetricity" of markets. This realization is present from J. M. Keynes (albeit in a different state) to J. Stiglitz (in the explicit state). If capital markets were perfect, the people for whom education would be a good investment would have a reasonable-enough motive to take loans in order to finance the acquisition of higher education. But private investors would not accept a mortgage in the form of an expected higher education diploma. Thus, the people who do not have sufficient funds, albeit capable enough, would in effect not have access to higher education. That is, unless the support comes from… exactly the state.

1.2. The research

A team of professors at the Faculty of economic and social sciences (FESS) at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" conducted an empirical research which had its pilot phase in the period December 2017 – April 2018 as part of a project on the subject: "Marketing communication and building competitive advantages by higher schools". Among the more important results from that initial phase are:

First, a comparative theoretic analysis was conducted of publications, devoted to the categories *marketing communications, competitive advantages, competitiveness*.

Second, an analysis was made on the current state and tendencies were drawn out for the development of the system of higher education in Bulgaria.

Third, a methodology was developed for monitoring (analysis and scanning) of *communication practices and activities in Bulgarian higher schools and universities*.

Fourth, pilot information was provided for the role and importance of marketing communications conducted by state higher schools and universities with a capacity of over 9000 students.

Factoring in the aforementioned, changes were made in the suggested methodology and developed tools. Part of the formulated work hypotheses were modified and a new one was formulated (see the second hypothesis).

This current study presents the results obtained by the second end-stage of the research which was realized in the period January 2019 – May 2019.

The main goal of the research is to describe and compare the communication practices and activities in Bulgarian higher schools and education in relation to their target groups – candidate students, current students and employers. **The object** of the research are public higher schools and universities operating on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria. **The**

subject – marketing communication as a factor for building competitive advantages for Bulgarian higher schools and universities.

The presented main goal of this second phase was specified with the following **tasks**:

1. To provide information for the role and importance of marketing communication in the process of developing competitive advantages to the remaining higher schools and universities operating in the country.

2. To draw the parameters of the successful marketing strategy of Bulgarian higher schools and universities.

The verifiable (by using the data from the conducted research) **research thesis** is: *In Bulgarian HSU the role, position and scope of marketing communication are developed to a different extent and this is dependent on the capacity and width of the product mix and the adopted management practices*.

When put in this way, it can be specified through the following hypotheses:

First hypothesis: Under the conditions of intense competition among higher schools and universities the three leading inherent competitive advantages will turn out to be "Positive brand image", "High quality of the offered education", "Good HSU education on the labour market".

Second hypothesis: The five types of higher schools and universities differ in the evaluated importance of the inherent competitive advantages.

Third hypothesis: HSU do not possess a drawn-out communication strategy.

Fourth hypothesis: HSU have a designated main communicator (their own team) dealing with marketing communication.

Fifth hypothesis: Public relations are the most widely used communication tool by HSU.

Sixth hypothesis: There is a directly proportional relationship between the width of the product mix of the HSU and the number of indicators for evaluating marketing communication effectiveness.

The research was realized under the following acknowledged limiting circumstances:

First. In the scope of the research fall only the state higher schools and universities (SHSU) in Bulgaria due to the condition that depending on the form of ownership Bulgarian higher schools and universities differ in their financing mechanisms.

Second. Outside of the methodological frame of the research is the competitive placement of higher schools and universities in Bulgaria depending on the marketing communications utilized by them.

In order to solve the posed research problems, online questionnaires were delivered among experts in the statistical units. For each statistical unit, only one participant was chosen who is responsible for the HSU's marketing communications.

The exact definition of the target population was realized with the help of data from the social statistics of the National statistical institute (NSI) and Reports of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) for institutional accreditation of higher schools and universities.

From Table 1 it becomes obvious that during the 2018/2019 school year there are 37 higher schools in Bulgaria.

Table 1

Higher schools by type and ownership in Bulgaria

Type and ownership	2018/19 (number)
Total	54
Universities and specialized higher schools	50
Independent colleges	4
Colleges in the structure of universities and specialized higher schools	17
From that number of private higher schools	17
Universities and specialized higher schools	13
Independent colleges	4
Colleges in the structure of universities and specialized higher schools	–

Source: National statistical institute, 2019.

For the goals of this current research a grouping of state higher schools has been suggested in five types according to their capacity (Table 2): **largest state higher schools** with a number of students over 20000; **large state higher schools** with 14000 – 19999 students; **medium state higher schools** with 9000 – 13999 students; **small state higher schools** with 4000 – 8999 students; **smallest state higher schools** with 850 – 3999 students. From the thusly defined population is excluded the Dimitar A. Tsenov Academy of Economics in Svishtov because at the time of the research it was discovered that the Decision of the Accreditation Council to NEAA from 16.11.2017 for institutional accreditation has not yet been enforced due to it being legally contested.

Therefore, the volume of the target population for the current research consists of 36 statistical units and the registered information covers 30 units, i.e. it can be considered that the conducted observation has a representational value.

Table 2

Distribution of higher schools by type

Type	State higher schools	Capacity
Type I **LARGEST SHSU** over 20000	Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"	37000
	University of National and World Economy – Sofia	27340
	Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"	22750
	Technical University of Sofia	21215
Type II **LARGE SHSU** 14000 – 19999	South-West University "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad	19600
	"Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse	19555
	"St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo	17368
Type III **MEDIUM SHSU** 9000 – 13999	University of Economics – Varna	13000
	"Konstantin Preslavsky" University of Shumen	12000
	Technical University of Varna	11000
	Medical University – Sofia	9770
	Trakia University – Stara Zagora	9435
Type IV **SMALL SHSU** 4000 – 8999	Technical University of Gabrovo	8000
	"Nikola Yonkov Vaptsarov" Naval Academy – Varna	6500
	University of Architecture, Civil Engineering and Geodesy – Sofia	6350
	University "Prof. D-r Asen Zlatarov" – Burgas	5875
	University of Food Technologies – Plovdiv	5500
	Medical University of Plovdiv	5185
	University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy – Sofia	5000
	Medical University – Varna – "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov"	4800
	University of Forestry – Sofia	4600
	University of Mining and Geology "St. Ivan Rilski" – Sofia	4400
	Agricultural University – Plovdiv	4200
	"Vasil Levski" National Military University – Veliko Tarnovo	4200
	National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" – Sofia	4000
Type V **SMALLEST SHSU** 850-3999	"Todor Kableshkov" University of Transport – Sofia	3700
	University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (UNIBIT) – Sofia	3400
	Medical University – Pleven	3230
	Ministry of Interior Academy – Sofia	2000
	VSU "Lyuben Karavelov" – Sofia	1800
	University of Telecommunications and Post – Sofia	1620
	National Academy of Music "Prof. Pancho Vladigerov" – Sofia	1600
	"G. S. Rakovski" National Defence College – Sofia	1400
	National Academy of Art – Sofia	1200
	Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts – Plovdiv	1060
	"Krastyo Sarafov" National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts – Sofia	850

Source: National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, 2019.

2. Results

2.1. *Competitive advantages*

From the very start the research tests to what extent higher schools recognize and want to develop competitive advantages related to social prestige and brand value compared to possessing advantages having to do with the specifics of the educational product itself. It should be noted that even though the *high quality of the education* is a leading competitive advantage for 2/3 of the higher schools, 60% of them rely primarily on the *positive brand image* and *good reputation on the market of labour* (Figure 1). In other words, two of the three main competitive advantages for educational institutions have to do exactly with building a positive public image. Competitive advantages having to do with specific attributes of the product itself (rich product portfolio, effective pricing policy) are left trailing.

Therefore, the **first hypothesis** that in the circumstances of high competition among higher schools, the three main competitive advantages will turn out to be "Positive brand image", "High quality of offered education", "Good reputation of HSU of the labour market" is **thoroughly confirmed**.

Figure 1

Most important competitive advantages that higher schools possess
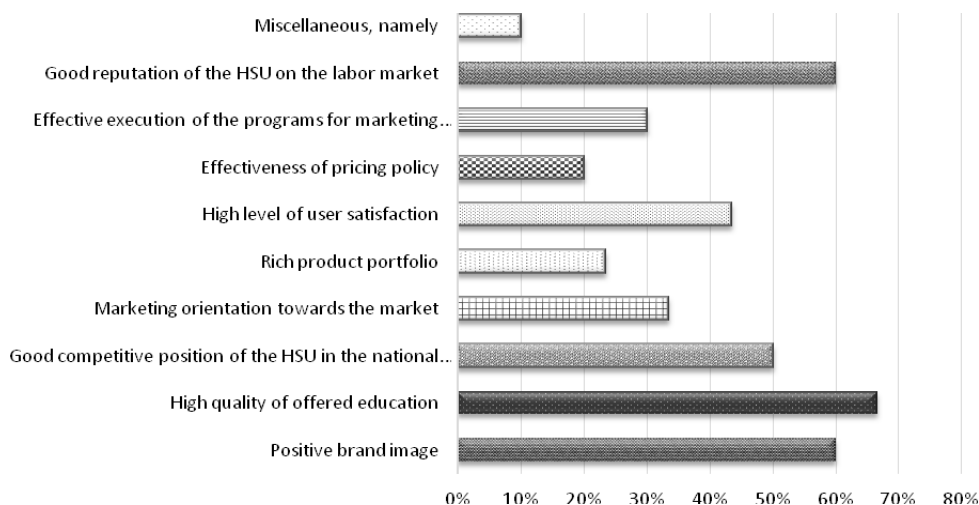
For the analysis of the **second hypothesis,** the non-parametric test of Kruskal-Wallis is applied, which is analogous to the single-factor dispersion analysis of range data. The reason for choosing this test is the necessity of statistical analysis of ordinal variables. As a *post-hoc* analysis, Dunn's test is applied for pairwise comparison. The used technical tools are SPSS and Python.

The variable "Type of HSU" is considered a feature factor with five levels. For a dependent feature is used the individual mark for the 9 different competitive advantages.
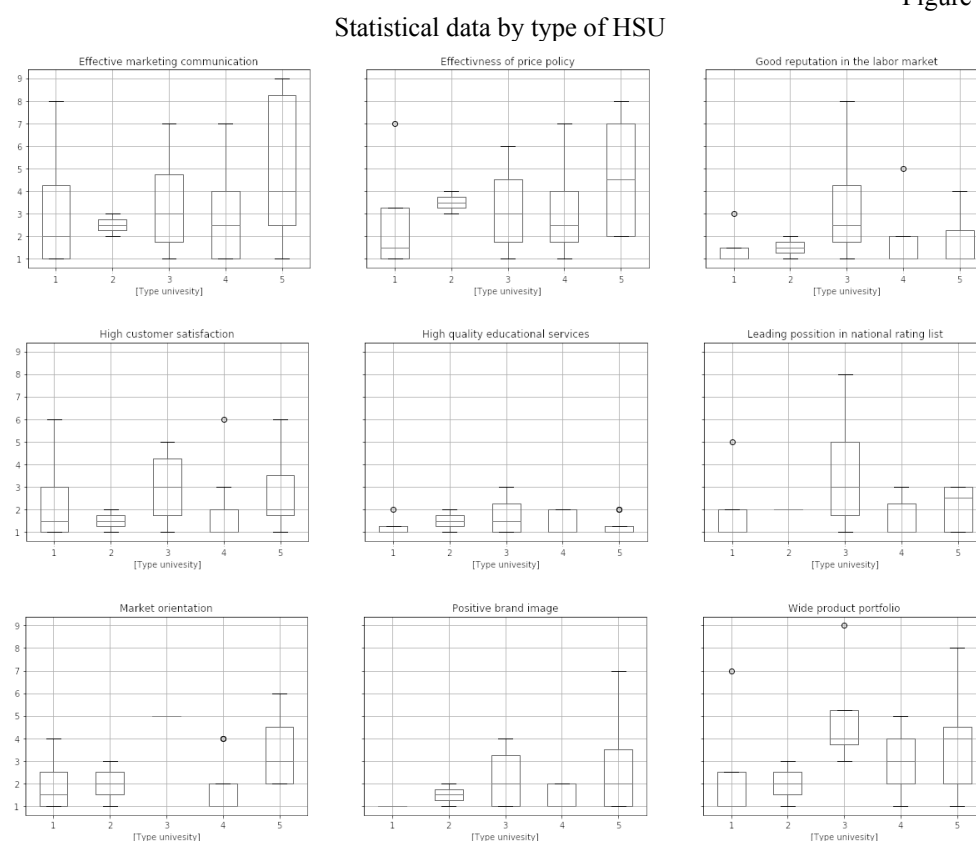
For each competitive advantage, the following working hypotheses are defined:

H0 – no statistically significant relation exists between the feature type of HSU and the mark for inherent competitive advantage

H1 – the relation between type of HSU and the mark for importance of inherent competitive advantage is statistically significant.

The accepted level of significance is $\alpha = 0.05$.

Figure 2

Statistical data by type of HSU

Summarized statistical information for the researched parameter "mark for the importance of inherent competitive advantages" on type of universities for each competitive advantage is shown in Figure 2.

In Table 3 is given data from the application of the Kruskal-Wallis test for finding a significant relation between the independent variable Type of HSU and the corresponding competitive advantage.

Table 3

Values of p-value in Kruskal-Wallis

Competitive advantage	P-value
Good competitive position of HSU in the national rating system	0.4112
Marketing orientation towards the market	0.0067
Rich product portfolio	0.2284
High quality of the offered education	0.8151
Positive brand image	0.1952
High level of user satisfaction	0.5402
Effectiveness of pricing policy	0.4715
Effective execution of the programs for marketing communication	0.7004
Good reputation of the HSU on the labour market	0.5229

The results in Table 3 and more specifically the significance of 0.0067 confirm the presence of a significant statistical relation between type of university and the evaluation of competitive advantage "Marketing orientation towards the market". This gives us reasoning to reject the null hypothesis for this variable.

To find out which groups of type of HSU differ, a pairwise analysis using Dunn's test is conducted. The results are shown in Table 4.

Significance values are adjusted by the Bonferroni correction for multiple tests. The value 0.012 of adjusted significance shows a significant difference between type II and type IV of the HSU types.

Table 4

Pairwise statistical analysis

Pairwise type HS	Test Statistics	Std. Error	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj.Sig.
4 – 2	16.042	4.942	3.246	0.01	0.012
4 – 5	-9.729	3.907	-2.490	0.013	0.128
1 – 2	-14.625	6.052	-2.416	0.016	0.157
3 – 2	14.250	7.412	1.922	0.055	0.545
1 – 3	-3.75	7.412	-0.51	0.960	1
4 – 1	1.417	4.942	0.287	0.774	1
1 – 5	-8.312	5.241	-1.586	0.113	1
4 – 3	1.792	6.537	0.274	0.784	1
5 – 2	6.312	5.241	1.204	0.228	1

The results of the applied statistical analysis show that there is a statistically significant relation between the feature "Type of HSU" and the dependent variable "Marketing orientation towards the market". These results confirm the **second hypothesis**, although not for each of the competitive advantages.

2.2. *Communication activity and expected results*

It was entirely expected for researchers that *increasing the interest in candidate students and parents* is the most desired result from higher schools' communication activity. This is true for 86,7% of respondents in the research (Figure 3). It is not surprising that of highest importance is one "speed" indicator which can appear quickly after a certain communication activity and can also be measured and observed through specific indicators. Still, looking for quick effects is very common for marketing communication. In this case, however, it should be noted that over 73% of respondents were not aware of the meaning of marketing communication for maintaining one constant attribute of higher schools – their *good reputation*. It should not be underestimated that exactly half of the participants in the research think that through their communication activity higher schools can consistently and reliably change the society's attitude towards the necessity for higher education and its quality. This is exactly what should be their leading long-term goal in the area of communication.

Figure 3

Most important expected results from communication activity in higher schools
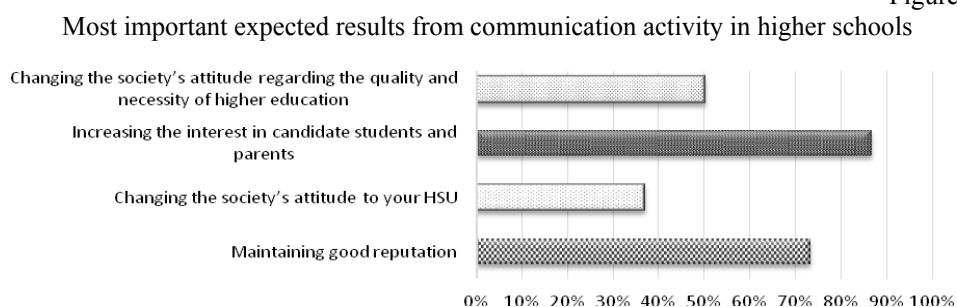

2.3. *Communication practices*

In relation with the execution of the set goals in the research, information was gathered about the methods and tools which higher schools use to obtain the desired communication results. It is well-known that in theory and practice of public relations (PR) a leading role is given to the marketing communication mix. For instance for Thomas Harris, management consultant at Thomas L. Harris & Company, educator, former president/partner of GolinHarris and author of the first book on marketing public relations (MPR), the function of public relations is far from simply supporting marketing and management. The PR legend states that: "…public relations plays a critical role in integrated marketing" and "…PR can add value to an integrated marketing communication (IMC) program", i.e. PR is a leading component of IMC (Harris, 1998, p. 322). Patrick de Pelsmacker, Maggie Geuens

and Joeri van den Bergh also believe that "PR plays a vital role in integrating the company's communications efforts" (Pelsmacker, Geuens, Van den Bergh, 2007, p. 291).

Similar leading role for PR can be found in this current research. Among communication tools used by higher schools, exactly the *public relations* possess a serious advantage. They are applied *always* in 73,3% of the time (Figure 4). Thus, the results inarguably **prove** the drawn-out **fifth hypothesis** of the current research.

Regarding *advertising*, this is valid among exactly 1/3 of respondents. After PR, ordered by frequency of application, come *personal sales* (43,3%) under the form of presenting the higher schools' advantages in front of the different target groups, providing the opportunity for communication, attending high schools, getting advice when applying, etc.

Figure 4

Frequency of application of communication tools (always)
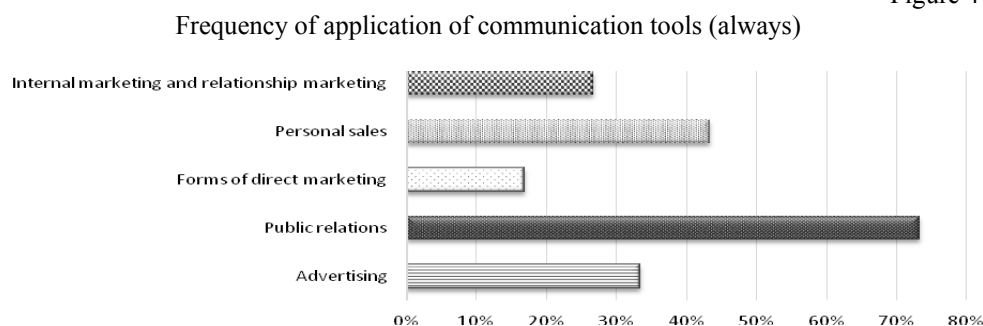
The lowest frequency of application is that of *direct marketing* (16,7%) as well as *internal marketing and relationship marketing* (26,7%) through communication stimulation of employees, professors, current students and leaders of the public opinion in order to attract more candidate students.

From the results become obvious ignoring the forms of direct marketing (e.g. by email, phone, through a catalogue…) even though it allows for very good user targeting and even personalization through the separate channels but requires excellent targeting by preset address lists and databases in order to be more effective. Still, higher schools could apply it more often considering its low cost and excellent selectiveness in terms of communication channels.

The leading importance of PR for higher schools has already been proven. Furthermore, it turns out that HSU rely more on the direct influence of this communication tool than on media. Half of the respondents say that among their PR activities the leading ones are: *organizing special events – open days, scientific forums, conferences, Olympiads and award ceremonies, etc.* which are used to reach directly their target groups (Figure 5).

Figure 5

PR activities for higher schools
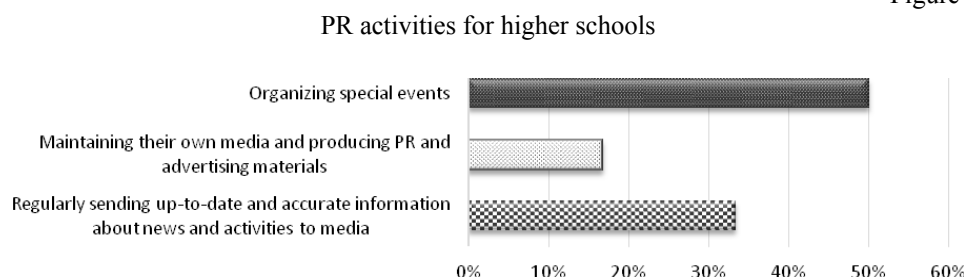
Barely 1/3 of participants in the research *regularly send information to media regarding news about their activity,* and even smaller is the percentage of those who recognize it as a PR goal *to maintain their own media and produce information materials*. However, this is not true for advertising. This is where own materials are preferred by higher schools, with 80% of them printing out *their own advertising brochures, pamphlets, flyers, catalogues* (Figure 6). In second place among preferred advertising channels come *social media* and *internet media (sites, blogs, etc.)* – respectively for 63,3% and 50% of respondents. Close to modern media come *traditional electronic media* with a result just below 50%. *Print media* are least preferred in only 16,7% of the time.

Figure 6

Used communication channels in the realm of advertising (always)
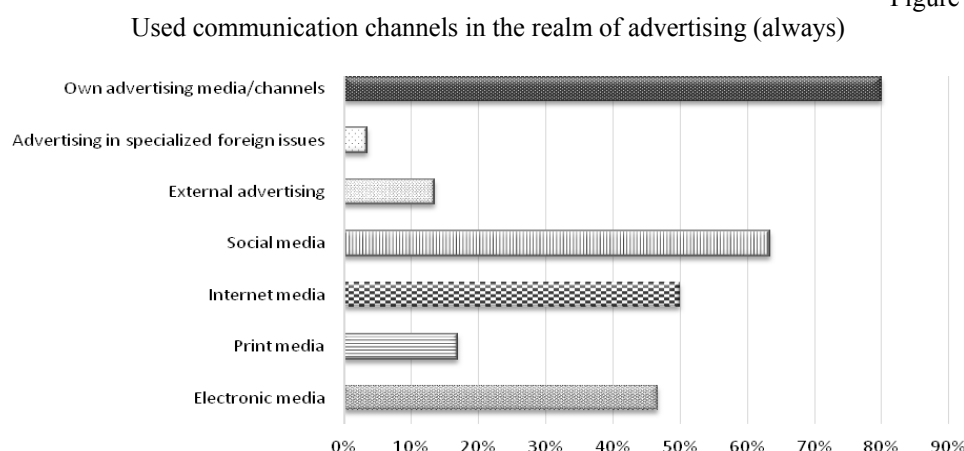
In relation to the most important communication channels that HSU rely on, a number of important dependencies stand out (Figure 7). *Newspapers and magazines* are the most important communication channel for 20% of HSU in their attempts to reach candidate students, graduated students and employers. A similar situation is observed with *radio and television*. The result of traditional media is closer to 25% for communication intentions regarding the graduated students and student candidates. One can conclude that there is a tendency for ignoring *traditional media* at the expense of *internet websites, social media,*

own media and the efforts for direct spread of information under the form of *special events*. Such ignoring should not occur because for instance, even with a decrease in sales, print has the feature of durability, can be read by multiple people, can determine topics for electronic media due to its analytical nature and depth. Regional papers, despite their lack of specialized content, have the power of covering the geographical target group and reaching a more heterogeneous audience, including parents and employers who can influence the candidate students' choice. Radio and television are quick and practicable. They are suitable for reaching a wider audience which is bound to include people from businesses, a number of graduated students, even student candidates (given a suitable media planning of communication activity).

Figure 7

Most important communication channels used by higher schools
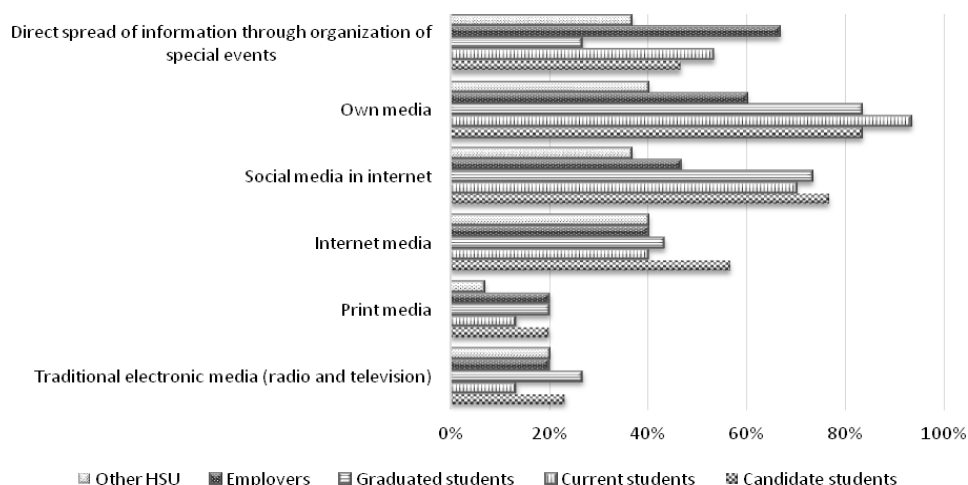
In their desire to reach candidate students, higher schools most often rely on *their own media* (83,3%) as well as *internet social media* (76,7%). *Internet media* are the most common tool for communicators 56,7% of the time, and almost 50% is the share of direct communication through organizing special events. It becomes obvious that preference towards *own controlled media* is dominant above non-controlled media. This hegemony reaches nearly 95% when factoring in contacts between educational institutions and **their current students.** In the frame of the pilot phase of the research, interviews were conducted with 10 of the leading schools, with 100% of participants declaring that they maintain their own web page on the internet (in some cases separate faculties also have specialized web sites). In 40% it is combined with a Facebook page. Other 40% declare that they own a newspaper or a magazine, 50% – informational video systems, one of the universities has their own television and radio. 80% of polled HSU have more than one own media, 50% possess three or more. Of course, higher schools rely on the spreading of information to regional and national media (with most admitting that internet media are

most important to them) and only one higher school answered that they do not hold targeted communication with mass-media. It was difficult for interviewers to evaluate the ratio between the usage of own and external media which is of big importance since non-controlled MMC reach a much wider audience.

Another important conclusion stands out – realizing the need for direct communication with target groups where the different forms of media are not mediators. Communication efforts through organizing *career forums, presentations, open days and other special events* supersede or approach in frequency and importance contact with traditional and internet media in relation with three of the researched target groups: employers (nearly 70%), current students (53,3%) and candidate students (just below 50%). Data shows that there is the belief that special events could perform functions which are not inherent to media communication channels and marketing communication tools such as advertising and PR through the means of mass communication.

Communication efforts of participants in the study are the least intensive in relation to **other higher schools** – barely 13,3% of respondents *regularly* spread information to other HSU (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Intensity of the spread of information to target groups
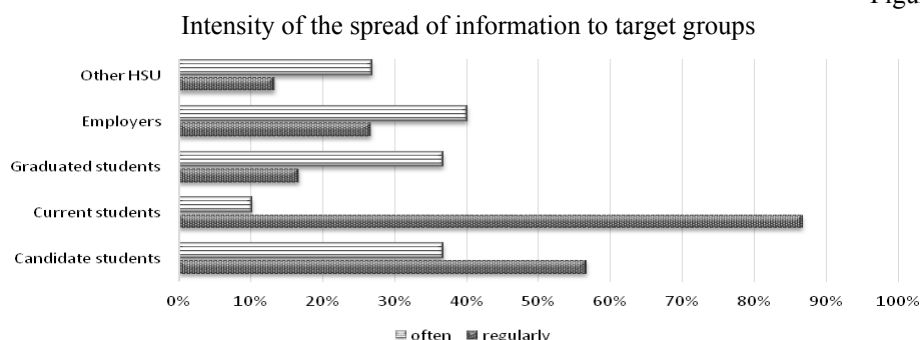
And while different HSU communicate irregularly among themselves, their contact with **employers** can be defined as *frequent* for 40% of them.

It turns out that the higher schools most often communicate not with their candidate students but with **current students**: 56,7% versus 86,7%. Of course, with the adoption of a more market-oriented approach this result, along with the communication with future users of the educational product, would change. So, in the future, higher schools should fine-tune their activities in relation to this target group.

2.4. *Planning and organizing communication activities*

An extremely interesting result can be observed in relation with the *presence of a planned communication strategy* by higher schools. Unlike the pilot phase, where only two HSUs had a planned communication strategy, here most of the respondents have one. This result

is in practice due to the inclusion of SHSU of types four and five (20 of them), 70% of whom declare to possess such a strategy.

A conclusion can be reached that **80% of SHSU of types one, two and three** (*largest, large* and *medium* state higher schools) **do not have a planned communication strategy, and 70% of SHSU of types four and five** (*small and smallest* state higher schools**) have one**. Of course, it is logical to ask why such a difference exists and what competitive advantages are provided by the presence of active marketing planning.

53,4% of all participants in the research have a planned communication strategy. Therefore, the formulated **third hypothesis** in this current research **is partially confirmed**.

Nearly 80% of the respondents share that their educational institution *has a designated person (team) dealing with marketing communication in its complexity*. This shows that the need for their own designated specialist/team, dealing with marketing communication, is understood and preferred to the alternative – using services of an outside marketing agency, dealing with communication activities.

Therefore, the drawn-out **fourth hypothesis** is **partially** confirmed.

2.5. *Evaluation of marketing communication effectiveness*

The subject of getting feedback on the relation from marketing communication and the control function in this process is complex and multi-layered in each organization due to different barriers in evaluating communication activity effectiveness. There are at least two reasons: the multiple factors of influence and the difficulty to isolate the influence of separate tools and determine the relative "weight" of their role. Evaluating the different levels on which communication works is also problematic which is demonstrated by the respondents in the current research.

26 of 30 higher schools participating in the research state that they *perform monitoring of marketing communication.* 13,3% are not interested in feedback from the process. The main indicators of this effectiveness among respondents which stand out are (Figure 9):

- Increasing awareness of different parameters of the work of HSU and the level of interest in candidate students in relation to a past period – these factors are most important to 70% of respondents;

- Degree of trust in the presented information – 63,3%;

- Degree of satisfaction by different target groups from communication with HSU – 63,3%

- Evaluation and degree of interest by the recipients in their own media: bulletins, newspapers, blogs, social media pages, internet sites... – 60%.

Inarguably the indicators pointed out as most important are not to be ignored but it is surprising that only 1/3 of higher schools are trying to track the influence of marketing communication in *changing their reputation*. And this is precisely what should be one of their long-term communication goals if planned effectively. There are different possible

explanations, such as higher schools do not know suitable tools for researching such dependencies or such research is above their means in terms of human and financial resources. Another conclusion that can be made is that less than half of HSU (43,3%) rely on their communication activity in climbing up *rating standings*. It can be summarized that with evaluating their communication activity higher schools focus their attention on parameters that are somehow closer and comprehensible at the expense of indicators that (albeit more slowly and difficult) would provide useful information for their activities in the sphere of communication.

Figure 9

Measures for evaluating marketing communication effectiveness
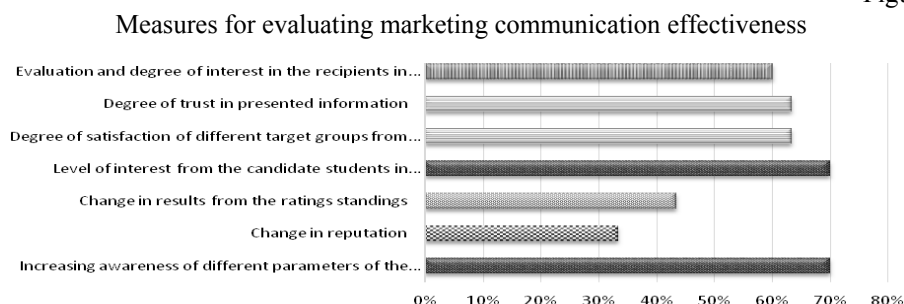
As for the level of evaluation for communication effectiveness, there is again contradiction and insufficient knowledge of the ability and tools that can be used to perform such control functions. 70% of respondents declare that they track marketing communication effectiveness on all levels – *preparation, implementation* and *impact/influence*. Similar is the share of those who trust most often media monitoring for performing this control but this tool by itself cannot provide sufficient information for the complete results of communication activity. The fact that they appeared in the media cannot help higher schools to analyze the objective results of their communication efforts. In the meantime, barely 1/3 of all HSU (most often) *collect and analyze the quantity and quality primary data from students, parents, employers and participators in forums* in order to trace the real influence of their activity (Figure 10).

40% of respondents say that they use *content analysis* (including of blogs, chatrooms, forums, social networks) and even fewer (only around ¼) – *analysis of specialized researches and data from educational institutions*. To more than 2/3 of the participants in the research *media monitoring* (press clipping) remains the main (and sufficient) way of getting feedback from marketing communication. It is undisputed however that it is not possible to judge by the collecting and storing of media publications for the real influence of communication activity which in fact a great part of the responders claim they realize on at least two of the levels. Immediately a logical question arises – how do they do it.

To analyze the statement of the existence of a direct proportionality between the width of the product mix[4] (WPM) of HSU and the number of used measures for evaluating

---

[4] Under width of product mix of HSU the team of the current research defines the number of accredited professional directions from the educational institution. The information for WPM in Table 3 is based on the officially published data by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency.

marketing communication effectiveness (MEMCE) (Table 5) a linear regression model was built by using programming language „Python".

Figure 10

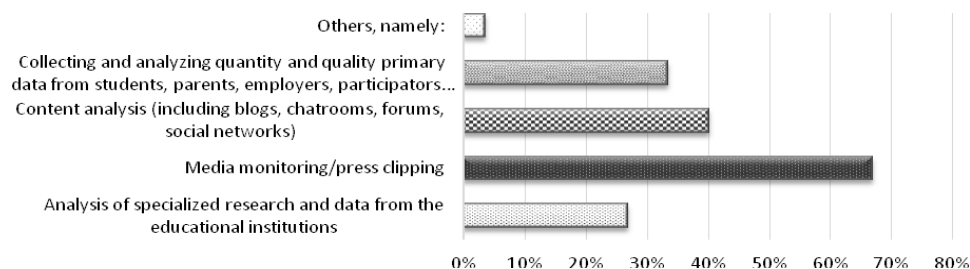Methods, means and tools for evaluating communication activity (most commonly used)

Table 5

Measures for evaluating marketing communication effectiveness and width of product mix for higher schools

Higher school	MEMCE	WPM
Technical University of Gabrovo	6	8
University of Food Technologies – Plovdiv	4	9
Medical University of Plovdiv	5	5
University of Chemical Technology and Metallurgy – Sofia	5	7
Medical University – Varna – "Prof. Dr. Paraskev Stoyanov"	3	5
University of Forestry – Sofia	6	8
University of Mining and Geology "St. Ivan Rilski" – Sofia	4	7
Agricultural University – Plovdiv	5	8
"Vasil Levski" National Military University – Veliko Tarnovo	5	7
National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" – Sofia	5	4
Medical University – Pleven	4	5
University of Telecommunications and Post – Sofia	5	2
"G. S. Rakovski" National Defence College – Sofia	6	3
National Academy of Art – Sofia	5	1
Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts – Plovdiv	4	4
"Krastyo Sarafov" National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts – Sofia	6	1
Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski"	5	28
University of National and World Economy – Sofia	5	6
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"	2	30
Technical University of Sofia	2	11
Trakia University – Stara Zagora	5	18
"Konstantin Preslavsky" University of Shumen	4	21
University of Economics – Varna	6	4
South-West University "Neofit Rilski" – Blagoevgrad	7	30
Technical University of Varna	4	8
"Angel Kanchev" University of Ruse	3	23

Since the quantity of data is not sufficient to find a more complex relationship between the independent and resulting variable, the simplest regression model is used – the linear model.

The coefficients *a* and *b* of the linear function *ŷ = a.(x) + b* need to be found, which can be charted as a straight line so that the sum of the squares of the distances between the points and the line is minimal.

Using the method of least squares (MLS) the regression coefficients *a* and *b* are evaluated with the formulas:

$$a = \frac{\sum Y_i X_i - N.\bar{X}.\bar{Y}}{\sum X_i^2 - N.\bar{X}^2} \qquad (1)$$

$$b = \bar{Y} - a.\bar{X} \qquad (2)$$

where:

$\bar{X} = \frac{\sum X_i}{N}$ is the average of X;

$\bar{Y} = \frac{\sum Y_i}{N}$ is the average of Y;

X_i – width of product mix for the *i* –th observation;

Y_i is the number of used measures for evaluating marketing communication effectiveness for the *i* –th observation.

From formulas (1) and (2) we obtain: ***a= – 0.029*** и ***b = 4.947***.

From the obtained regression equation *ŷ =-0.029.(x) + 4.947*, we calculate the coefficient of determination:

$$R^2 = \frac{\sum (\hat{Y}_i - \bar{Y})^2}{\sum (Y_i - \bar{Y})^2} = 0.044$$

The obtained coefficient of determination shows that only a small part of the variation in the number of used MEMCE is caused by WPM.

In Figure 11 is given the line of the regression model *ŷ =-0.029.(x) + 4.947*. The obtained coefficient in front of the variable is negative, which is obvious from the slope of the line of the regression model. Therefore, the **sixth hypothesis** regarding the presence of a directly proportional relationship **should be rejected**.

Figure 11

Regression model between WPM and used MEMCE
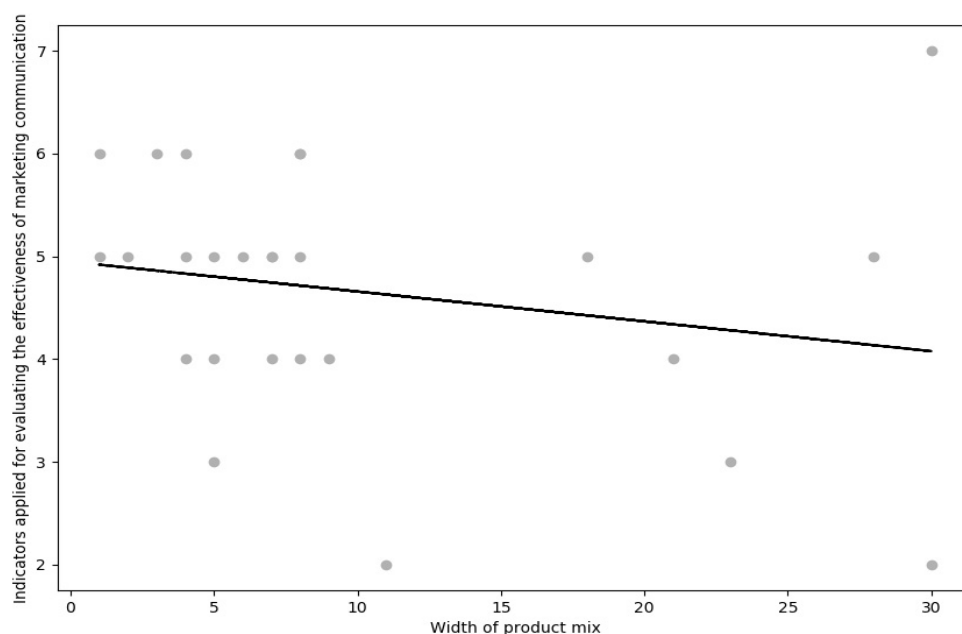
Testing the stated hypotheses in the current research demonstrates the following:

- The first hypothesis that in the conditions of intense competition among higher schools the three main competitive advantages will turn out to be "Positive brand image", "High quality of offered education", "Good reputation of HSU on the labour market" is thoroughly confirmed.

- The second hypothesis that the five types of higher schools differ in the estimated importance of inherent competitive advantages required reviewing the variable "Type of HSU" as a feature factor on five levels. For a resulting feature were used the evaluations of the separate competitive advantages. The presence of a statistically significant relation was confirmed only between "type of university" and the evaluation of competitive advantage "Marketing orientation of market". That result effectively shows that the stated second hypothesis is partially confirmed.

- The third hypothesis for the presence of planned communication strategy in HSU is partially confirmed.

- The fourth hypothesis, related to the presence of a designated communicator at the HSU, is partially confirmed.

- The fifth hypothesis that public relations are the most commonly used communication tool from higher schools is confirmed.

- The sixth hypothesis for the presence of a direct relation between the width of the product mix of the HSU and the number of measures for evaluating marketing communication effectiveness is rejected.

Thus, **the results from the conducted research partially confirm the formulated basic statement** that in Bulgarian HSU the role, position and reach of marketing communication are developed to a different degree which is determined by the capacity, width of product mix and the adopted administration practices.

3. Conclusion

Among the more important conclusions that stand out from the research are:

- The most important competitive advantages for state higher schools in Bulgaria are "High quality of the offered education", "Positive brand image", "Good reputation of HSU on the labour market". So two of the three leading competitive advantages for educational institutions have to do exactly with building positive public images. Competitive advantages having to do with specific attributes of the product itself (rich product portfolio, effective pricing policy), are left behind.

- Even though every HSU relies on marketing communication in building competitive advantages, 53,4% of them have a planned communication strategy.

- Nearly 80% of respondents share that within their educational institution there is a designated person (team) dealing with marketing communication in its complexity which shows that the necessity of a designated person/team, dealing with marketing communication, is understood.

- Almost 90% of HSU rely on "Increasing the interest in candidate students and parents" in their communication activity – an expected result which can be categorized as mostly quick. However, it should be pointed out that 73% of respondents are aware of the meaning of marketing communication for maintaining a lasting attribute of higher schools – their good reputation. Furthermore, 50% of participants in the research think that with their communication activity, higher schools could consistently and reliably change the society's perception about the necessity of higher education and its quality.

- PR has a leading role (73,3%) among communication tools used by higher schools in Bulgaria. Behind it in the frequency of application come personal sales (43,3%), advertising (33,3%), internal marketing and relationship marketing (26,7%), direct marketing (16,7%). So there is a trend to ignore the forms of direct marketing which can be exceptionally effective because it allows for a much better user targeting and even personalization through the respective communication channels.

- Own media are determined by HSU as the most important communication channel for reaching candidate students, current students and graduated students. The direct spread

of information through the organization of special events is leading in terms of communication with employers.

- Communication efforts of participants in the research are with the highest intensity in respect to their current students (86,7%) and with the lowest in respect to other higher schools (13,3%).

- Regarding the level at which communication effectiveness is being evaluated, there is a contradiction and insufficient knowledge of the ability and tools that can be used to perform such control function. 70% of the respondents declare that they follow the effectiveness from their marketing communication on every possible level – preparation, implementation and impact. To more than 2/3 of the participants in the research media monitoring (press clipping) remains the leading (and sufficient) way of getting feedback from marketing communication.

- There is no directly proportional relationship between the spread of the HSU product mix and the number of indicators for evaluating marketing communication effectiveness which means that the number of accredited directions by HSU is not a factor for performing a complete complex evaluation of marketing communication effectiveness.

References

Schüller, D., Chalupský, V. (2012). Marketing Communication Management in Higher Education. – Acta Univ. Bohem. Merid, 15 (2), pp. 61-69.

Youngah, L. (2019). Understanding parents' view on US higher education marketing communication. – Educational Research for Policy and Practice, [Online], Available from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-019-09249-2.

Horrigan, D. (2007). Integrated marketing communications in higher education. – *Doctoral Dissertations*. AAI3265778. [Online], Available from: https://opencommons.uconn.edu/dissertations/AAI3265778.

Edmiston, D. (2009). An Examination of Integrated Marketing Communication in U.S. Public Institutions of Higher Education. – International Journal of Educational Advancement, 19 (2), pp. 142-165.

Popovic, A. (2015). Marketing communications of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia. – Marketing, 46 (3), pp. 166-178.

Smedescu, D., Ivanov, A., Ionăş & Fruth, A. (2016). Marketing Communications Mix in Higher Education Institutions. – International Journal of Academic Research in Economics and Management Sciences, 5 (4), pp. 291-298.

Harjadi, D., Fatmasari, D. (2017). Implementation of Integrated Marketing Communication in Image of Private Higher Education. – TRIKONOMIKA, 16 (2), pp. 63-67.

Dimitrova, T. (2018). Marketingat v Sistemata na Vissheto Obrazovanie. – Marketingat i Mezhdunarodnite Ikonomicheski Otnosheniya v Savremieto – Tendentsii, Perspektivi i Predizvikatelstva, [Online], pp. 68 – 83, Available from: https://pu-science.net/fisn/res/MMIO2018.pdf.

National statistical institute. (2019). Educational institutions by type and kind of ownership. Available from: http://www.nsi.bg/ [Accessed: 11/7/2019].

National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency. (2019). Accredited higher education institutions. Available from: https://www.neaa.government.bg [Accessed: 11/7/2019].

Harris, T. (1998). Value-added Public Relations: The Secret Weapon of Integrated Marketing. NTC Business book, 1998.

Pelsmacker, P., Geuens, M., Van den Bergh, J. (2007). Marketing Communications: A European Perspective. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.