

## POSITIONING STRATEGIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA <sup>a</sup>

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### Abstract

Contemporary higher education institutions act as agents on a highly competitive market. Therefore, they have been obliged to modify their management approaches to attract and retain students, in order to ensure survival and development on such a market. These new management approaches include more explicit use of marketing principles and activities. Research presented in this paper is focused on positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia. The paper analyzes the content of accredited higher education institutions' Internet presentations (websites) in order to identify the bases of strategies used for differentiation from other institutions. More specifically, it searches for characteristics that higher education institutions highlight to show their superiority over other institutions to the general public, and most importantly – to prospective students. Those characteristics are treated as implicit/explicit competitive advantages, on which positioning strategies are based. The aim of this paper is to identify different elements used as bases for the positioning strategies of Serbian higher education institutions. Additional objective is to identify the most frequently used competitive advantages and the ones that are theoretically conceptualized, but not sufficiently used in the practice of Serbian higher education institutions.

The paper includes three parts. The first part overviews the theoretical background related to positioning strategies in the higher education context. The research related to the bases of Serbian higher education institutions' positioning strategies is described in the second part of the paper, together with the obtained results. The main finding of this empirical research shows that conclusions from previously conducted studies are valid for Serbia, as well – positioning strategies of higher education institutions are mostly based on the same characteristics, while explicit implications of specific, unique, competitive advantages are missing. The majority of higher education institutions in Serbia tend to position themselves based on institutional reputation as well as on opportunities for students to find employment after graduating from those institutions. The final part of the paper includes conclusions and directions for further research.

**Key words:** marketing, higher education, positioning, competitive advantage

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## СТРАТЕГИЈЕ ПОЗИЦИОНИРАЊА ВИСОКОШКОЛСКИХ УСТАНОВА У РЕПУБЛИЦИ СРБИЈИ

### Апстракт

Савремене високошколске установе делују на тржишту на коме је конкуренција веома изражена. Због тога су биле принуђене да промене начин управљања активностима, како би, привлачећи и задржавајући студенте, обезбедиле опстанак и развој. Нови менаџмент приступи подразумевају и експлицитнију употребу маркетинга. Предмет истраживања у овом раду су стратегије позиционирања високошколских установа у Републици Србији. Анализиран је садржај Интернет презентација (веб сајтова) свих акредитованих високошколских установа, да би се утврдило на којим се основама базирају стратегије којима ове установе теже да се диференцирају од осталих. Конкретно, испитивано је које се карактеристике потенцирају приликом истицања супериорности у односу на друге установе (првенствено) потенцијалним студентима. Те карактеристике су третиране као имплицитне/ експлицитне конкурентске предности на којима су базиране стратегије позиционирања. Основни циљ истраживања је утврдити да ли постоје разлике у основама на којима се темеље стратегије позиционирања високошколских установа. Додатни циљеви су: идентификовање најчешће истицаних конкурентских предности и указивање на оне које су теоријски концептуализоване, али нису (у довољној мери) коришћене у пракси високошколских установа у Србији.

Рада је конципиран тако да садржи три основна дела. У првом делу је начињен кратак осврт на специфичности стратегије позиционирања у контексту високошколског образовања. У другом делу је описано емпиријско истраживање основна стратегија позиционирања високошколских установа у Србији, и презентовани су добијени резултати. Основни налаз истраживања указује на то да су закључци претходно спроведених студија валидни и у контексту Републике Србије – стратегије позиционирања високошколских установа су углавном засноване на истим основама и у њима недостаје експлицитно истицање специфичних, јединствених конкурентских предности. Већина високошколских установа у Србији позиционира се на основу репутације и могућности за запошљавање дипломираних студената. У завршном делу рада представљена су закључна разматрања и смернице за будућа истраживања.

**Кључне речи:** маркетинг, високошколске установе, позиционирање, конкурентске предности

### INTRODUCTION

Significant social changes that occurred in the mid-twentieth century have led to an increase in the number of individuals interested in higher education, which is considered to provide access to better paid jobs and higher social positions (see: Поповић & Ђорић, 2011; Грубор, 2012). As a result, the existing universities are faced with a new challenge: to provide education for the growing number of those who are interested, while maintaining the standards by which it was delivered to a small number of privileged individuals. Direct responses to this challenge were also the

establishment of new universities and the emergence of new types of higher education institutions (Mainardes, Alves & Domingues, 2010; Tam, 2007). With the aim of educating professionals of various profiles, new study programs have been created within the framework of scientific disciplines and areas that had not previously been studied at the higher education level (Smith, Scott, & Lynch, 1995; Maring & Foskett, 2002). Increase in the number of different institutions that offer various study programs and a variety of study options has been additionally intensified by the liberalization of national higher education policies around the world (see: Спасојевић, Клеут & Бранковић, 2012). All these changes have accelerated the transformation of higher education from an elite system to a mass system. Authors from the field of higher education marketing interpret these changes as the transformation of higher education from the state-controlled sector into a market-led sector<sup>1</sup> (Jongbloed, 2003). Although this transformation is the result of a compromise between state control, university autonomy and privatization (Young, 2002), the higher education market is considered to be a “well-established phenomenon” (e.g. Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006), and the logic and terminology of business are therefore considered appropriate and applicable in this context.

Higher education was conceptualized as a market-led sector in which conditions were determined by the relationship of *demand and supply* as early as the 1970s (Hawkins & Cocanougher, 1972), and afterwards many prominent authors (Kotler, 1979; Doyle & Lynch, 1979; Smith et al., 1995) used the conceptual apparatus of marketing to describe and explain the analyzed changes. The increased number of individuals interested in higher education is perceived as an *increase in demand*; the increase in the number of different higher education institutions and the development of a variety of educational content are interpreted as the *expansion and diversification of supply* and, consequently, the growth of *competition* in the sector. It is believed that by the end of the 1970s the development of a market-led system of higher education was further intensified by financial constraints imposed on this sector worldwide (Russell, 2005). All these changes have led to a further *intensification of competition* among higher education institutions, which tend to attract as many students as possible in order to increase their market share in the national or international market and to provide income to compensate for reduced inflow of funds from the state budget (Tapper & Salter, 1995).

Having been confronted with new challenges, higher education institutions were forced to accept new ways of management, or new business models, in order to survive and develop in the market. Since increased competition always implies the need for a more intensive use of marketing

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<sup>1</sup> In the Anglo-Saxon literature, the term ‘marketization’ is used for this transformation.

(Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Vranješ, Gašević and Drinić, 2014), these institutions began to develop and apply different marketing strategies (Kotler, 1979), primarily for the purposes of *gaining a competitive advantage* and increasing their *market share* in the national and international markets. One of the most significant marketing strategies that enable the achievement of these goals is the positioning strategy. It is the subject matter of this study. After a brief comment on the specifics of the positioning strategy in the context of higher education (section entitled *Theoretical Basis of Research*), this paper provides an analysis of the bases on which the positioning strategies of the higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia are established. The content of Internet presentations (websites) of all accredited<sup>2</sup> higher education institutions were analyzed in order to determine which features are emphasized to indicate superiority over other institutions (primarily) to potential students. These characteristics have been treated as implicit/explicit competitive advantages, i.e. the bases on which positioning strategies are founded. The final part of the paper contains concluding remarks and guidelines for future research.

#### *THEORETICAL BASIS OF RESEARCH: POSITIONING OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS*

Positioning is defined as a strategy oriented toward creating and maintaining a more favorable position compared to the competition by creating a recognizable and more convenient image of the organization and its role in the economy and society (Станковић & Ђукић, 2014, p. 237). In other words, positioning is “the process of designing an image and value so that customers within the target market understand what the organization or brand stands for in relation to the competition” (Wilson & Gilligan 2002, p. 302). These definitions lead to the conclusion that positioning is primarily focused on the competition and consumers – the goal is for consumers to perceive the organization and its offer as different from and superior to other organizations and their offers. Communication processes in which the emphasis is on the components that distinguish the organization from its competitors are very important for positioning strategy. In the business sector, *special features of the company offer*, the advantages and opportunities to solve specific customer problems, or characteristics that distinguish it in relation to the offers of other companies are most often highlighted as the bases for positioning. Products and services can be positioned on the basis of prices, value (relationship between quality and price), technology, marketing channels, additional

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<sup>2</sup> According to the *Guide through Accredited Study Programs in the Institutions of Higher Education in Serbia* (Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance, 2015)

services, image, and the offer intended for a particular category of consumers or for a particular situation of use (the so-called special occasions), or by combining several bases (Станковић & Ђукић, 2013).

Like other organizations, higher education institutions also have to identify specific aspects around which they will be positioned (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009, p. 60) in current highly competitive higher education market (Marginson, 2004). The idea of positioning in such context was presented in the mid-1970s by Hirsch (1976), who argued that, in the eyes of the students, their parents, and employers, some institutions (and the diplomas awarded after completion of studies there) provide better social status and opportunities in relation to other higher education institutions. However, since the higher education sector is characterized by high levels of regulation and uniformity, the creation of a distinctive image is very difficult, and so is the development of positioning strategy of higher education institutions (Niculescu, 2009). Temple and Shattock (2007, p. 81) state that “most universities are actually doing (or they say they are) very like most other universities [...] and base their positioning on a mix of elements such as “excellence”, “quality”, “achievement” – none remotely unique”. Therefore, it is considered that the marketing communication activities and tools, and advertising appeals of higher education institutions are mostly based on the same elements, which makes all the institutions essentially look the same in the minds of potential students and the general public.

Instead of emphasizing the same or similar characteristics, it is suggested that higher education institutions should base their positioning and the consequent marketing communication on unique or specific physical elements of their offer, but also on the intangible elements such as reputation (Price et al., 2003) or specific added value they offer to students (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). These recommendations are based on the belief that awareness of the motives that drive students to opt for certain institutions and educational programs enables the definition of potential bases for the development of positioning strategy (Maringe, 2005). The research results indicate that *the personnel and the physical environment* (Nguyen & Le Blanc, 2001), as well as the *reputation* of the institution<sup>3</sup>, and the study program (James, Baldwin & McInnis, 1999; Temple & Shattock, 2007), are the factors that decisively influence the decision making of students regarding their choice of a higher education institution. These, as well as other influential factors, enable the definition of the bases for positioning.

One study (Medina & Duffy, 1998) identified five main dimensions on which a higher education institution positioning may be based:

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<sup>3</sup> Reputation of a higher education institution is often regarded as the essential basis because it represents “the core of the institution and what it actually sells” (Temple & Shattock, 2007). The favorable reputation allows constant attraction of new (Oplatka, 2002) and retention of the existing (Nguyen & Le Blanc, 2001) students.

- *the learning environment* (including the personnel and the physical environment – rooms and physical resources, i.e. equipment),
- *reputation of the institution* (including the awareness of the brand, i.e. name of the institution, its achievements, and high standards of education),
- *opportunities for graduates* (related to employment, expected salary, and opinion of employers on the graduates of a particular higher education institution),
- *image of the destination* (including political stability, security, and hospitality), and
- aspects related to *the possibilities of integration* of students in the social environment (including religious freedom and cultural diversity).

The last two dimensions are particularly important for the positioning of higher education institutions in the international market (see e.g. Маричић, 1991) made up of potential students from abroad. The research presented in this study, however, pertains primarily to the positioning of institutions in the national (domestic) higher education market. Nevertheless, in the analysis of positioning in the national market, the factor of micro-location (including the accessibility of the institution in terms of transport infrastructure, etc.) can be considered instead of the destination image. Possibilities of integration of students in the social environment can also be viewed at the micro-level, in terms of interculturality (cultural diversity) of the academic and the local communities.

Starting from these considerations, we define the basis of empirical research presented below. The principal research question is formulated as follows:

- What are the bases of positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia?

Additional research questions emerged from the principal one:

- *Do higher education institutions mainly emphasize the same/similar features as their competitive advantages?* (Objective: to check the thesis proposed by Temple & Shattock (2007))
- *Which dimensions are used as the bases for positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia?* (Starting from the categorization proposed by Medina & Duffy (1998))
- *Which of these dimensions have been used in practice the most and which the least?*
- *Are there any dimensions of positioning in this categorization that are not used in the Republic of Serbia?*
- *Is it possible to identify some other dimensions that are used in practice in the Republic of Serbia, but which are absent from the above categorization?*

**RESEARCH OF THE BASES FOR POSITIONING OF HIGHER  
EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN SERBIA**

*Research Description*

**The subject, aim and objectives of research.** *The subject* of this research includes the characteristics that higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia implicitly and explicitly highlight in the communication directed to potential students and the general public. *The aim* of the research is to determine whether there are differences in the bases on which the positioning strategies of higher education institutions are founded. *The objectives* are the following:

1. Identification of characteristics that higher education institutions generally highlight as their implicit/explicit advantages over other institutions, or, in the context of the marketing of higher education institutions – identification of the most frequently emphasized *competitive advantages*;

2. Highlighting the potential competitive advantages that are theoretically conceptualized, but are not (sufficiently) used in the practice of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia.

This research encompasses **all accredited<sup>4</sup> higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia**, including: 1) *faculties*, which have the status of legal entities, and 2) *integrated universities*, if their constituent faculties are without the status of independent legal entities.<sup>5</sup> The preliminary list of accredited higher education institutions is defined on the basis of:

1. *List of accredited faculties and universities by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia* (Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance) in 2014 (Министарство просвете, науке и технолошког развоја РС, 2014), and

2. Official information presented on the websites of accredited universities in the Republic of Serbia about the faculties that are their constituent parts.

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<sup>4</sup> Higher education institutions where teaching is carried out in the framework of accredited study programs (at least one program is accredited)

<sup>5</sup> The research covers higher education institutions as a whole and not separate departments or study programs, because positioning at the institutional level is the dominant form of this strategy in practice. The results of the PhD study of A. Popović (data collected in the period between December 2014 and March 2015) indicate that the strategies of positioning and marketing communication are designed and implemented for the level of the entire higher education institution – either a faculty or an integrated university. Promotion is performed by means of a single prospectus/brochure or a similar printed promotional medium, on social networks, via videos, through presentations in secondary schools, education fairs, and the like. Only a few cases (5 out of 131 institutions, departments, or study programs) are presented in a separate means of communication.

The list of accredited institutions was then redefined in accordance with the data from the most recent *Guide through Accredited Study Programs in the Institutions of Higher Education in Serbia*, dated May 8, 2015 (Комисија за акредитацију и проверу квалитета, 2015). The final number of accredited higher education institutions with the status of a legal entity is **131**<sup>6</sup>, of which 87 institutions are founded and 54 are not founded by the Republic of Serbia.

**Sources and methods of data collection.** In order to identify the bases of positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia, we analyzed their message targeting via the Internet, potential students, and other groups of the general public. We decided to analyze the content of websites for several reasons:

1. All higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia have the obligation to communicate with interested groups through their websites.<sup>7</sup> All institutions of our designated population run websites whose content is updated fairly regularly.<sup>8</sup>

2. The analysis of other means and forms of communication (apart from the websites) would cause significant limitations. The vast majority of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia are not promoted in the mass media, and even when they are, they are advertised on local television and radio stations and in local printed media, which makes it

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<sup>6</sup> In this research, universities founded by the state (University of Belgrade, University of Niš, University of Kragujevac, University of Novi Sad, and University of Priština) were not included in the population, although they represent higher education institutions where teaching is organized within the accredited study programs (interdisciplinary programs or programs within the framework of research projects). Instead, faculties that are their constituent parts (with the status of separate legal entities) were analyzed. The analysis at the level of the universities founded by the state was carried out only in the case of the State University of Novi Pazar, which is the only integrated university of this type.

We excluded the following cases from the population: the higher education institutions that belong to the accredited universities (whose founder is not the state) but are not accredited themselves, or are in the process of accreditation, or do not have the status of a legal entity.

<sup>7</sup> This is confirmed by the fact that, according to the *Rules of standards for self-evaluation and quality assessment of higher education institutions* (Национални савет за високо образовање, 2006), these institutions are obliged to provide indicators and annexes relating to the Standard 14 – *Systematic monitoring and periodic quality checks*. Annex 1 of the Standard 14 is entitled “*The information presented on the higher education institution website related to the activities that provide systematic monitoring and periodic quality checks aimed at maintaining quality improvement of the higher education institution*”.

<sup>8</sup> Regarding this matter, 108 institutions from the population have their own websites, while 23 institutions are presented on separate pages within the websites of the universities to which they belong (three faculties of the Megatrend University, two faculties of the Alfa University, all three faculties of the Metropolitan University, six faculties of the Singidunum University, and nine faculties of the Educons University).



difficult for researchers to analyze their messages. The same applies to the potential analysis of other media with limited range (e.g. billboards). Dissemination of printed promotional materials (information leaflets, booklets, brochures, etc.) is generally performed at special events (“Open Doors Days”, education fairs, presentations of higher education institutions to secondary school students, etc.). However, most of these materials exist in digital form on the websites of higher education institutions, which is an additional argument for our decision to analyze the content of Internet presentations.

The content of the websites was analyzed in order to identify explicit and implicit competitive advantages, i.e. characteristics that higher education institutions highlight as their advantages. Explicitly defined competitive advantages were searched for in the segments with information aimed at prospective students. We analyzed the content stating the facts that might persuade this target group to opt for a particular higher education institution. Typical examples of such content are:

1. Web pages that are related to the call for enrollment in the first year of study at a specific faculty/university (for example: *Why should you enroll at this faculty?*; *Ten reasons to study at this faculty*; *Join this faculty yourself*, etc.);

2. Information booklets, brochures, and other promotional material (digital versions), including video presentations (videos), which invite prospective students to enroll at a specific faculty/university and which directly emphasize benefits/advantages with regard to the enrollment and studies at a particular higher education institution. Videos of this type are of promotional character and usually have titles like “Promo Film”, “Advertising Video”, and “Admissions 2015/16”.

In addition, the content of websites that were assumed to contain implicitly specified competitive advantages was also analyzed. Typical examples of such content are:

1. Web pages with information about the institution (e.g. pages with the following headlines: *About the Faculty/University*, *History of the Institution*, *Mission/Vision/Objectives of the Institution*, *Our Management Philosophy*, *The Word of the Rector/Dean/Manager/Owner*);

2. Digital versions of publications containing information about the institution, including video presentations (of informative character); These publications and video materials usually have the name of the institution as a title, or their title refers to the specific purpose for which they were created (e.g. “50 years of existence of our institution”, etc.) and they contain basic information about the institution, its history, and the like.

**Research period.** Data collection for research purposes began in early January 2015 and lasted until mid-May 2015. This is based on the assumption that the data about the call for admission to the first year of studies (for the academic year 2015/16) will be placed on the websites of

higher education institutions during that period, bearing in mind that enrollment begins in June in most higher education institutions. This created the necessary basis for the research of elements and tools of marketing communication aimed at potential students, because the assumption is that the implicit/explicit competitive advantages of the institution and study programs will be highlighted exactly in these means of communication.

#### *Analysis of Research Results*

The data collected in this study should provide the basis for the answer to the main research question: *On which bases are positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia founded?* Since the main objective of the research is descriptive, research results will be presented by use of methods of descriptive statistics. Since the survey covers the entire population of accredited higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia, there is no need to apply inferential statistics and statistical tests in this paper.

***Implicit and explicit highlighting of competitive advantages.*** In the period the research was conducted, the majority (73 institutions or **56%**) of accredited higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia displayed explicitly highlighted competitive advantages on their websites. An interesting finding is that the benefits are explicitly mentioned not only in textual and other content intended for *prospective students* but, even more often, in the content intended for the public. Other institutions (58, or 44% of the population) highlight competitive advantages on their websites implicitly, on a regular basis, in the content intended for the general public. A more detailed review is given in Table 1.

***The bases for positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia.*** After a detailed preliminary analysis of the content of websites of all the analyzed higher education institutions, we found that the characteristics that they referred to as the implicit/explicit competitive advantages can be classified into seven categories. Most of these characteristics can be classified into the categories identified by Medina and Duffy (Medina & Duffy, 1998):

- *learning environment;*
- *reputation of the institution;*
- *opportunities for graduates;*
- *image of the destination* – which in this case includes micro-location factors;
- *possibilities for the integration of students* – i.e. cultural diversity of the university and local environment.

Table 1. Manner of presenting competitive advantages on websites and location of content in which they are presented

Manner of presenting advantages	Explicit		Implicit	
	Sum	% of the total No. of HEIs	Sum	% of the total No. of HEIs
Location of the content				
Content by which <i>prospective students</i> are targeted	24	18%	/	/
Web pages related to student enrolment, e.g. "Why to enroll at this institution/program"	9	7%	/	/
Guide/booklet/brochure for prospective students – e-version	7	5%	/	/
Video for prospective students ( <i>promotional video</i> )	8	6%	/	/
Content by which <i>general public</i> is targeted	49	37%	58	44%
Main/home page	4	3%	7	5%
Web pages with information on the institution (e.g. "About the Faculty / General information / History of the institution", Institutional Mission/Vision/Goals/Values"	35	26.5%	29	22%
Web pages "Word of the Dean/Rector/Manager/Owner"	10	7.5%	22	17%
<i>Total</i>	73	56%	58	44%

However, some characteristics that have often been shown on the websites could not be classified into the above categories, so we added two new ones:

- *opportunities for students during studies* – especially possibilities related to: financial benefits (such as tuition-free studies for the best students at the institutions whose founder is not the state) and scholarships; student mobility and student life;
- *(special) benefits during enrollment* – free preparatory classes, free registration, etc.

After the categories were defined, all the characteristics mentioned on the websites of higher education institutions were categorized and ranked according to their frequency (Table 2).

The obtained data showed that *the majority of higher education institutions based their positioning strategies on a combination of elements*. Generally, ***the possibilities that individuals are entitled to after graduation*** from a particular institution (in particular, employment opportunities) are most frequently emphasized. Positioning is very often based on *the reputation of the institution*, as well. On the other hand, positioning of higher

education institutions is least often based on *destination image* and *opportunities for the integration of students in the social environment*.

*Table 2. Bases for the positioning of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia (ranked according to frequency of use)*

Categories of competitive advantages	All institutions	
	Sum	%
1. <i>Opportunities for graduates</i>	114	87.02%
2. <i>Institutional reputation</i>	104	79.39%
3. <i>Opportunities during studies</i>	90	68.70%
4. <i>Learning environment</i>	72	54.96%
5. <i>Enrollment-related opportunities</i>	23	17.56%
6. <i>Destination images</i>	6	4.58%
7. <i>Social integration – cultural diversity</i>	6	4.58%

Some additional analyses were also performed to determine whether there is a difference in the frequency of using bases for positioning at higher education institutions: 1) founded by the state, and 2) not founded by the state (table 3).

*Table 3. Bases for the positioning of different types of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia (criterion: institution founder)*

Categories of competitive advantages	Institutions founded by the state		Institutions not founded by the state	
	Sum	%	Sum	%
	1. <i>Learning environment</i>	44	33.59%	28
2. <i>Institutional reputation</i>	76	58.02%	28	21.37%
3. <i>Opportunities for graduates</i>	73	55.73%	41	31.30%
4. <i>Destination image</i>	3	2.29%	3	2.29%
5. <i>Social integration – cultural diversity</i>	3	2.29%	3	2.29%
6. <i>Opportunities during studies</i>	46	35.11%	44	33.59%
7. <i>Enrollment-related opportunities</i>	4	3.05%	19	14.50%
<i>Total</i>	87	100%	54	100%

The analysis of these data led to some interesting conclusions: 1) the highest number of *higher education institutions founded by the state* based their positioning strategies on *reputation* and 2) the largest number of *higher education institutions whose founder is not the state* based positioning strategies on highlighting the *opportunities they provide to students during their studies*. This analysis also showed that, regardless of the institution type, positioning strategies are least often based on the image of the destination and on the possibilities for integrating students in the social environment.

The following level of analysis pertains to the investigation of possible differences in the frequency of using bases for positioning among the higher education institutions belonging to different scientific fields: 1) humanities and social sciences (HS); 2) technical and technological sciences (TT); 3) natural sciences and mathematics (NM), 4) medical sciences (MS), and 5) arts (A).<sup>9</sup> The data are presented in Table 4.

*Table 4. Bases for the positioning of different types of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia (criterion: scientific field that the institution belongs to)*

Categories of competitive advantages	1. HS		2. TT		3. NM		4. A		5. MS	
	Sum	%	Sum	%	Sum	%	Sum	%	Sum	%
1. Learning environment	39	66.10%	15	44.12	6	50%	6	50%	4	36.36%
2. Institutional reputation	45	76.27%	29	85.29	9	75%	10	83.33%	9	81.82%
3. Opportunities for graduates	54	91.53%	31	91.18	8	66.67%	10	83.33%	9	81.82%
4. Destination image	4	6.78%	2	5.88	0	/	0	/	0	/
5. Social integration	3	5.08%	3	8.82	0	/	0	/	0	/
6. Opportunities during studies	51	86.44%	20	58.82	6	50%	6	50%	5	45.45%
7. Enrollment-related opportunities	12	20.34%	5	14.71	2	16.67%	1	8.33%	2	18.18%
Total	60	100%	34	100%	12	100%	12	100%	11	100%

Proceeding from this analysis, we can conclude that there is no difference in the bases for positioning strategies of higher education institutions belonging to various scientific fields, either. In fact, most of the institutions base their positioning on the opportunities for graduates, with the following exceptions:

1. the majority of institutions (9 out of 12) in the field of natural sciences and mathematics base positioning on the reputation of the institution;

2. the majority of institutions in the field of arts and medical sciences base positioning on the combination of elements related to the reputation of the institution and opportunities for graduates.

<sup>9</sup> The categorization is taken from the *Guide through Accredited Study Programs in the Higher Education Institutions in Serbia* (Komисија за акредитацију и проверу квалитета, 2015). The field of interdisciplinary studies has been omitted because the population does not include institutions where the study programs of this type are dominant.

### CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

We conceived the conclusions as answers to the research questions and research objectives set at the beginning of the paper. At the same time, we proposed the directions of future research, as well.

*Positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia are mostly founded on the same bases.* Therefore, unique competitive advantages are rarely emphasized in the information that is forwarded to potential students and the public. Highlighting of these same characteristics, which most institutions consider their “distinctive” advantages, may result in all institutions looking alike in the eyes of students and the public.

*Positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia are usually based on opportunities offered to students after graduation (primarily employment opportunities, but presented in very general terms) and on the reputation of the institution.* Regarding this matter, there is no difference in the frequency of using different characteristics as the bases for positioning strategies of higher education institutions involved in different scientific fields. Regarding the categorization according to the founder as the criterion, there is a difference: higher education institutions founded by the state emphasize their *reputation* as the most important competitive advantage; institutions whose founder is not the state emphasize *opportunities provided to the students during the study period*.

*These facts suggest the need for further research of positioning, image, and reputation of institutions from the perspective of students and the general public. In addition, there is a need to investigate the decision making about the elements on which positioning is based. It is necessary to examine whether persons responsible for managing the activities of higher education institutions conduct a systematic research to detect the factors on the basis of which students choose the institution and study program, and whether these factors are used as bases for positioning.*

*Location (image of the destination) and aspects related to the integration of students in the social environment are very rarely highlighted as competitive advantages of the higher education institution.* This may be due to the fact that higher education institutions from the Republic of Serbia most frequently target potential students from within the national borders and rarely from abroad. *This assumption needs to be explored in more detail.*

An additional conclusion derived from this research is the fact that higher education institutions often highlight advantages in the content that are oriented toward the general public and not directly toward potential students, to whom they should primarily be communicated. Therefore, it is necessary to examine whether potential students find communication strategies adequate, in particular – whether they receive the necessary information in suitable ways.

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## СТРАТЕГИЈЕ ПОЗИЦИОНИРАЊА ВИСОКОШКОЛСКИХ УСТАНОВА У РЕПУБЛИЦИ СРБИЈИ

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### Резиме

Савремено тржиште високошколског образовања је изузетно конкурентно. Како би их привукле и задржале, високошколске установе морају да укажу студентима на своје предности, карактеристике које их издвајају од других сличних установа. Резултати досадашњих истраживања вршених у иностранству, показују, међутим, да менаџери високошколских установа заправо стално истичу сличне карактеристике, тако да правог диференцирања и нема. Због тога су, у очима потенцијалних будућих студената и јавности, све високошколске установе сличне. У претходним студијама је идентификовано пет врста конкурентских предности на којима се базирају стратегије позиционирања ових установа: окружење у коме се одвија учење, репутација установе, могућности које се пружају дипломираним студентима, имиџ дестинације и могућности интеграције студената у друштвену средину. Циљ аутора овог рада је био да спроведу својеврсно репликативно истраживање (прво ове врсте у нашој земљи) и провере да ли и у Републици Србији високошколске установе спроводе међусобно сличне стратегије позиционирања и да ли су те стратегије засноване на конкурентским предностима из наведених група. Коришћена методологија подразумева анализу садржаја веб презентација акредитованих високошколских установа у Републици Србији. Подаци су прикупљани у периоду јануар-мај 2015. године.

Резултати истраживања указују на то да више од половине високошколских установа из Републике Србије експлицитно истиче конкурентске предности на својим веб сајтовима и то не само у садржајима намењеним потенцијалним студентима већ, чак и чешће, у садржајима намењеним генералној јавности. Притом су присутне карактеристике које спадају у све наведене групе. Међутим, након прелиминарне анализе, утврђено је да се користе и неке друге основе за позиционирање – могућности које се пружају студентима током студирања и приликом уписа. Сем тога, уместо имиџа дестинације се користе фактори микролокације, а уместо могућности за интеграцију у друштвено окружење истиче се мултикултуралност универзитетске и локалне заједнице. Све анализиране високошколске установе зајимички примењују стратегије позиционирања на комбинацији елемената, а најчешће су коришћени елементи који се односе на могућности које се пружају студентима након дипломирања и репутацији установе. Нема разлика у стратегијама позиционирања које примењују установе које припадају различитим научним пољима. Разлика, међутим, постоји када је реч о установама чији је оснивач република и оних чији оснивач није република. „Државне” високошколске установе најчешће истичу своју репутацију као водећу конкурентску предност, а „приватне” истичу могућности које се пружају студентима током студирања. Међутим, општи је закључак да резултати ове студије потврђују налазе претходних студија – да се високошколске установе позиционирају на сличне начине и да се недовољно фокусирају на изградњу и комуницирање онога што их заиста чини јединственим.