# Market Development by Utilizing Alumni Practices

Case: The Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti University of Applied Sciences Ltd

Lahti University of Applied Sciences Ltd
Degree Programme in International Business

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                        Alumni Practices
                        The Degree Programme in
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ABSTRACT

Recently, education has become a service product which requires efficient marketing operations. Among higher education institutions the competition has increased significantly, and therefore they need to come up with creative ways to stand out from the crowd with their marketing strategies.

The objective of this research is to gain more understanding about the current marketing practices of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti University of Applied Sciences and to develop marketing of study program by utilizing alumni and their experiences and stories about their career paths.

In the study the research approach will be deductive and the qualitative research methods will be utilized. The collected data is from both secondary and primary sources. The secondary sources consist of literature and online sources. The primary source of data includes interviews of the personnel of the Lahti University of Applied Sciences and of the graduated students of the Degree Programme in International Business.

The theories which will be examined in the study, are marketing of intangible products, higher education marketing and storytelling as a marketing tool for marketing alumni experiences. Also the research will present an analysis of the results of the interviews and a development plan based on the theories and the interviews.

According to the findings of the research, the idea of utilizing alumni practices in marketing gained support. Also the results showed that alumni and their stories and experiences would be an efficient tool for market differentiation as long as the contact with alumni is maintained and the alumni are inspired to join the marketing activities after graduation.

Key words: Alumni practices, education marketing, intangible marketing, market development, service marketing, storytelling

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# 1  INTRODUCTION

The first part of the thesis will be an introduction, where the background of the study will be introduced. In addition, the objectives of the thesis and the research questions will be defined. After that there will be an introduction to the theoretical framework, research methodology and data collection methods used in this research. Finally, the thesis structure will be presented.

## 1.1  Research Background

The world is full of different kinds of opportunities for higher education, from which young adults are able to choose where they want to study. Solely in Finland, there are 14 universities and 24 universities of applied sciences (minedu.fi). Every year, when new students apply for degree places, it creates a large competition for universities, who try to tempt as many new students as possible. All these universities need to have an effective and attractive marketing strategy, which will stand out from the crowd and attract as many potential future students as possible. As stated by Schmidt (1991, 30.) the students should be viewed both as consumers of the study programs and as the product of the study programs.

In fact, higher education should be seen as an intangible product, which needs to be marketed like any other product. There are challenges in marketing intangible products, because there is no visible evidence of the actual product for potential customers to evaluate. (Anctil 2008, 31-32.)

In marketing intangible products, such as higher education, there needs to be an implementation of marketing methods which attract customers, without the possibility of testing the product physically. In order to convince potential new students, the universities could implement visible evidence of their success, for example, alumni. By utilizing the experiences and stories of the alumni, it is possible to actualize the higher education institute to the potential customers, in other words new students. Stories are a great marketing method, because they have a way of appealing to

customers' emotions and that way attracting customers (Alasalmi 2015, 7-8).

As a student of Lahti University of Applied Sciences (Lahti UAS) the author thinks that marketing of universities has a high impact on the choices of young adults who are looking for a suitable university. That is why the universities need to invest in their marketing and focus on finding ways to stand out from the other universities and their marketing. When searching for the right university, the branding of different universities definitely stuck to the author's mind. However, one thing that was missing, was experiences of already graduated students. That is why the author believes that experiences of the alumni and stories of their success could bring new point of view to the marketing of universities. The author believes that when applying to university, many students would want to find out, what kind of possibilities for a future there actually are for those students who have already graduated.

This information could be advantageous for the faculty itself because the faculty could utilize this information to develop the study program to be even more beneficial for students and to find new aspects to their marketing plan. In addition, since the author studies in the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS, there is a personal interest to find out, what benefits the graduated students actually had from the internationality aspect of the study program in the business world.

This topic is very current at the moment due to changes in the policies concerning universities. Since the beginning of 2016, universities are able to set tuition fees for all students coming from outside the EU (minedu.fi). Also it is decided that from August 2017 onwards, all universities will have a minimum annual tuition fee of 1500 € for non-EU students (studyinfinland.fi). Also, in the case of Lahti UAS, it has been decided that the annual tuition fee is going to be 7900 € for the Bachelor's degree and 8900 € for the Master's degree for non-EU students (lamk.fi). This really changes the situation especially for international study programs, because

a remarkable part of the students in those programs is coming from outside EU, for example from Vietnam, China and Russia (Viljanen 2016).

Previously one of the main inducements to studying in Finland for international students has been a possibility for free higher education. Since the change in the situation, Finnish universities need to come up with new effective and attractive ways to market international study programs for international students.

A good marketing strategy for universities should include positive and supportive experiences and also success stories from alumni. It would be interesting to see, whether these experiences actually have a positive impact to people and whether they are able to improve the brand of the universities. Therefore, the topic of this research is about market development by utilizing the experiences of alumni of Degree Programme of International Business at Lahti UAS. As a support for the topic of the thesis, this thesis will focus on studying about marketing higher education as an intangible product. Also one of the useful marketing methods, storytelling, was chosen to be introduced in detail as an example on what could be done for the marketing of the study program along with other activities.

## 1.2   Thesis Objectives, Research Questions and Limitations

The objective of the thesis is to develop a deeper understanding of exploiting alumni practices in marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS. One objective is also to find ways to strengthen the alumni network and increase their interest to join the alumni activities and that way to bring content to the marketing plan. In addition, other supporting goals of the thesis are to research marketing of intangible products and marketing practices of higher education institutions and also to get familiar with one of the possible marketing methods, storytelling. All in all, this thesis will concentrate on developing the marketing of the Degree Programme of International Business in Lahti UAS by utilization of alumni experiences.

When conducting a research, it is crucial to define research questions in order to explain the main idea and focus of the research. In the thesis the main research question is:

- **How alumni and their experiences and ideas could be utilized in the marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS?**

Also, sub questions for this research need to be defined in order to specify and ground the research topic. The sub questions in this thesis are:

- **How to market an intangible product?**
- **What are the main features of an efficient marketing strategy for higher education?**
- **How storytelling can be beneficial for marketing practices?**
- **How alumni practices are already utilized in the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS?**

As for the limitations of the thesis, the research is focusing only on the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS. Therefore, the research is not covering marketing of the whole Lahti UAS and all its study programs.

Also, the results of the thesis might be too specific to be applicable for other universities or study programs.

1.3   Theoretical Framework

This research will be based on marketing theories, which will create a foundation and a deeper understanding of the topic. The theories will be associated with the topic of the research and provide helpful knowledge for readers of this thesis in order for them to assimilate the whole topic and its background.

The theoretical part of this thesis will be formed from three parts, and together all these parts will create a consistent base, which underlays the topic of the thesis.

The first part of this research will analyse marketing of intangible products. This part will be the first in the theory section, because the nature of intangible products and their marketing is crucial to understand before studying more about marketing of a study program by utilizing alumni stories.

Then the next theory chapter will get the readers acquainted with the concept of marketing higher education in general. This part is important to absorb in order to be able to understand and develop marketing of a higher education institution, in this case, the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS.

In the thesis, the final part of the theory will be about storytelling as a chosen marketing tool, which operates as an example of possible ways to utilize alumni in marketing. This part is crucial for the thesis, because it creates understanding of the main functions of storytelling. This will be helpful for the implementation of the alumni experiences in this study.

1.4   Research Methodology and Data Collection

When planning a study, it is important to determine a proper research methodology for implementation of the study. The right kind of research approach, research methods and data collection methods need to be defined. The figure below presents the research approach, research methods and data collection methods which are utilized in the thesis.
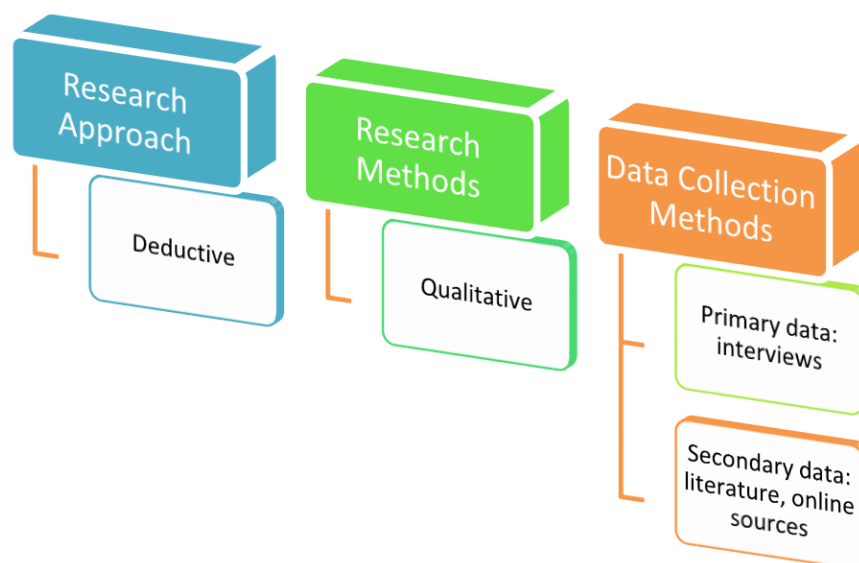
FIGURE 1. Research methodology overview

First of all, the right approach for the research needs to be defined. The approach can be either deductive or inductive. Deductive research is based on testing an already existing theory. Also, deductive research first starts from information that is more general and then continues to more specific and detailed information. In inductive research, the research is focused on creating a new theory from the results of the research. Inductive research proceeds from the more detailed information to more general ideas. When contemplating the type of this study, as seen in the figure above, in the thesis the deductive approach will be implemented. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 124.)

In addition, it is important to define whether the research is qualitative or quantitative. The key is to determine, which of the research methods will be more suitable for the nature of the research.

Qualitative research includes data, which is non-numeric data, or data, which is not quantified. It is a type of research where the focus is on understanding the subject and the reasons of it and finding out why and how. The data obtained for qualitative research can be for example interviews or other literary documents. (Saunders et al. 2009, 414-416.)

Quantitative research is focused on statistics, graphs, charts and figures and the research is based on mostly testing and facts. In quantitative research, the collected numeric data needs to be analysed carefully in order to be able to examine the topic and achieve research goals. (Saunders et al. 2009, 414-416.)

As the figure above shows, the qualitative research method is chosen for the thesis, because it suits the type of this study in the best way. It is the best method, because this study is based on data from few detailed interviews that approach the topic by few profound point of views instead of a vast amount of statistical information.

Collecting data is a very important part of conducting a research. The collected data enables the research to be implemented and it helps the researcher to find information and form an idea about the research topic. As seen in the figure avove, interviews will be the major data collection method. Also, literature and online sources will be exploited in collecting data for the theoretical part of the thesis.

The data of the empirical part of the thesis will be collected with semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews are conducted in a way, where the interview questions do not need to be strictly followed, but the interview will consist of few open themes related to the topic and the discussion will have a lot of room for free conversation about the topic (Saunders et al. 2009, 302). This interview method is suitable for this research, because it will be based on the detailed insights of few involved persons. The interviews for the thesis will be divided into two parts. In the first part, graduated students from the Degree Programme in International Business will be interviewed on their opinions over the marketing in general and over the exploitation of alumni experiences in marketing of the study program. In the second part of the interviews, the personnel of Lahti UAS will give insight about the current situation of marketing and alumni practices of the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS.

## 1.5   Thesis Structure

The thesis consists of two main parts which are the theoretical part and the empirical part. First, in the theoretical part the essential theories for the research are covered. Then the empirical part gets acquainted with the results received from the interviews and a development plan for marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business will be created. After that a conclusion and a summary will conclude the thesis. The whole structure of the thesis is presented in the figure below.
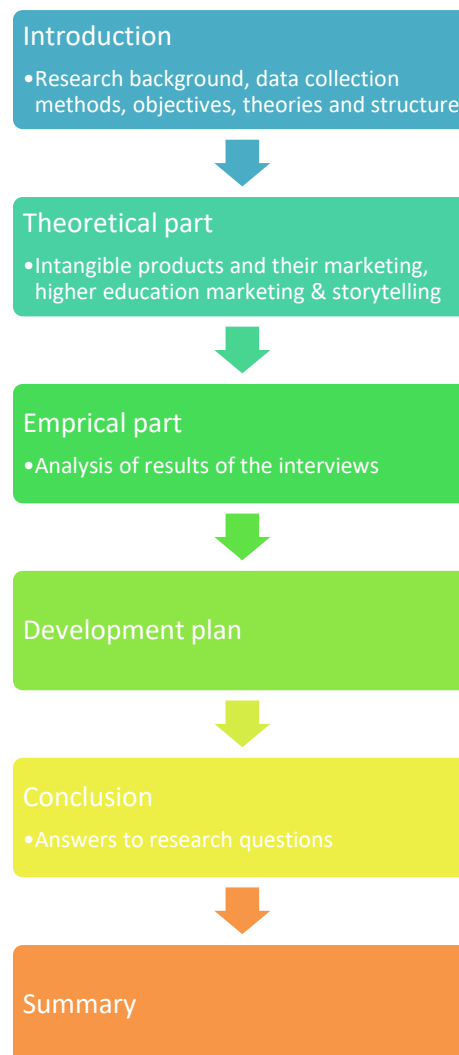
FIGURE 2. Structure of the thesis

The main points of each chapter of the thesis which were presented in the figure above will be now introduced in more detail. First, the thesis starts with an introduction, which underlies the thesis and its topics for readers.

The introduction provides background information about the topic, research objectives, questions and limitations. It also introduces different theories, which will be researched in the thesis. Then the research methodology and data collection methods used in the thesis will be presented. Finally, the introduction will explain the whole structure of the thesis in detail.

Then in the theory part of the thesis, the theories will be examined. First theory chapter will be about intangible products and their marketing practices. This chapter will help the reader to understand the intangible nature of higher education and its impact on the marketing strategy better. Next theory chapter will go deeper into the marketing of higher education and tell the readers all its features and functions. Then the final theory chapter will be about storytelling, which was chosen to this research as one of the important marketing methods to understand in order to be able to utilize the alumni experiences in the marketing practices of Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS in the empirical part of this thesis.

After the theoretical part, the thesis will proceed with the empirical part, where the objective is to develop marketing of Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS by utilizing alumni experiences. In the empirical part the results received from the interviews will be presented and after that a development plan for marketing of the study program based on the results will be created. Then finally, there will be a conclusion of the research made, where the research questions are answered. The thesis will end with a summary of all topics, which were featured in this thesis.

2    MARKETING THE INTANGIBLE

In order to examine the marketing practices of higher education institutions more closely, first it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the concept of marketing intangible products. That is because higher education is one great example of a product which is intangible. This chapter will go deeper to the concept of intangible products and marketing of that type of products. This chapter will get familiar with the concept from the point of view of services and their marketing, because services are excellent examples of intangible products.

Intangible products are products, which do not have a physical form. Intangible products cannot be touched, evaluated or tried out. For example, services are intangible. When marketing intangible products, the key is to figure out how to convince customers from the value of the product beforehand, even though the customer is not able to see it physically. (Anctil 2008, 31-32.)

When comparing marketing of intangible products to tangible products, marketing of intangible products can be seen as marketing promises. These promises need to be accompanied with metaphors and images which will strengthen the customers' idea of the product and the value which the product will provide to the customer.  This way the intangible products become more tangible to customers. The impression that customers receive from the products, matters. (Levitt 1981, 38-39.)

2.1    Services Marketing

A good way to start studying intangible marketing is to study the key points of services marketing, because overall intangible products are mainly services.

First, a service can be defined as an operation which has more or less an intangible nature. Services usually include contact between customers and service providers as an essential feature of the whole service process. As

with regular products, services do not include transfer of ownership due to their intangible nature. (McDonald, Frow & Payne 2011, 27.)

The economy is divided into three economic sectors which are primary sector, secondary sector and tertiary sector. The primary sector consists of agriculture, the secondary sector consists of manufacturing and the tertiary sector consists of services. (McDonald et al. 2011, 1.) Previously the primary and secondary sectors have been the largest and the most contributing sectors. However, in recent times due to the changes in the economy, the tertiary sector which is the service sector, has grown fast and nowadays it is the largest sector in the whole economy. (Kotler, Armstrong, Harris & Piercy 2013, 251.) A phenomenon of recent decades is the decrease of the traditional manufacturing industries. The growth of the service sector is especially visible in western countries, where service organizations are boosting the economic growth substantially. (McDonald et al. 2011, 1.)

### 2.1.1 Characteristics of a Service

There is a large variety of different kinds of service industries in the economy. The types of service industries can be divided into four categories as seen in the figure below.

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                    Different service
                        industries
         ┌──────────────┬──────┴───────┬──────────────┐
    Government      Private non-       Business       Professional
                       profit        organizations      services
                   organizations
         │              │                 │                │
    Hospitals,       Museums,        Banks, airlines,   Legal services,
  schools, police   foundations,       retailers         accounting,
     services       universities                        architecture
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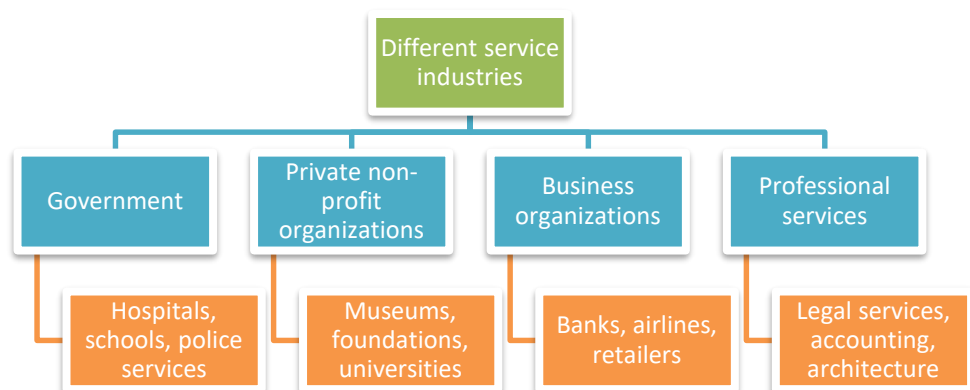
FIGURE 3. Different types of service industries (Kotler et al. 2013, 251; McDonald et al. 2011, 27)

All in all, the figure above explains all of the types of different service industries. In this chapter the types will be gone through in more detail. First, there are services which are provided by the government. These services are for example hospitals, schools and police services. Also, one type of different services are private non-profit organizations, such as different foundations, universities and museums. Finally, the last category is different business organizations which seek profit from their operations. There is a huge variety of different service firms, but just to mention few of them, banks, airlines, consulting firms and retailers are good examples of such firms. (Kotler et al. 2013, 251.) According to McDonald et al. (2011, 27) also professional services can be seen as one type of services. Professional services include for example legal services, accounting, architecture and many others.

There are multiple characteristics, from which it is possible to recognize a service. One main characteristic which is also the topic of this theory part, is the intangibility of services. Services are intangible, because it is not possible to actually see, feel or evaluate them before buying them. Regarding the intangibility of the services, one unique feature compared to the tangible products is that intangible services are purchased and sold before the actual production and consumption of the product. (Kotler et al. 2013, 252.) Because intangible products are not possible to be tested beforehand, potential customers need to rely on their perception of the product and to presume in advance what kind of value they are going to receive from purchasing the product. For example, potential customers can look information about the service and learn from other customers' reviews before the purchase. These types of actions help customers to form an idea of the intangible product beforehand. (Levitt 1981, 39-41.) As mentioned in the book "The principles of marketing" (Kotler et al. 2013, 252), customers are searching for signals from the intangible products in advance in order to get a general idea and to be assured from the quality of the product. These signals can be observations which the customers have upfront about the things they can explore, such as the price, location and people behind the service. In order to convince the potential

customers about the quality of the product, the marketers of the product need to come up with ways to bring out the tangible features of the intangible products as an evidence of the product (Anctil 2008, 31-32). However, even though intangibility is one of the main characteristics of services, the level of intangibility varies a lot among different services. Some services have an intangible nature, for example therapy or other counselling sessions. On the other hand, some services may have more or less tangible features, such as hairdressers, who leave a physical evidence of their services to a customer in a form of a new hairdo. Overall, every service is different from others when measured by their level of intangibility and that is why not all services can be comprised with only one definition. (McDonald et al., 28.)

Another characteristic of services is their perishability. That means that the services are type of products which actually are not possible to be stored and to be put away for postponed usage (Kotler et al. 2013, 253). As Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry (1985, 34) describe in their article "Problems and Strategies in Service Marketing", services can be seen as sort of performances by their nature, and that is why they are not able to be saved for later, in other words, placed in storage. The perishability of services may cause problems in meeting of supply and demand. In supply and demand, there often occurs fluctuations and also supply and demand may not always be in balance. Sometimes in services there might occur possible situations where there is excessive amount of demand. Then on the other hand, there are situations where the amount of demand is very little. It is a challenge for service firms to plan their services in a way that supply and demand comport with each other in the most ideal way. An example of this kind of service planning is for example off season sales and on the other hand providing extra equipment for services in rush hours. (Kotler et al. 2013, 253.)

One key characteristic which separates services from actual physical goods, is inseparability. Inseparability of the services means that it is not possible to distinguish the actual service from the provider of the service. In services, the production and consumption of the service happen at the

same time, differently than with tangible products. In services, the person who provides the service is a crucial part of the service and the presence of the customer is an inevitable part of the production. For example, it is not possible to organize a gym class for customers as a service, if the customers are not attending the actual production of the class. Both the provider and the receiver of the service have an influence to the quality of the service and it is crucial that the communication between both of them functions in the best way possible. (Kotler et al. 2013, 252.)

The final characteristic of services is variability. Variability of services means that it is not possible to have a strict standard quality with services, because the quality depends on many variable factors. To put it more simply, the quality of the service is dependable on how the service is organized and who is organizing the service. For example, the mood of the employee offering the service and other similar factors can impact the quality considerably. (Kotler et al. 2013, 253.) Even the quality of the same service may vary in different times. A problem that comes with the variability of the service is the question about how it is possible to offer stable quality for all customers every day regardless of the possible changes the service firm may encounter, for example with changing employees and other variable factors. (Zeithaml et al.1985, 34.)

Along with intangibility, there may also be exceptions with other characteristics what comes to different services. For example, usually services are perishable, but on the other hand, some services, such as concerts can be recorded and that way saved for later use, hence they do not fulfil the description of a perishable service. Also with inseparability, even though it is a remarkable feature of services, there are also services which do not require direct contact and participation with the customer. These types of services are for example different deliveries and transporting freight. Then finally, even though services usually have a high level of variability, there are services which are not variable at all. For example, a withdrawal of cash from ATM machine is a similar operation every time regardless of the customer, the time or the place. (McDonald et al. 2011, 27-28.)

### 2.1.2 Planning Process of Service Marketing

Because services have own special characteristics, they need own special strategies in marketing as well. It is crucial to create a good foundation to these marketing strategies by careful marketing planning. At the beginning of this part, the main features and steps of efficient marketing planning will be studied. In order for a service firm to become successful, they have to make precise plans for the future and set long-term goals to the company. It is very important to focus on long-term operations of the company and also on creating long-term relationships with customers, rather than maintaining huge success for only a short period of time. That is why planning the service and its marketing operations beforehand is necessary. When setting goals and objectives for the service and its marketing, the company needs to find right operations that support the objectives and their attainment. Also, the external factors are important to take into consideration while planning services marketing. The company's ability to foretell the situation about potential competitors and markets and to consider fluctuations in the economy will help them to plan their marketing operations to fit the current situation and the future ahead. (McDonald et al. 2011, 50-55.)

The whole process of service marketing planning may be very recursive. This means that in the process it is possible that some information which has been discovered in the later phase of the whole planning process will affect to the earlier, already completed phases and bring new aspects to them. This may cause the need for the executors of the plan to return to the earlier phases and to alternate them according to the new findings. Even though the process may be very variable for this reason, there still are specific main steps of services marketing planning process. The first main step is setting goals and objectives for the service company and its marketing practices. The next steps are carrying out a review of the company's current situation, planning and creating effective strategies for the company and its marketing and then finally allocating the company's available resources and creating a budget for marketing the service. The

figure below presents each of the steps of the market plan and also operations which are included to each step in detail.

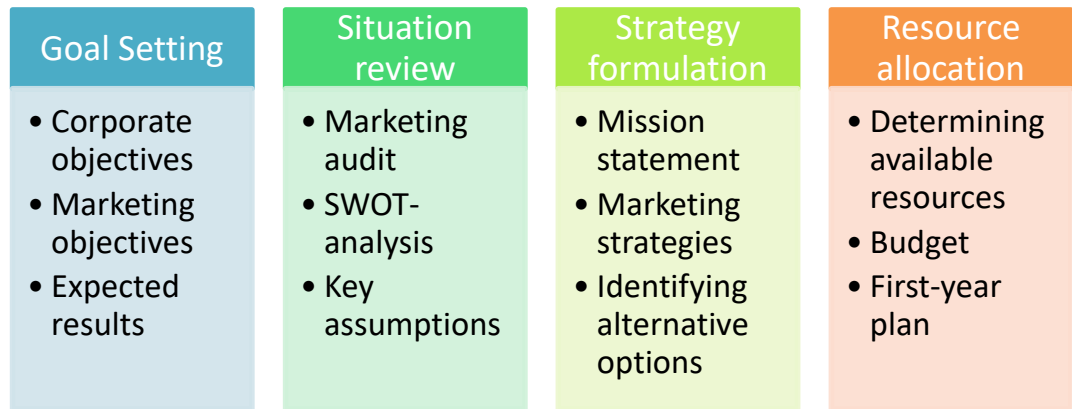| Goal Setting | Situation review | Strategy formulation | Resource allocation |
|---|---|---|---|
| • Corporate objectives<br>• Marketing objectives<br>• Expected results | • Marketing audit<br>• SWOT-analysis<br>• Key assumptions | • Mission statement<br>• Marketing strategies<br>• Identifying alternative options | • Determining available resources<br>• Budget<br>• First-year plan |

FIGURE 4. Steps of services marketing planning (McDonald et al. 2011, 55-60)

As seen in the figure above, the main stages are also possible to be separated into more specific steps. The first one of these more detailed steps is to create a clear mission statement for the company. Then, stating the objectives and goals for the company, collecting all crucial data which affect to the marketing plan and creating an analysis of the company's current situation, are the next crucial steps. Then, the following step is to consider all strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats the company may face during the marketing process. This can be determined by creating a SWOT-analysis which includes all these aspects. Then, it is advisable to consider presumptions about the probable situations of the company externally and internally in the future, because these presumptions may help the company to be more prepared for different future situations. After stating the objectives for the whole company, it is important to also state objectives solely for the marketing process. After that, the usable marketing strategies are necessary to be chosen. A good idea is to consider possible outcomes and results of the plan beforehand.

While conducting the plan, also all alternatives are important to be evaluated before selecting the most suitable ways to operate and execute the plan. It is crucial to determine the resources and the budget the company is able to reserve for the execution of the plan. By following these steps, it is easier to start executing the plan and developing company's marketing practices. (McDonald et al. 2011, 55-60.)

### 2.1.3 Marketing Strategies for Services

After learning about the planning process of services marketing, in this theory part useful strategies for services marketing will be introduced. First, one useful concept which describes the important processes in services marketing, is called the service profit chain. This concept can be utilized in services marketing and it is an important part of the study to familiarize oneself with, when studying about services and their features. The service profit chain is about the interaction between the service providers and the customers. The main idea of the service profit chain is that it connects the effects of the personnel contentment to the level of loyalty of the customers using the service and that way to the profitability of the service firm. In other words, if the employees of the company are happy and satisfied with their jobs, that will have a positive effect to the quality of the service and that way increase the customer satisfaction. (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser & Schlesinger 1994, 164-168.) The figure below presents the steps of the service profit chain one by one.



FIGURE 5. The service profit chain (Kotler et al. 2013, 253)

As seen of the figure above, the service profit chain consists of five stages which all affect to the quality of the service. The first stage of the chain is the internal service quality. It is important to take good care of the service employees. When the employees of the firm are trained well and offered a good support network and inspiring working atmosphere, that will increase their motivation to perform well in their job. The satisfied employees are the next phase of the service profit chain, because when employees are content with their workplace, it will guarantee the level of effort in their work and also create a solid foundation for functional customer service. Satisfied employees work more efficiently and that leads to the third phase of the service profit chain which is great customer value. If the providers of the service feel enthusiastic about the service and work hard to provide good quality, it will create greater value for the service. Moreover, when the service has a high quality, it also attracts more customers and makes the customers content with the service. This increases customer loyalty, because after a good service experience customers are more likely to use the same service again and to recommend it for other potential customers. Altogether, these links create potential growth in the revenue of the service and makes the service firm more profitable. (Kotler et al. 2013, 253.)

According to "Marketing plans for services" by McDonald et al. (2011, 37-38), regarding service marketing strategies, for efficient service marketing, the typical marketing mix needs to be upgraded into an expanded version. Regularly, the typical marketing mix is formed from four elements which are product, price, promotion and place. These four elements are also more shortly known as 4 P's. Product indicates to the actual commodity or service that the company is selling and producing. The price indicates the fee, which is charged from the offered product or service. Promotion points to marketing of the product, and all operations and communication related to it. Then finally, the place indicates to where the product is available for customers and to where it is distributed. In service marketing, with these original four elements additional elements has been added in order to expand the marketing mix to be more suitable for services marketing. The added elements are people, processes and customer service.

People should be added as one element, because people are in a key position what comes to services and their marketing. Especially in the services, where there is a large amount of contact between customers and service employees, the employees have a huge impact on the quality of the service. Processes, which are the next element added to the original marketing mix, have an impact on the creation of the service and on how it is provided to the customers. Processes include all operations from all procedures and systems to company policies. Then the final inclusion to the marketing mix is customer service which is an essential part of the operations of the service firms. When companies invest on customer service, it is a great way to stand out from competitors and develop the quality of the service. In fact, customer service can be developed into a competitive advantage for the company. All in all, customers and their power to spread word about the company, and to influence on the success of the company, are crucial. By focusing on all the elements mentioned above, service companies are able to develop their service and its quality. In addition, some researchers have said that one more element should be added to the marketing mix in order for it to be complete. That element is physical evidence which is in fact a very crucial part of services. Due to the intangible nature of services, the services marketers need to find physical evidence from the service to present for the customers in order for them to become convinced from the quality of the product. (McDonald et al. 2011, 37-38.)

One way to enhance marketing of services and increase the effectivity is to study the customer base of the service and divide the customers into different segments in order to target the right kind of marketing for all customer groups. Customer segmentation is a useful tool, where customer base is divided into different segments according to their different features. Customers can be segmented for example according to age, gender, lifestyle, nationality and consuming habits. Between these different segments, the marketing mix can vary according to its suitability. For example, pricing, customer service and promotion of the service may change between customers in different segments. This way the company

can focus on fulfilling the needs of customers in ways which are suitable to everyone. However, when performing customer segmentation, companies need to remember that too many different segments may become too complicated for the company to actually carry out. That is because it is not possible to adapt to all possible customer needs out there, if there are too many of them. The key is to find the most crucial customer segments and focus on their needs. The company needs to define their strong points and focus on them. It is important to find segments which are large enough to bring a lot customer base to the company and return the effort. The segments need to be divided so, that the customers in these segments have clear unitive factor among them, but still have clear differences when comparing to other segments. Also, access to the customers in the segments is an important factor. It needs to be possible to be able to reach the customers through the company's communications in order to build wider customer base. (McDonald et al. 2011, 38-39.)

However, in services marketing it is essential to not only focus on regular external marketing, such as the marketing mix described above. In service marketing a key strategy is to invest in internal marketing as well. In internal marketing, the main idea is to inspire and motivate the service employees who are taking care of the customer contacts and face-to-face customer service. The company needs to find employees with the right kind of mind-set and train them well in order for the employees to offer best kind of service. If the employees feel motivated and supported, they will provide better customer service. It is important that the company creates customer service oriented mind-set to its employees and emphasizes its importance in the service business. In service marketing, internal marketing needs to be focused on more than external marketing, because the satisfaction of the employees guarantees that the quality to the service product the company is providing. (Kotler et al. 2013, 254.)

Interactive marketing is another important strategy to consider when marketing services. Interactive marketing focuses on relationship with customers, which is a key to the successful service operation. The relationship and communication between customers and service

employees has a large impact on the quality of the service. Therefore, the employees have a large role in the service process and that is why interactive marketing is something companies should invest in. Marketers need to come up with innovative solutions which enhance the interaction between seller and customer and makes the purchasing process easier for customers. For example, travel agencies offer nowadays online services for travel bookings instead of old-fashioned travel agencies and phone services. Another example is home delivery. Many services, such as restaurants and massage firms can offer nowadays home delivery of their products and services. That improves the communication between the seller and the customer, because it makes the service easier for customers. (Kotler et al. 2013, 254.)

Final strategy which is introduced in this theory chapter, is market differentiation for services. Due to the competition of customers between different service firms, services need to come up with something which makes them stand out from other competitors. The service firms can come up for example with new image or they can introduce new customer appealing features to their products or to the customer service. Branding is a very helpful tool when a service firm wants to differentiate themselves with a new image. Through branding, the firm can create for example a distinguishable symbol or a brand image, which attracts new customers. They can also enhance and update their operations by for example developing their delivery systems or coming up with new innovations. Service firms need to find their competitive advantage, in other words, their unique advantages compared to other companies, which will help them to differentiate themselves from the competitors. (Kotler et al. 2013, 255.)

3   EDUCATION MARKETING

In order to understand the topic of this thesis more thoroughly, it is necessary to study and get familiar with education marketing and its features.

Higher education as a target of marketing needs specific and adequate methods. Higher education can be seen as an intangible product, because there is no straight tangible evidence of it for potential customers to value. The key to effective marketing is to provide evidence of actions, functions and characteristics of the institution in order to show potential customers what the education includes and to assert people of its benefits. Beside the diploma which is provided for students at the end of studies, higher education institutions should be required to discover other tangible features from the education in order to utilize them in the marketing practices. This can be seen as an objective of higher education marketing. Another objective is market differentiation. It is important to emphasize differences between higher education institutions and make oneself stand out from the crowd. Market differentiation needs an ability to be inventive and imaginative. In higher education marketing, there are challenges as well. For example, one challenge is the intense competition between different institutions. Because many universities seek the interest and attention of every possible student, even though the universities would be very different, they still try to attract the same customer base. That is why the market place for higher education is very competitive and crowded. (Anctil 2008, 31-32.)

Recent times have formed the field of higher education to the direction, where higher education institutions are operating more as producers of products than institutions with solely academic goals. Universities are seen nowadays rather as providers of services. When marketing education, it is crucial to understand its nature as a product which is not intended to be consumed instantly. The value of the product will form by the actions of the customer and the service provider in the future.

When planning marketing for universities, it is essential to highlight certain features, such as values of the institution, vision of what constitutes an excellent education and an efficient mission statement. What comes to the potential students searching for a degree place, it is crucial for the universities to see them as customers and understand their expectations, endeavours and objectives. The key is to understand the customers and value their efforts in what they want to become. (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 4-8.)

## 3.1 Strategies for Higher Education Marketing & Branding

In recent years, the competition between different higher education institutions has increased substantially. Because the amount of potential new students enrolling has been decreasing compared to the amount of different higher education institutions, the institutions feel the pressure caused by the challenges of the changing market environment, and that is why they need to find ways to develop their visibility and presence in the market compared to others. The main objective is to satisfy the needs of their customers attentively and to find out what kind of expectations customers have. The right kind of marketing strategies can operate as effective tools in the search of the right solutions for higher education institutions and their market presence. When planning the marketing strategies for higher education, it is important to adapt the strategies according to the nature of higher education as a product. Because higher education is an intangible product with only few tangible aspects, the most suitable way is to market it as a service product. (Enache 2011, 23.)

Due to the increasing competition between educational institutions, the institutions need to create a distinct and a successful brand around the institution. Effective brand development and marketing is nowadays a lot more than classic selling and advertising. Institutions need to utilize distinctive and creative means in order to differentiate themselves and to create a competitive advantage for themselves. In order to draw attention of potential students, institutions try to organize new ways to gain their

interest, for example organizing different original events and happenings, such as flash mobs. Even though the institutions have to modernize themselves in terms of branding and marketing activities, it is also crucial to maintain more traditional and popular marketing strategies, such as organized visits and get-togethers, even though there is a lot of room for innovation as well. When creating and developing a successful brand, the process requires precise and composed actions and endeavours in order to build long-lasting and desirable results. The institutions need to conserve consistency in quality and in all of its functions and activities. Principally, the key is that the institutions must keep their word about all promises which are made regarding the quality and other matters of the education. The promised value must be fulfilled in order to convince the customers about the quality and in order to ensure the amount of good reviews from the customers for strengthening the brand. All in all, when building the brand, institutions need to operate in a diverse way in multiple fields. There are many ways to present the brand to the customers, such as traditional recruitment events, seminars and alumni practices, where graduated and current students recruit and inspire new students through their experiences. Also marketing activities, such as social media, advertisements and merchandise are one way to present the brand. To conclude, the direct contact and communication with customers are the most important aspects of branding and marketing activities of higher education institutions. (Hanover Research 2014, 3-8.)

When examining the strategies for higher education marketing from more practical point of view, there are many different marketing tools to utilize. This chapter will examine the variety of these tools more closely. First of all, the higher education institutions need to be aware of the needs of the customers and their consumer behaviour. That way they can find the most suitable marketing tools to develop right kind of marketing which fulfils the customers' needs. As stated already in the chapter concerning the service marketing strategies, higher education can be seen as a service product, and that is why the tools of service marketing need to be utilized also in marketing of higher education. In order to create successful and consistent

marketing efforts, all required aspects of marketing need to be covered properly. These aspects are careful market planning in order to consider and utilize every part of the marketing process, communication and relationship marketing in order to build and maintain strong and efficient network, proper market segmentation and targeting in order to target the service product for the right customer base and precise market differentiation, positioning and branding in order to make the service stand out from the crowd and appeal to potential customers. By paying attention to all these aspects, higher education institutions will be able to succeed in the crowded market of educational institutions. (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006, 328-332.)

### 3.1.1 Students as Customers

Students are the main reason for the universities to exist. In other words, the universities plan their services for students to utilize them. Therefore, in a sense, students can be seen as the customers of the universities. However, students cannot be considered as regular customers who simply buy a certain service or a product from a provider, because students and the purchase process of education have many distinctive features which are not typical for regular customers and their buying routines. In fact, students can be viewed as active producers of the education service, because the whole education experience depends on the input of the students as well. The students need to participate to the providing of the service by studying and receiving good results in order for them to gain value from the education service. Another special feature students have as customers is that whereas regular customers might have an opportunity for compensation in case of failure of the service, educational services do not enable a possibility for compensation for students, in case of they for example drop out from a university program or fail a course terminally. The education is mostly an intangible service apart from the tangible diploma, hence it cannot be refunded as a defective good, even though the students would be discontent with its quality. Also from one point of view, education as a service has a unique nature in a sense, that higher

education institutions impact on who are qualified to start studies and accepted for the higher education. Universities set standards for enrolling students and therefore they determine, who can become their customer. (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 33-35.)

Customer satisfaction is one of the key things to focus on in service business. This applies to higher education as well. When reaching for ultimate customer satisfaction, higher education institutions need to put a lot of effort in meeting or exceeding the demands and expectations students have from the education. The satisfaction of students can be improved by providing a consistent quality and customer value and by responding to possible complaints thoroughly. Higher education institutions need to deliver a trustworthy and truthful image for the students in order to gain their trust and favour. All in all, universities need to take care and to invest also to their current and former students and not only focus on attracting new students. (Elliot & Healy 2001, 2-3.)

3.2   Image and Reputation

One of the main aspects of higher education marketing is the image a certain university conveys to its customers about their service. The other matter that is equally important is the reputation of this certain university. The way to look at these two aspects varies among researchers. Some say that image and reputation can be seen as equal things which do not differ from each other. Then on the other hand it is believed that image and reputation cannot be considered as a same thing, but as two different things which are strongly connected to each other. Image can be defined as the perception that the customers have from the institution. The image can originate from different signals the institution is conveying to the customer base, whereas reputation indicates a range of different images which have a much deeper sustainability and foundation, and which are more difficult to dispose from the minds of the customers. (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 136.)

The image plays a huge part in the opinions people have from an institution. The image forms gradually during a long time period from all activities and operations organized by the higher education institution (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 129). It has a large effect on the popularity among potential students and on the level of people applying for studies. The images people have from an institution can form in multiple ways, for example by influence of other people and experiences others have shared, from word of mouth and also from the own marketing efforts of the institution. The image forms from both advantages and weaknesses of the university. That's why the image can have both good and poor sides (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 129). Usually the information people form their opinions on might be rather limited, or even incorrect. That is why institutions need to make sure that their image is presented correctly and that it does not create false promises. The image needs to be created in a distinctive way in order to differentiate the institution from other similar institutions competing in the same market. (Ivy 2001, 276-277.)

Due to the significance of reputation for the institutions, they need to put a lot of effort in creating, improving and sustaining of the reputation. A good reputation is a valuable asset for institutions, for example with recruiting new potential students or with business-to-business relationships. Good reputation also increases the credibility of the messages delivered by an institution, because the status of the originator of the message affects to the attitudes of the audience. (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 129-136.)

Reputation management can be examined from different perspectives. These perspectives are the public relations perspective, the marketing communications perspective, the risk management perspective and the corporate branding perspective. The public relations perspective refers to the operations, where institutions attempt to bring the impressions of the people to match with the reality, whereas in the marketing communications perspective the intention is to deliver desired messages and information about the institution to the potential customers in order to increase their interest and positive attitude towards the institution. The risk management perspective is very important for higher education institutions in case of a

crisis. The institutions need to plan certain operations to avoid and suppress possible risks in order to maintain a steady position. Then finally the corporate branding perspective is associated to the development of a strong brand to support the marketing activities and competitive advantage of the institutions. (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 130-133.)

3.3   Recruitment

A key strategy for successful recruitment processes of higher education institutions is to be able to completely understand their current situation among the other competitors in the same field (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 147). In recent times, there has become few notable trends in higher education which have an effect to the recruitment processes. These trends are for example different changes in demographics, increased costs of the tuition fees, growing internationalization of students, opinions and preconceptions of the public and also increased meaning of mobile online access. (Hanover Research 2014, 12-13.)

In recruitment processes of higher education institutions, the right means to attract future students need to be utilized. The strategies that are used to attract new students are mostly different events which include direct communication with new potential students. These events can be for example organized campus visits, seminars and other happenings, such as group meetings for the potential students. These types of traditional recruitment efforts are continuously very popular among potential students, even though nowadays for example also social media is widely used to attract new students. (Hanover Research 2014, 14.)

Besides regular students, higher education institutions need to consider also other key audiences in their recruitment processes. One of these key groups is international students. Nowadays, different universities are having intense competition for the international students who are a constantly growing student group. The means for universities to gain the interest of international students are first of all to have visibility also abroad. In order to achieve this, universities could organize presentations

of their study programs also abroad. Also social media is a fast and simple tool to reach the attention of international students in many countries all over the world. Finally, universities can organize different ways to offer special aid for international students, in order to help them to settle down more easily. Another key group for higher education institutions is adult students. Also the amount of adult students has been on increasing recently. For adult students, universities may utilize the same tools than with other students, for example different events and other methods. However, there are some ways to create the higher education even more appealing for adult students. For example, the study programs can be created to be more flexible for the needs of adult students, because most of them are already working elsewhere or being otherwise busy. In practice this could be implemented by offering more evening studies or individual online studies and also possibilities for credit transfers. (Hanover Research 2014, 15-17.)

## 3.4 Alumni Impact

Due to the increase of competition in the field, different higher education institutes need to focus more on attracting both local and international prospective students. That way the institutes are able to get a larger amount of students from the larger geographical area. Also changes in the economy and increasing tuition fees have an effect to the competition and oblige universities to illustrate visible evidence of their education and its benefits in order to attract new students. Therefore, since alumni can be seen as a physical evidence which can prove the university's value to prospective students, alumni and their personal experiences are an effective way to market the university and its study programs. (Himmelspach 2013.)

When utilizing alumni in marketing activities, there are few things that need to be considered by higher education institutions. Because alumni consist of people who are all different, of course all alumni will have different experiences,point of views and ways to act in terms of marketing the

university. All in all, each alumnus will bring different components to the marketing practices of the higher education institution. For example alumni, who have graduated more recently, are still more connected to the university and have newer memories from the studies, whereas the students, who graduated longer time ago might have already successful careers and that way they might have motivating career stories to share for prospective students. On the other hand, these graduates might have less time to focus on to alumni activities due to their careers and although newer graduates might have more time and enthusiasm, they might not have that many experiences from working life for sharing. That is why it is important to choose the alumni representatives carefully and to make sure that all kinds of alumni are added to the team. (Baker 2015.)

### 3.4.1   Benefits of Alumni in Marketing and Recruitment

According to Himmelspach in the article "Alumni are worth more than donations", (2013) the amount of new students, who name alumni and their experiences as one of the main motives for them to apply to a certain university study program, is constantly increasing. Alumni can operate as the university's promoters and brand ambassadors who act as a real evidence of the university's value. Using alumni as promoters is an economical and low cost marketing strategy for universities (Baker 2015). Prospective students, who are contemplating different options, want to have an opportunity to talk to someone, who has a genuine point of view and inside knowledge about the studies. Alumni are able share their knowledge and experiences about the studies and their career paths. (Brittan 2016.) Also because alumni have been students themselves, the prospective students might relate to them more easily on a personal level and that way universities are able to create a closer relationship to potential students (Himmelspach 2013). With their own similar experiences, alumni could help the new students with their possible problems related to their studies and act as their mentors, who help them through their studies (Baker 2015). All in all, benefits of utilizing alumni in marketing strategies of higher education institutions are diverse. To

mention few of them, alumni has a good overall knowledge about the institution which can convince the prospective students about their cause. Also alumni of an institution can be originally from different parts of the world and that way the institution can reach out to people internationally from many different countries. Also alumni may be very enthusiastic about promoting their former study place and that way have a passion for its success. All in all, alumni offer many advantages for universities and their marketing. (ICEF Monitor 2012.)

### 3.4.2   Alumni Strategies in Marketing and Recruitment

First of all, it is important that alumni offer to give guidance, advice and also experiences about the studies to the new students. When planning the marketing content strategy of the university and its recruitment processes, it is crucial to add alumni and their input as former students of the university to act as a main part of it. (Brittan 2016.) To begin with the effective content strategy, universities need to motivate and persuade the alumni to participate actively to the alumni activities and also to bring content with their experiences to the marketing (ICEF Monitor 2012). The university's marketing activities, which alumni could participate to are for example different talks and seminars, where alumni can share their experiences and insight. Also alumni could organize open tours at the faculty to show the premises. According to Anyangwe in the article "Alumni relations in a changing higher education sector" (2012), due to the growing importance of the internet in marketing activities, alumni could be active in social media as well, and for example write success stories and blogs in the website of the university, do video blogs or interviews, or share other social media updates. These marketing methods are great, because they cost nearly nothing for the universities to execute. But in order to stand out from the crowd, the content shared by the alumni needs to be original and authentic. (Baker 2015.)

It is very important that universities include alumni also to the planning process of different marketing activities, events and other content. The

ideas, input and opinions of alumni can be very valuable asset for the marketing of the universities. In order to succeed in the cooperation between alumni and the university, alumni needs to be aware of the mission statement and visions that the university has. (Hanover Research 2015, 25.) The location is also an important part of the alumni strategy. It is efficient to choose international students as alumni, so they are able to promote the university in locations around the world. (Baker 2015.)

## 3.5 Trends

In higher education marketing it is always really important to stay up to date with the newest trends and to try to stay ahead in the competition with other institutions (Patel 2015). The use of technology has become one of the main trends in higher education in recent times. The online and digital space are increasingly the largest part of the new innovations of higher education. One of the most important features in the online space for higher education institutions is a functional and visionary website which can be considered as an "ultimate brand statement". It is very important to focus both on the creative and functional design of the website and also on the easiness of the navigation in the website (Hanover Research 2014, 3-6.) Along with the digital operations, higher education institutions need to update their operations also to the mobile form. Because the use of mobile-devices has increased largely in recent times, the institutions need to create their website also as a mobile version, for example mobile applications are a very popular digital form nowadays (Seltzer 2016).

Probably the most popular channel for marketing and for visibility of the institutions is social media. Social media is a great tool to reach potential students simple and fast, because social media is a very common and popular platform among young students. That is why many institutions invest a lot in social media, because they want to have an easy access to communication with potential customers. Since social media is so wide platform with many different social media websites to be active in, higher education institutions need to plan carefully, what are the channels they

want to utilize in social media. Along with very popular Facebook and Twitter, the significance of videos and many video sharing services should not be overlooked. Videos are nowadays a great tool to draw attention, to reach potential customers and also to forward influential stories for them (Seltzer 2016). Large video sharing services, such as YouTube, are constantly growing to be even more popular among young students and that is something higher education institutions should utilize. Also besides video, marketers of higher education should utilize other mixed media tools, such as photography and interactive animation to differentiate themselves in the eyes of the customers. (Patel 2015.)

There are also new rising trends in the field of content strategy. Content strategy includes strategic planning of how and what kind of content does the institution want to forward to its customers (Casson & Nichols 2013, 2). One of these trends is storytelling which recently has increased its value in content strategies of different companies. Stories can be used as a tool in order to enhance and develop a brand to have even deeper content and meaning. (Seltzer 2016.) Higher education institutions could utilize for example stories from their current students and alumni, who could share their experiences as recommendations for future students. These stories can be utilized for example in social media, in the websites and in other marketing channels to draw the attention of as many people as possible. (Patel 2015.) Also content creators are one efficient way to distribute marketing content for customers. Content creators are normal people, for example bloggers and active social media personalities, who can be used as kind of marketers. They can for example share recommendations in their blogs or in a video format, in other words, as a video blog. (Seltzer 2016.)

Also regarding to the marketing efforts of higher education institutions, one increasing trend is partnerships and cooperation with other companies and big brands. In these partnerships the institutions will be able to attract new customers, and the big brands on the other hand will gain more recognition to their brand. (Patel 2015.)

4   STORYTELLING

This chapter in the theory part of this thesis will research storytelling. Storytelling was chosen as a topic for this thesis, because it is a great example of possible methods to utilize in marketing of alumni experiences. This chapter will explain the power of using stories in order to develop more effective marketing strategy. Because this thesis will contemplate alumni practices as a tool for marketing development, it is crucial to understand storytelling in order to include it to this thesis as one possible marketing method for alumni. This chapter will make the readers familiar with storytelling and explain the features of storytelling in detail.

There are many different definitions to explain what the word "story" actually means. One way to explain it is to think stories as a way to create an experience which is told in detail and with emotion in order for the listeners to experience it as real through their imagination. Briefly story is a way to offer an experience for its listeners which will impact their emotions. (Simmons 2007, 19-20)

The act of sharing stories by creating experiences by utilizing imagination to listeners is called storytelling. It has a long history as a distinguished way of human expression. Interaction between the two parties, the teller and the listener, is one key element of storytelling. Spoken words, physical actions, gestures and facial expressions form the action of storytelling. (storynet.org) Storytelling is an ability all humans have by nature and thus it is needless to learn. Throughout the times stories have been the means for humans to communicate before science was discovered. All humans tell stories every day, mostly unconsciously. By paying attention and affecting consciously to the stories, it is possible to intentionally deliver desired messages to listeners. (Simmons 2007, 22-24)

Storytelling can be seen as a performance of telling stories, which require both planning and doing (Denning 2011, 1). There are no unequivocal and applicable directions for excellent storytelling (Simmons 2007, 27). There are as many ways to practice efficient storytelling as there are different

storytellers. Storytelling needs to be consistent and to meet the needs of its audience. In other words, storytelling needs to make its audience interested, emotionally invested and eager to hear more. All in all, storytelling is a very people-centric activity. (De Clerck 2016.)

## 4.1 Storytelling in Marketing

Storytelling is an effective tool which is widely used in marketing. With storytelling companies are able to strengthen their brands and bring their identities and personalities forth to their customers. Storytelling is one of the key strategies of content marketing. (De Clerck 2016.) In content marketing the key is to find valuable content for the marketing activities in order to captivate potential customers (contentmarketinginstitute.com). Companies need to find ways to entertain their customers through their brands and activities, and that is possible by means of entertaining and interesting stories which are distributed to customers by successful storytelling (Olenski 2015). With marketing, companies pursue to attract their customers to enter their store and make a purchase. The content and progression of the stories is determined according to the goals companies hope to achieve through storytelling. Through right kind of stories companies are able to motivate and inspire the customers and appeal to their emotions. If people are feeling good towards your company and product, it is more likely that they will purchase the product. When people feel related to the story and are emotionally invested, that will increase their loyalty to the company. (De Clerck 2016.)

### 4.1.1 Storytelling Strategies

First of all, in order to succeed with storytelling, the storytellers must pay attention to their audience. In other words, when using the storytelling tool in their marketing activities, companies must listen to their customers and focus on their wants, needs and attitudes in order target their stories correctly. The companies must continue to listen to their customers even afterwards in order to monitor their reactions to the stories and other

marketing activities of the companies. The monitoring of the reactions will help the companies to develop their marketing operations according to the desires of the customers. (De Clerck 2016.)

When developing efficient storytelling activities, there are many useful techniques to utilize. First, in storytelling the planning phase is everything. The creation of a story needs careful planning and the storyteller needs to define above all, what he or she wants to say and how (Nesterenko 2016). It is important to create a character and choose the point of view for the story. The character needs to be someone, who the audience can relate to and also someone, who draws the attention of the audience and makes them interested in the story. Also, the right theme and the mood of the story needs to be planned beforehand. The theme and the mood need to be suitable and support the overall story. Along with the right theme and mood, the plot of the story is a crucial part of the preparations of storytelling. (Lewan 2012.) The plot needs to be consistent and have a proper beginning, a fitting middle part, a brilliant climax and an ending with a suitable conclusion. The writer of the story can also add an element of surprise to change the plot to an unexpected situation in order for the audience to get even more lured to the story. (Nesterenko 2016.) In a good story, there also needs to be a conflict in the plot which the audience will want to solve. It creates excitement which will make the audience lured to follow the story until the end. (Lewan 2012.) The following figure presents the structure of a good story in detail from the beginning to the end.
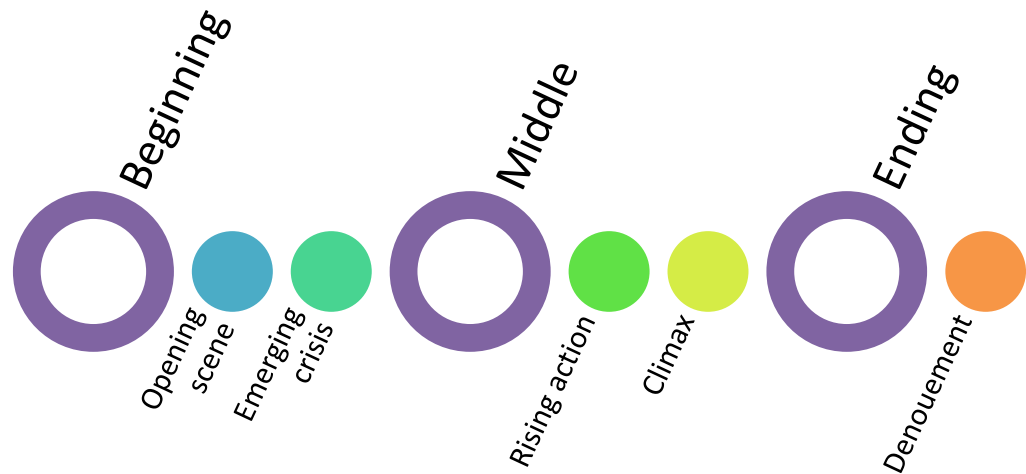
FIGURE 6. The structure of a story (Jimenez 2016)

As the figure above shows, the story needs to have more than just a beginning, a middle and an ending in order to keep the audience interested. Also, one way to keep the audience interested during the whole story, is that the storyteller can give hints or clues to the audience throughout the story. However, it is crucial to keep the story realistic, because the audience might lose their interest, if the story becomes implausible. Also hook beginnings and endings are a great way to captivate the audience. If there is some kind of hook right at the beginning of the story, people want to instantly find out more. Whereas a hook at the end of the story will leave the people wanting to hear more. All in all, the story needs to bring out the emotions in the audience and be personal (Nesterenko 2016). Also because Internet and digitality are constantly growing tools in marketing, they can also be used to make storytelling more interactive. For example, the story could be told in a platform, where the audience has a possibility to take part for example through commenting the story. (Lewan 2012.) The stories can be created to be even more innovative by utilizing their visual aspects as well. For example, using pictures and videos are good methods of visualising the story. (Nesterenko 2016.)

## 4.2   Features of a Good Story

A good story is all in all something, that enables a personal connection with the storyteller and its audience. In other words, the storyteller is able to connect and build a bond with its audience through a good story. To summarize, the main features of a good story are personality, creativity, emotionality, inspirationality and authenticity. (De Clerck 2016.) But in this chapter, the features of a good story will be looked into more deeply. A good story is created in a way that it both touches the audience and also helps the storytellers to achieve their goals (Nesterenko 2016). A good story is riveting, but also often based on truthful information. A good and consistent structure makes it easier for the audience to follow the story and therefore it is also one of the most important features of a good story. In order to be effective, the story needs to complete the needs of its audience and answer to their questions. (De Clerck 2016.) The story needs to be able to impress and draw the attention of its audience and keep their interest throughout the whole story. All in all, as already mentioned in the strategies of good storytelling, there are few elements, which all good stories need to fulfil. Those elements are a turning point or a conflict somewhere in the plot of the story, a strong character that the audience can relate to, the emotional aspect of the story and the details and accuracy, which help the audience to imagine the story and hence make it more visual in their minds. (Nesterenko 2016.)

### 4.2.1   Right Mediums for Storytelling

There are many different possibilities for mediums, where to tell a story. Almost any medium can be used to tell a story and therefore there are many options for storytellers to choose from. But not every medium is suitable for every story. That is why it is very important to find the right kind of medium, that is the most suitable option for the presentation of the story. (De Clerck 2016.) In the figure below the right mediums for different types of stories are presented.
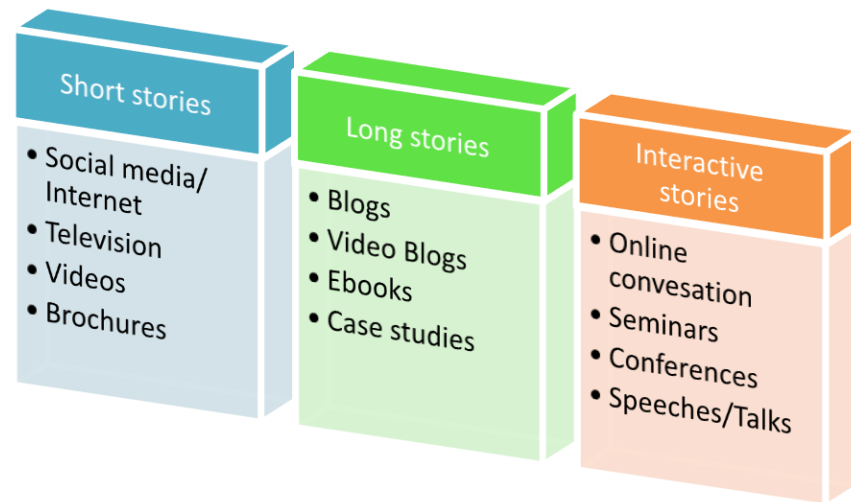
FIGURE 7. The mediums for storytelling (De Clerck 2016)

As seen it the figure above, some stories are more fitting for a longer format, whereas some stories might be more effective in a shorter format (Nesterenko 2016). Shorter stories are better to use in platforms which are suitable for short messages, such as social media, Internet and television. Longer stories fit better to formats, which are planned for larger content, for example for blogs, videos, case studies, success stories, articles and others. Also for example different seminars and conferences are the most suitable format for interactive stories, because they enable a personal connection with the audience. (De Clerck 2016.)

4.3   Benefits of Storytelling

Storytelling as a marketing tool has many benefits. First of all, companies can express their personalities through stories to their audience. Stories operate as perfect platforms for companies which allow them to let people know their true identities and beliefs and use that as a competitive advantage. Stories are also a great way to show the emotional side of the company. If a company shares its real and genuine side to the customers through personal stories, the company will be able to connect on a personal level. Also intriguing stories with a climax and an addictive hook ending leave the audience wanting more. That way the customers might

become interested in being involved in the future activities of the company and perhaps returning to the company with new purchases. (Olenski 2015.)

Stories are also able to build memories and that way they remain in the minds of people for a long time. That is a great benefit for companies, who attempt to stay in the minds of their customers. Stories have an ability to motivate people as well. An inspiring storyteller might have a positive impact on people and excite them over the topic of the story. Hence also companies can motivate and inspire their customers through stories. Stories are an effective tool in building relationships with customers and increasing commitment. Customers, who feel connected to the brand and the company may become loyal customers and also leave positive customer reviews and recommendations. Stories are also a great means to make a company's marketing more exciting. For example, industries, who might provide products which are not considered trendy among the customers, could utilize exciting stories to catch the attention of the customers. Also stories can be exploited as a sort of facelift for companies, because through innovative and creative stories companies are able to renew their image and bring new aspects to their brands. (Katz 2016.)

5    EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This chapter of the thesis will introduce and analyse the empirical research conducted for the thesis for the reader. In the beginning of the chapter the research design and data collection methods will be introduced and after that the data analysis will be executed and the results of the research will be discussed.

The empirical research will be conducted through two kinds of semi-structured interviews. In the first part of the interviews the personnel of Lahti UAS will be interviewed and in the second part the graduated students of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS will be interviewed. The results of the interviews will be utilized as the source of data in this research.

5.1    Research Design

Through this empirical research, the author of the thesis is determined to create an overview and to examine the current situation of alumni practices and their utilization in marketing at the moment in Lahti UAS in general and more specifically in the Degree Programme in International Business. Also this research will examine and collect the views and opinions of graduated students of this specific study program about the marketing of the Lahti UAS and of the Degree Programme in International Business and about the possible development of alumni practices in the marketing and in general.

As already mentioned in the thesis, the research is conducted by utilizing qualitative research which characteristically includes non-numeric data and interviews as the main data sources of the research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 414-416).Therefore, this research is qualitative, because it is conducted by few informative semi-structured interviews and these interviews and the views of the people interviewed for the research will create the main source of the conclusions and results of this research. In other words, this research will pursue to understand and embrace the topic

of the research by focusing on few broad discussions instead of a vast amount of straightforward data collected from multiple targets.

The empirical research of the thesis is conducted in two main parts. Both parts consist of few semi-structured interviews, as mentioned already in this chapter. The first part will include two semi-structured interviews of personnel of Lahti UAS. For these interviews, a representative from the marketing and communications department and a representative from the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS are interviewed. As mentioned, the purpose of these two interviews is to investigate the current situation of alumni practices and their usage in marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business and the Lahti UAS.

The second part of the research consists of six semi-structured interviews of already graduated students, in other words the alumni, of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS. The purpose of these interviews is to find out what the graduated students of this specific study program think about the possible exploitation of alumni practices in marketing and other activities of the study program. Through these interviews the author wants to find out whether there is demand and willingness to develop the marketing through alumni practices among these students and what do they think that should be done in order to develop the marketing of this specific study program. The following figure presents the structure of the empirical research in a more simple form.

**The Empirical Research**

**Interviews of the personnel of Lahti UAS**

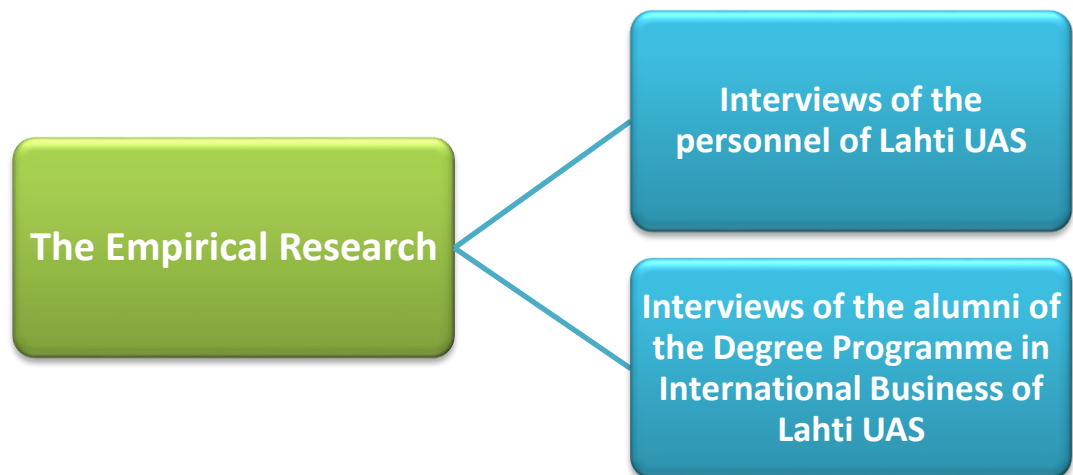**Interviews of the alumni of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS**

FIGURE 8. The structure of the empirical research

As seen in the figure above, together these two parts will establish the research for the thesis and the results of these two kinds of interviews will lead the path to find out whether these kinds of practices would be useful for the marketing of the Degree Programme of International Business of Lahti UAS.

5.2   Data Collection Methods

This chapter will introduce the whole process of data collection and the data collection methods utilized in the whole thesis. The process of data collection was started at the beginning of 2016, when the whole thesis process started. The data collection process started with collecting theoretical data for the theoretical part of the thesis. The collection of theoretical data was very irregular. First, it started during February and March of 2016 and after that the collection of the theoretical data continued in the beginning of September 2016 and from there it continued more or less until the beginning of January 2017. After explaining the timeline of the data collection process, next the utilized data collection methods will be introduced. For the theoretical part of the thesis only secondary data was collected. The sources of the data for the theoretical

part of the thesis were mainly literature and different online sources, such as articles and professional blog posts.

Then, the data collection of the empirical research started at the end of October 2016 and it continued until January 2017. For the empirical part of the thesis, only primary sources of data were used and the data was collected from semi-structured interviews. Eight interviews were organized for the research in total. As mentioned in the last chapter, the interviews were divided into two parts. The first part of the interviews included the interviews of the personnel of Lahti UAS and the second part of the interviews included the interviews of the graduates of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS.

As stated earlier, the interviews of the personnel included a representative from the marketing communications department and a representative from the Degree Programme of International Business. One of these interviews was organized as a phone conversation and the another of these interviews was organized as a face-to-face interview. Both interviews were organized in November 2016. Along with these interviews the second part of the interviews were organized. In the second part six graduated students from the specific study program were interviewed. The interviewed graduates all represented different nationalities. All in all, there were interviewees from Finland, Russia, Vietnam and Italy. Most of the international students in Lahti UAS are coming from Russia or Asian countries such as Vietnam and also few international students are coming from other countries, such as Italy. Therefore, the nationalities of the interviewees were very topical. Five of the interviewees were female and one was male. Multiple data collection techniques were utilized in these interviews. One of the interviews was organized as a face-to-face conversation, two of the interviews were organized via Skype, one of the interviews was organized via email and two of the interviews were organized via Facebook Messenger. The interviews were organized between the end of October and the middle of November 2016. The analysing of the data and the results received from the interviews started right after starting the interview process at the end of October and it lasted

more or less until January 2017. The analysis included writing transcripts of the interviews and collecting results and doing conclusions from the answers of the interviewees. In the figure below the whole timeline of the data collection process is presented.
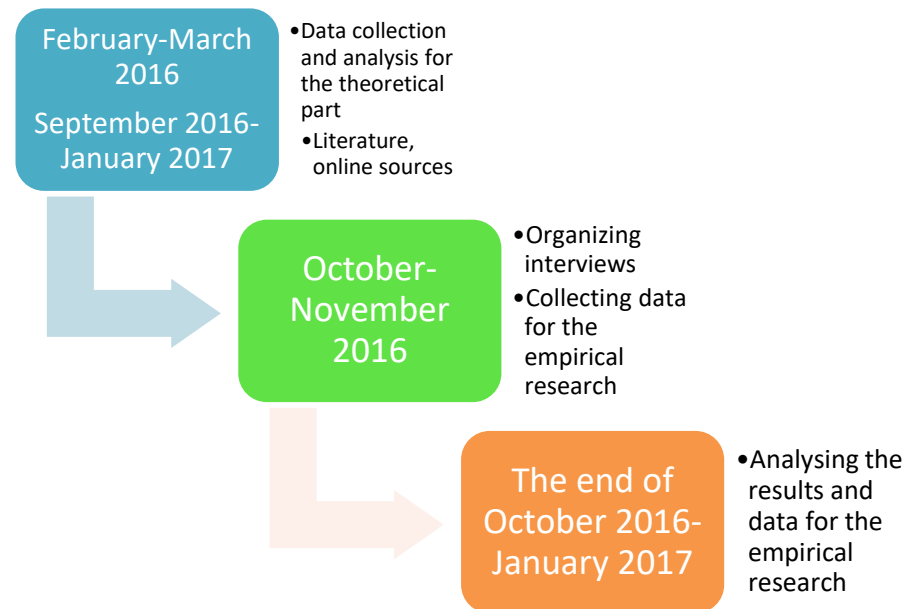


FIGURE 9. The timeline of the data collection

As seen in the figure above, all in all the whole process lasted a year due to the irregular nature of the timing of the process. And finally to summarize the data collection methods, which were executed during this timeline, the primary data for the empirical part of the thesis was collected through interviews and the secondary data for the theoretical part of the thesis was collected from books and online sources.

5.3   Data Analysis & Results

In this chapter the collected data of the interviews will be analysed in detail. Firstly, this chapter will look into the interviews of the personnel of Lahti UAS and go through the interview questions and the results thoroughly. Then the interview questions of the graduated students of the Degree Programme of International Business will be analysed one by one. The goal of this data analysis is to learn more about the current marketing situation and utilization of alumni practices of the Degree Programme in

International Business of Lahti UAS and to form an overview of the attitudes and opinions of the graduated students, who have personal experience from this certain study program, regarding the marketing activities and development by utilizing alumni practices.

5.3.1   Interviews of the Personnel

This chapter will analyse the interviews of the personnel of the Lahti UAS. As mentioned earlier in this part of the thesis, two representatives of the personnel were chosen to the interviews. The first interviewee from the marketing communications department gave insight about the current overall situation of alumni practices and marketing of Lahti UAS. The second interviewee shared information about the same issues specifically from the point of view of the Degree Programme of International Business. Therefore this chapter will go through the interview questions one by one and it will share the results of the questions first from the point of view of the whole Lahti UAS and then more specifically from the point of view of the Degree Programme in International Business. All in all, the goal of these interviews is to create an overview of the current situation in terms of alumni activities and their marketing in Lahti UAS and the Degree Programme in International Business.

1. **All in all, what kind of alumni success stories have been utilized in Lahti UAS (and in the Degree Programme in International Business)?**

According to the representative of the marketing and communications department, some alumni success stories, both domestic and international, has been shared in recent years through the official website and also through the local newspaper Etelä-Suomen Sanomat. Besides alumni success stories, other alumni activities which have been executed already, are lectures held by the alumni and also different projects and internships offered to the current students by alumni. However, the presence of the alumni should be stressed even more to the current students during these activities and alumni could also share their success

stories and experiences during these activities alongside the original activity, such as lecturing. Also different alumni events and seminars have been organized during the past years, where alumni shared stories in form of speeches for the current students. These events have been very popular among the students.

Then, according to the representative of the Degree Programme of International Business in Lahti UAS, there has been no systematic collection and publishing of alumni success stories in this study program yet. The stories about the career paths of graduated students and their life after graduation have been collected only randomly, for example as a student work. Therefore, there is definitely space for more success stories to be published and alumni success stories are still an unused resource for the study program.

2. **How the alumni (and their stories) have already been utilized in marketing and other practices of Lahti UAS (and in the Degree Programme in International Business)?**

All in all alumni are a very important target group of the marketing activities of Lahti UAS. This is a very good thing to keep in mind, because it is very important to preserve active contact with alumni in a regular basis, because alumni are a very important asset in terms of marketing, projects and other activities. The important question is, whether Lahti UAS is approachable enough for the students after their graduation. Every study program has an own alumni representative, who is responsible for the alumni activities of their study program and who operate as contact persons between alumni and the institution. Also graduated students often remain close with the teachers of their study program, and that way remain in contact with the institution. Also an alumni association Lamk alumni ry has been established in 2016 for creating a solid alumni network of all graduated students of Lahti UAS. The alumni association also organizes different alumni events and also does frequent cooperation with the Lahti UAS.

Then, in the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS, there has been no active creation of own alumni network due to the definition of policy, that the Lahti UAS will firstly focus solely on creating a common alumni network for the whole institution. After that it would be possible to start considering about the study program specific alumni activities. Therefore, there have not been specific plans for alumni activities for the Degree Programme in International Business yet. But to name few activities which have been executed by the study program, for example different lectures and talks held by alumni has been organized for the current students.

3. **What kind of effects have these alumni activities and stories had to the Lahti UAS (and to the Degree Programme of International Business)?**
    a. **Is there "demand" for this kind of practices among potential students?**

According to the interviewee, the students and alumni have a lot of interest to act together, so there is a lot of demand for different activities. That is why the contact between the alumni and the institution should be improved even more. All in all, it is very important that even after graduation, alumni would maintain the network which was built during their studies.

Also as for the Degree Programme in International Business, there is demand for alumni activities and alumni success stories among the current students and also among the new potential students. Lectures organized by alumni or talks where alumni has shared their experiences have always received very positive feedback and reactions from the students, because they are very interested in finding out, what possible career paths do the alumni of the study program have and also what kind of possibilities are there after graduation. The success stories from the alumni, to who the students can relate to, might also increase the motivation for studying, because the students will feel encouraged by the stories to achieve their own goals as well.

4. **How the exploitation of alumni could be expanded even more?**

### a. What kind of new things could be done in order to develop the exploitation of alumni?

According to the interviewee, in order to come up with new ways to develop the alumni activities of Lahti UAS, a good idea is to look into what has been done in other universities and gain ideas from their actions. For example, the University of Helsinki organizes a nomination of the "Alumni of the year", which is something that could be a good idea for the Lahti UAS as well. All in all, a good idea is to get inspiration by looking at other universities' websites and to get ideas from them. Along with this the main thing that needs to be developed is the communication between the institution and the alumni.

According to the second interviewee, the alumni activities and communications should be developed to be more systematic. At the moment the system is that the students are only asked about their interest in joining the alumni network only when they are graduating, and therefore the alumni activities could be marketed to the current students already during the time of their studies.  Also the alumni network is for all graduated students of Lahti UAS so also the students from the international study programs are included to the joint network. Regardless of this joint network, at the moment the most communication with the alumni probably happens through the teachers and the network of their own study program. Also one idea that could be utilized also in the Lahti UAS and in the Degree Programme in International Business is an activity, which the Satakunta University of Applied Sciences has performed at their own institution, where they reached out to the entire alumni network by asking the alumni to write short stories about their current situation after graduation, and then presented the received replies at the university campus for the students as greetings from the alumni. Also in the Lahti UAS one idea could be to approach the alumni with similar questionnaire, and to also inquire their willingness to participate to the alumni activities. Also marketing-wise these responses from alumni could be utilized as stories which could be advertised to the potential new students in order to get them interested in applying to Lahti UAS.

5. **How the internationality aspect is being taken into consideration when planning marketing activities and alumni practices?**

In Lahti UAS for marketing activities there are certain target countries depending on the study program, where the institution is marketed, for example by attending to different study fairs. International marketing has been done for example in Russia and in Asia, especially in Vietnam and in China, where Lahti UAS has an own marketing agent. There has been international cooperation also with CIMO, The Centre for International Mobility, for example in Brazil, Asia and Russia. Also a new feature in the international activities is exporting the education especially in the social and health care studies to other countries, such as Arab Emirates. Regarding the marketing activities, the official website is one of the main tools. Concerning the internationality of the institution, it is very important that all media is bilingual, including the official website, intranet Respa and social media. All media of Lahti UAS is both in Finnish and in English and it is very important to keep all of the media equally updated in both languages. Also, all alumni activities pursue to be as international as possible, even though there might be some events and activities, which are only organized in Finnish language. Therefore, especially the communication with international students and alumni needs to be improved. Alumni network also offer their support by providing possibilities for different projects and internships also for international students.

Then regarding the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS, the study program is involved with a joint network with other universities of applied sciences. The network handles especially the marketing of the international study programs of the member institutions. The network is a very useful way to market the institution, because for example Lahti UAS is such a small operator internationally and therefore it is much more efficient to operate together with the other institutions as a part of a bigger picture internationally. Also the international operations, such as different international projects and the student exchange could be highlighted more in the marketing of the Degree Programme in

International Business and used as a marketing tool to attract potential and internationally oriented students.

6. **What will the future hold? What kind of future plans are there for exploiting alumni practices and success stories in Lahti UAS (and in the Degree Programme in International Business)?**

One of the main priorities is the development of Lamk alumni ry, where Lahti UAS will help as much as possible. Also the communication between the alumni and the institution needs to be developed in the future. And what comes to the other activities and events, a good idea would be to discuss with the alumni about their ideas and wishes about what kind of activities should be organized. For example some of the alumni wish to have more professional seminars and networking with companies, whereas some want to work with the students and have activities together with them. Then some of the alumni wish that there would be more shared parties and events, where it would be possible to socialize and network with people. It is important that Lahti UAS will pursue to develop all these different forms of activities equally according to the wishes of alumni and the students as well. Also the alumni could be utilized to attract new students and also current students to join the alumni network more in the future. For example, the alumni representatives of each study program and the alumni association could work on this matter in the future.

Then for the Degree Programme in International Business, a good step towards to the future would be to inquire a possibility to start developing an own alumni network along with the joint alumni network of the whole Lahti UAS, and to create a plan on how to start building and activating the alumni network. One option would be that alumni groups would be formed by country, and each country group would have few active alumni members, who would have a lot of contacts and willingness to develop the network and participate in organizing the activities. These alumni could also be active on communications and update news and greetings from the alumni on a regular basis. There could also be alumni events few times a year, where the alumni could share their stories and experiences

and network with the students. All in all, there are a lot of possibilities in what could be done in the future.

5.3.2   Interviews of the Graduated Students

In this chapter the interviews of the graduated students of the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS will be gone through in detail, and the answers to each interview question will be analysed one by one. As mentioned, all in all six graduated students were interviewed about their opinions about the possible development of alumni activities in terms of marketing in the Degree Programme in International Business. The goal of these interviews is to determine, whether there is demand for such activities according to the opinions of a sampling of students, who have personal experience of the study program. In this analysis each of questions will be gone through question by question and the key points of the answers of the interviews will be summarized as results for each question.

1.  **Please describe your current life situation after graduation. (Are you studying, working, living abroad etc.)**

This question was performed first in order to define the career paths of the interviewed students so far, and to also learn about their current situations after graduation. This question will operate as an introduction to the interview and it is useful for seeing what kind of possibilities are there for the graduates of the study program.

First of all, all of the interviewees have graduated from the Degree Programme in International Business from Lahti UAS in different times, one year ago at the earliest and last autumn at the latest. Five of the interviewees mentioned that they are currently have a job. Also one of the interviewees is currently continuing studies with the master's program, and also another interviewee mentioned an interest for doing a master's degree in the future. Also three of the interviewees currently live in another country, where they are currently working or studying.

2. **Marketing-wise, what kind of things would you like to mention when telling about your experiences of the Degree Programme of International Business in Lahti UAS?**

The Degree Programme in International Business offers interesting and internationally challenging studying environment which brings people out of their comfort zones due to the great variety of cultures represented by many international students. The school also emphasizes international cooperation and activities and offers a great platform for internationalization through student exchange, internships abroad and international courses. In addition, good things to mention are for example sense of community among students, practicality of the studies, location, modern studying environment and premises, free-time activities, interesting selection of courses and cooperation and projects with different companies. Also especially good teachers and good connections to teachers even after graduation are among the important things to point out. Also, some of the interviewees wanted to point out the fact that all the studies are in English. They wanted to decrease the pressure new students might have about studying in a different language and show that even though using it might be difficult at the beginning, when actually studying in English every day and getting used to it, it is possible to find it as an exciting challenge instead of a burden. All in all, the study program offers a comprehensive educational base for the students and for their future.

3. **Do you think that culture and cultural differences have an effect to the choice of study place of different students? And if they do, how?**
   a. **What kind of things people from your own culture emphasize in choosing a study place?**
   b. **Who participates to the decision-making when choosing a study place?**

Some of the interviewees believe that culture has a large impact on the choice of the study place, whereas some believe that instead of culture, location, overall life situation, financial situation, friends in the same life situation and the reputation of the school affect more to the decision of the study place. Also some interviewees believed that culture has some effect to the choice of study place, but that also other factors, such the family and personal interests affect to the choice as well.

When considering different cultures, in Russian culture the reputation of the study place, internationality, career opportunities, sense of community, location and accommodation opportunities are important factors when searching for a study place. Also in Russia the influence of the parents depends on the family, but especially if the parents are financing the studies of their children, they have stronger influence in the selection of the study place. Also parents offer help and support to their children during the selection process especially due to the fact, that in Russia many students apply to the universities at a very young age.

Different career opportunities are also important factors for students coming from Mediterranean countries besides interest to the field of study and the availability of the study places in selection of the study place. In those cultures parents might affect to the decision of the children, but it depends more on the family than on the culture.

In Asia the students want to choose a study place according to its ranking compared to other schools. Especially if the students are coming originally from bigger cities, they want to choose their study place from bigger cities, where there are also more opportunities for activities outside studies and also good possibilities for finding a job. Also parents have an impact on the choice of their children's study place in Asian countries especially if their child is applying to a study place in an another country.

Finnish students are looking for quality, good location and a study place from the field they are the most interested in when they are choosing a study place. In Finland people value the opinions of their parents and

spouses, but at the end of the day, students make their own decisions regarding the choice of the study place.

4. **What kind of things in general students are searching for when they are choosing a study place? What things might have an effect to their choice of university/ study program?**
   a. **In your opinion, what are the advantages of Lahti UAS and its marketing practices, and what in your opinion was missing from the marketing?**

According to the interviewees, important factors every student consider regardless of their culture when choosing a study place are location, selection of the courses, study environment, good facilities, reputation of the institution, level of innovation, career opportunities, professional approach to the studies, international community, personal interest and the level of usefulness of the education in terms of for their future career goals.

Also in terms of Lahti UAS, the institution is very well on display in the Internet and in the social media in the domestic market according to some of the interviewees. Also the design of the brand and the website gained positive feedback. Involvement of real students in the marketing campaign in the form of the pictures used in the website is great, because potential students can feel personal connection to the students in the pictures. Also regarding the Finnish market, in the point of view of a marketing tutor, who has been involved in marketing of Lahti UAS, sharing own personal experiences about the studies to the potential students is very beneficial, because people are very interested in hearing about the actual experiences of students of the institution when considering about applying for studies. Also regarding the international marketing, for example in Russian market Lahti UAS has a good visibility in international study fairs according to one of the interviewees.

On the other hand, even though the marketing of Lahti UAS gained positive feedback, some of the interviewees felt that the visibility of Lahti UAS should be more equally balanced between different target coutries.

For example, in the Asian market, when comparing to other similar institutions, which were presented in the study fairs in Asia, there could have been more visibility from the Lahti UAS as well, whereas in Russia Lahti UAS has been very visible according to the interviewees. Also as one way to increase the amount of awareness among international students, international alumni could operate as representatives for potential students from their home countries, who could ask for advice from them during the applying process. Also special activities organized by Lahti UAS, such as study trips, courses abroad and visiting lectures could be utilized more in marketing as inducements for potential new students. Also important marketing channels to take into account are the Facebook-groups students coming from the same countries have together, because many students get useful tips regarding the studies from there. Therefore, these group pages should be made sure to stay active for example by having representatives from the current students and alumni to update the group pages.

5. **Do you think that alumni could be a useful tool to develop and improve marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS?**
    a. **Do you feel that they would have an influence to the potential new students, who are looking for a study place?**
    b. **If possible, would you be interested in taking part of alumni practices of Lahti UAS yourself?**

All of the interviewees agree that it would be a good idea to utilize the alumni in marketing of the Degree Programme in the International Business, because the personal experiences of the alumni could function as an inducement and as a reference for prospective students and also bring motivation for them.

As potential alumni activities the alumni could for example participate to the study fairs to market the institution and also utilize social media as the main medium, where alumni success stories and updates could be

published. Alumni could also start a blog in the official website, where they could share their stories and update their news to potential and current students. The alumni network could be enhanced by finding inspiration from activities that other similar institutions have executed. There could also be more events, where alumni could network and share their stories, experiences and advice on how they have for example found a job.

All of the interviewees were interested in joining to the alumni network, participating to alumni activities and sharing their stories and experiences to new students. Some of the interviewees also hope that there will be many events and possibilities to participate for also international alumni in the future.

6   DEVELOPMENT PLAN

This chapter will collect the ideas formed from the thesis and create a development plan by utilizing these ideas. The ideas from the theoretical part and from the empirical part will be combined into one plan which purpose is to offer ways for the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS to recognize its current situation and possible needs for improvement in terms of marketing, and also offer tools and methods on how to develop the marketing by utilizing alumni success stories and other operations. As mentioned in the results of the interviews of the personnel, currently there are no individual alumni activities organized solely by the Degree Programme in International Business due to the joint goal of the whole institution to focus on developing joint alumni activities organized by the whole Lahti UAS. But in the case of international study programs, individual alumni activities along with the alumni network of the whole institution would be beneficial for developing the international aspect of the alumni activities of Lahti UAS. Also individual alumni activities of international study programs would develop the international alumni network of Lahti UAS. Therefore, this development plan will introduce the possibility of developing individual alumni activities in terms of marketing for the Degree Programme in International Business.

6.1   Implementation of the Marketing Plan

The development plan for the thesis will be implemented in the form of a marketing plan which has gained inspiration from the marketing plan process which was introduced already in the theory chapter about service marketing. In this development plan the four main steps of the marketing plan introduced in the theory will be adapted to the case of marketing development by alumni practices of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS. The marketing plan from "Marketing Plans for Sevices: A Complete Guide" (McDonald et al. 2011.) offers an efficient tool for careful marketing planning, which starts from setting objectives and pursued results to defining the current situation of the

institution and to planning efficient strategies for the marketing development and to finally determining the available resources and timeframe for the plan. This tool will be utilized in this development plan by adapting parts of it in order to create efficient plan for future development ideas for Lahti UAS and the Degree Programme of International Business. Also along with the four steps adapted from the marketing plan process, objectives, current situation review, strategies and resource allocation, the author will add aspect of internationality to the development plan due to the international nature of the study program.

### 6.1.1  Objectives

The presentation of the development plan will start by defining and suggesting possible objectives and goals that the Degree Programme in International Business and Lahti UAS could achieve by utilizing the plan of marketing development by utilizing alumni practices.

As one of the main objectives of this development plan the aim is to attract even more potential customers, in other words new students, to apply for Lahti UAS. Potential customers want to receive physical evidence of the promised value of the intangible service, in this case the study program, beforehand (Levitt 1981, 43-44). The objective is to utilize positive alumni stories and experiences in order to do that. The another main goal is to stand out from the crowded and competitive market of higher education by utilizing the alumni experiences. The goal of market differentiation is very important, because in order to gain the attention of customers in the crowded market, the institution needs to come up with ideas, which help them stand out (Kotler et al. 2013, 255). One of the goals is to gain more interest from the international students as well with utilizing international alumni experiences to influence their choice of study place. Also objectives of the development plan are building authentic and creative image for Lahti UAS and for the Degree Programme of International Business and developing ways to build and strenghten the alumni network for the Degree Programme of International Business.

6.1.2  Current Situation Review

In order to determine what should be done in order to develop the marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS, there needs to be an idea of the current situation of the study program and the institution. Therefore, this chapter of the development plan will determine and revise the current situation based on the results received from the interviews of the personnel of Lahti UAS.

As stated in the interviews, there has been some amount of alumni stories published in different mediums, such as the website, both in the Degree Programme in International Business and in Lahti UAS in general. However, the exploitation of alumni experiences and stories has not been systematic. Also, other alumni activities have been organized, such as events with alumni talks. Also in terms of international marketing, Lahti UAS has been active for example in Russia and in Asia, where Lahti UAS has participated for example to study fairs. All media, such as the official website and social media are bilingual, so it its targeted also for international students. Also in terms of the Degree Programme in International Business, as stated few times previously, there is no individual alumni activities of the study program and therefore there would be need for development in that matter.

6.2  Strategies

In the case of the Degree Programme in International Business, alumni offers a great possibility to demonstrate the value of the education to potential customers, because as stated by Himmelspach (2013), alumni experiences are named more often to be a motive for students to apply for certain institution.

In this chapter, after defining the starting point of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS, the possible strategies for utilizing alumni in the marketing development are introduced. The strategies are based on the information gained from the theory chapters of the thesis and

also from the results received from the interviews. One of the main strategies which will be implemented in this plan is internal marketing. It is important in order to activate and motivate as many alumni as possible to participate to the marketing activities. Then, relationship marketing towards customers could be developed through positive alumni activities and market differentiation. The strategy of market differentiation will include authentic alumni activities and other things that create a more personal image for the institution. Then finally, because the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS is a study program targeted also for international students, the internationality aspect is a crucial part of its marketing strategy. The internationality aspect will be examined at the end of the chapter.

The strategy of utilizing alumni is advisable to start from the internal internal marketing, because as stated in the interviews of the personnel, the communication between institution and alumni is very important. That way more alumni would stay in touch with the school and participate to the alumni activities even after the graduation. In order to keep the alumni motivated, a good idea would be to increase the amount of free-time activities and get-togethers organized only for alumni in order to increase their motivation to stay active. As stated in the interviews of personnel of Lahti UAS, there has been already similar events and after work get-togethers organized for the alumni, but of course there is always room for more activities. However, regarding the alumni events, it should be taken into consideration that some of the alumni might have moved away, even to a different country. That is why there needs to be ways to participate also for those who cannot join to the events organized on the spot. For example, ways to communicate and reunite could be developed in the Internet as well, for example there could be a group chat in Facebook and other similar ways of communication for alumni so that everyone regarless their location could join to the communication. Also in order to motivate alumni, it is important to discuss with them and include their opinions for the planning of future alumni activities because that way alumni would feel

that their opinions are valued and taken into consideration (Hanover Research 2015, 25).

The contact with alumni could be more systematic. For example the alumni representatives of the study programs could take care of contacting alumni in a regular basis. Also when considering possible ways to develop the communication with alumni, a good strategy was discussed in the interview of the representative of the Degree Programme of International Business, who shared an idea about the messages sent to the alumni network in Satakunta University of Applied Sciences. Similar communication would be effective also for the Lahti UAS and the Degree Programme in International Business. There could be systematic contact for example via email to the whole alumni network, where their current life situations and also their interest to participate to the alumni activities could be inquired. This way news about the alumni and their interest to join would be received on a regular basis.

Because the alumni network is filled with different personalities, alumni and their individual experiences are a great tool to utilize in market differentiation and in bringing authenticity and more personal connection to the marketing strategy of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS (Baker 2015). Alumni could be the ambassadors of the study program and advertise their positive experiences for potential new customers. Traditional activities, such as different campus visits, seminars and recruitment events including alumni and their talks, are efficient in terms of marketing. Also there is room for creativity when planning different activities, for example flash-mobs are a creative and interactive way of raising awareness about the institution. (Hanover Research 2014, 3-8.) Also alumni could participate to the different study fairs, where they could share their experiences, stories and advice to potential students. Also one idea for raising awareness of the alumni is to organize different nominations, such as the "Alumni of the year" nomination.

Alumni could be active in various modes of media, such as in the official website of the institution and in the social media sites, such as Facebook

and Instagram. There could also be own social media accounts for alumni, where alumni could shares stories and experiences. Alumni could for example organize an own Instagram blog, where they would share news and updates about their daily life and studying experiences in form of pictures. Also the marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business could utilize the features, that the alumni recommend to be the benefits of the study program in their marketing. For example, in the interviews conducted for the research, the alumni mentioned the international environment and cooperation along with many possibilities for internationalization along with many other advantages as the main benefits of the study program. These recommendations of alumni should be utilized as inducements in the marketing strategy.

Also, with stories alumni can bring their message forth to the target audience and therefore it would be beneficial to create more systematic sharing of the alumni success stories. As mentioned in the interviews of the graduated students, for example an alumni blog or articles in the official website would be efficient ways to share alumni stories to the audience on a regular basis. Also more creative format would be video blogs, where alumni could share their stories and experiences (DeClerck 2016). More interactive way to share stories would be through events, such as seminars, where alumni could share their stories to the audience of interested potential students (DeClerck 2016).

6.3   International Aspect

International students are an important target group of the study program. In order to attract international students, Lahti UAS needs to have visibility abroad (Hanover Research 2014, 15-17). According to the interviews of the graduated students the amount of international marketing activities executed by Lahti UAS could be more balanced and international activities could be divided more equally between target countries. Also an idea, which came up from the interviews of the graduated students, suggested that international alumni could operate as representatives and menthors

for new students who are applying for the study program from their home countries, and help them by giving advice and useful tips. Also if possible, international alumni could attend to the study fairs and other marketing activities in their home countries.

Also, based on the interviews, there could be more international alumni events organized in Lahti UAS. More events could be for example organized in English, so that everyone, also international students, would be able to join. For example alumni blogs and other shared updates could be targeted to international students and therefore they could be written also in English. For the individual alumni activities of the study program, own country groups for alumni from different countriescould be formed, and inside these groups the most active members could maintain the activities and update the news from the alumni to different mediums, for example to social media. The active alumni could also maintain contact with other alumni and engage them to also join to the alumni activities.

## 6.4   Resource Allocation

The final step of the development plan is to discuss about the resourcing and also to present a tentative one-year plan for possible activities as a suggestion created by the author based on the theory and the results from the interviews conducted for this thesis.

When shortly examining the resources of this development plan from the financial point of view, utilizing alumni as representatives and promoters of the study program is financially very low-cost marketing strategy, especially if social media, and other low-cost mediums are utilized. (Baker 2015). The main resource utilized for this strategy is the time and effort of the alumni of the study program. Therefore, in order to succeed, this strategy needs active members, for example the alumni representatives, who will maintain the activities on a regular basis. All in all, this resource allocation will focus on creating a tentative one-year plan for marketing development, which could be executed by the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS.

6.4.1   One-year Plan

The one-year plan for this development plan will be executed in a form of a table which will present options for activities that could be executed by the study program in a course of one year.

TABLE 1. One-year plan for marketing activities

| The month | The activity |
|---|---|
| July | Plans for contacting the alumni network. |
| August | • Contact the whole alumni network (questionnaire, email) and collect the responses.<br>• The commucation should continue on a regular basis. |
| September | • Gather active alumni to plan future activities, form country groups from the international alumni. Meetings with the alumni should be organized on a regular basis.<br>• Plan social media updates for alumni, activate own social media accounts or blogs for alumni.<br>• Back to school- event with alumni for welcoming new students. |
| October | • Marketing activities and an event or a campus tour for potential new students regarding the upcoming application period of international study programs in January.<br>• Include alumni to promote the study program for future students. |
| November | Plan international activities, for example the participation of the international alumni to the study fairs of their home countries. |
| December | Alumni participating to the annual Studia-fair as promoters. |
| January | • The application period for international study programs. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • Engage alumni to operate as mentors for the new applying students internationally and also domestically. |
| **February** | New social media meeting with the alumni including planning new posts and innovative updates, videos and others. |
| **March** | There could also be an event featuring alumni talks in the spring semester. |
| **April** | • Contact alumni and collect alumni stories.<br>• This should be executed on a regular basis. |
| **May** | • Organize international event for the alumni to network with each other and to feel motivated for participating to alumni activities.<br>• Consider also other methdos of communication for the alumni, for example own Facebook-groups. |
| **June** | Make sure alumni maintains activity in social media, in the blogs and other mediums even during the summer. |

In the table above the suggestions for the monthly marketing operations of the Degree Programme of International Business are presented. The one-year plan starts from the middle of the calendar year, because in the opinion of the author it is more functional to start from the beginning of the academic year instead of the calendar year. This one-year plan can be used as directional manual for possible marketing activities executed by the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti UAS. Even though there are two application periods per year, the plan is created from the point of view of the application period on January. The author believes that it is advisable to start the activities by focusing on one of the application periods in the first year of implementation. Later on, this plan can also be utilized and adapted to match to the both application periods.

7    CONCLUSION

This chapter is the conclusion of the thesis which will collect the results, conclusions and information received from the thesis and from the whole research process. In this chapter the author will first answer to the research questions presented in the introduction of this thesis. Then the author will examine the validity and reliability of this study and give suggestions on futher research about this topic.

7.1    Answers for Research Questions

All in all, the main purpose of the thesis was to find ways to develop the marketing of the Degree Programme of International Business in Lahti UAS by utilizing alumni and their experiences. Therefore, the main research question of the thesis, as stated in the introduction was:

**How alumni and their experiences and ideas could be utilized in the marketing of the Degree Programme of International Business at Lahti UAS?**

In this chapter the main research question will be answered last after the author has gone through all the sub-questions which were also stated in the introduction of the thesis. The answers to the sub-questions of the thesis will be reviewed below.

**How to market an intangible product?**

When marketing an intangible product, the marketer needs to present physical evidence of the actual quality of the product for the customers, because due to the intangible nature, it is not possible to review the product before the purchase. That way the customers can get an idea of the quality of the product beforehand. (Anctil 2008 31-32.) Because providing intangible products usually includes communication between the service provider and the customer, it is important to practice also internal marketing to keep the personnel content and motivated. That way they offer better service for the customers and more loyal customers are

gained. (Kotler et al. 2013, 253.) The expanded version of the original marketing mix is also an efficient way to market intangible products due to the three extra features included to the original product, place, price, promotion and place. These new features are people, processes and customer service. Some also want to include physical evidence to these features. (McDonald et al. 2011, 37-38.) Also it is important to stand out from the others by efficient market differentiation (Kotler et al. 2013, 255).

**What are the main features of an efficient marketing strategy for higher education?**

Due to the intangible nature of higher education institutions, the best way is to market them as intangible services (Enache 2011, 23). First of all, careful market planning is an essential part of an efficient strategy. Also targeting to the right customer groups and creating customer segmentation are crucial parts of a good strategy. For this it is crucial to examine the customer base and their consumer behaviour. (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006, 328-332.) Because in the field of education marketing there is a lot of competition among different institutions, it is very important to create a competitive advantage which helps the institution to stand out from the crowd. Also creating a creative and compelling brand is an important part of an efficient marketing strategy. (Hanover Research 2014, 3-8.) Also, reputation management and development of a good image are essential parts of creation of the brand (Gibbs & Maringe 2009, 136). In addition, because recruitment is a large part of the operations of the institutions, efficient marketing of the recruitment processes belongs to a successful marketing strategy for higher education institutions. All in all, there needs to be exploitation of the right marketing means to attract potential customers to recruit. (Hanover Research 2014, 14.)

**How storytelling can be beneficial for marketing practices?**

Storytelling is an effective marketing tool, which helps companies to bring their personalities forth to their customers. Stories used in marketing are able to strengthen the brand and also to draw the interest of potential

customers. Stories have an ability to excite, inspire, motivate and also to appeal to the emotions of the customers. That way the customers will feel more connected to the brand and might become more loyal customers. (DeClerck 2016.) Storytelling is also a great way to renew the image of the company and give more positive image from the company. People are also keen on remembering stories which have touched them on an emotional level and therefore it is highly probable that the company will stick in the minds of the customers better. (Katz 2016.)

**How alumni practices are already utilized in the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS?**

The alumni activities of the study program have not been systematic. There has been publication of some alumni stories once in a while. Also, some stories from international students which have been written in English have been collected. Also other activities, such as lectures have been organized. There have not been individual alumni activities for the Degree Programme in International Business because of the common guidelines, that Lahti UAS will first focus on creating a joint alumni network for the whole institution. All in all, in terms of marketing, especially for this specific study program there has not been systematic marketing activities utilizing alumni so far.

After the answers to the sub-questions, the main research question will now be answered based on the results received from the research.

**How alumni and their experiences and ideas could be utilized in the marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business at Lahti UAS?**

In order for the exploitation of alumni activities to maintain a productive level, all activities regarding alumni and the marketing strategy need to be more systematic. In order to underlay the effective marketing operations with alumni, first thing to do is to attract alumni to stay active and in contact even after graduation. Through internal marketing the relations between the institution and alumni can be improved. The communication

with alumni should be maintained on a regular basis and alumni could be attracted to participate more by organizing different interesting events and also by involving alumni more to the market planning. With alumni the relationship between the institution and the potential students may be improved, because as former students alumni are able to create more personal connection to the prospective students. Authentic experiences of alumni are a useful tool for market differentiation. Through stories alumni can operate as content creators and share their experiences to new students. Stories can be shared in many different mediums, such as in social media, where alumni could have their own account in different websites or even an own blog. Alumni can also attend to study fairs, seminars and tours, where they can share their experiences in person. Regarding the internationality of the study program, also international alumni are an important part of the alumni network, because for example they are able to expand the marketing activities to their home countries. All in all, in order for this plan to work, there needs to be active members or alumni representatives, who maintain the activities regularly.

## 7.2    Validity and Reliability

This chapter will determine the reliability and validity of this research. Concering the objectives and the research questions that were stated at the beginning of the thesis, each of them were addressed and answered in this thesis. Also regarding the data collection of the thesis, the data was collected from secondary and primary sources. The secondary data was collected from literature, such as books, articles and also from electronic sources, such as articles and professional blogs. The primary data was collected from qualitative interviews of two representatives of the personnel of Lahti UAS and six graduated students of the Degree Programme in International Business. The interviews of the personnel offered a valid overview of the current situation of the study program and the institution, and information about the things that needs to be developed. The interviews of the graduated students also offered a good general idea about their views regarding the study program and the needs

for development due to the fact that they all had personal experience from the study program. All in all, the interviews offered valid information from the study program and the alumni network, and also reliable opinions about the development of marketing by alumni practices. Therefore, the author believes that the thesis can be considered as valid and reliable.

## 7.3   Suggestions on Further Research

The research conducted for the thesis focused mainly on the results received from the interviews and on the theoretical information. Therefore, regarding further research of this topic, the author suggests that an advisable thing to research more is the actions of other similar institutions regarding the alumni activities and their exploitation in marketing, as the topic entails. Further research could focus on gaining inspiration and ideas from these similar institutions and their alumni activities by benchmarking their alumni operations and researching, whether some institutions are already utilizing alumni in their marketing activities and getting ideas about how do they do it.

8   SUMMARY

In the final chapter of the thesis, there will be a detailed summary about the content of the thesis. All in all, the objective of the thesis was to find ways to develop marketing of Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS by utilizing alumni practices, experiences and stories.

The thesis started with an introduction which gave a comprehensive overview on what the thesis is going to include. In the introduction the topic and its background were described. Also the research and data collection methods utilized in the thesis process were introduced along with the research questions and the thesis structure.

The theoretical part of the thesis examined the main theories which supported the overall thesis topic. First, the thesis examined marketing of intangible products and important features and strategies concerning it. The theory of intangible marketing is crucial in order to understand marketing operations of higher education institutions due to their intangible nature. Therefore, the next theory of the thesis addressed marketing of higher education and effective strategies related to that. Both of these theories are important in underlaying the main thesis topic, which is concerning the development of marketing of a higher education institution. The final theory chapter introduced storytelling as a supporting marketing tool which could be one method to utilize when executing the main topic of the thesis, market development by utilizing alumni practices. The thesis pointed out the efficiency of storytelling in expressing alumni experiences in marketing.

After the theoretical part of the thesis, the empirical research conducted for the thesis was presented. First the research design and also the methods utilized in executing the empirical research were introduced. The empirical research was conducted in the form of interviews of  the personnel of Lahti UAS and of the graduated students of the Degree Programme in International Business. The objective of the interviews was to gain an

overview of the current situation of the study program and also ideas for development. Also the goal was to collect opinions of the study program in general and of the idea of utilizing alumni in the marketing from the graduated students.

Based on the theoretical information and on the results received from the interviews, a development plan about the development of marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business was created. The development plan focused on creating ways to develop marketing of the study program by alumni practices and to strengthen the alumni network of the study program in order to attract alumni to participate to these alumni activities as active members. Also at the end of the development plan, a tentative one-year plan for the alumni oriented marketing activities was introduced.

Finally in the conclusion of the thesis, the research questions stated in the introduction were answered based on the information received from the thesis. Also the validity and reliability of the thesis were analysed and suggestions for further research were given.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1. Interview questions of the personnel of Lahti University of Applied Sciences.

1. All in all, what kind of alumni success stories have been utilized in Lahti UAS (and in the Degree Programme in International Business)?

2. How the alumni (and their stories) have already been utilized in marketing and other practices of Lahti UAS (and in the Degree Programme in International Business)?

3. What kind of effects have these alumni activities and stories had to the Lahti UAS (and to the Degree Programme in International Business)?
   a. Is there "demand" for this kind of practices among potential students?

4. How the exploitation of alumni could be expanded even more?
   a. What kind of new things could be done in order to develop the exploitation of alumni?

5. How the internationality aspect is being taken into consideration when planning marketing activities and alumni practices?

6. What will the future hold? What kind of future plans are there for exploiting alumni practices and success stories in Lahti UAS (and in the Degree Programme in International Business)?

APPENDIX 2. Interview questions of the graduated students of the Degree Programme in International Business of Lahti University of Applied Sciences

1. Please describe your current life situation after graduation. (Are you studying, working, living abroad etc.)

2. Marketing-wise, what kind of things would you like to mention when telling about your experiences of the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS?

3. Do you think that culture and cultural differences have an effect to the choice of study place of different students? And if they do, how?
   a. What kind of things people from your own culture emphasize in choosing a study place?
   b. Who participates to the decision-making when choosing a study place?

4. What kind of things in general students are searching for when they are choosing a study place? What things might have an effect to their choice of university/ study program?
   a. In your opinion, what are the advantages of Lahti UAS and its marketing practices, and what in your opinion was missing from the marketing?

5. Do you think that alumni could be a useful tool to develop and improve marketing of the Degree Programme in International Business in Lahti UAS?
   a. Do you feel that they would have an influence to the potential new students, who are looking for a study place?
   b. If possible, would you be interested in taking part of alumni practices of Lahti UAS yourself?