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INSTITUTIONAL VIEWPOINT ON UNIVERSITY SELECTION AS A BUYER DECISION PROCESS

Marketing and information channels, institutional factors and image of a case study university

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VAASAN AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU
Markkinointi

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Tutkimuksen lähtökohtana oli tehdä hakija-analyysi Vaasan yliopiston kansainvälisille maisteriohjelmille. Työn tarkoituksena oli selvittää missä hakijat kuulivat yliopistosta ja kuinka tärkeitä tietyt lähteet olivat lisätiedon saamisessa. Lisäksi haluttiin selvittää eri institutionaalisten tekijöiden tärkeyttä Vaasan yliopistoon hakeutumisessa sekä hakijoiden mielikuvaa yliopistosta.

Teoreettisena viitekehyksenä käytettiin kuluttaja- ja ostokäyttäytymistä, markkinointiviestintää sekä mielikuvaa. Näitä täydennettiin aikaisemmilla, erityisesti korkeakoulutukseen, liittyvillä tutkimuksilla ja niiden tuloksilla. Myös viimeaikaisia kansallisia selvityksiä kansainvälisten opiskelijoiden hakeutumisesta suomalaisiin korkeakouluihin ja korkeakoulujen kansainvälisestä hakijamarkkinoinnista hyödynnettiin.

Tutkimusmenetelmänä toimi kvantitatiivinen kohderyhmäkysely. Keväällä 2019 sähköinen kysely lähetettiin kaikille kansainvälisiin maisteriohjelmiin hakeneille ja markkinointiluvan antaneille hakijoille. Vastauksia saatiin 164 kappaletta, joita tarkasteltiin eri taustatekijöiden valossa.

Kaikkien hakijoiden vastauksia katsottaessa markkinointikanavista yliopiston hallinnoimat ulkoinen palvelu A sekä kansallinen opintopolku.fi olivat valituimmat kanavat näkyvyydelle, ja lisätiedon lähteenä yliopiston www-sivut arvioitiin tärkeimmäksi. Koulutusohjelmien piirteet sekä opetuksen laatu olivat tärkeimmät institutionaaliset syyt hakeutua Vaasan yliopistoon. Hakijoiden mielikuvissa korostuivat sanat koulutus, tutkimus, opiskelu, mutta myös sanat laatu ja kansainvälisyys, sekä adjektiivit hyvä, paras, mahtava ja ystävällinen.

Tutkimustulokset ovat linjassa esitettyjen teorioiden ja aikaisempien tutkimusten tulosten sekä selvitysten kanssa. Lisäksi hakijoiden mielikuvat vastaavat hakijamarkkinoinnissa välitettävään imagoon. Eri taustatekijöitä tarkasteltaessa saadaan yksityiskohtaisempaa dataa, jota voidaan hyödyntää mahdollisesti kohdennetumpaa hakijamarkkinointia tehtäessä.

Avainsanat	ostopäätös, mielikuva, yliopisto

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of the study was an applicant analysis on the applicants to the international Master's degree programmes of the University of Vaasa. The aim was to find out where the applicants heard about the university and how important where the various channels in finding more information. In addition, the importance of various institutional factors in applying to the university as well as the image of the applicants for the university were examined.

The theoretical framework consisted of buyer decision process, marketing communication and image. These were supplemented by previous studies and their results relating to higher education. Also, recent national surveys on international applicants to Finnish higher education institutions and international recruitment in Finnish universities were utilised.

The research method was a quantitative focus group survey. Spring 2019 an electronic questionnaire was sent to the applicants who had agreed to marketing purposes. 164 answers were gathered and examined by various background variables

When examining all the responses the university-controlled marketing and information channels of service provider A and the national information and application service Studyinfo.fi were the most selected channels regarding visibility, and the website was the most important source for further information. The programme characteristics and the quality of education were the most important institutional reasons for applying to the University of Vaasa. Regarding the image of the University of Vaasa, the education, research and studies are prominent words, as well as concepts of quality and internationalisation and adjectives such as good, great, best and friendly.

The findings are in line with the theories presented and with results of the earlier studies and surveys. In addition, the images the applicants had of the university correspond to the image conveyed in student recruitment. When looking at the various background variables more detailed data can be gained, that can be utilised when possibly doing more targeted student recruitment.

Keywords	buyer decision process, image, university

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

TIIVISTELMÄ

APPENDICES

LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES

LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The survey questions

Appendix 2. Image word clouds

1   INTRODUCTION

Higher education, initially a government –supported service, has entered the marketplace. In the wake of globalization and technocratization, universities and colleges have undergone a major transformation and are in stiff competition with each other in the global market for higher education. Under neo- liberalism, education is treated as a "consumable commodity and experience" (Kumar 2011). With marketization of higher education comes competition and the need to attract students who possess the fee-paying capacity for academic programmes that are 'customized' to their needs. Universities are big businesses, marketing themselves in the world-wide education market (Salter & Tapper 2002). Since global student mobility creates big business, the motivations of countries and universities in recruiting international students have become highly commercial. Many universities balance their academic budgets on international student enrolments. (Gupta 2018, 1,4.)

At the moment there are more than 5 million students pursuing their education outside of their home countries – a number three times that of international student enrolments in 1990. By 2022, the number of internationally mobile students is expected to reach 7 million. The most significant growth comes from Asian students, who are looking to study abroad in English. (Studyportals 2018) In 2016 the portion of international degree students who entered Finland with the purpose to study is approximately 5% in all Bachelor degree students (OECD average is 4%, EU-22 7%) and 12% in all Master degree students (OECD average 12% and EU-22 13%). The growth in the numbers of students entering higher education outside their home countries, does not mean that competition on international talent would become easier. (OKM 2018, 3.)

As of 1 January 2016, the Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences have had the possibility to collect tuition fees from students coming from outside the EU /EEA area in degree programmes leading to a Bachelor's or a Master's degree. Tuition fees must be collected from students as of 1 August 2017. The aim of the introduction of the tuition fees is to promote the universities' possibilities

for education export and to enhance the financial basis of the universities. The proceeds from the tuition fees remain at the disposal of the universities. The introduction of tuition fees to non-EU/EEA degree students in 2017 was feared to weaken Finland's chances in the competition on international talent. In the academic year 2017-2018 the number of new international degree students in Bachelor and Master programmes diminished from previous year with approximately a quarter (2016: 5 501, 2017: 4 158) and the number of international students from EU/EEA rose in proportion to the non-EU/EEA students. All and all the number of international degree students in Finnish universities was 20 249 students. (OKM 2018, 3-5.)

The decision to study overseas is one of the most significant and expensive initiatives that students may ever undertake. Therefore, the high costs of studying abroad make it a complex decision. Most complex and expensive decisions are more likely to involve deeper buyer deliberation. In this way, the decision to study abroad increases the complexity of the selection process. Consumers usually associate intangibility with high level of risk. Thus, intangibility hinders the communication of services to the customer and the setting of prices for international education. (Mazzarol 1998). Consequently, the decision process of consumers is influenced by indirect mechanisms of service evaluation. Consumers analyse aspects such as the image of the brand, the institution, and the country of destination. (Cubillo, Sanchez, Cervino 2006, 102.)

The literature on the marketing of services conceptualizes a service such as higher education as highly complex and high in divergence (Shostack, 1987). It is intangible, heterogeneous, inseparable and perishable (Zeithaml et al. 1985), and difficult for the consumer to evaluate, even after purchase, because it is high in credence qualities and low in search qualities (Zeithaml, 1981). Undergraduate higher education is a significant, usually one-off, purchase. It is a decision likely to affect not only the next 3 or 4 years but will also influence long-term future career prospects. (Walsh, Moorhouse, Dunnett and Barry 2015, 671.)

Higher education is a pure service and is characterised by a greater amount of interpersonal contact, complexity, divergence, and customization than other service businesses (Patterson et al. 1998). Individuals process in a more extensive, selective and in a more attribute-based fashion when choices are more emotionally laden. In examining students' choice of university course, it is worth bearing in mind that choosing a complex, high credence, one-off purchase is a difficult task for a consumer. (Walsh et al. 2015, 671-672.) Most of the quality attributes in higher education cannot be perceived, felt, or tested in advance. This nature brings difficulties to the evaluation of a programme, especially for an international student. (Cubillo et al. 2006, 103.)

The relatively limited number of studies regarding international students' choice of university outside their home country – across a range of counties – is surprising. Although there are some studies in this area, including studies that take into account choice of international students, more research is needed to compare the differences among students in terms of the process of choice and differences in their choice of destination countries as well as their countries of origin. (Hemsley-brown and Oplatka 2015, 268.) Relatively little has been written on the marketing of education within international markets. There is scarce literature analysing the decision-making process of prospective international students in general (Cubillo et al. 2006, 102)

In 2018 two separate surveys were published on international students in Finland, the International Student Barometer (ISB) and a survey as part of the interim report from the national working group for the follow-up and evaluation of the implementation of tuition fees set by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. One of questions examined was the reason the students chose Finland. Both surveys highlighted the content and quality of education, reputation and expenses relating to education. (Faktaa express 2018 and OKM 2018). The present study wishes to address the matter further and in a more detailed point of view of a case study organisation, the University of Vaasa.

Research problem and research questions

As presented by the points above, the selection process for higher education is a complex decision, especially in the international context. The purpose of the present study is to examine the matter from the viewpoint of a case study organisation, University of Vaasa and its international Master's degree programmes.

1. From which marketing and information channels did the applicants learn of the institution / degree programmes at the institution?

2. Where did they search for more information?

3. What are the specific reasons for choosing the institution / a degree programme?

4. What kind of image do they have of the institution?

These are the research questions in the present study to be examined in the context of the case study organisation by the means of a focused target group survey; the purpose is not to present a general universal model or theory, but to analyse these questions for the benefit of the case study organisation.

A quantitative survey was done on the applicants to the international programmes during spring 2019 to find out their answers for the research questions. The theoretical background for the survey and the study relies on the basic concepts of buyer decision process, marketing communications and image and branding, with a special emphasis on higher education to be presented in the first chapters.

Results of the survey and study presented in chapter seven should allow generalisations on the reasons of different applicant segments for choosing the University of Vaasa / degree programme, marketing channels /information sources and their images on the university. Based on these findings marketing communications could be further developed and possibly targeted based on different applicant segments.

2 BUYER DECISION PROCESS

Consumer behaviour is a complex phenomenon and an eclectic field. Consumer behaviour involves interactions among people's thinking, feelings, actions and the environments. Thus, marketers need to understand what products and brands mean to consumers, what consumers must do to purchase and use them, and what influences shopping, purchase and consumption. The more marketers know about how these interactions influence individual consumers, the better they can satisfy consumer needs and wants and create value for them. (Peter & Olson 2010, 7.) The stimulus-response model of buyer behaviour (Figure 1) shows how marketing stimuli and other stimuli from the environment enter the consumer's black box containing the buyer's characteristic and the buyer's decision process, which leads into the buyer's response.

The environment		Buyer's black box	Buyer responses
Marketing stimuli	Other	Buyer's characteristics	Buying attitudes and responses
Product	Economic		
Price	Technological	Buyer's decision	Purchase behaviour
Place	Social	process	Brand engagements and
Promotion	Cultural	→	→ relationships
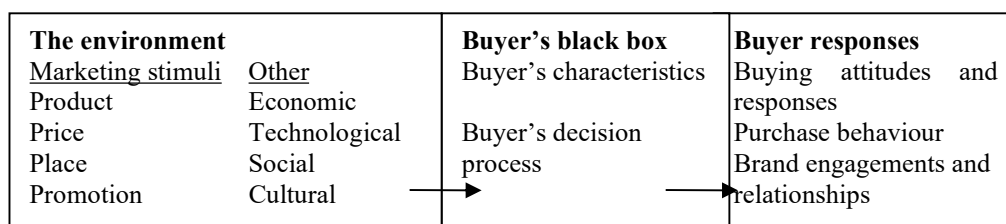
Figure 1. The model of buyer behaviour. (Kotler and Armstrong 2016, 167.)

The buyer characteristics can be divided into internal and external factors. Internal factors include demographic factors, i.e. personal features and psychological factors. External factors are the cultural and social factors. (Kotler and Armstrong 2016.)

The buyer decision process (Figure 2.) consists of five stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase decision. Clearly, the buying process starts long before the actual purchase and continues long after. Marketers need to focus on the entire buying process rather than on the purchase decision only. (Kotler and Armstrong 2016, 183.)
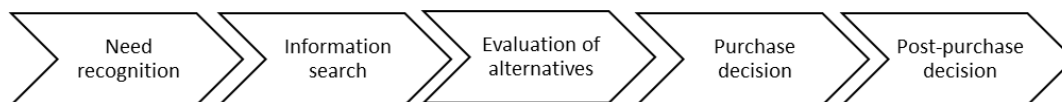
Figure 2. Buyer decision process. (Kotler and Armstrong 2016, 182.)

Consumers undertake complex buying behaviour when they are highly involved in a purchase or perceive significant differences among brands. Consumers may be highly involved when the product is expensive, risky, purchased infrequently and highly self-expressive. This buyer will pass through a learning process, first developing beliefs about the product, then attitudes and then make a thoughtful purchase choice. Marketers of high-involvement products must understand the information-gathering and evaluation behaviour of high-involvement customers. They need to help buyers learn about product-class attributes and their relative importance. (Kotler and Armstrong 2016, 182)

The choice of which university to attend has been characterised as a highly complex decision that is subject to multiple influences (Briggs and Wilson 2007). The internal and the external factors cause the consumer to seek after higher education. The process of "buying" a higher education degree requires a lot of work and background information in order to find and evaluate the options at hand. The purpose of the present study is not to examine the whole consumer decision model in higher education, but to focus on the information search aspect and the factors affecting the evaluation and selection of an institution (steps two and three of the model), which will be looked at more closely in the following subchapters, especially in the context /of higher education. First, we will examine where the applicant finds the information for the evaluation of alternatives.

2.1 Information search – higher education

Institutional attention is increasingly focused on attracting high-quality resources and students. Such a context demands a deeper understanding of the sources of information prospective students resort to when applying to a higher education institution. The importance of effective and focused student recruitment practices is paramount, because such an understanding may greatly enhance higher educa-

tion institutions' marketing policies. Information search has been addressed in different consumption situations. Nonetheless, there is the need for a deeper understanding of search behaviour, in particular in services. Indeed, consumers tend to search for more information when buying a service than when purchasing a tangible product. (Simoes and Soares 2010, 371-372.)

In general, the higher the involvement with the purchase, the higher is the product's perceived risk. To reduce risk perceptions, consumers employ strategies such as searching for information, gauging service provider reputation, visiting service facilities, talking to retail assistants and comparing service settings on the Internet. In services, in particular, information search effort is related to perceived risk levels: the higher the degree of perceived risk, the greater is the tendency to search for information. Therefore, information search constitutes a key element of consumer decision models. (Simoes and Soares 2010, 375.)

Information search, which can be internal or external, covers the process consumers undertake to acquire information and identify possible solutions to their problem (Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel 2006). Internal search is based on retrieving existing information in memory or knowledge from previous related experiences. External search refers to information search beyond one's memory and involves collecting new information from both personal and non-personal sources. External search occurs when internal search is considered not sufficient for a confident decision, and whenever the benefits of the additional information prevail over its costs: e.g. first-time buyers are frequently uncertain about available alternatives. It should be noted that the gathering of product-related information can be ongoing: i.e. consumers may search for information when they are not planning to buy a product immediately (Bloch, Sherrell, and Ridgway 1986). (Simoes and Soares 2010, 375.)

Sources of information and choice factors are important dimensions when addressing information-seeking behaviour. During the decision-making process, consumers can resort to various resources to gather relevant information about the product/service under consideration. They may use different information sources,

which can be broadly classified as internal and external search. Beatty and Smith (1987) classify external information sources as interpersonal, media, neutral, and retailer. Olshavsky and Wymer (1995) categorise sources as direct inspection of the good by the consumer, interpersonal sources (e.g. relationships), marketer controlled (e.g. advertising), reseller information (e.g. catalogues) and third-party independent (e.g. consumer reports). (Simoes and Soares 2010, 375-376.) Sources of information used to make choices identified by Bonnema and van der Weldt (2008) include direct resources, media sources and social sources (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, 266).

Preference for information sources varies according to factors such as perceived risk, purchase involvement and type of product. The greater the perceived risk, the greater are the importance and influence of interpersonal sources, which allow elucidation and feedback. In terms of educational services, the usage and relevance of various sources of information (e.g. media reports; parents and teachers; brochures, leaflets and university websites; university open days) have been investigated. Studies assessing students' information requirements and relevance have found that students tend to rely primarily on information sources developed by the university (e.g. brochures, leaflets, university websites). Some students place a strong emphasis on the need to collect and compare information to support their choice (Veloutsou et al. 2004). The clusters of students identified in their study prefer different sources. Those with the greatest cultural capital, who were also focused on university rather than a technikon, preferred direct resources; those subgroups that focus on social life as an important aspect of attending university ("university lifers" and "new lifers") also preferred to rely on social sources (interaction with others) as a source of information. (Many of these students are mature students.) Applicants with "little direction" and "poor motivation" tended to prefer media sources. (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, 266.)

Simoes and Soares (2010) conducted a survey to find out where Portuguese students applying to a university found information on the university. The sample included 1641 respondents. From the typology of Olshavsky and Wymer (1995), the following items were considered: (1) interpersonal (i.e. former/current univer-

sity students and teachers), (2) marketer controlled (i.e. official guides, promotional visits to secondary schools, university brochures and leaflets, and website), (3) the consumers' direct inspection of the good/service (i.e. organised campus visits) and (4) third-party independent (i.e. media/publicity and secondary school counsellors). (Simoes and Soares 2010, 376.)

Among the marketer controlled sources, which was the most popular source-group, university website was the most used source indicated by 16% of the respondents, and 81% of respondents highlighted it as one of the three most significant sources. Students seemed to resort less to the other marketer controlled sources: university brochures and leaflets (8% ranked this source as the most used, and 23% selected it as one of the three most used), university official guides (8% and 24%, respectively), Interpersonal sources also played a significant role; former/current ABC University students was the most used source by all respondents, noted by 17% of the respondents, and 59% of respondents considered it among the three most important sources. In addition, teachers were indicated by 10% of the respondents, and 30% of respondents considered it among the three most relevant sources. The third party independent information sources included in the study were media/publicity and secondary school counsellors. These were ranked as the most used sources for 10% of the respondents, and 23% of respondents considered the one of the three most important sources. (Simoes and Soares 2010, 378-379.)

Choosing which higher education institution to apply to is a high perceived risk decision, given its long-term implications on students' lives and careers. As Briggs and Wilson (2007, 61) state, decisions are based on a combination of information available, word of mouth, perceptions and reputation. Prospective students actively engage in information search. In addition to formal sources, they seek advice from social networks (e.g. friends/acquaintances, teachers) and counsellors. The importance of interpersonal sources has been previously acknowledged for high perceived risk decisions, as a complement to formal sources (Murray 1991). (Simoes and Soares 2010, 384.) This notion is backed up by Kotler and Armstrong (2016, 184) who note that traditionally consumers have received the

most information about a product from commercial sources- those controlled by the marketer. The most effective sources, however, tend to be personal. Commercial sources normally inform the buyer, but personal sources legitimize or evaluate profits for the buyer.

The findings of Simoes and Soares refer to national (Portugese) applicants. When the focus is expanded to international applicants and international markets, not that many studies have been made. One could argue that the marketing channels and information sources need to expand in the international context and use more various ways of providing information and attracting the attention of the prospective customers. Finding information on the institution on national level is relatively easy, the more demanding task in the international context is to catch the attention of the applicant.

Regarding Finland and attracting international students, Finnish universities mostly use social media, websites and targeted campaigns in their marketing. These channels are complemented by student ambassadors, different kinds of research, development and innovation and education export projects, using personal contacts, partnerships (like double degree agreements) and networks. Through networks marketing has been done in non-EU/EEA countries through fairs, school visits, seminars and/or social media events in China, Vietnam, India and Brazil. Through FINNIPS network (Finnish Network for International Programmes) entrance exams organised abroad are also part of the universities' international student marketing and a presentation of constant presence in certain countries. (OKM 2018, 41.)

With the introduction of tuition fees nearly all universities indicated to be using more digital marketing, such as different social media channels and portals. Content on own websites, degree programme descriptions and regional information have been renewed and made more specific. New international partnerships in digital marketing that have worked well before have been sought. There have been campaigns to USA, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, India, Vietnam, Norway, Canada, Poland and Russia. Many universities indicated an increase in new video material in English. Network co-operation outside of EU/EEA has increased and

network partnerships have been developed. The focus of networks has shifted more toward planning and co-execution. Most Finnish universities (28/37) use different commercial actors like agents, consults or marketing portals in their international student marketing. 10 universities used agents, 2 universities used a separate communication- and marketing agency and 22 universities used marketing portals. Traditional education fairs had been also attended, but clearly in a more modest manner. (OKM 2018, 16, 40.)

This subchapter addressed information search and the various ways and channels Finnish universities are seeking visibility in the education market. After gaining visibility and catching the interest of the applicant, the applicant will look for more information on the institution, as in the buyer decision process. The study by Simoes and Soares presented the sources for finding further information used by Portugese students based on the classification of internal and various external sources, which can be applied for the present study as well.

The next subchapter will present models and studies on the factors the affect the university selection decision. These are the factors the applicant might search further information on in order to better evaluate the different alternatives before making a purchase decision.

2.2 Evaluation of alternatives – higher education

The consumer must find and evaluate the options to decide on the right choice as demonstrated by the consumer decision framework (Figure 3). The total number of brands within a category is referred to as the total set. The total set gives rise to the notions of awareness and unawareness sets. The unawareness set is those brands that the consumer does not know about and, therefore, for which the chance of purchase does not exist. The awareness set refers to all those brands about which the consumer knows. There are three subsets within the awareness set, including the consideration set, inert set, and inept set. The consideration set includes those few select brands that are evaluated positively. The inert set contains brands with a neutral evaluation. The inept set includes those rejected brands

that the consumer has negatively evaluated. (Narayana and Markin 1975, in Stephenson, Heckert and Yerger 2016, 491.)
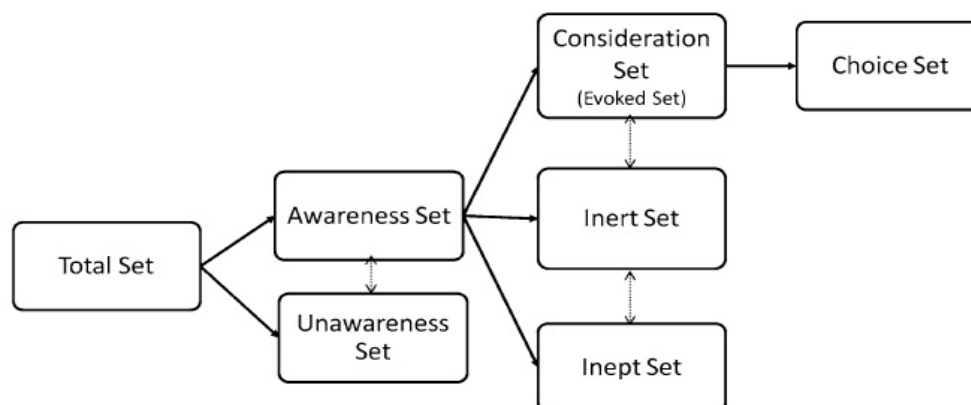
Figure 3. Consumer decision framework. (Stephenson, Heckert and Yerger 2016: 492.)

With good promotion from various marketing channels and sources of information, the student has managed to acquire information on the institution, which has now become part of the awareness set of the consumer. Now in order to become part of the eventual choice set, the consumer will evaluate the alternatives, as indicated by the third stage of the buyer decision process. What are the criteria that will be used in this evaluation, especially in relation to higher education?

University choice is a complex, highly involved decision process (Zaichkowsky, 1985), especially when, along with its future ramifications, there are also real and present risks for the student making a choice of university course. The risks may relate to (i) performance, that is, whether the student will successfully complete the course and achieve a respectable grade; (ii) social and psychological concerns relating to the experience of attending a particular institution, that is, friendship, personal contacts and the psychological impact of the learning experience; (iii) time: university courses typically take 3 or even 4 years to complete; and now increasingly, (iv) financial risks: the costs associated with university are considerable and may include: fees, living costs and potential loss of earnings whilst studying (Mitra et al. 1999). (Walsh et al. 2015, 671.)

Whilst there are parallels between the choice of university course and other conventional consumption behaviours, there may be important differences. One difference is that students do not simply choose their university and their course. Rather they have to obtain the qualifications necessary to gain entrance into their chosen institution. Thus, part of the choice-making process involves an assessment of which institution and course might accept them. A further complexity is that the choice decision for many purchases may be viewed as a discrete event whereas, in contrast, the choice and thereafter the consumption of a university degree programme takes place over an extended period of time during which the consumer is likely to undergo important changes in how they evaluate their experience. (Walsh et al. 2015, 670.)

Understanding how students make decisions regarding college selection has led to the development of several student behaviour models. These models can be classified into economic/econometric models, status attainment/ sociological models, and combined models. Economic/econometric models assume that consumers are highly rational and suggest that choices result from a calculation of the costs and perceived benefits of each institution. Thus, choice would fall on the institution offering the highest value. Status attainment/sociological models take into consideration sociological variables and account for the context of the decision making. These models suggest that students' choice of a higher education institution is influenced by the interaction between behavioural (e.g. academic performance) and background (e.g. social class) variables. Combined models draw simultaneously on the rational approach of economic models and the sociological perspective, thus providing a more comprehensive explanation about choice. (Simoes and Soares 2010, 373-374.)

It has been argued that the combined models proposed are the most representative ones. These models do not consider the cognitive process the student goes through when deciding which university to attend. Building on such contributions, Vrontis, Thrassou, and Melanthiou (2007) develop a contemporary higher education student-choice model for developed countries. The model represents a holistic view of the process, considering both the sequence of the decision steps and the

various influences. These determinants include: (1) environment (general public policy and influences/media), (2) high school characteristics (e.g. social composition, quality), (3) higher education institutions (characteristics and actions), and (4) individual (customer and personal attributes). (Simoes and Soares 2010, 374.)

Bergerson (2009) highlights that, in the 21st century, the idea that students are homogenous and/or that one model can cover every situation has fallen out of favour. By acknowledging that university is also an emotional decision, the work by Allen (2002) shows that regardless of the significant information processing and cognitive stages of decision-making that may exist, final selection of a university will often come down to whether or not it feels right, i.e., 'Fits Like A Glove'. The complexity and the intangible nature of the higher education experience create additional pressure on the young student-consumer and add to the difficulty of making a well-informed choice, let alone the 'right' choice. (Walsh et al. 2015, 671.)

The complexity of the issue can also be seen in the number of researches done on the matter and the results, which can vary a lot depending on the point-of-view taken and the factors examined. There have been a large number of studies seeking to determine reasons for students' choice of institution, in a number of local settings, but there has been little which draws together the findings from examining these prior studies. Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) set out to draw together these finding to find out any common antecedents between all the studies. The examined peer-previewed publications between 1992-2013 not focusing on specific institutions or countries to get an overall view of it all, this resulted in 75 different papers to be examined more closely.

The analysis of these papers provides the basis for the thematic presentation of the findings. The top-level categories relate to the supply and demand side of the market in higher education: the institutions and the applicants. The next level provides an overall heading for the factors which were mapped from the literature. First, factors which relate to the students (Figure 4.): demographics and academic factors. Second, factors which relate to the institution: quality, outcomes and ben-

efits, facilities, and the characteristics of institutions factors and the factors where institutional characteristics interact with student characteristics: price and price sensitivity; information and information sources; and travel and geographical factors (Figure 5.). (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, 258.)
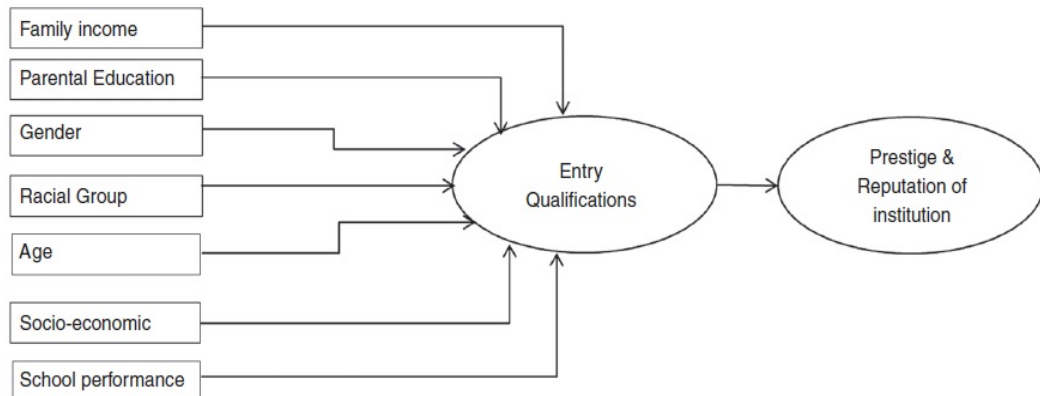
Figure 4. Research model: student factors. (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, 261.)
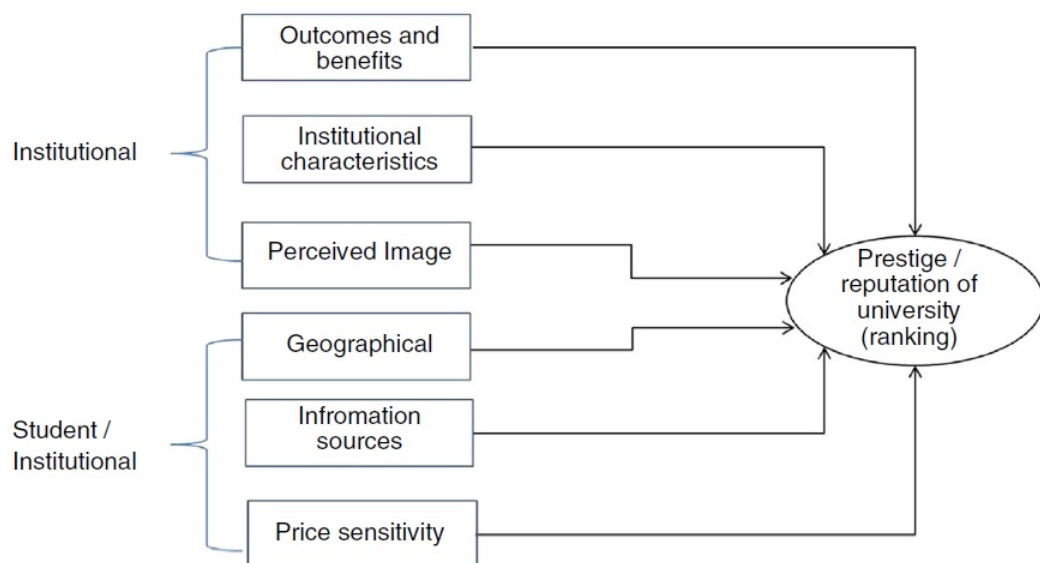
Figure 5. Research model: institutional and student-institutional factors. (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, 264.)

Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka present well all the different factors affects the applicant, but it could be argued that in the light of the combined models and the fits like a glove -metaphor, more emphasis could have been put on the actual interac-

tion between the student and institutional factors. Choosing an education is not a haste decision, but a lengthy process with much information search and evaluation of the different criteria and factors of each university, the institutional factors, how well do they respond to the criteria and factors of the applicant – there needs to be a match between the two, the fit like a glove (Allen 2002).

Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño (2006) provided a more extensive and combined model for the process, presented in Figure 6. A model of international students' preferences. The model of takes well into account all the different variables and little of their interaction in the complex process of decision making. The model especially focuses on the selection process of international students and shows well the different variables affecting the decision. Purchase intentions resulting from the different variables and especially their interaction could also be translated as the fits like a glove –feeling (By Allen 2002), indicating that there is a match between the individual and the institution variables and their interaction and there is intention to "purchase" the product (if the buyer/applicant is deemed good enough by the progamme/institution to be accepted as a student). Such as the models by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015) the model also relies on the findings on previous studies, thus being a purely theoretical model, which was not empirically tested as part of their study.

The model by Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño could be further developed, especially with the interaction between the variables, and it might as a good universal basic model for the university selection, if the interaction between the variables would result in a fits like a glove – feeling. However, this would require extensive empirical data from different case study organisations. the purpose of the present study is to focus on a single case study organisation and the background theory is used to provide insight on all the possible factors affecting the purchase decision.
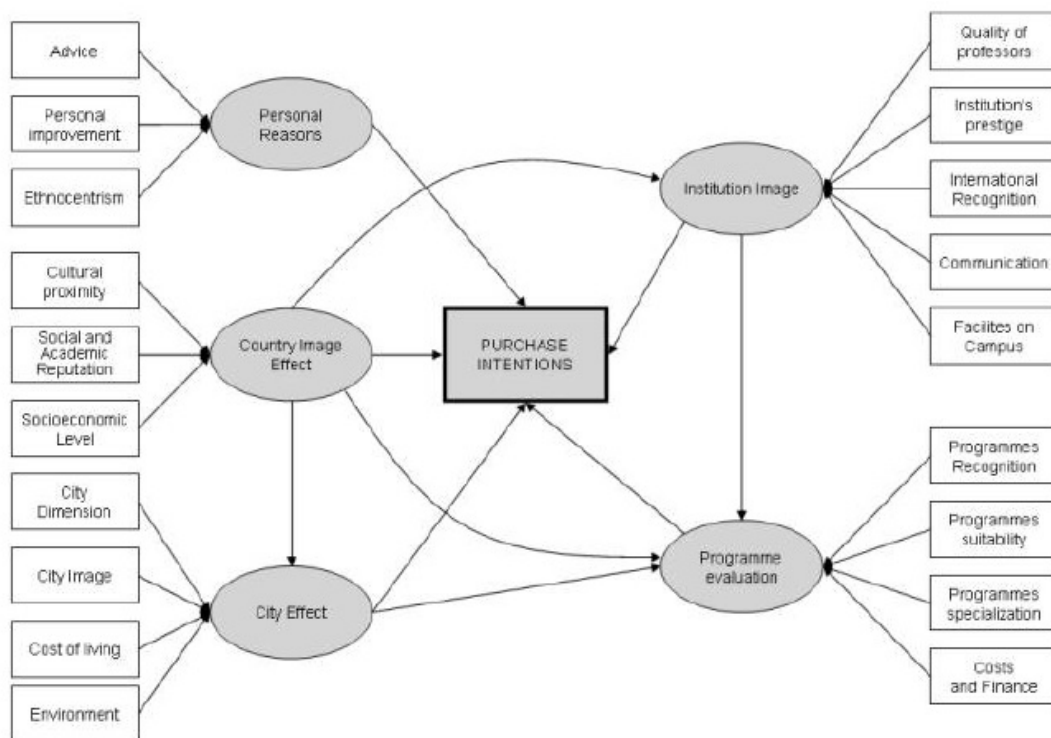
Figure 6. A model of international students' preferences. (Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño 2006, 107.)

The various factors presented by these figures provide important theoretical background information on what types of different factors can be used. These factors and figures are based upon the findings from other studies, so they can be argued to be valid for providing some form of framework for the most common factors.

However as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka point out, there is unlikely to be a single list of factors that all students use; there is not a single factor or short-list of factors that will finally provide a definitive answer to why students choose a university. The higher education student market is therefore a segmented market (this might seem to be an unremarkable observation, but the research in the field has rarely acknowledged such a scenario). The use of samples from single institutions in many studies exacerbates the problem, because institutions offer different benefits and emphasise different values (employability, accredited programmes, etc.) and this is likely to result in findings which are biased towards the specific strengths of the institution where the study is carried out. Similarly, studies from a single country may not provide insights into how students choose a university in

that particular country, unless a wide range of institutions is used in the sample. (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, 266-267.)

The current study wishes to address the factors that attract students to select the programmes in a case study university. The focus of the current study is not to test empirically the above-mentioned theoretical models, they are presented are only to provide the theoretical backdrop to the study. Thus, the empirical part of the study will focus on the factors relating to the case study institution, not on the socio-demographic or motivation factors of the applicant, nor on the interaction of these individual aspects with the university (the fits like a glove). As Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015, 263) note, researchers who focus more on marketing issues (as opposed to student-related issues) have sought to identify institutional-related factors which might influence who goes to which university and why.

Academic reputation, the variety of courses, the quality of education, campus safety, costs/fees, campus location, and the opinion of others have been identified as significant contributors to students' decision-making process. According to Bowers and Pugh (1973), one of the earliest studies on students' choice of their host institutions conducted in 1958 identified the prestige of the school or the department as the key variable to students' choice of their host institutions. Acknowledging the changing tertiary demographics over the last 50 years, it is interesting to note that subsequent research over the past five decades appears to support this conclusion. (Shanka, Quintal and Taylor 2006,:34.)

 The most important characteristics are those which place a university in a position of high esteem, high regard or prestige, rather than those relating to specific facilities or physical characteristic: Veloutsou et al. (2004) argue that the most important information candidates seek is related to reputation, courses and campus. Institutional public image plays a significant role in differentiating the institutions, particularly international recognition, and the high standard of qualifications which means some institutions are held in high esteem (Imenda et al. 2004). (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2015, 264.)

However, as pointed out earlier there is no absolute list of preferences that apply to all students. This is very well seen in the international context; in the study on an Australian university by Shanka, Quintal and Taylor (2006) the authors discuss the institutional factors of quality, price and location among other things. Out of their sample of 297 respondents of international students studying in that university, there was variety among nationalities. Students from Singapore and Indonesia would have more likely chosen the university for its proximity to their home countries. The Malaysian and students from other Asian countries would have chosen this destination based on low cost of living. Likewise, students from other countries outside of Asia would more likely have chosen the destination for its quality/variety of education. (Shanka et al. 2006, 35.)

In a different study from Australia, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) investigated the factors which influence the selection of an Australian educational institution for international and domestic students. This sample included 879 domestic and international students (466 international students and 413 domestic students) in Australian universities and colleges were sampled. They were asked to rate the importance of each factor on a scale from 1 (unimportant) to 7 (important). Out of the 17 factors the most important factors were qualifications recognised by employers (mean 6. 0), reputation for quality (mean 5.66), willingness to recognise previous qualifications (mean 5.65), and the least important factors were large number of international students enrolled (mean 4.45), links to other institutions known to me (mean 4.42), strong alumni providing information (mean 4.03). It was also found that the international students ranked six variables as more important in their selection of a host institution than domestic students. Those six variables were the quality and reputation of the institution, the recognition of the institution's qualifications in their own country, the international strategic alliances the institutions had, the quality of the institution's staff, its alumni base and its existing international student population. (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002, 87).

An US study of 50 international students investigated the factors influencing the decision of a foreign student to select that graduate business school in the U.S. The students were asked to rate the importance of each factor on a scale from 1

(unimportant) to 6 (important). Out of the 17 factors to be the most important were opportunities for post-graduation employment (mean 4.98), availability of financial aid (mean 4,9), and reputation of the institution (4,82). These three factors are statistically more important than the second set of factors, which include accessibility of information on the institution (mean 4.5), AACSB accreditation (4.42), tuition (4.26), cost of living in the area (4.26) and public safety (4.10). The least important factors were recommendation by parents/relatives (mean 3.14), availability of athletic scholarships (2.7) and the number of international students (2.64). (Daily, Farewell and Kumar 2010.)

All these different studies show some relativity regarding the important factors, quality of education was mentioned in the results of all the surveys as a top factor. Employment prospects as well as economical factors (tuition or living expenses) were mentioned in two of the three survey results. However, the survey by Shanka, Quintal and Taylor (2006) did no have employment as a factor in their survey nor did Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) have economical factors as an option in their survey on reasons selecting a host institution (cost issues were a factor when deciding to study abroad over-all and selecting destination country). This goes to confirm the points presented earlier by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015), that using single institutions with specific features does provide different results and no generalisations should be made on that basis. This also goes to show how the selection of factors in the survey can influence the results, and all possible factors should be taken into consideration or presented as an option. Also, the above-mentioned surveys were done with students already accepted and enrolled into the universities in question. They had already moved on from being prospective buyers to students/customers/had purchased the product, so their responses already could have been influenced by their experiences at the university. Nevertheless, the models, findings from the surveys and the results presented above provide good data on the institutional factors that need to be taken into consideration when drafting a questionnaire for the purpose of the present study to presented in later chapters.

As pointed out earlier, the awareness set, from which the consumer makes the final selection, comprises only of the brands the customer is aware of. There might be a whole world of brands and products the customer is unaware of, especially in an international context. Entering the awareness set is a question of marketing communication. It is important to get visibility and be seen by the prospective customers, enter their awareness set and spark interest, so that the consumer can go and find more information on the institution, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter in reference to information search. Through this information search and being in contact with the promotional material of the institution (marketing communications), the applicant will form an image of the institution in question. The next chapters will examine more closely on how marketing communications affect the buyer and how the formation of an image happens and why image is important for universities. These provide important theoretical information for our third research questions, what kind of image do the applicants have on the University of Vaasa.

3   MARKETING COMMUNICATION

In the model of buyer behaviour (Figure 1), the buyer was influenced by stimuli from the environment. One of these stimuli was the marketing stimuli of product, place, price and promotion. At a basic level, marketing communications, or 'promotions', is used to communicate elements of organisation's offerings to target audience. This represents a broad view of marketing communication and fails to incorporate the various issues, dimensions and elements that make up this important communication activity. In addition to the planned communications there are marketing communications experienced by audiences relating to their experience with the product or service. In addition to these there are communications arising from unplanned or unintended events, unplanned marketing communications as presented by the scope of marketing communications (Figure 7). (Fill 2013, 10.) This relates well to the notion of the various information sources discussed earlier, there were not only the marketer-controlled (referring to the planned communication), but also the interpersonal sources of information and third-party independent (unplanned communications) as well as direct inspection of service (experience-based communications).
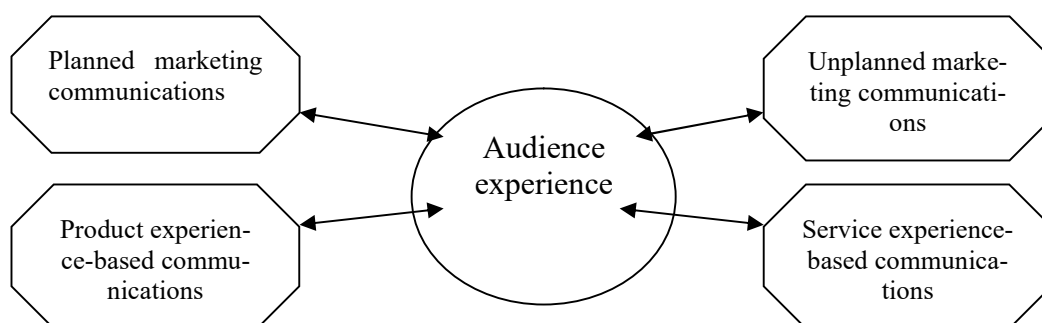
Figure 7. The scope of marketing communications. (Fill 2013, 11.)

Companies must communicate their value propositions to customers, and what they communicate should not be left to chance. All communications must be planned and blended into carefully integrated programmes. Several major factors are changing the face of today's marketing communications. In this digital, wireless age, consumers are better informed and more communications empowered.

Rather than relying on the marketer-supplied information, they can use the Internet, social media, and other technologies to find information on their own. They can connect easily with other consumers to exchange brand-related information or even create their own brand messages and experiences. The new digital and social media have given birth to a more targeted, social and engaging marketing communications model. In the end, however, regardless of the communication channel they key is to ingrate all these media in a way that best engages customers, communicates the brand message and enhances the customer's brand experiences. (Kotler and Armstrong 2016, 446-449.)

In order to find information about the various alternatives (disciplines, degrees, countries, universities, programmes) and evaluate the options, the applicant must closely examine and evaluate the possibilities. In a high-involvement purchase this might take time exposing the applicant to a more direct and in-depth contact with the various options, their information, promotional material and possibly even to services (by contacting the institutions). It could be argued that when doing so, the involvement of the applicant with the selected set of institutions grows.

Involvement is a person's perceived relevance of the object based on their inherent needs, values and interests. The word object is used in the generic sense and refers to a product (or a brand), an advertisement or a purchase situation. Because involvement is a motivational construct, different antecedents can trigger it. These factors can be something about the person, something about the object or something about the situation. Interactions among the persons, situations and object factors are likely to occur. We can view involvement as the motivation to process information. As involvement with a product increases, the consumer devotes more attention to ads related to the product, exerts more cognitive efforts to understand these ads and focuses more information on the product-related information in them. (Solomon 2006, 128-129.) Involvement is closely linked to engagement.

The primary role of marketing communication is to engage audiences. Engagement can be considered to be a function of two forms or response it can be thinking and feeling response (generating brand values) and/or behavioural responses

(generating actions). Engagement can also be either one-way communication to understand product and service offers or two-way interaction, which is more relationship and situation specific. Engagement can be considered to consist of two main elements: intellectual and emotional. The intellectual element is concerned with audiences engaging with the brand on the basis of processing rational, functional information. The emotional element is concerned with audiences engaging and aligning themselves with the brand's values on the basis of emotional and expressive information. Communications should reflect a suitable balance between the need for rational information and expressive types of communication. Unfortunately, there is no single model for marketing communications for successful engagement. (Fill 2013, 13,112-113.)

One marketing communication model relating to engagement is the cognitive processing model (Figure 8), where the message/stimulus is processed through various thoughts to form an attitude of the product/brand as well as the advertisement, potentially leading into a purchase (intention).
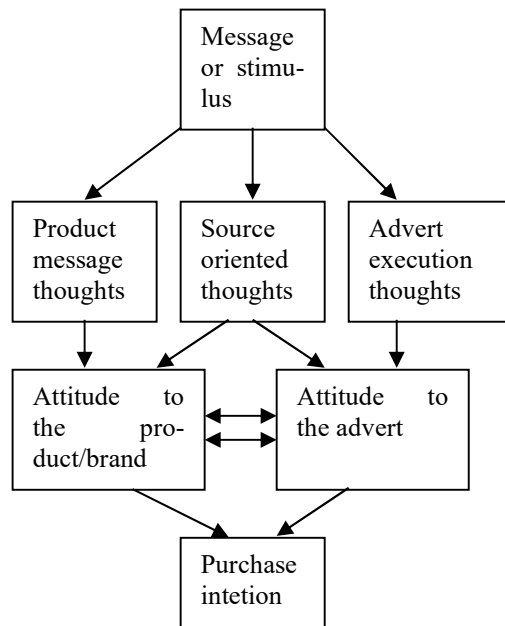
Figure 8. A model of cognitive processing. (Fill 2013, 132.)

With the help of marketing communication the company and the customer communicate with one another and created shared concepts. The purpose of marketing communication is to create to both the company and the customer the same image

of the products or services, the company and their working methods. Through successful marketing communication the company can influence positively to the perceived image and contribute to the formation of good image and brand. With marketing communication the company wants to influence the data, which affect the customers' buying behaviour and trust formation. (Vierula 2009, 17.)

The attitudes towards the product and brand in the model of cognitive processing could be used a synonym for the image a customer has towards to product and the brand. Planned corporate communication reflected through symbols, various types of planned communication and behaviour, are accompanied by unplanned communications such as those generated by competitors, through word-of mouth and the personal experiences and memories held by an individual (Cornellisen 2000, in Fill 2013: 365). The messages/stimuli could come from various channels and sources of information, not only from the marketer controlled planned marketing communications but also from interpersonal, word-of-mouth unplanned marketing communications and experiences. The next chapter will more closely look at the formation of an image, the factors affecting it and why a good image can be argued to be important for a university.

4   IMAGE AND BRAND

Brand image is the image on the product or service that is formed in the mind of the customer. Customers constantly get stimuli of the brand to be created, compare these to the received brand messages, react to these and form a brand image in their minds. A brand is the image formed in the minds on the customers. Brand as a concept is always an image. Because a brand is formed as an image in the minds of customers (or other interest groups) the marketer cannot build a brand. The brand is formed in the constant brand building process in the minds of the customer and the marketer should create the right conditions for the development of the desired brand image. (Grönroos 2009, 386, 393.)

The international, national or local image of an organisation represents the values that customers, potential customers and lost customers and other interest groups link to the organisation. The image together with the external marketing campaigns communicates about expectations. The image has always its own effect on expectations. Image depends on the expectations and experiences of the customers. When customers form expectations and then experience the reality through technical and functional quality, the experienced service alters the image. If the experienced quality of the service is in accordance with the expectation or exceeds it, the image is strengthened. If the image is not clear to the customer, it will be formed based on their experience. To certain extent the image can be influenced through communicative means. (Grönroos 2009, 398, 400.) Image can be born without personal experiences. We have a lot of images and opinions about things and organisations that we have not personally encountered but have only read and heard of. Images can be born through generalisations as well. (Vuokko 2003, 104.)

An image of a company is born even though the company does not consciously try to build one. A company cannot control their image, even though it can influence it. Images are born from several various sources. A company cannot independently decide on the elements forming their image. An image is born of all possible factors: information, beliefs, attitudes and values, prejudices, experiences

and hear-say. (Vuokko 2003, 104, 111) The co-forming of an image by all these elements is illustrated in Figure 9. Elements of corporate image.
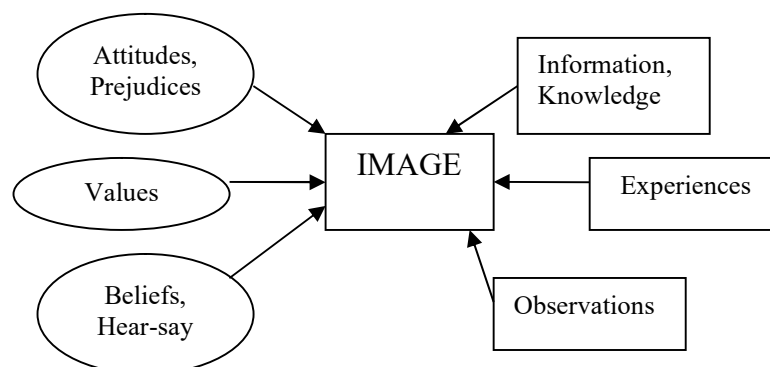
Figure 9. Elements of corporate image. (Vuokko 2003: 111.)

We can see how the formation of an image can be divided into two distinct sub-groups. On the left side of the figure are the factors, which the company cannot directly influence. Values, attitudes, and prejudices represent the customer-based factors in image formation, they are the internal views of the target group on the company or organisation and its' actions, which might not be based on reality or real experiences. In order to change these, it is not enough just to state these are completely different from the reality. Experiences are needed to change these. On the right side we see the factors the company can directly influence. These are the target groups' experiences and information on the company and the products. Actively influencing these is crucial, so that the image would not be completely arbitrary and that the company would try to influence their image by various profiling methods. (Vuokko 2003, 111.)

What is relevant in an image is the fact that it is always true for that person. When a person is of an opinion, that image is then a personal truth. The image doest not always need to be the same as the object of that image. Thus, different people can have very different views and images about things. (Rope 2005, 53.) Even the images of individuals are not set or solid but are constantly evolving and that is why companies must direct the development of their images by communicative means. Communication is an investment to the images and preferences of customers,

where concrete results are often seen later. (Malmelin & Hakala 2007, 140- 141.) In effective marketing it is crucial to be able to build and communicate the right images to the consumers. Images are subjective constructs and not so much about how things are, but how they are made to seem. In image marketing the essential point is to make own products or services seem better that the ones of the competition in the eyes of the consumer. (Rope 2005, 176.)

Brand identity is the description of the brand image that the marketer wants to create. When talking about brand image that the marketer wishes to be born in the minds of the customers, we can talk about desirable brand identity. (Grönroos 2009, 386.) Corporate brand identity is about the cues an organisation uses, deliberately or by default, to shape the ways it wants to be perceived. Corporate image is concerned with the perception that different audiences have of an organisation and results from the audiences' interpretation and meaning that they ascribe to the identity cues presented by an organisation. The images stakeholders hold of an organisation are a result of combination of different elements, but are essentially a distillation of the values, beliefs and attitudes that an individual or an organisation has of an organisation. The images may vary according to individual experiences, this means that an organisation does not have a single image but may have multiple images. Corporate images are shaped by stakeholder interpretations of the identity cues they perceive at an individual level. For an image to be sustainable, the identity cues around which the image is fashioned must be based on reality and reflect the values and beliefs of the organisation. Images can be consistent, but they are often based on a limited amount of information. Images are prone to the halo effect, whereby stakeholders shape images based on a small amount of information. (Fill 2013, 364-365.)

A study by Paramewaran and Glowacka (1995) into university image argues that higher education institutions need to maintain or develop a distinct image to create a competitive advantage in an increasingly international market. It is, after all, this image that will impact on a student's willingness to apply to that institution; therefore, it becomes essential to establish an image in the eyes of stakeholders. The basis of developing a brand in an educational institution is to enable that institu-

tion to be attractive to students, to differentiate British education and training, for example, from its major competitors, in particular the USA and Australia. (Hemsley-Brown 2012, 1008.)

Brand is a set of mental associations held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service (Keller 1998). Branding is a process of adding value to the product by use of its packaging, brand name, promotion and positioning in the minds of the consumer. Branding is the culmination of a range of activities across the whole marketing mix, leading to a brand image that conveys whole set of messages to the consumer about quality, price, expected performance and status. Consumer benefits from the brand in terms of knowing what the quality will be, knowing what the expected performance will be, gaining some self-image values. (Blythe and Martin 2016, 141).

There are many attractive benefits for a college or university to engage in branding practices. Branding allows organizations to differentiate themselves from competitor. As complex organizations, universities can differentiate themselves from competitors on features such as athletics, facilities, academic stringency, or geographic location. A university brand operates as an identifying device, promotes prestige, and functions as a stamp of excellence. Additionally, branding affords individuals the opportunity to gain membership in the group and ultimately creates a sense of identification or definition of the self by association with the organization. As a branded institution, a university ''maintains a variety of services and products that bear its brand and serves a variety of customers and other stakeholders for whom the brand is meaningful'' (McAlexander et al. 2004, 62). Prospective students compare university brands and features and assign levels of importance. Institutions with well-known brands will have a better chance of recruiting students. (Stephenson et al. 2016, 490.)

Next chapter will present not only the case study organisation and the messages and images it wants to communicate to applicants, but also some previous data on the reasons international students have chosen Finland as their destination country.

5   FINLAND AND THE UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) report the results of four separate studies in which students from four countries (Indonesia, Taiwan, India, and China) were surveyed to examine factors which influence the selection of a host country. The results of these studies show that at least fourteen factors influence the decision to pursue an international education and these factors appear to be important, regardless of the student's home country. Two factors were significant in the decision to study abroad. First, students had the perception that an education abroad was superior to a domestic education. Second, they felt a greater awareness of "Western culture" could be achieved through international study. (Daily et al. 2010, 61-62.)

Factors which significantly influenced the students' choice of host country included: (1) the accessibility of information on the host country, (2) the students' existing perception of the host country, (3) perception of educational quality, and (4) whether the degree would be recognized when the student returned home. Further, recommendations from family and friends were important to the selection decision. Costs, monetary and social, were also a consideration in the selection decision; specifically, the availability of part-time work, a low crime-rate and the presence of an existing international student population representing the student's home country impacted the selection. Environment was ranked as important to the decision with environment encompassing not only the climate, but also perceptions of whether the host country was an exciting place to live and whether the host country would provide a studious environment. Finally, the presence of friends and relatives currently studying in the host country was important to the selection decision. (Daily et al. 2010, 61-62).

5.1   Reasons to choose Finland and marketing of Finnish universities

All in all in year 2017 there were 20, 249 international degree students in Finland. The number of new international degree students in Bachelor and Master programmes diminished from previous year with approximately a quarter (2016: 5 501, 2017: 4 158). (OKM 2018, 3). In 2018 two separate surveys were published on international students in Finland, the International Student Barometer (ISB)

and a survey as part of the interim report from the national working group for the follow-up and evaluation of the implementation of tuition fees set by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.

International Student Barometer (ISB) is a survey aimed at international exchange and degree students studying in different countries carried out by the British iGraduate since 2005. Finland has previously participated in the survey in 2010 and 2014. In total, 110,386 students from 129 higher education institutions and 17 countries responded to the ISB survey of autumn 2017. There were 21, 061 international students in Finnish higher education institutions and 4, 396 of them responded to the survey, 81 % of respondents were from non-EU/EEA countries vs. 77 % of all international degree students in Finland. (Faktaa express 2018.)

The most important reasons for choosing to study in Finland were the content and cost of education, quality of research and reputation of the higher education institution. The proximity to home country stood out as the least important factor. All the different criterion and the percentages of respondents who found them important very important are presented in Figure 10 below. The students studying in Finland considered an opportunity to a scholarship, bursary or fee waiver as a more important selection criterion compared to their peers in other countries. By contrast, the international students in Finland perceived the city or location of studies, opportunities to work during or after studies and the reputation of an individual academic as less important criteria than the respondents in other countries. (Faktaa express 2018.)

38

The respondents who found this criterion important or very important [%]

Criterion	%
Specific course title	95
Quality of research	94
Cost of education	94
Reputation of this institution	93
Personal safety and security	90
Cost of living	88
Earning potential of the degree	88
Scholarship/bursary/fee waiver	87
Opportunities for further study in this country	81
Opportunities for full-time work in this country	81
Opportunities to work while studying	75
City/Location	74
Social life	73
Reputation of an individual academic	71
Opportunity for permanent residence in this country	66
Ease of getting a visa	63
Proximity to my home country	27

Figure 10. The most important reasons for choosing to study in Finland. (Faktaa express 2018).

There were no major changes in these numbers compared to the results of 2014 ISB survey. However, there was an increase from 77% to 87% in the significance of an opportunity to receive a scholarship, bursary or fee waiver. The number of students who considered the opportunity for permanent residence as an important factor had also grown (from 60% to 66%). The students from non-EU countries put more emphasis on factors linked to subsistence: the opportunities for a scholarship, bursary or a fee waiver, costs of living and opportunities to work while

studying. They also put more value on opportunities for further study, full-time work and permanent residence in Finland. By contrast, there was no difference in the cost of education as a selection criterion between the students from EU and non-EU countries. (Faktaa express 2018.)

Similar findings can be found in the survey of the interim report from the national working group for the follow-up and evaluation of the implementation of tuition fees set by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture. 363 students from 34 universities answered the survey. Several different factors affected the students' decisions to study in Finland. The most important reasons to come and study in Finland were the good quality of education and the good reputation of education and research, as well as free education and the possibility of a scholarship, which was mentioned by 35% of the respondents. In addition, when students were asked to mention three of the most significant factors based on which they selected the university in which they wanted to study in Finland the three of the most significant factors were the interesting degree (88%), good reputation of the institution (54%) and the possibility of a scholarship (39%). (OKM 2018, 34-35.)
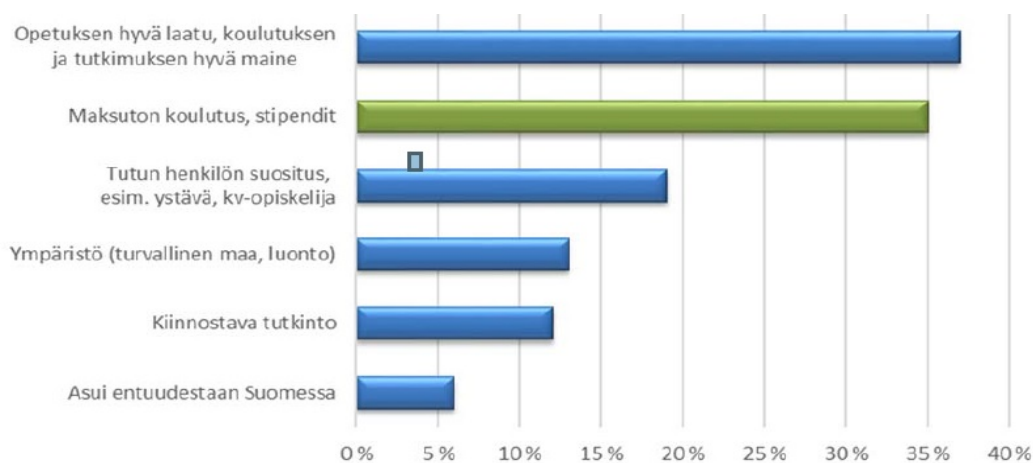
Figure 11. Tärkeimmät syyt ulkomaalaisten opiskeljoiden hakeutumiselle Suomeen opiskelemaan (seuranta ja arviointiryhmän opiskelijakysely 2018). (OKM 2018, 34.)

Based on the results, it can be said that scholarships and free education have been significant factors in choosing Finland and a particular university. In general, the students regarded the quality, flexibility, support, free education and freedom to be the strengths of Finnish education. The thoughts of international students on Finland as a country to live and study were often positive. In addition, security, nature and quality of education were in the centre of the students' good experiences. (OKM 2018, 34-35.)

25 universities have separate marketing plans for international education. The central countries outside the EU/EEA were China, Vietnam, India, Russia, Brazil, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, USA and Iran. In addition, universities emphasised individual countries on nearly all of the continents, countries where the universities had already had long-term partnerships. Part of the universities belonged to larger networks like FINNIPS and Finland University, through which targeted marketing was done, like participation in recruitment fairs, joint social median advertising and joint entrance exams in target countries. Universities participating in these networks have jointly agreed on marketing events and targets. Subsequently one third (12/37) of universities informed that at the moment they did not have a marketing plan for international education outside the EU/EEA. Some had no international education, or it was in development and some focused on EU marketing. (OKM 2018, 40.)

22 universities informed that their marketing had changed after the introduction of tuition fees. The most significant factors had been the introduction of specific countries or regions and a more organised and planned manner of marketing. Profiles of international educations had become more focused and marketing to certain target groups had been increased, for example marketing had been targeted more to Europe and Finland. Financial inputs into marketing had increased. The challenge has been, e.g. lack of or poor knowledge of marketing, poor knowledge of commercialisation of education and services and market knowledge. Knowledge has been acquired among other things by attending outside EU fairs and using external agents in recruitments. Also new networks and partnerships have been actively built in international marketing. Nearly everybody indicated

using more digital marketing than before, different social media channels and portals. (OKM 2018, 40.)

5.2 University of Vaasa

The University of Vaasa is a Finnish science university providing degrees from Bachelor's to Doctorate. The university was founded in 1968 as a business school, but nowadays includes also technology, administrative sciences and communication. In 2017 there were 4690 Bachelor and Master students (of which 225 were international) and 269 Doctoral students (of which 75 were international), personnel in 2017 was 452 persons (of which 16% were international). The first international English-taught Master's degree programmes were introduced in 2005 and currently the university offers six programmes: Master's Degree Programme in Finance, Master's Degree Programme in International Business, and Master's Programme in Strategic Business Development in the field of business studies; Master's Programme in Industrial Systems Analytics and Master's Programme in Smart Energy in the field of technology; and Master's Programme in Industrial Management providing a business degree but a combination of business and technology. (University of Vaasa 2019.)

The mission of the University of Vaasa is energising business and society. Internationality and quality are emphasised in research and education. Today's knowledge and skill requirements are built into the education programmes and all students are provided with business skills and the ability to work internationally, entrepreneurial mindset is fostered. Programmes meet the needs of modern working life and society. The University of Vaasa educates responsible and internationally minded leaders and experts of tomorrow. Graduates are innovative and open-minded trendsetters. Students praise the high standard of teaching, inspiring teachers and diverse teaching methods. A sense of community and working together are the strengths of the university. (University of Vaasa 2019.)

The webpages for international applicants present the University of Vaasa as one of Finland's newest campus areas close to the sea, often referred to as the most beautiful campus in Finland, located in Vaasa, the sunniest city of Finland. With

its 12 000 students, Vaasa is also a lively student city. The tightly-knit international community of more than 5000 students is one of the main strengths of the university. 12% of students and 25% of the academic staff are international ensuring a lively and active campus. The webpages present studying in Finland, the application process, admission criteria, tuition fees and scholarships and the programmes. The individual degree programmes are presented in greater detail with student and alumni testimonials as well as presentation of the teaching staff. The website also names nine good reasons to choose the University of Vaasa: close ties with businesses, high-quality education, degree valued by employers, thriving city and region, meeting good people and forming networks, close community on campus, individual support and service, beautiful campus and international aspects of the university. (University of Vaasa 2019.)

The University of Vaasa has a specific marketing plan for the international programmes. Marketing plans consists of actions and material carried out by the university as well as services acquired by external service providers. The details of these actions and the external service providers will be not discussed in detail nor will the service providers be mentioned by name in this work in order to keep them and the marketing plans and action of the university private.

The next chapter will discuss the research setting and method in reference to the research questions, to the theoretical framework presented in the earlier chapters in the forms of various models and findings from earlier studies as well as in reference to the institutional characteristics of the case study organisation presented in this chapter.

6 RESEARCH METHOD, SETTING AND DATA

The current study is quantitative in nature. Quantitative research emphasises quantification in the collection and analysis of the data and entails a deductive approach giving weight to the testing of theories. Debate about differences between quantitative and qualitative research has existed for a long time. Often qualitative research is seen narrowly and is related to certain means of gathering material, typically by interviews and/or field study, or its non-numeric feature, whereas quantitative research is related to numeric measuring and statistical analyses. But in practice these two approaches are hard to strictly separate from each other. They are seen as approaches which complement, not compete one another. (Bryman 2004) This applies to the present study as well. The basis for the study is a quantitative survey with numerical data based on number of option selections, averages of various sources and reasons and the occurrence of certain words but also contains possibilities for comments to shed more light on quantitative data.

In a survey–research one of the central ways to gather material is to make a survey. Survey refers to such forms of inquiries, interviews and observations, in which the material is collected in a standardised manner and the target group forms a sample from a population. Standardisation means that a certain thing must be asked in similar way from all the respondents. The advantage of the survey is that one can gather extensive research material; either by using a big target group and/or asking many things. Survey is also efficient because it saves time and effort of a researcher. Survey's advantage is its objectivity, since researcher does not affect answers through his/her presence and attendance. It also improves reliability when the questions are asked similarly all the respondents. (Valli 2001, 101–102.)

There are also disadvantages; usually material is considered superficial and research theoretically modest. Other weak spots are that one cannot be sure how seriously respondents take the survey, nor is it neither clear how successful were the answer alternatives from the respondents' point of view. Misunderstandings are hard to control. It is also usually impossible for a respondent to ask clarifying in-

formation or help from the researcher regarding vague questions. Researcher cannot ask supplementary questions like when doing interviews. Non–response ratio can also be quite high. (Valli 2001, 101–102.)

The validity and the reliability of the present study are in order. Validity is concerned with the question of how reliably we have researched that what we wanted to. Reliability is concerned with the question of whether we have researched that what we had wanted to. The results of the study must be repeatable. The material and the analysis should be trustworthy and credible. The theoretical background focuses on the reasons for choosing a university, sources of information, marketing communications and image. These are also the research questions of the present study, specifically focusing on these aspects from the viewpoint of the case study organisation. Hence the data from the theoretical background combined with the specific features of the case study organisation provide an extensive frame for survey questions. The survey questions themselves are clear, precise and self-explanatory. The possibility for open comments opens the possibility for more elaborative answers. The survey is done on focused target group, which is contacted through the contact information they have personally given. The primary presentation of the research data is to be in numerical form, backed up by possible open comments.

All and all, quantitative surveys can be considered reliable as the survey can be reconducted at any given time at any given place, so the research is repeatable. As the data received is numeric and given by the respondent, it is trustworthy and in theory self-explanatory, there is no room or possibility of (mis)interpretations by the researcher. This can be proven by cross-tabulating the numerical data. However, the researcher is not aware of the respondent or of any factors that might be affecting the answers given at the certain time, so at a different time in a different situation the answers might be different and different conclusion could be drawn, but with the same focused target group the results should be similar.

6.1 Analysis method

The replies from the applicants to the questions of the survey will be in a format that can be analysed using various statistical analysis methods. Background questions are closed structured questions, where the applicants have a set of fixed options to choose from. Most of the actual research questions can be regarded as mixed questions where there are the fixed options of a closed questions, but also the possibility of indicating an option not as in an open question. (Heikkilä 2014.). The data is then analysed with the use of statistical analysis methods. Magnitude (how much) and multitude (how many) are the two principal types of quantities. Tendency describes the way in which a group of data cluster around a central value. Frequency analysis is an important area of statistics that deals with the number of occurrences (quantity and tendency) and analyses measures of central tendency (mean, median and mode), dispersion (standard deviation and range) and percentiles. (Heikkilä 2014.)

Mean usually refers to the arithmetic mean that is counted by diving the sum of the observed values by the count of the observations (the most common type of average). The weighted arithmetic mean is similar to an arithmetic mean, except that instead of each of the data points contributing equally to the final average, some data points contribute more than others. If all the weights are equal, then the weighted mean is the same as the arithmetic mean. The median is the value separating the higher half from the lower half of a data sample. For a data set, it may be thought of as the "middle" value (when uneven values) or the mean of the two middle values (when even values). The basic advantage of the median in describing data compared to the mean (often simply described as the "average") is that it is not skewed so much by a small proportion of extremely large or small values, and so it may give a better idea of a "typical" value. Median income, for example, may be a better way to suggest what a "typical" income is. The mode of a set of data values is the value that appears most often, the most frequent. Mode is not a good source for information if several values are close to one another or have the same frequency. (Heikkilä 2014.)

Standard deviation is a measure that is used to quantify the amount of variation or of a set of data values. It depicts how the values are dispersed around the mean. Minimum and maximum indicate the lowest and the highest value and the range is counted by deducting the lowest value form the highest. Percentiles divide the observed values into equally large portions. (Heikkilä 2014.)

For the analysis of the present study the quantities and means will be analysed with the relevant questions. The research questions will mostly use nominal scale (selection of either yes and no) when counting the quantities and interval scale (with set minimum and maximum) when counting the mean, the Likert scale with set values from 1 to 5 will be used in counting of the mean making the counting of the median less important as the range will be set. Examining the quantities and means through the various background question variables reveals the possible differences in the answers making any specific cross-tabulations unnecessary.

6.2 Research setting

The research questions for the current study are:

1. In which channels did the applicants see or hear University of Vaasa promotion?

2. From where did they search for more information?

3. What are the specific (institutional) reasons for applying to the University of Vaasa?

4. What kind of image do the applicants have on the University of Vaasa?

The model of buyer behaviour presented in chapter two shows the various stimuli from the environment affecting the buyer, one of the marketing stimuli being the promotion. In order to find out how successful is the promotion of the University of Vaasa in the various marketing and information channels it uses, the applicants will be asked to mark all the channels where and through which they learnt about the University of Vaasa. All marketing/information channels are listed (with ex-

ternal service providers coded), and they can also be grouped into internal source and various external sources ((1) interpersonal (i.e. former/current university students and teachers, recommendations), (2) marketer controlled (i.e. official guides, promotional visits, university brochures and leaflets, social media, various marketing channels and ads) and (3) third party independent (i.e. media/publicity, counsellors, etc.)), as in the study of Simoes and Soares (2010) presented in chapter 2. The data provided is quantitative, how many selections per each information source. Applicants will be segmented with different variables in order to find out whether there are differences between different applicant segments and which marketing channels are the most visible ones.

After the applicant has become aware and interested of the University of Vaasa, in accordance with the buyer decision process presented in chapter two, the applicant will search for more information on the institution. The sources for further information are also classified in accordance with Simoes and Soares (2010). The applicants will be asked to evaluate the importance of each source in finding more information on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being of no importance and 5 being of extreme importance. Based on this information an average mean of importance will be given to each information source by the applicants and possible differences between the segments can be seen in order to estimate the most important sources for further information.

The third step in the buyer decision process is the evaluation of alternatives. This responds to the third research question on the specific institutional reasons the applicants had for choosing the University of Vaasa. After the applicant has learnt about the university and found more information, the applicant must evaluate all the alternatives discovered. What are the factors that the applicant will be looking at on an institutional level and what are the specific institutional factors that made the applicants apply to the University of Vaasa?

Chapter two presented several previously done models on these factors as well as findings from previous studies, the focus of the present study is especially on the institutional factors of the case study organisation. The theoretical background is

complemented and combined with the specific features of the case study organisation (Nine good reasons to choose the University of Vaasa presented earlier) and the results from the International Student Barometer presented in chapter five. This is because as Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015, 266-267) pointed out, there is unlikely to be a single list of factors that all students use; there is not a single factor or short-list of factors that will finally provide a definitive answer to why students choose a university. Institutions offer different benefits and emphasise different values (employability, accredited programmes, etc.) and this is likely to result in findings, which are biased towards the specific strengths of the institution where the study is carried out. Researchers who focus more on marketing issues (as opposed to student-related issues) have sought to identify institutional-related factors which might influence who goes to which university and why.

The applicants have 14 ready factors for reason to choose to the University of Vaasa based on the theoretical framework (mainly on the model of Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño on international students' preferences, referred to as the model), findings from earlier studies and case study organisation specific features. Applicants are asked to evaluate the importance of these factors on scale on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being of no importance and 5 being of extreme importance. The 15th option is left open for the respondent to indicate a not listed factor. The options here are shortened to indicate the factor idea and also the background (theory/model/source) for the option is shortly presented.

1. City or region: over-all city effect in model, thriving city in Vaasa reasons

2. Degree programme characteristics: programme specialisation/suitability in model; high quality teaching in Vaasa reasons

3. Quality of education: quality of professors in model; high quality teaching in Vaasa reasons

4. Ranking and / or accreditations: programmes recognition, international recognition, institution's prestige in model; high quality teaching in Vaasa reasons

5. Tuition fee and scholarship system: Costs and Finance in model

6. Business contacts and own career prospects: close ties with businesses and valued by employers in Vaasa reasons; Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Daily, Farewell and Kumar (2010) had employability as the top reason in their study.

7. Campus facilities and services: Facilities on campus in model; most beautiful campus and individual service in Vaasa reasons

8. Communication and contact: Communication in model; individual service in Vaasa reasons

9. Previous studies: Previous experience with university with whatever reason for the first studies; entry qualifications as a factor in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015)

10. Recommendation: Communication in model; information source as a factor in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015); Good people in Vaasa reason

11. International aspects: International in Vaasa reason

12. Atmosphere: Community/Good people/Individual service in Vaasa reason, Fits like a glove idea by Allen (2002)

13. Admission criteria: over-all programme evaluation in model; entry qualifications as a factor in Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015)

14. Research, possibility for PhD: Research in ISB; Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Daily, Farewell and Kumar (2010) had employability as the top reason in their study

15. Other: indicate what reason

Based on this information an importance mean can be counted to each reason by all the applicants and by applicant segments as well as possible differences be-

tween the segments can be seen in order to estimate the most important institutional reasons for applying to the University of Vaasa.

Through the planned marketing communication, i.e., promotion, in various marketing channels, and through un-planned marketing communication, such as interpersonal information source i.e. word-of-mouth, the applicant will form an image of the University of Vaasa in their minds. The model of cognitive processing in chapter three and the elements of corporate image in chapter four show us how the image can be formed and what all factors affect the formation. By expressing in a few words, short concepts or sentences their current thoughts on the images and perceptions the applicants have on the university, a word cloud can be formed from the various answer to see what words and concepts are dominating in the image of the university in various segments and an answer to the fourth research question is received. Word cloud is a representation of text data, typically used to depict keyword metadata or to visualize free form text. The importance and occurrence of a single word is shown with font size and/or colour, providing quantitative data in a visual form. This format is useful for quickly perceiving the most prominent terms and for determining its relative prominence to various applicant segments.

6.3 Case study survey and respondent data

An E–lomake survey was sent by e-mail to all the applicants who had agreed to marketing contacts on the international Master's degree programme application round 2019. The survey was built accordingly into sections on reasons for choosing, information search and image concept. As pointed out earlier, the alternatives for the questions in the survey and their foundation come from the theoretical background, previous studies and the institutional characteristics of the case study organisation. The survey questions are presented in appendix 1.

The application period started on 1 November 2018 and ended on 23 January 2019. The application form was sent to applicants who had agreed to marketing contacts after the application period had ended and the applicants had to answer by 4 February 2019. It could be argued that after the application period the appli-

cants could be more actively viewing their emails and waiting for possible contacts from the university and the matters the study wishes to address would still be in mind. Usually most answers to surveys come during the first day, so a long answer time was not deemed necessary.

The survey was sent to 569 applicants who had agreed to marketing contacts and 164 applicants answered the survey. This gives a response percentage of 28.8 %. The 164 applicants produced 215 applications, which is 25.7% of the total application number of 837 applications. The number of applications is much higher than of applicants, because a single applicant could produce an application into each of the six programmes. The following Table 1. presents the responses by different variables.

Table 1. Responses by various variables.

Applicant Variables

Gender	n= 164	%
Men	111	67.7%
Women	52	31.7%
Other / Rather not say	1	0.6%
Nationality	**n= 164**	**%**
Finnish	23	14%
EU / EEA	11	6.7%
Non-EU / Non-EEA	115	70.1%
Non-EU / Non-EEA with permanent residence permit	15	9.2%

Application Variables

All the programmes	n= 215	%
Business programmes	**129**	**60%**
Finance	25	11.6%
International Business	69	32.1%
Strategic Business Development	35	16.3%
Technology programmes	**56**	**26%**
Industrial Systems Analytics	20	9.3%
Smart energy	36	16.7%
Industrial Management	**30**	**14%**

The answers of the respondents participating in the survey on their reasons to apply to the University of Vaasa, information channels and information search as

well as the image of the University of Vaasa are presented in the next chapter. Tables are drawn on answers of the respondents based on these individual and application variables. Gender will be divided only into male and female as only one respondent indicated something else. Also, the application variables will be examined in this study as business programmes or technology programmes only, excluding responses from Industrial Management, in order to keep the programme-specific data non-identifiable. In addition to the tables also some comments from the respondents will be included. These findings are later followed by discussion and the conclusions.

7 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

This chapter presents the answers from the survey based on applicant and application variables presented earlier. The applicants answered questions regarding the channels of awareness and promotion, sources for further information, reasons for applying and the image they have of the University of Vaasa.

7.1 Channels

The respondents were asked to select all the channels where they had heard of/ read about or seen the University of Vaasa. Table 2 below presents the total number of selections by the respondents by various variables.

Table 2. Total number of channel selections by various variables.

Applicant Variables

	All		Men	Women		FI	EU	non-EU	Permit
Prior knowledge	58		38	20		18	1	30	9
University social media	39		26	13		5	5	23	6
Some-advertisement A	19		11	8		3	1	12	3
Some-advertisement B	1		1	0		0	0	0	1
Some-advertisement C	10		5	5		2	2	4	2
Search engine advert	19		13	6		2	1	13	3
University brochure	22		14	8		2	2	14	4
Service provider A	65		45	20		4	5	49	7
Service provider B	32		26	6		0	1	30	1
Service provider C	6		4	2		0	0	6	0
Service provider D	0		0	0		0	0	0	0
Activity E	7		4	3		0	1	3	3
Studyinfo.fi	63		40	23		14	4	41	4
Study fair or visit	6		3	3		2	1	2	1
Studyinfinland.fi	52		41	11		2	2	41	7
Uni Admissions Finland	34		24	10		0	2	28	4
Media / Publicity	5		3	2		0	0	4	1
Recruitment agency	5		4	1		0	0	5	0
Friend / acquaintance	50		31	19		9	5	32	4
Teacher / professor	13		5	8		3	2	7	1
Family member	17		11	6		2	0	14	1
Study counsellor	3		0	3		1	2	0	0
Other	8		4	4		2	2	4	0
TOTAL	534		354	180		71	39	362	62

Application variables

	All applications	Business	Technology
Prior knowledge	66	45	21

University social media	46	27	19
Some-advertisement A	23	15	8
Some-advertisement B	1	0	1
Some-advertisement C	13	10	3
Search engine advert	20	14	6
University brochure	25	16	9
Service provider A	74	49	25
Service provider B	35	23	12
Service provider C	6	3	3
Service provider D	0	0	0
Activity E	9	6	3
Studyinfo.fi	86	53	33
Study fair or visit	7	3	4
Studyinfinland.fi	58	34	24
Uni Admissions Finland	38	24	14
Media / Publicity	5	2	3
Recruitment agency	6	5	1
Friend / acquaintance	60	43	17
Teacher / professor	17	11	6
Family member	22	16	6
Study counsellor	5	4	1
Other	11	9	2
TOTAL	632	410	222

The following table 3 presents the most selected information channels and the number of the selections in parentheses by various variables.

Table 3. Most selected channels by various variables.

Applicant Variables

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
All (n=164)	Service provider A (65)	Studyinfo.fi (63)	Prior knowledge (58)	Studyinfinland.fi (52)	Friend/acquaintance (50)
Men (n=111)	Service provider A (45)	Studyinfinland.fi (41)	Studyinfo.fi (40)	Prior knowledge (38)	Friend/acquaintance (31)
Women (n=52)	Studyinfo.fi (23)	Service provider A, Prior knowledge (20)	Friend/acquaintance (19)	University social media (13)	Studyinfinland.fi (11)
FI (n=23)	Prior knowledge (18)	Studyinfo.fi (14)	Friends/acquaintances (9)	University social media (5)	Service provider A (4)
EU (n=11)	Service provider A,	Studyinfo.fi (4)	7 options with 2 selec-	6 options with 1 se-	

			tions	lection	
	Friend/acquaintance, University social media (5)				
non-EU (n=115)	Service provider A (49)	Studyinfo.fi, Studyinfinland.fi (41)	Friend/acquaintance (32)	Prior knowledge Service provider B (30)	Uni Admissions Finland (28)
Residence permit (n=15)	Prior knowledge (9)	Studyinfinland.fi, service provider A (7)	University social media (6)	Brochure, Studyinfo, friend/ Uni Admissions FI (4)	Some-ad A, Search engine ad, activity E (3)

Application Variables

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
All (n=185)	Studyinfo.fi (86)	Service provider A (74)	Prior knowledge (66)	Friend/acquaintance (60)	Studyinfinland.fi (58)
Business (n=129)	Studyinfo.fi (53)	Service provider A (49)	Prior knowledge (45)	Friend/acquaintance (43)	Studyinfinland.fi (34)
Technology (n=56)	Studyinfo.fi (33)	Service provider A (25)	Studyinfinland.fi (24)	Prior knowledge (21)	University social media (19)

By applicant variables the service provider A was the most indicated channel by all the respondents (65 selections) closely followed by the national information and application service Studyinfo.fi (63 selections) and prior knowledge as the third most indicated channel (58 selections). Also, national promotion website Studyinfinland.fi (52 selections) and friend/acquaintance (50 selections) were selected. The channels for men were the same, with a small change in order: service provider A (45 selections), Studyinfinland.fi (41 selections), Studyinfo.fi (40 selections), prior knowledge (38 selections), and friend/acquaintance (31 selections). For women studyinfo.fi was the most selected channel (23 selections), followed by service provider A and prior knowledge (both 20 selections) and friend/acquaintance (19 selections). Women selected university social media as the fifth channel (13 mentions) instead of Studyinfinland.fi (11 selections).

More variety arises when examining the nationality variable. Finnish tend to rely mostly on prior knowledge (18 selections) and the national information and application service Studyinfo.fi (14 selections), also friends/acquaintances (9 selections) are a channel before university social media (5 selections). EU applicants select the service provider A, university social media and friends/acquaintances (all 5 selections) before Studyinfo.fi (4 selections). For non-EU applicants the service provider A was the most selected channel (49 selections), followed by followed by the national information and application service Studyinfo.fi and the national promotion website Studyinfinland.fi (41 selections). Also, friend/acquaintance (32 selections), prior knowledge and the service provider B (both 30 selections) were selected before national promotion website University Admissions Finland. Non-EU applicants with permanent residence permit indicated prior knowledge as the most selected channel (9 selections), followed by Studyinfinland.fi and the service provider A (both 7 selections) and university social media (6 selections).

When looking by application variables the national information and application service Studyinfo.fi (86 selections) is the most selected channel followed by the service provider A (74 selections), prior knowledge (66 selections), friend/acquaintance (60 selections), Studyinfinland.fi (58 selections). The channels are the same when looking at business programme applications. For technology programmes Studyinfinland.fi comes before prior knowledge, and the university social media is mentioned before friends/acquaintances.

The applicants had the possibility of marking other channels as well. However, some of them did not indicate the other channel even though asked to do so or mentioned channels that could be argued to be have been covered by the options (i.e. previous degree from the university, exchange at the university could have been regarded as prior knowledge). One applicant mentions the University of Vaasa being on the list of recommended universities in official Chinese education webpage and one applicant notes the Instituto Iberoamericano de Finlandia as information channel. Also a few applicants mention just googling the list of universities in Finland and looking through them one by one.

The findings show that applicants heard of the university through various channels, which can also be seen in some of the open comments on channels

I saw it in the search engine *advertisement and I read background of university then I was satisfy it.* (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

I Googled myself to search best universities in Finland for international students and University of Vaasa came as search result along with other universities. Then I did browse university courses in studyinfo portal and also in the main university website. (female, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

At first I've heard about University of Vaasa from my senior who is pursuing a MS degree there and then I got the whole information from studyinfo.fi. The student blog, instagram account was also helpful for me to know about University of Vaasa. (female, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

I had read about Vaasa on service provider A while my best friend who is currently on Exchange program at Vaasa confirmed the welcoming and nice campus I have read about Vaasa. (male, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

7.2 Information search

After the applicant has become aware of and interested in the University of Vaasa through messages in various channels, the applicant will search for more information on the institution. The applicants were asked to evaluate the importance of each source in finding more information on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being of no importance and 5 being of extreme importance. The means of the various information sources by various variables are presented below in Table 4.

Table 4. Means of information sources by various variables.

Applicant Variables

	All		Men	Women		FI	EU	non-EU	Permit
University website	4.8		4.7	4.8		4.6	4.8	4.8	4.8
Service providers	2.7		2.8	2.4		2.1	2.5	2.8	2.9
Study fair or visit	2.7		2.7	2.7		2.1	2.4	2.9	2.5
Studyinfo.fi	4.2		4.1	4.2		4.3	3.6	4.2	4.3
University brochure	3.1		3.1	3.2		2.2	2.8	3.3	3.7
Media / publicity	2.8		2.8	2.9		2.2	2.5	3.0	2.8
Contact to University	3.5		3.4	3.5		3.2	3.2	3.5	3.4
Former/current UVA student	2.7		2.6	3.0		2.7	3.3	2.7	2.9
Former/current UVA teacher	2.5		2.4	2.7		1.9	3.0	2.6	2.3
Other teacher/ coun-	2.5		2.5	2.5		1.8	3.2	2.6	2.0

sellor									
Other:	1.5		1.6	1.4		1.2	1.0	1.6	1.7

Application variables

	All applications	Business	Technology
University website	4.9	4.9	4.9
Service providers	2.7	2.6	2.9
Study fair or visit	2.8	2.4	3.4
Studyinfo.fi	4.2	4.2	4.3
University brochure	3.1	2.9	3.5
Media / publicity	2.8	2.6	3.0
Contact to University	3.5	3.3	3.7
Former/current UVA student	2.6	2.6	2.7
Former/current UVA teacher	2.5	2.4	2.8
Other teacher/ counsellor	2.5	2.2	2.9
Other:	1.6	1.5	1.8

The following table 5 presents the most important information sources for further information and their means in parentheses by various variables.

Table 5. Most important information sources by various variables.

Applicant Variables

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
All (n=164)	website (4.8)	Studyinfo.fi (4.2)	Contact to uni (3.5)	Brochure (3.1)	Media / Publicity (2.8)
Men (n=111)	website (4.7)	Studyinfo.fi (4.1)	Contact to uni (3.4)	Brochure (3.1)	Media / Publicity (2.8)
Women (n=52)	website (4.8)	Studyinfo.fi (4.2)	Contact to uni (3.5)	Brochure (3.2)	Former/current UVA student (3.0)
FI (n=23)	website (4.8)	Studyinfo.fi (4.3)	Contact to uni (3.2)	Former/current UVA student (2.7)	Brochure (2.2)
EU (n=11)	website (4.8)	Studyinfo.fi (3.6)	Former/current UVA student (3.3)	Contact to uni. other teacher counsellor (3.2)	Former /current UVA teacher (3.0)
non-EU (n=115)	website (4.8)	Studyinfo.fi (4.2)	Contact to uni (3.5)	Brochure (3.3)	Study fair/visit (2.9)
Residence permit (n=15)	website (4.8)	Studyinfo.fi (4.3)	Brochure (3.7)	Contact to uni (3.4)	Former/current UVA student, Service providers (2.9)

Application Variables

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
All (n=185)	website (4.9)	Studyin-fo.fi (4.2)	Contact to uni (3.5)	Brochure (3.1)	Media / Pub-licity (2.8)
Business (n=129)	website (4.9)	Studyin-fo.fi (4.2)	Contact to uni (3.3)	Brochure (2.9)	Media / Pub-licity, For-mer/current UVA student, Service pro-viders (2.6)
Techno-logy (n=56)	website (4.9)	Studyin-fo.fi (4.2)	Contact to uni (3.7)	Brochure (3.5)	Study fair or visit (3.4)

By applicant variables the university website was viewed as the most important source for further information by all the respondents (mean 4.8 out of 5) followed by the national information and application service Studyinfo.fi (mean 4.2). There is no difference in the order of the sources nor a great change in the importance mean (0.1) when looking at various variables, only EU applicants rate Studyin-fo.fi's importance lower (mean 3.6) than the other groups (mean 4.1-4.2).

Differences occur when looking at the third most important sources. Contact to the university is the third most important information source for all the variables (mean 3.2-3.7) whereas for non-EU applicants with residence permit the third most important information source is the brochure (mean 3.7) and for EU appli-cants the third most important information source is former/current students (mean 3.3). EU applicants have also other interpersonal sources as the fourth and fifth most important sources. All and all the fourth and fifth most important sources are more varied, the fourth one being most often the brochure (mean 2.9-3.5), and the fifth most important sources are most often Media/Publicity (mean 2.6-2.8) or Former/current UVA student (mean 2.6-3.0), also Study fairs/visits are mentioned (mean 2.9-3.4).

Applicants had the possibility of indicating and evaluating other information sources, if not listed as an option. However, these sources were usually already listed or included various search engines (usually leading to the university website or to other information source, i.e. not being the actual source for further infor-

mation). The embassies of Finland in various countries were also mentioned as sources for further information as well as the university Youtube-channel and videos as well as social media, but both with a very small mean in importance. For finding more information and for information search, the applicants used various information sources as demonstrated by some of the open comments.

Elaborate Information on Website made it easy to understand and apply for programmes at the University (male, non-EU/EEA, business and technology applications)

Mostly searched the school website and discussed about the school with friends via different communication channels. (female, Finnish, business applications)

Vaasa Website, Opintopolku.fi/studyinfo.fi and a friend confirmation made feel like I can't wait to be in the campus. (male, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

The information on University of Vaasa was first gotten from my friend before personal effort on the institution's website, service provider A and opintopolku.fi/studyinfo.fi to confirm how true it is and it was exactly true. (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

7.3 Reasons for applying

The applicants were asked the evaluate the various reasons for applying to the University of Vaasa on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being of no importance and 5 being of extreme importance. The means of the various reasons by various variables are presented below in Table 6.

Table 6. Means of reasons by various variables.

Applicant Variables

	All		Men	Women		FI	EU	non-EU	Permit
City & region	3.8		3.8	4.0		3.5	4.1	3.8	3.5
Programme characteristics	4.8		4.7	4.8		4.8	4.7	4.7	4.7
Quality of education	4.7		4.7	4.6		4.3	4.6	4.8	4.3
Ranking & accreditation	4.0		3.9	4.1		3.5	3.7	4.1	3.5
Tuition fee & scholarship	3.9		4.1	3.6		1.9	3.5	4.4	3.5
Business contacts, career	4.1		4.0	4.3		4.3	3.7	4.1	4.1
Facilities & services	4.0		4.1	3.8		3.5	3.8	4.2	3.5
Contact &communication	3.8		3.8	3.8		3.3	3.6	3.9	3.7
Previous studies	2.1		1.9	2.5		1.9	3.0	2.0	2.1
Recommendation	2.9		2.8	2.9		3.1	2.5	2.9	2.1
International	4.1		4.0	4.1		3.8	4.1	4.1	4.1
Atmosphere	3.9		3.9	4.0		3.5	3.5	4.1	3.4

Admission criteria	4.0		4.0	4.2		3.9	4.4	4.1	3.4
Research, PhD	4.1		4.1	4.0		3.5	3.4	4.3	4.5
Other	2.1		2.1	1.9		1.9	2.4	2.1	2.1

Application variables

	All applications	Business	Technology
City & region	3.9	3.7	4.1
Programme characteristics	4.8	4.8	4.8
Quality of education	4.6	4.5	4.9
Ranking & accreditation	3.9	4.0	3.9
Tuition fee & scholarship	3.9	3.7	4.1
Business contacts, career	4.1	4.1	4.1
Facilities & services	4.0	3.8	4.2
Contact &communication	3.7	3.6	3.9
Previous studies	2.0	1.9	2.2
Recommendation	2.9	2.8	3.0
International	4.0	4.1	4.0
Atmosphere	3.8	3.7	4.0
Admission criteria	4.0	4.0	3.9
Research, PhD	4.2	4.1	4.3
Other	2.1	2.1	2.1

The following table 7 presents the most important reasons for applying and their means in parentheses by various variables.

Table 7. Most important reasons by various variables.

Applicant Variables

	1st	2nd	3rd
All (n=164)	Programme cha-racteristics (4.8)	Quality of education (4.7)	Business contacts and ca-reer prospects, International aspects, Research and pos-sibility for PhD (4.1)
Men (n=111)	Programme char-acteristics, Quali-ty of education (4.7)	Facilities and services, Tuition fee & scholar-ship, Research and pos-sibility for PhD (4.1)	Business contacts and ca-reer prospects, International aspects, Admission criteria (4.0)
Women (n=52)	Programme cha-racteristics (4.8)	Quality of education (4.6)	Business contacts and ca-reer prospects (4.3)
FI (n=23)	Programme cha-racteristics (4.8)	Quality of education, Business contacts and career prospects (4.3)	Admission criteria (3.9)
EU (n=11)	Programme cha-racteristics (4.7)	Quality of education. (4.6)	Admission criteria (4.4)
non-EU (n=115)	Quality of educa-tion. (4.8)	Programme cha-racteristics (4.7)	Tuition fee & scholarship (4.4)
Residen-ce permit	Programme cha-racteristics (4.7)	Research and possibility for PhD (4.5)	Quality of education (4.3)

(n=15)			

Application Variables

	1st	2nd	3rd
All (n=185)	Programme characteristics (4.8)	Quality of education (4.6)	Research and possibility for PhD (4.2)
Business (n=129)	Programme characteristics (4.8)	Quality of education (4.5)	Business contacts and career prospects, International aspects, Research and possibility for PhD (4.1)
Technology (n=56)	Quality of education (4.9)	Programme characteristics (4.8)	Research and possibility for PhD (4.3)

By applicant variables the programme characteristics were ranked as the most important reason for applying to the university by all the respondents (mean 4.8 out of 5) followed closely by quality of education (mean 4.7). Business contacts and career prospects, international aspects, research and possibility for PhD were all listed as the third most important factors (mean 4.1) followed by ranking and accreditation, facilities and services and admission criteria (mean 4.0). All the applicant variables regarded either programme characteristics and/or quality of education as the most important reason. Men ranked programme characteristics and the quality of education as the most important reasons (mean 4.7 for both), followed by facilities and services and research and possibility for PhD as well as tuition fee and scholarship as an important reason (mean 4.1). Men ranked business contacts and career prospects, international aspects, and admission criteria high as well (mean 4.0). The top reasons for the women were programme characteristics (mean 4.8), quality of education (mean 4.6), business contacts and career prospects (mean 4.3), admission criteria (mean 4.2) and international aspects and ranking and accreditation (mean 4.1).

More variety in the reasons following programme characteristics and quality of education can be seen when examining the nationality variable. Finnish and EU-applicants rate Admission criteria as the third most important reason (mean 3.9 and 4.4). Non-EU applicants with residence permit ranked research and possibility

for PhD as the second most important reason (mean 4.5), and non-EU applicants marked tuition fee and scholarship as the third most important reason (mean 4.4).

Application variables follow the same pattern applicant variables, for all programme applications the characteristics of the programme or quality of education followed by the other and research and possibility for PhD as the third option, sharing the third place with business contacts and career prospects and international aspects in business programme applications.

Applicants had the possibility of evaluating and indicating other reasons for applying. However, these reasons were usually already listed, or the mentioned reasons could be argued to be have been covered by the options (rare degree, reputation of the programme, English as degree language, i.e. programme characteristics; high standard of teaching, good teachers and teaching methods, academic environment i.e. quality of education; elaborate information and communication with admission office, i.e contact with university). Reasons that were not covered by list of option were the mentions of Finland as a country, opportunity to experience a new educational culture, continue to study abroad (but these could be regarded as reasons not so much to do with the specific institution but more with the country or applicants' personal attitude and motivation towards international education). Also, interaction with the society was mentioned as a reason, which was not covered directly by the list of options. Below are a few open comments elaborating more on the various reasons for choosing the university.

The reason that I applied for masters in programme X *is diversified culture and expert staff of university. I want to work with them under their supervision and want a platform to polish my intellectuality. In future, I want to run a business in my country with the personality groom in University of Vaasa prestigious environment. But only the problem in excelling is finance. By getting scholarship I can hatch my wagon to star.* (male, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

One of the most important reason behind applying for this programme X *is the course curriculum structure and the quality of education that are being given at University of Vaasa.* (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

University of Vaasa is an institution of reputable and good quality with high standard performance. I have a colleague who studied there and enjoyed his programme fully. He was the one who recommended University of Vaasa to me. Also

*checking the institution's website, it's loaded with quality programmes and effi-
cient facilities alongside a friendly environment for learning from my own re-
search view in line with what my colleague who studied there told me.* (male, non-
EU/EEA, technology applications)

*I believe that with the specialized academic environment, developed over the
years by dedicated researchers, teachers and even students at University of Vaasa
will put me on the fast track to a career in international business range of
knowledge acquired during the course at your University will enable and equip
me with the skills and competence required in rapidly changing corporate world.*
(male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

*I applied here because of my research interests matching to university research
group. I see possibility of PHD here. Also, my professors who have studied from
Finland recommended me this university. My friend living in Vaasa recommended
me business studies at Vaasa university because of their good collaborations with
industry. Also, I would like to admire their application system, it is very open for
both experienced and non experienced students with less admission restrictions.*
(female, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

*The school being one of the best ranked educational institution, the international
student team are multiculturally inclined, opportunities also abound in your net-
works of sponsors and work related connections with big companies worth bil-
lions in income. Furthermore aiming for my MBA at your University will bring
my fulfilment to fruition also the chosen degree will help broaden my skills.* (fe-
male, Finnish, business applications)

7.4 Image of the University of Vaasa

The applicants were asked to write a few words, short concepts or short phrases
expressing their current image / perception of the University of Vaasa in order to
find out what kind of an image they had of the university. The word clouds were
formed with Microsoft Office 365 Word extension Pro Word Cloud, which auto-
matically removes the most common words (articles, prepositions, personal
nouns, etc). Also, the words University and Vaasa (as well as their misspellings)
were removed because of their domination. The word count of the clouds was set
to max 75 words. Word clouds of all the applicants, Finnish applicants, non-
EU/EEA applicants, business and technology applications will be presented be-
low. The other word clouds can be found in the appendix 2.

The word cloud from all the applicants presented in Figure 12 highlights the words most frequently used in the description on the image of the university. Education, research, study, students, quality and other nouns related to universities and to studying are the most actively used. Also adjectives like good, international and best as well as the noun quality are prominent. Business, career, ranking and environment, modern and top are well presented. Other good words are atmosphere, people and city, future and opportunity as well as technology, industry and energy. The presence and weight of a more personal/ experience-based adjective friendly (and welcoming on a smaller scale) is notable, as these words might not necessarily be automatically connected to a university in comparison with the other words in the cloud.

Figure 12. Image word cloud of all applicants. (n=164)

The word cloud of the Finnish applicants in Figure 13 clearly stresses the words of quality and international. Words relating to studies and to studying are clearly dominating over research, which is not even seen in the word cloud. Innovative and fresh are occurring adjectives, alongside with vibrant, unique, compact and modern. Career and working, flexibility are also words that the Finnish applicants have used frequently when describing their image on the University of Vaasa.

Figure 13. Image word cloud of Finnish applicants. (n=23)

The word cloud of non-EU/EEA applicants presented in Figure 14 is more evenly varied between various words in comparison to the Finnish applicants. Research is the clearly dominating word or concept in the answers regarding the image of the university before words relating to education and studies or international. PhD is also a word used in the word cloud of non-EU/EEA applicants There are more words relating to various locations: environment, Finland, world, place, country, facilities, campus, city, etc. than in the Finnish applicants' word cloud. Adjectives like beautiful and prestigious occur as well.

Figure 14. Image word cloud of non-EU/EEA applicants. (n=115)

The word cloud of business applications in Figure 15 focuses on the international image of the university. Research and education are in balance and adjectives like good, best and great are used frequently, as well as friendly. Business, quality career, and futures are also often used words in the image descriptions in business programme applications. Interesting, excellence, strong and history are new words that appear in the business cloud.

Figure 15. Image word cloud of business applications. (n=129)

Research and education dominate the word cloud of technology applications in Figure 16, followed by quality, good, best. In comparison to the earlier word clouds, the word international does not appear as often in the descriptions of technology applications. Finland and place are occurring often, as well as environment, energy and facilities. New words like beneficial and professors appear in the word cloud of the technology applications.

Figure 16. Image word cloud of technology applications. (n=56)

Below are a few comments on the image of the applicants on the image of the University of Vaasa.

My perception about university of Vaasa is the great education culture the school as built for herself for ages. Not only that but also the accessible facilities, well grounded environment of learning and ability of the lecturers to assist student to achieve their dreams. (male, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

1- Opportunities for practical experiences/ industry insights 2- Possibility of PHD in future 3-Continuity of my research work with research groups 4-Good and in-dividualistic supervision. (female, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

University of Vaasa is a tranquil and friendly place where to feel like home. It is also a very international and very interesting place where to study and to develop an international knowledge and to be prepared for the future job. (female, EU/EEA, business applications)

Community of strong educational learning. -Supporting the provision of a sus-tainable world. -Excellence in education and career opportunities. (male, EU/EEA, business applications)

International, vibrant, modern and up-to-date with today's demands in society and Business life. Positive outlook on background studies; well adjusted pro-grammes for many. (female, Finnish, business applications)

These are my perception of the University of Vaasa; best quality of education with a strong international relations, international accreditation of education, and provides excellence of educational opportunities to all students. (female, non-EU/EEA with permanent residence permit, business applications)

Uni of Vaasa is a place for one learn and grow through prospective professors and fellow students through interactions and exchange of knowledge and ideas, be part of a larger academic community where, one can apply bold thinking and work through problems by utilizing the academic resources. (female, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

From my point of view, University of Vaasa is one of the best Higher Institute with core values having standard facilities and conducive environment for learning. It is a place to be and any student who will pass through such experience will match up to any other standard institute globally. (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

University of Vaasa, a final destination for students who are intrested in getting quality and research based studies. The vision on your website depicts the keen goals of delivering result oriented studies which in my point of view present a fantastic image of your university. (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

University of Vaasa educates professionals in different fields and people count on the University of Vaasa as a reliable partner and an innovator in higher education. (male, non-EU/EEA with permanent residence permit, technology applications)

Quality education, Specific program focus, Flexibility of customizing courses, real projects, company collaboration, Data, International city. (male, Finnish, technology applications)

8 DISCUSSION

This chapter examines and discusses the empirical findings of the previous chapter in the light of theories and other studies presented earlier. Implications and suggestions for further research will be presented before drawing up the conclusions.

8.1 Channels and information search

The empirical data presented in the previous chapter clearly shows that applicants had heard of the University of Vaasa through various marketing and information channels. The most selected channels were service provider A (all applicants, men, EU/EEA applicants, non-EU/EEA applicants) or Studyinfo.fi (women, all applications, business applications and technology applications), with the other one usually following as the second most selected channel, both channels are marketer controlled. Finnish applicants and non-EU/EEA applicants with permanent residence permit indicated prior knowledge as the most selected channel. Interpersonal channel of friend or acquaintance followed the marketer controlled channels or internal prior knowledge. The question of remembering and selecting all the channels can be regarded as a difficult one, as the respondent might not remember or might not be able to recall all the various channels where a university promotion was seen.

For EU/EEA applicants, non-EU/EEA applicants the most selected channel was the service provider A. This finding is in line with and backed up by the information that with the introduction of the tuition fees, more strategic emphasis has been put on co-operation with other actors in the field, as suggested by the interim report from the national working group for the follow-up and evaluation of the implementation of tuition fees set by the Finnish Ministry of Education (2018). The national application and information portal Studyinfo.fi was the most selected channel among women and all applications. As all applications to the programmes are done through the system and it also serves as a database for finding programmes, it explains the frequency of the portal as a channel for especially the programme variables, where the University of Vaasa programmes might have

been discovered when searching for other similar programmes. The selection of prior knowledge as the most selected source for Finnish and non-EU/EEA with residence permit is understandable as these applicants could be expected to have gained some prior knowledge of the various Finnish universities and not remembering where they heard or saw promotion for the University of Vaasa for the first time.

All in all, the marketer controlled channels dominated when looking at the various selections of various variables. The use of various channels for marketing communication is in line with many of the theoretical models presented in the study. The marketing communication model presented earlier, relies on planned marketing communications, unplanned marketing communications, service experience-based communications and product experience-based communications. These are all not only information/marketing channels but also important sources for further information in accordance with the buyer decision process. The following examples from then open comments demonstrate well the influence and power of the different marketing communications channels and actions and why they all are equally important to be kept in mind. For some it is the information mainly from the marketer controlled sources that does the trick, others rely also on interpersonal information and un-planned marketing actions and for others it can be even be sort of personal inspection by the means of getting good service experience-based marketing communication (which is marketer controlled source)

I have visited almost all Finland's university website that i found university of vaasa is best that i ever seen of Finland university website (male, non-EU/EEA with permanent residence permit, business applications)

I have heard of University of Vaasa before although I have seen the advert on social media A. I also have a friend in Oulu who told me some interesting things about the city of Vaasa. (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

To speak the truth, I haven't heard about Vaasa University before. However, after getting suggestion from service provider C, I read detail about the subject. I also watched youtube videos. They grew my interest about the university. (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

At first, I heard about it at my previous university from professors. Then I searched university website and took help from studyinfo.fi. Best channel was di-

rect contact with admission team of University. (female, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

I have made direct contacts with the University and they have helped me a lot in my application, which made me more confident in the institution regarding to their professionalism. (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

As Briggs and Wilson (2007, 61) stated, decisions are based on a combination of information available, word of mouth, perceptions and reputation. Prospective students actively engage in information search. In addition to formal sources, they seek advice from social networks (e.g. friends/acquaintances, teachers and counsellors). When looking at the importance of various sources for further information, after the initial contact with the University of Vaasa, the marketer controlled sources are still the most important ones. All the variables name the university website as the most important source for further information, followed by the Studyinfo.fi and contact to university as the third option (except by EU applicants and non-EU/EEA applicants with residence permit). This is in line with the findings from previous studies presented earlier by Kotler and Armstrong (2016, 184) who note that traditionally consumers have received the most information about a product from commercial sources, those controlled by the marketer. Studies assessing students' information requirements and relevance have found that students tend to rely primarily on information sources developed by the university (e.g. brochures, leaflets, university websites) (Simoes and Soares 2010, 376). Their own study on Portuguese students verified the same results too with marketer-controlled sources being the most selected in comparison to the other sources (interpersonal, third party independent and direct inspection of service).

The findings from the current study seem to stress the marketer controlled sources of information over the other sources of information and channels, even over the important social interpersonal sources of information. EU-applicants have current/former UVA students as the third most important source of information, followed by other interpersonal sources and Finnish applicants have former/current UVA students as the fourth most important source of information. Other variables mention the marketer controlled brochure or even the third party independent sources of information such as media/publicity before the interpersonal sources.

This is not in line with the findings of Simoes and Soares where former/current university students was the most used individual source of information. In smaller national surroundings the interpersonal sources might play a more important role as a source of information than in larger international context, or the knowledge on where such interpersonal sources might be more limited, and hence they do not appear as important sources of information for the majority of the applicants in the current study in an international context.

However, the importance of interpersonal sources has been previously acknowledged. The most effective sources, however, tend to be personal. Commercial sources normally inform the buyer, but personal sources legitimize or evaluate profits for the buyer. (Kotler and Armstrong 2016, 184.) Maybe in the light of the findings of the present study the interpersonal sources do not act as an important source of information, but serve another function, as suggested by Kotler and Armstrong. The interpersonal sources might not provide information, but more so confirmation on / support for the decision done by the applicant, as presented by the examples from some of the open comments below.

I was recommended by cousin studying in Finland. Although i searched and studied about your university online intensively but his recommendation also play important role. (male, non-EU/EEA, technology applications)

I made some searching about reviews of Vaasa University before applying. I am sure that I am lucky to apply after reading reviews. All comments are great and encourage me to apply. (male, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

My current perception of University of Vaasa has been extremely positive, since I have a few of my close friends who study there and have heard information that made me apply for the Masters programme. (female, Finnish, business applications)

8.2 Reasons for applying

When looking at the reasons for applying to the University of Vaasa the programme characteristics were the most important reason for applying to the University of Vaasa for all applicants, women, Finnish, EU/EEA applicants, non-EU/EEA applicants with residence permit, all applications and business programme applications. Non-EU/EEA applicants and technology programme appli-

cation had the quality of education as the most important reason, however only with a 0.1 difference. Men applicants had programme characteristics and quality of education sharing the position of the most important reason. This finding supports the previous findings (Veloutsou et al. 2004; Shanka et al. 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002) as well as the literature presented earlier, that the factors relating to the quality of education are the most important reasons when applying to higher education.

Other important reasons were research and possibility for PhD, which non-EU/EEA applicants with permanent residence permit ranked as the second most important reason after programme characteristics and before quality of education; business contacts and career prospects, which Finnish applicants rated as the second most important reasons alongside with quality of education; Tuition fee and scholarships for non-EU/EEA applicants and men (which were mostly non-EU/EEA applicants). All these findings are also in line with the findings from the ISB survey and the interim report from the national working group for the follow-up and evaluation of the implementation of tuition fees set by the Finnish Ministry of Education, which mention the research and the financial aspects as an important reason. The study by Daily, Farewell and Kumar (2010) noted opportunities for post-graduation employment as one of the key factors in selecting a graduate school.

All in all, all the various reasons listed as options for selecting the University of Vaasa, whether rising from the theoretical background or the from the reasons from the marketing communication of the University of Vaasa got evaluations and means of importance, so they could be argued to be valid reasons for the applicants to choose the University of Vaasa and used as a criteria when evaluating their alternatives as in the buyer decision process. Only one applicant mentioned the reason of interaction with society, that was not clearly marked as a reason. Business contact do cover some of that, but it does exclude the civil society and NGOs. However, as the factor was pointed out by a single applicant, it's importance for all the applicants as a reason can be questioned.

The least important reason based on the means was previous studies: previous experience with the university for whatever reason for the first studies. The lowest mean for this reason was 1.9 among the men, Finnish applicants, and business applications; the highest mean was 3.0 among the EU applicants. Clearly the possible previous experience with the university does also play a role when applying for further studies, as it indirectly gives the applicants first-hand and personal knowledge on the quality of education, which was rated as one of the most important reasons. This is well presented in the example from the open comments below. Comments indicating the other reasons were presented in the earlier chapter with the empirical findings.

I fell in live with the city and the country when i came 1 year ago to study as an exchange student. The University provides really good content, teaching-wise, and the teacher are really present for their students. The grading system is the best though. (male, EU-applicant, business applications)

I has exchanged in 2017 for three months; feeling good about people's personality and the environment there:) (female, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

However, the point of Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2015, 266-267) must be kept in mind, that here is unlikely to be a single list of factors that all students use. Studies are frequently based on convenience samples from one university or even one subject discipline in one university and such studies need to be treated with caution – the results reveal more about that single institution, than they do regarding choice per se.

The findings of the present study and the reasons the applicants had to select from relate to the University of Vaasa international Master's programmes. Even though they are in line with the previous findings (both international and national), the number of responses, un-even distribution of variables (especially nationality) and the use of a single institution is a something that needs to be kept in mind in making any generalisations. Maybe a qualitative survey on the reasons of various variables (nationality, gender, fields of study) could reveal some deeper reasoning on individual motivation factors and expected outcome, the cause-affect, the dependency and the interaction between the different individual and institutional factors

(the fits like a glove by Allen (2002)) and thus provide interesting insight to the more personal reasons for choosing the University of Vaasa.

8.3 Image of the University of Vaasa

Word clouds on the image of the University of Vaasa by the various variables presented in the earlier chapter and in appendix 2 mostly focus on the aspects on education, research, quality and internationality All of these are promoted in the marketing communication of the international Master's programmes or are closely related to higher education. Research might not be as strongly promoted in the promotion of the Master's degree programmes but is an inseparable part of a university and the strategy of the University of Vaasa. The mission of the University of Vaasa is energising business and society. Internationality and quality are emphasised in research and education. (University of Vaasa 2019). Adjectives like good, great and best are also present in the word clouds, as well as notions to innovation, business and career as well as to Finland, environment and facilities.

The word clouds of various variables vary in their emphasis. Business applications and Finnish applicants tend to put more emphasis on the international aspect; and the technology applications and non-EU/EEA applicants seem to put more emphasis on research. Cross tabulation reveals that the majority of the technology applications were from non-EU/EEA applicants, and the majority of the Finnish applicants applied to business programmes, so this verifies the similarities between the world clouds. Also technology applications mentioned research and possibility for PhD as the third most important reason for applying to the university, which supports the research emphasis of the technology and non-EU/EEA world clouds.

As the image is not only formed by planned marketing actions and marketer-controlled communication, but also by personal experiences on service or by word-of-mouth, as the presented theories suggest, the influence of this could be seen in some of the word clouds as words relating to friendliness and the feeling of being welcomed, as well as some of the open comment earlier relating to the service received by the university, which also reacts well to the image that the

University wishes to promote. These are also words that might not usually be associated with a university.

All in all, the word clouds and the examples from the open comments respond well to the messages the university is promoting in it's marketing communication. This can be viewed as a mean of successful marketing communication and the brand identity and brand image being in line with one another. The message/the stimulus through the various channels has created positive thoughts towards the marketing communication, towards the message and towards the organisation resulting in positive attitudes and the university becoming a part of the applicant's consideration and choice set ending in eventual in purchase decision, i.e. the decision to apply.

However, the relationship between the marketing communication and image is usually interwoven. As Hemsley-Brown notes, it can be a two-way process – students respond to the advertising on the websites and give these factors as reasons for choice; institutions monitor the reasons students give for choosing that university and then use these reasons to reinforce and focus their advertising. There is a process of reciprocity in the dialogue that is often not fully acknowledged. (Hemsley- Brown 2012, 1017) The following example from the open comments illustrates this.

Internationality was strongly highlighted in the material which I observed during the application process. The content of the study programmes and the feedback from previous students convinced me about the quality of teaching and the future career prospects. (female, Finnish, business applications)

There is another interesting notion by Hemsley-Brown (2012). It deals with motivation letters but could be applied to this survey and the part on the image of the university as well. She notes that sometimes these personal statements and motivation letter tend say to what the applicant might expect the admissions tutors wanting to hear. The following examples from the open comments illustrates this

The city of Vaasa is sunny. I think it is the sunniest city in Finland based on sunny days per year with over 65,000 inhabitants, and it is today the educational, cultural and tourist centre of Western Finland. The faculty of Business Studies is one of the largest in its sector in Finland. The University of Vaasa drives its strength

from the community spirit, which promotes multidisciplinary studies and research. The faculty of Business Studies is one of the largest in its sector in Finland. (male, non-EU/EEA, business applications)

The images that the applicants have on the University of Vaasa can be strongly influenced by the marketing communications (which of course is a good thing when the message, brand identity and brand image meet) or they can be written down from the point of view what the applicants wants the university to hear. Even though these notions should be kept in mind, the answers and the word clouds formed can be regarded as sincere and authentic – proving that the image the applicants have and the image that is wanted to be conveyed are in line.

One interesting suggestion for further research comes from the notion Walsh et al. who note that the choice and thereafter the consumption of a university degree programme takes place over an extended period of time during which the consumer is likely to undergo important changes in how they evaluate their experience (Walsh et al. 2015, 670). Maybe doing a survey for the enrolled students instead of applicants might reveal other reasons and factors concerning the University of Vaasa that describe and are unique to the university and that have arisen during their experiences there. These could be used in marketing communication and promotion, this data combined with the results from the present survey might also give insight if it would be worthwhile to continue with / focus on segmented marketing communications (messages and channels) based on the data from the preferences and opinions of different variables

9   CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present study was to examine from which marketing and information channels did the applicants of the international Master's degree programmes of the University of Vaasa hear or see the university, from which information sources did they search for more information about the institution/programmes, what were the specific institutional reasons for choosing the degree programme at the University of Vaasa and what kind of image did they have on the University of Vaasa. The theoretical background focused on buyer decision process as well as marketing communication and image, especially in the context of higher education. The empirical data was gathered by a focused target group survey, which provided quantitative data by various variables.

The marketer controlled marketing and information channels of service provider A and the national information and application service Studyinfo.fi were the most selected channels by the applicants regarding visibility, but also interpersonal channels and especially prior internal knowledge played a role in hearing of the University of Vaasa for some applicants with prior contact to Finland. Regarding sources for further information, the marketer controlled source of website was evaluated as the most important followed by marketer controlled source Studyinfo.fi and contact to university. Even though theory states that for high-involvement decisions consumers tend to rely and search for information from various sources and channels, the findings of the present study based on the results from the survey suggest that in the case of the international Master's degree programmes of the University of Vaasa, the marketer controlled information and marketing channels and information sources dominate over the interpersonal sources, which is suspected to be the reason of the wide international context (vs. a more set national context).

Regarding the institutional reasons for applying to the University of Vaasa, the factor concerning the programme characteristics was rated as the most important reason followed by the quality of education. Other high-rated reasons were business contacts and own career prospects, research and possibility for PhD and tui-

tion fee and scholarships. These findings are in line with previous studies on international degree students' reasons for choosing particular institutions, and as well as in line with the national surveys conducted on international (degree) students. All the various reasons as an option in the survey to the applicants received some form of importance in their evaluation by the applicants and no other institutional reasons were extensively indicated by the applicants. The institutional reasons stemming from the theories and from the marketing communications of the university can be regarded as playing a part in the evaluation and the selection of a university.

The image of the University of Vaasa based on the strategy of the university, the reasons promoted in the planned marketing communication of the university as well as service-based experiences and un-planned marketing communication (word-of-mouth) experienced by the applicants can be seen in the word clouds created of the images the applicants had of the university. Education, research and studies are prominent words, as well as concepts of quality and internationalisation and adjectives focusing on good, great and best. Also words like innovation, career, business, Finland, environment were present. Words like friendly and welcoming one might not associate generally to a university. These are all words relating to the University of Vaasa and act as evidence that the brand image the applicants have of the university is in line with the brand identity the university wishes to convey in its marketing communication when recruiting students to its international Master's degree programmes.

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Background information
Gender: Female, Male, Rather not say

Nationality: Finnish, EU/EEA (including Switzerland), Non-EU/EEA, Non-EU/EEA with A or P residence permit to Finland

Programmes you applied for: Master's Degree Programme in Finance, Master's Degree Programme in International Business, Master's Programme in Strategic Business Development, Master's Programme in Industrial Management. Master's Programme in Industrial Systems Analytics, Master's Programme in Smart Energy

Reasons for applying
Please evaluate how important each of the following factors were when choosing to apply to the University of Vaasa (on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being of no importance and 5 being of extreme importance).

City or region (safety, existing contacts to city or region, etc.)
Degree programme characteristics (courses and programme focus)
Quality of education (teaching methods, good teachers)
Ranking and / or accreditations of University of Vaasa / programme
Tuition fee and scholarship system
University of Vaasa business contacts and own career prospects
Campus facilities and services (buildings, technology and services)
Communication and contact with University of Vaasa
Previous studies at the University of Vaasa
Recommendation from a friend, parents and relatives, teachers (indicate who in comment)
International aspects of the University of Vaasa (international students and staff, double degrees)
Atmosphere on compact campus (focus on individualism and communal spirit)
Admission criteria and entry requirements
Research at the University of Vaasa, possibility for PhD
Other: indicate what in comment (choose 1 if no other factor)

Possible comments on your reasons for applying to the University of Vaasa. (Indicate recommendation source and/or the other factor if you have a factor not listed)

Information channels and further information search
Please choose all the channels from where you heard of/ read about / saw the University of Vaasa.

I knew the University from before, internal knowledge
University of Vaasa social media account (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn)

Some advertisement A
Some advertisement B
Some advertisement C
Search engine advertisement
University of Vaasa -brochure
Service provider A
Service provider B
Service provider C
Service provider D
Activity E
Opintopolku.fi / Studyinfo.fi
Study fair or University of Vaasa promotional visit
Studyinfinland.fi
University Admissions Finland
Media / Publicity
Student recruitment company / agency
From a friend / acquaintance
From a teacher / professor
From a family member
From a study counsellor at previous institution
Other: indicate what in comment
Possible comments on where and how you heard of the University of Vaasa. If a channel is not listed, indicate this channel

After you had heard of the University of Vaasa and wanted to find out more information. Please evaluate how important each of the following sources were for finding more information about the University (on a scale of 1 to 5)

University of Vaasa -website
Various service providers
Study fair or University promotional visit
Opintopolku.fi /studyinfo.fi
University of Vaasa -brochure
Media / publicity
Direct contact to University
Former/current University of Vaasa students
Former/current University of Vaasa teachers
Teacher/counsellor at previous institution
Other: indicate what in comment (choose 1 if no other source)

Possible comments on where and how you found more information on the University

Image
Please write a few words, short concepts or short phrases that express your current image / perception of the University of Vaasa and / or things you associate with the University of Vaasa.

Image word cloud of men (n=111):

Image word cloud of women (n=52):

Image word cloud of EU/EEA applicants (n=11):

Image word cloud of non-EU/EEA applicants with permanent residence permit (n=15):

Image word cloud of all applications (n=185):