THE ROLE OF HEI BRANDS AS KEY DRIVERS FOR STUDENTS AND RECRUITERS’ CHOICES IN A COMPETITIVE MARKETPLACE: EXPLORING BRAND ATTRIBUTES AS PERCEIVED BY STAKEHOLDERS (INSTITUTION, STUDENTS AND RECRUITERS)

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Abstract

In recent years there has been a sharp increase of competition in the higher education sector, particularly from the private sector. Given the budgetary constraints of families but also of HEIs (Higher Education Institutions), one of the main challenges faced by this competitive market is to combat the decline in student numbers.

At the same time, unemployment rates of fresh graduates are critical when the labour market faces profound challenges and cannot absorb most of the new graduates. Students now deal with a career perspective marked by uncertainty. In this context, knowledge of the labour market coupled with the existence of a strong and recognized HEI brand can make a difference on students’ choices of courses and institutions, but also, and more importantly, on the recruitment choices made by companies.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the attributes of a HEI brand as perceived by three different stakeholders: institution (top management, teaching and non-teaching staff), students and recruiters. Specifically, it seeks to understand which characteristics of the HEI dictate students’ choices and which brand attributes are most valued by the labour market when recruiting.

Regarding methodological decisions, this research presents a case study of a private HEI offering marketing courses, whereby seven dimensions were analysed: changes in education, sustainability, attractiveness, importance of using marketing strategies, brand attributes, elements of students’ choices, relationships with the labour market. Data collection was based on two techniques: eight interviews to internal and external stakeholders and one focus group with students. Two different interview guides were designed: one adjusted to interview internal stakeholders (lecturers, staff and top management) and one adjusted to interview recruiters from companies that had previously hired graduate students from this HEI. The focus group included nine graduate students from different academic years and encompassed projective techniques that allowed us to explore students’ feelings and associations with the HEI brand, including word associations, imagery associations, and personifications.

This study contributes to deepen our knowledge regarding HEI’s relationships with different stakeholders, particularly with organizations from the labour market. By exploring, understanding and interpreting perceptions and brand associations of different groups of stakeholders regarding the HEI brand, institutions are better equipped to create positive, lasting and well-planned relationships with their students but also with companies that ultimately play an utterly important role in deciding to hire students graduated from an HEI.

Keywords: Brand, Higher Education, Marketing, Students, Recruiters, institution, HEI, educational marketing, Choice attributes.

1 INTRODUCTION

The current panorama of Higher Education in Portugal is in crisis: supply is higher than demand, the number of candidates is falling, and youth unemployment shows that the market does not absorb all graduates. After a period of expansion, higher education is stagnant and forced to take measures to combat student numbers reduction and retain the current ones, thus avoiding financial problems. Building a strong brand may be the solution to this problem. A brand ceased to be just an identifying sign, name or logo and became a complex junction of dimensions with varied functions for customers and suppliers. The same applies do the HEIs brand, which begins to gain space and importance in the literature. In this scenario, the representation and the dimensions of a HEIs brand have an increasing
importance that can help differentiating and creating an impact in the process of choosing one HEI's over another. This process, for students, includes many more alternatives than in the past [1]. As will be shown, the attributes of choosing a HEI are very complex.

Another important aspect concerns a variable not commonly studied: the labor market. The gap between HEIs and market may lead to a lack of attraction both to HEIs and student's recruitment [2]. But, what explains the choice of an HEI over another? What impact do its signifiers have on the choice? What attributes are the basis of building an HEI brand? These are some of the issues that lead to this research, which is based on the study of the HEI brand. This paper is developed using the case study methodology – a private and polytechnic subsystem school of Porto, which offers specialized training in marketing.

1.1 The Higher Education Institutions Brand

Branding at the educational level derives directly from marketing and, therefore, seeks to establish loyalty to an educational brand or product [3]. Although it is more limited, brand literature at the educational level begins to gain space in research as it becomes an important management tool for all organizations [4]. Ali-Choudhury et al. [5] have characterized HEI brands as a manifestation of the institution’s resources that distinguish them from others and reflect their ability to meet students’ needs, building trust in their capability to offer a certain type and level of education. Some authors [6] propose that an HEI be represented by: 1. A set or promises about its advantages (e.g.: careers prospects after studies); 2. Realities, which instead of promises, define brand nature and come from experience in the institution (e.g.: ease of entry, suitability of the degree program); 3. Symbolic elements that correspond to the visual and aesthetic elements of the institution (its name, logo or design). HEI's names evoke, to those who hear it, associations, emotions, images and faces [7] intrinsically linked with the emotional and rational characteristics [1].

In addition to the dimensions that are transmitted by the HEI positioning, there are common attributes among HEI considered to be successful brands [8]. According to authors, institutions recognized as “successful” had leadership support since its inception, with the recognition of those responsible for HEI for the new paradigm. Localization is also a very important factor for this identification as successful HEI brands, although it is not recognized by all the institutions. The author also suggests that HEIs have the power to transform the place where they are inserted and therefore must be a synergy between HEI and city brands. It also shows that successful HEIs present a clear vision and a well-defined strategic program – the institution vision must be transformed into priority goals and all staff must associate with these goals. Internal support is another important attribute; however, it is the most complicated one because it involves the organization’s culture and its collective vision, which is difficult to control. Finally, successful HEI brands use press and public relations as a constant communication tool.

1.2 HEI choice attributes

If, in the past, HEIs made no effort in attracting students, the choice process by students now includes many more alternatives [1] and a complex decision-making process can be simplified through the existence of a brand [9]. Marketing as a tool to attract students has become an extremely important investment for HEIs. In-depth knowledge of reasons that lead students to apply for an HEI is of crucial importance. One of the initial studies on the process of choosing an institution was carried in 1978 by Punj e Staelin [10] in an investigation in which the authors consider that the valorization of the HEI marketing was essential to know the buying behavior of students and to design a marketing strategy. Later, Chapman (1981) [11], also a pioneer author in this field, defined a model which suggests that choosing and HEI is a combination of characteristics grouped into three categories: 1. The influence of significant people; 2. Characteristics of the institution; 3. Institution’s efforts to communicate with prospective students. This model considers students characteristics and external influences to choose the HEI for them and their family. The decision to choose a HEI depends on the correspondence between students’ characteristics (perspectives and perceptions) and institution characteristics (curriculum, fees, location, among others) [12]. Authors [5] sought to know what are the HEI attributes, from student’s point of view, highlighting some that contribute to the perception of brand in future students. General environment was considered by this author as the most critical attribute since it is the first touching point with the brand.

Other authors [13] examined the HEIs reputation from the consumer perspective, demonstrating that the ease of getting a good job after the degree is the most important attribute for building a HEI
reputation, followed by teaching experience of the institution. Authors’ results also show that there are other variables with moderate importance that contribute to build reputation: the number of courses offered, available technology, cost and difficulty of training or students’ academic quality.

2 METHODOLOGY
Considering the flexibility needed in this study as well as the complexity of the collected data, this paper uses a case study with qualitative methodology and multiple sources of information and data collection, through semi-structured interviews and the application of a focus group.

Interviews considered the procedures identified by Quivy, Van Campenhoudt [14] and Yin (2013) [15]. First, two scripts were created for the interview – the first to apply to the HEI and the second to the labor market. Eight interviews were conducted.

The focus group consisted of 9 participants – 5 females and 4 males, all of them master’s students of the HEI under study. To guarantee confidentiality of the participants, their names were coded. Letter E followed by a serial number identifies the interviewees (E1 to E6 for HEI and E7 and E8 for labor market). For the students that took part on the focus group, the letters FG followed by the order number they were seated in the room were used (FG1 to FG8).

3 RESULTS
3.1 The Higher Education Institution Brand
The importance of HEI brands is an issue which all respondents agree on. Even it is a recent concern in this sector, all interviewees agree that HEI brands are gaining relevance and importance: “They are. I think they are” – E2; “I think so. Of course, a brand, especially in higher education, involves a lot, doesn’t it?” – E5.

The growing importance of HEI brands is recognized in the labor market, as interviewee E8 says: “Yes, without a doubt. I think universities now sell themselves as well as a company (…) I can say that there are brands that have a lot of impact”. According to the interviewee, nowadays, it is not just the companies that seek the candidates. Depending on the University, some candidates may choose the company.

E7 says that “much more than a designation or symbol, brands incorporate associations related to rational and emotional benefits (…) also in the area of higher education, brand has gained value and importance”. E8 adds that “I think universities now sell themselves as well as a company. Nowadays it’s not just us who are looking for the students and trying to recruit them, it’s them who can have the opportunity to choose companies where they want to go, according to the University from which they come.”

In this category, interviewees agree that brand has gained great importance for HEIs, since these have become active elements in the research and identification of their candidates [3].

3.2 Institution’s Perception
3.2.1 Brand attributes perceived by the HEI
The HEI brand studied in this paper is described by E5 as “the first marketing school, even when no one yet believed that marketing could be a discipline, especially in Portugal”. According to E3 this is a specialized institution, and this is a differentiation factor: “We want to be specialized, to be good, but to be specialized. And this strategy, I think, has allowed us to go through those years of crisis without great dents”. This emphasis on specialization is supported by the respondents E2 and E3: “it is very rare to find a single public or private institution focused on one field only”; “It is a strong brand in the field”. The HEI brand operates outside the traditional academic environment, as E1 says: “This HEI has had to this day… the great capacity of never letting go in the traditional academic environment (…) was building its position and its image of a different institution, not so academic or not so orthodox”.

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3.2.2 HEI Brand attributes

The HEI brand is now described in more detail in the institution’s point of view. Authors Ali-Choudhury et al. (2009) considered that the general environment is the most critical attribute of HEIs and interviews reveal consistent answers. General environment was even the most mentioned attribute by the interviewees, corroborating the authors who say that “openness, sympathy, atmosphere, comfort, spirit and welcome” are variables of the most important and critical element of an HEI brand. Interviewees refer the interaction between the school and the student, the familiarity, the proximity with teachers and collaborators as the brand main attributes. E1 – “I think it’s the relationship and interaction between school and students. They feel comfortable”; E2 – “The school familiarity (…) we believe… that a student very quickly comes face to face with a collaborator, with any teacher, with the course director, with the head of the school… we believe that this is very important”; E3 – “(…) the proximity, they can talk to teachers as they spoke in high school”; E4 – “quick answers, support… not only from teachers but also from staff”; E6 – “(…) the issue of proximity to teachers. I think I can’t find it anywhere”.

The second most mentioned attribute was the connection between school and the labor market. Some authors [5] consider that employability and community involvement (employers and companies) are crucial attributes for a HEI brand. Other authors [13] consider that the ease of getting a good job after studies is the most important factor for building the reputation of an HEI. E1 – “Employability, I admit, yes. In fact, this [attribute] is even basic”; E2 – “(…) the connection to business (…) HEI’s reputation in the market”; E3 – “Working directly with companies”; E4 – “I think it’s the link between school and the market”.

The innovative and differentiating spirit of brands appears in the interviews with the same frequency as the connection to the labor market. This last attribute wasn’t reported by authors [5] but it was discussed during the interviews so that, at least for the institution, it is of great importance. E2 – “School breaks many times with some rules”; E3 – “The practical spirit, innovation and creativity”; E6 – “The proximity. They can talk to teachers as they spoke in high school. (…) this question of the dynamism. We are dynamic, we do not like to do things the same way every year. (…) proactive, innovative, creative”.

The practical and experiential nature of teaching was also mentioned by interviewees and was not predicted by the authors. The use of real case studies, dynamic and practical teaching are some of the examples mentioned in the interviews: E3 – “Practical character of studies”; E6 – “… We are very close to real cases, they’re not only case studies, they are real cases”; E4 – “Teaching style, very experimental, roll up the sleeves and don’t get stuck in theoretical models (…) we have teachers from companies and they bring this information, they know the reality and integrate it in the classes”.

The focus and specialization in marketing are also referred by the interviewees as an important attribute for HEIs, emphasizing that the teaching experience of the Institution is a determining attribute in the construction of its reputation [13].

E1 – “I would say that the first attribute I think is linked to the question of marketing itself and what is understood as a science that combines creativity with practice… this HEI was for fifteen years the only marketing school in Porto”; E2 – Focus on marketing, specialization. The first value I would tell you is the total specialization in the marketing issue… this HEI was born 31 years ago as a marketing school and 31 years later it continues to be and will continue to be a marketing school”; E3 – “We want to be specialized, to be good but to be specialized. And I think this strategy has allowed us to go through these years of crisis without great dents”. The following statements from two of the interviewees also refer to the technical and scientific referencing of the Institution as a determining attribute. This was not found in the literature review. E1 – “The question of academic and scientific referencing.” E3 – “The technical capacity of HEI”.

3.2.3 HEI Brand Differentiating Elements

The differentiation of an HEI increases with the connection of its characteristics with that of the students [12]. The studied HEI is presented by the interviewees as a differentiating, modern and somewhat irregular brand when compared to most HEI: E1 – “This HEI has had to this day… the great capacity never to let itself go in the traditional academic environment” E2 - “We have internalized that we have to do almost everything contrary to what is done in public education. (…) this does not mean that we think public education is bad (…) it is precisely to distinguish ourselves and to differentiate. (…)}
The school breaks many times with some rules (...) and we prefer to take the risk. (...) trying to be unique (...)."

The interviewees’ statements bring ideas that are in line with what some authors [16] refer to when explaining that HEIs should differentiate their offer:

- **By quality:** E5 – “(...) and this has to do with a series of factors that have to do with many years of work developed by the HEI, a work of excellence, of great quality.” - E4 “(...) we have been able to offer quality of teaching.”

- **By the study plan:** E5 – “(...) It is clearly the practical spirit.” - E3 “(...) The very characteristics of teaching that have a practical component and know how to do very well.”

- **By the general atmosphere:** E2 – “(...) that students feel that the school is not made from teachers to students, the school is made by everyone. (...) we almost savor the victories of the students as if they were ours (...) A school, if it does not change the life of its students (...), I do not know what space it will have in the market.”; E5 – “Here we can work each person (...). The issue of informality, access to teachers, quick answers, I think this all provides a good experience.”

- **By courtesy:** E5 – “(...) because the student... when he arrives here, especially at night, comes from work and comes with a full day in the back, as I say. So, I always pointed out that this way of receiving students into the night shift was essential for them not to give up. “- E1 “Here we can work for every person .... The issue of informality, access to teachers, quick answers, I think this all provides a good experience.”

- **Staff training:** E3 – “The technical capacity. Not only teach theory but teach them experiences. Because here all teachers have professional experience (...) The quality of the teachers, which the night shift students can already evaluate in a different way.”; E2 – “The teachers we all have so far have professional experience.”; E6 “It has always been a bit leveraged in teachers with a different experience, coming from the job market ...”

- **For the events held:** E1 – “Fifteen years ago, when there was modesty on communicating HEIs, we were going with a double-decker bus from those decorated ... 15 years ago! This today is a common thing; 15 years ago it was not. In higher education it was not. (...) you cannot even imagine the impact. (...) Some five years later, we sponsored the summer festivals. Today festivals are one thing but 10 years ago they were not. And having a higher education institution at a summer festival to promote itself was not a normal thing either. (...) 7 or 8 years ago we did product placement in [a soap opera] “; E5 – “The way we can pull the job market for us, all the events we do”; E4 – “the open days in which the students are invited to come to the Institution to have contact with the marketing, to know the facilities (...).”

### 3.2.4 HEI symbolic elements

The symbolic elements of a brand correspond to the visual and aesthetic elements of the institution as its name, logo, design, etc [6]. Interviewees showed their agreement with authors when they say that the building and the slogan are the symbolic elements of the brand with greater importance and prominence.

E2 – “I think it's The Marketing School. (...) is probably the one that best aggregates ... all these things we've talked about so far.”; E6 – “It's the Marketing School part, the signature. Because in fact we are from Marketing School, we are neither more nor less (...).”; E3 – “All the lettering used here. The HEI logo I think is stronger for the daytime students because they live after the academic part (...). And the design part of the building.”; E4 – “Probably at this point, the building.”

### 3.2.5 Internal and leadership support

Internal and leadership support is an attribute with evident association with a successful HEI [8]. The importance of branding and the work that can be done with it is recognized by HEIs. Author also points out that internal support is very important and has an evident association with the success of an HEI, which is more complicated because it involves an organizational culture and collective vision that are very difficult to control. The interviewees’ reports show that there is awareness from the leadership of the importance of brand strategy.

E2 – “We always share everything with the team. What we do well, what we do wrong. Everything!”; E4 – “The way that the directors give us the autonomy and space to grow and to work, there is pride
and taste (...) begins with leadership, no doubt. I think it has a lot to do with leadership.”; E5 – “It comes from leadership, it comes from people’s culture, this organizational culture.”.

The interviewees’ testimony demonstrates the difficulty regarding the control and evaluation of internal support for the brand [8]. Although it is noted that this support exists, the interviewees have some doubts in their equal realization, reinforcing the author’s idea that the collective view and culture of the organization are difficult to control.

E1 – “I do not know nowadays, but in the annual meetings we had in the past, we reinforced this communication a lot. And I, the people I know who have been here for twenty years ... I think they have a bit of this vision.”; E2 – “The whole Porto and Lisbon team, teachers and collaborators, I was very pleased to know that all these people understand these concerns and are sensitive to them. Do they all perform in their everyday life with the same vigor? No. This is done by people and therefore there will always be their differences as is evident.”; E3 – “I think it has undergone so many changes in recent times that I am not sure. It would be expected that yes, I hope so, but I’m not sure. Because there are many new people. I (...) really care about the HEI and I think I’m one of the staunchest defenders, because I really do.”; E4 – “I think when people are involved and in love with what they are doing,”; E6 – “In a great majority, I am not saying all, in a great majority. When I do something ... I always have the support of everyone. It may not be the support I want, but at least it gives the idea of proactivity.”

3.3 From student’s perspective

3.3.1 The HEI brand in student’s perspective

The student’s perspective is of extreme importance for this study because it is through attracting them that HEIs can survive. The urgency of attracting students to HEIs and consequently filling more vacancies leads to the importance of understanding their behavior to adjust supply of HEIs and their marketing strategies. In this chapter we analyze the information collected and observed during the focus group, where mental associations, promises and realities, symbolic elements and faces of the brand as well as the process and attributes of student choice are analyzed. The influence of some attributes (family influence, location and labor market) referred to in the literature review as the most important for students is also verified.

3.3.2 Choice process and attribute

The process and attributes of choosing an HEI are crucial for the institutions and it is at this early stage that they must intervene so that, faced with more and more alternatives [1], the possible student chooses them over others. It is at the stage of the process of student choice that marketing assumes a greater importance for HEIs [17]. Participants refer to several attributes of choice at this point: the most mentioned was the recommendation (influence of significant people, such as family and friends), but also ease of entry into the institution, the practical side or at suggestion of their employer.

- Influence of significant people: FG2 – “My brother studied here and spoke well. And I think that more and more HEIs are being recommended there ...”; FG3 – “I had a friend who was also here. FG1 – “Colleagues already here.”; FG7 – “My mother has a great image of this HEI, my father too, by the way, ... he is here to take the degree also.”

- Ease of Entry: FG2 – “To enter here is easy”; FG7 – “I’ve applied to other institutions too and I did not enter. But before I even knew I thought: if I don’t enter I’ll apply to this HEI because I know I’ll manage to get in”;

- Practical strand: FG6 – “It was also practical. And by being in contact with the companies. And for being a reference.”; FG3: “I also chose it for that, mainly. At the time I did not know if it was going to be easy ... but what I was told ... was that it was very difficult in terms of work and I think everyone agrees with that.”

- Employee suggestion: FG9 – “In my case it was the employer.”

These results match with what some authors stated [11], who refer that the process of choosing an HEI is a combination of the influence of significant people (in this case, family and friends) and characteristics of the institution (practical teaching and curricular plan). As aforementioned, the influence of significant people (family and friends) is one of the categories of the HEI choice model, [10]. Also, authors [5] refer to the ease of entry into the institution and the connection to employers.
and prestigious companies as factors that contribute to the positive perception of HEI brand in future students.

### 3.3.3 Labor Market

The relationship with the labor market was a much-discussed issue during the focus group. At a time when there is a great difficulty for companies to hire graduates [2] and when some authors mention that there is a dichotomy between HEIs and the market [18], this subject has crucial importance. At this stage of the focus group, participants were asked about their perspectives after their degree and how the HEI would influence their career path. From the development of personal professional projects to employment, all participants agree that having studied at this HEI gave them a chance to get a job that they would not have in another institution. The appreciation of its curriculum is very much mentioned. Participants feel more prepared to enter the labor market due to the practical aspect of their training.

FG9 – “I wanted to build a project of my own (...). Marketing management can give me some knowledge that I did not have to carry out a project I had thought of.”; FG5 – “That was what we were talking about ... the prestige in the job market, the renown and notoriety of this HEI.”; Moderator – “Does everyone agree with FG5?” All participants say yes; FG7 – “But also because of the field itself (...) gives us more employability.”; FG7 – “It gives a perspective what are we going to do seriously!”

### 3.3.4 Location

The location of HEIs was one of the most prominent attributes during the literature review. Some authors [16] refer to location as a form of differentiation of an HEI. Chapleo (2010) [8], also refers to this attribute, claiming that it has an obvious association with a successful HEI (p. 179). Chen (2007) [12] states that location interferes with the decision to choose an HEI and Ali-Choudhury et al. (2009) [5] demonstrates in his research that localization is an attribute that influences the perception of the brand in future students. Thus, being an important topic and much discussed during data collection, a joint analysis of the interviews and focus group of this theme was carried out, showing differences or similarities between the institution and its students. Regarding the focus group, this topic was much debated with mixed opinions about the location of the HEI. Some participants reported not liking the current location of the institution, others said that the location was good, and the institution was close to the business.

FG5 – “The location is awful”; FG7 – “For me it’s great”; FG5 – “Subway is there but, I mean, it’s a 15-minute walk. When it’s raining it’s a problem. I think this is badly located (...) the previous [location] was better. On the other hand, I think here in this area (...) they are well located because it’s very close to companies”; FG7 – “I like it because I live right here”.

HEI employees also answered this question about location. The interviewee E2 begins by admitting that “location is one of the most important factors for the success of an HEI”, adding that “I thought this site was not good ... we are not in the most charming part of the city” but that “the fact that we are here also contributes to the idea that we are distinct from others ... this is good for this HEI’s location because there are many important companies around here.” The same opinion is shared by E3 when saying that “not be too far from home” and “being here alongside the companies was strategic” but refers that has some doubts “if students perceive and value it.” According to the interviewee, the students “would like to be in a place where there were more services with younger people nearby”.

Interviewees agree that HEIs have the power to transform the place where they are inserted [8]. E1 states that “things change with student movement but later with the relationships that are being created” while E2 states that “we came to liven up the zone, honestly ... and so I think our neighbors are very happy that we are here today”. E3 says that the HEI can also have a negative impact on the transformation in the area in which it is inserted - “it transforms in such a way that so many cars are here ... it’s negative” but also in a positive way, stating that “brings other environment “and” the fact that there are always young people around here is also interesting”.

### 3.4 Labor Market Perspective

#### 3.4.1 HEI Brand in the perspective of the labor market

The absorption of students by the labor market is, now, one of the great challenges of an HEI. The lack of interest by the market may negatively influence the reputation of the higher education system
itself [2]. So, it matters, even if very briefly, to understand how the HEI brand is viewed by the labor market.

3.4.2 Associations with the HEI brand

The HEIs brand is an element that interviewees recognize that is gaining a lot of importance. The HEI brand according to E8 "is very much associated with marketing." According to the interviewee, when the company seeks marketing, the HEI brand soon appears. He added that "it is a brand that I think is recognized in the market." E7 says that the HEI brand "combines theoretical knowledge with practice, seeking a close relationship with the reality of companies". The interviewee recognizes the value of his "highly qualified" teaching staff, experts in different professional fields and coming from various business sectors, in a close connection to the business world.

3.4.3 HEI's relationship with companies

The two interviewees have close relations with the HEI, as they describe. E7 describes his company's relationship with this HEI as quite durable - "this HEI's (...) relationship with HEI has been around for almost a decade. There are many employees (...) who were students of this institution of education ". He adds that "every year we integrate several students in internships, into the reality of our companies, and for the most part they have been evolving and with successful careers." E8 states that his company "establishes a very close relationship, initially advertising vacancies (...) some events and also integrate this HEI students in recruitment processes ".

3.4.4 HEI Brand Symbolic Elements

Regarding the visual and symbolic elements of the HEI brand, E7 says that brand reminds "marketing in action in business" adding that the "the home shaped logo and roasted yellow are salient in my memory." E8 refers to the building as the most outstanding visual element: "I think of HEI and I think it has a very beautiful building. (...) first element, without a doubt ".

3.4.5 Brand differentiation

In this regard, respondents agreed. E7 values individual students by pointing out that "good and bad professionals come from all institutions" and "the success of each student ... depends on him and how he has used the knowledge acquired." E8 refers to the better preparation of this HEI students for the job market - "it better prepares students for what the job market is" - referring positively to the way "there is some care and some preparation of the students to get to know the company and show that in fact they are interested in the opportunity, compared to other institutions." This interviewee also notes that the "feedback they have given us [HEI students] is positive and that is why we also continue to recruit this HEI people." E7 addresses the tools that are given to HEI students saying that these are "very strong practical work component." He added that "from the experience I have of other HEIs, this HEI is a benchmark in this ability to easily adapt to the day-to-day business dynamics and get to work."

4 CONCLUSIONS

The present study aimed to determine the elements that constitute an HEI brand, through a case study. This paper was based heavily on very relevant international studies [5],[6],[11],[19], [20], among others. Thus, exploring references from the most relevant authors of the area, it was intended to determine the attributes that make up the HEI brand from HEI's point of view as a supplier, from the student as a consumer and from the job market, through interviews and a focus group, to confirm or not the authors' studies. It is possible to draw a series of conclusions.

The use of marketing strategies by HEIs is considered positive and essential for understanding the market and students. The use of these strategies allows students to compete in the same way that companies compete for their potential clients. In this sense, awareness of the importance of HEI brands is growing and, for both students and the labor market, the brand plays a key role in spreading its offerings and its graduates. The HEI is seen by the institution and its students in a very similar way: specialized in marketing, differentiated from other HEIs, recognized by the job market, with a very practical teaching and close to companies. The importance of the brand and its strategy is recognized by the leadership that manages to convey to employees a different organizational culture. However, there remain doubts in the accomplishment of the objectives of the leadership, by the employees. The location of the HEI was not consensual among students. Proximity to companies is recognized but the
public transport network is not ideal. The HEI itself admits that not all students value or understand the proximity to companies. On the other hand, it is recognized that the presence of an HEI can change the place where it is inserted.

Regarding the labor market, there is an association of the HEI with marketing. It is concluded that there is a high recognition of the brand, its employees and students and the connection to companies is valued. Despite some bureaucratic obstacles stemming from the acquisition of the HEI, the professionals who enter companies represent well the brand's promises and meet expectations. It is inferred that the brand prepares its students well and feedback is very positive.

It is during this period, where supply far exceeds demand and that youth unemployment continues to leave thousands of graduates out of business, that HEIs are facing their biggest challenge: to fight against the decline of candidates, to maintain and retain current students and to successfully send them to the labor market. The work that is done around an HEI brand helps counter the current state of the country by showing the benefits that its students can bring to businesses. More than teaching students how it is done in a theoretical way, it is urgent to teach and have students doing practical and real cases, in contact with companies and with society.

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