

Enhancing The Student Image In Higher Education Institutions: Current Status And Future Outlook

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Abstract

Objective: This article aimed to address the challenge of shaping the image of students in higher education institutions and provide recommendations to improve it. **Methodology:** A comprehensive survey was administered to stakeholders involved in the educational process to evaluate the contemporary student's image perceptions. Data collection and analysis comprised both quantitative and qualitative methods, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. **Results:** The study findings disclosed perspectives from student participants on the positive and negative facets of their images. These insights were crucial for the development of recommendations designed to create more favorable student images within higher education settings. Notably, the survey results revealed novel approaches to generating impactful improvements, emphasizing the

significance of encouraging students to develop their professional personas in alignment with their individual career aspirations. **Conclusions:** In conclusion, this study determined that fostering a positive image among students at higher education institutions necessitates targeted strategies that acknowledge diverse personal and professional goals. By providing tailored recommendations based on the findings, the article contributes valuable insights to the ongoing conversation about enhancing the overall student image in higher education institutions.

Keywords: Student perception, Higher education, Student image, Personal development, Academic environment, Career aspirations.

Introduction

Contemporary higher education institutions face the persistent challenge of developing a positive image for their students, one that can enhance the overall educational experience and outcomes (Plachynda, Dovga, & Levchenko, 2019). A favorable student image contributes to improved self-processes, including self-reflection, self-development, self-improvement, and self-actualization, all of which are instrumental in advancing a student's academic and professional career.

Problem Statement. With ongoing reforms in educational units across Ukraine, the importance of fostering a positive image among higher education students is increasingly relevant. As students navigate through this pivotal stage in their lives, engaging with various self-processes such as self-reflection, self-development, self-improvement, and self-realization (Plachynda et al., 2023), becomes essential for optimal intellectual, physical, and creative growth. These self-processes lay the groundwork for a successful future, particularly in educational and professional domains.

Background. The image of student youth has recently garnered significant interest from researchers due to its critical role in shaping young individuals' beliefs and self-concepts during their intellectual and physical development (Geary & Xu, 2022). This period hides illusions that intellectual and physical strength will always accompany a person, and that success can be achieved thanks to beauty and youth, without making any special efforts. Consequently, it is crucial to motivate young people at this stage to cultivate a positive image, combining both external and internal elements. While external factors include visual attractiveness, physical perfection, healthy appearance, and good manners, the internal aspects emphasize an individual's mentality, moral qualities, volitional characteristics, general culture, and professional competence.

Objectives. The primary objective of our research project, as presented in this article, is to investigate future professionals' attitudes toward their image and develop evidence-based recommendations for shaping a positive individual image.

Basis of the Research. This study relies on a comprehensive survey of future professionals, providing insight into the relationship between students' self-image and their attitudes toward personal development. By examining diverse factors such as mentality, moral values, and professional competence, this research aims to identify key areas that may require targeted intervention to enhance the overall image of students in higher education institutions in Ukraine.

Acknowledging the critical role of student image in higher education, this study explores the current status of students' self-perceptions and investigates the underlying factors that can contribute both positively and negatively to these perceptions. Furthermore, the study proposes recommendations for improving the student image in higher education institutions, fostering a supportive academic environment that can bolster students' personal and career development.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars from various countries have identified critical factors that contribute to the formation of a higher education student's image, including professional competence (Prokopenko et al., 2020), socio-professional maturity (Danylov, 2021), professional self-development, professional mobility, and professional ethics. An essential aspect of socio-professional maturity, as described by Radul (2019), is an individual's ability to perceive and understand oneself, maintain a certain attitude and behavior within their environment, have a self-contemplative image, and manifest specific traits and properties as an active entity (p. 175). This comprehensive view of oneself also involves emotional experiences, self-esteem, and typical methods employed in their day-to-day interactions.

Prima (2009) asserts that professional mobility of a specialist necessitates the presence of professionally significant qualities such as individual image, adaptability, autonomy, communication skills, prompt thinking, goal-orientation, responsibility, critical thinking, self-confidence, and self-control (p. 148). Within the Ukrainian context, pedagogues emphasize the importance of fostering personal and

professional qualities in future specialists as a prerequisite for their professional success and marketability in the workforce.

The image is regarded as a universal characteristic encompassing a complex spectrum of personal and professional attributes (Paranthaman et al., 2020). With the ongoing reform of higher education in Ukraine, not only are quality and professional training requirements evolving, but the image of student youth is also transforming. The generalized image of a student is integral to the overall impression of a university, influencing public perception, institutional rankings, participation in promising projects, expansion of international relations, and the influx of applicants, all of which contribute to the university's competitiveness.

Both domestic and foreign researchers have investigated the image of higher education students, applying various methodologies. As an example, Valeeva (2016) defines the student image as a personal property of the individual, reflecting their self-concept through a combination of visual attributes, behaviors, and internal and external biosocial characteristics within a specific environment. This image enables optimal integration into society and the effective pursuit of activities in their chosen social practice domain (p. 11).

From the researcher's perspective, the structure of a student's image integrates various components, including natural (physical, psychophysiological, age, gender), and socio-behavioral aspects (visual, auditory, olfactory, kinesthetic characteristics; individual lifestyle, role-playing interactions, morality, and emotional-volitional qualities of a professional) (Hanhal et al., 2022).

Zherebnenko (2008) posits the image of a professional at the core of a student's image, as the student represents a future professional who must refine their fundamental attributes during their professional preparation. The researcher identifies the following components in the professional's image: external (visual attractiveness, harmony, demeanor, facial expressions, gestures, voice timbre and strength, attire, gait, etc.), procedural (behavioral style, self-presentation, communication style, professionalism, adaptability), and internal aspects (individual's inner world, knowledge, abilities, understanding of their spiritual, moral, and intellectual development, needs, and values) (p. 14).

Dovga (2018) in her research highlights that contemporary students are not immune to societal changes. Like the vast majority of young people, they follow trends and invest in their appearance. Within the student community, the prevailing notion is that being fashionable

primarily involves adhering to trends in clothing and accessories. Consequently, students often allocate considerable funds to crafting their own fashionable image (purchasing expensive clothing, luxury fragrances, cutting-edge mobile gadgets, etc.), but undervalue the ability to dress appropriately and with taste, while developing their individual style, considering fashion trends, and beyond (p. 29).

In this context, the researcher Prins (2022) suggests drawing students' attention to the social-image function of clothing, which signifies an individual's affiliation with a specific profession, income level, ethnic or regional origin. Clothing facilitates self-expression, individualization, and builds connections with people from certain social circles. Dressing appropriately is one of the main principles of fashion (Nimon, 2020); looking good demonstrates respect for those around us. Through clothing, an individual establishes their presence and cultivates a distinct image in the eyes of the public (Dovga, 2018).

Podgurska (2016) focuses on examining the linguistic component of the modern student's image. The researcher highlights the importance of using so-called fashionable words that emphasize the contemporary and avant-garde (occasionally bohemian or elite) aspects of the speaker while simultaneously showcasing a national and multicultural personality. This approach is integral to shaping a student's "modernity" as these words are frequently employed in various contexts. Therefore, following this direction can also guide educators in forming students' linguistic image (p. 350).

Alves and Raposo (2010) have proposed a model that reflects the impact of an image on student satisfaction and loyalty. Their model illustrates that image is the construct that most significantly influences student satisfaction. They emphasize that the image also has considerable relevance when it comes to student loyalty. In their research, the scientists describe the specific influences of image on student satisfaction and loyalty, as well as their respective levels of influence.

Some researchers aimed to investigate the relationships between cognitive, affective, and overall university image as a precedent for student satisfaction. The researchers stressed that fostering a positive university image is crucial for students' interest in successful learning (Azoury, Daou, & Khoury, 2014).

Maymon, Hall, and Harley (2019) emphasized the importance of perceptions of actual support received in relation to stress and well-being among first-year students attending Canadian and U.S. higher education institutions.

Upon analyzing the scientific sources concerning the aforementioned issue, it was concluded that there is a lack of research focusing on the student image in the context of future professional success. In order to determine the significance of forming a positive image for student youth, a survey involving university students was conducted (Plachynda et al., 2023), and based on the results, specific recommendations were provided.

Method

Following our previously published study on high school teachers' images (Plachynda et al, 2019; Plachynda et al., 2023), we were motivated by the students' interest and involvement in the interviews to continue our research on the student image during higher education institutions' educational processes.

For this purpose, we created a questionnaire using Google Forms and distributed it amongst higher education students through various online networks. The participants included 263 respondents from diverse universities such as pedagogical, medical, and economic institutions. Among them, 194 students (75.2%) were pursuing a bachelor's degree, and 64 (24.8%) were pursuing a master's degree. There were 180 women (69.2%) and 80 men (30.8%) involved in the study. The Google Forms platform automatically calculated the participants' responses.

The choice of a questionnaire as a data collection method allowed us to gather information from a diverse sample, ensuring reliability and generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, this method facilitated the efficient gathering of opinions and ideas aligned with the research topic.

The questionnaire consisted of various questions addressing essential aspects of a student's image in higher education institutions, such as appearance, behavior, academic success, communication, extracurricular activities, and language proficiency. The goal was to understand the students' perspectives and offer recommendations for cultivating a positive image.

The research design encompassed a descriptive, cross-sectional approach, which allowed for the analysis of students' perspectives at a specific point in time. This approach was chosen as it enabled us to achieve our primary research objective of understanding students' opinions on pertinent image-related aspects and identifying ways to improve the student image in higher education institutions.

This study's methodology involved creating a comprehensive questionnaire distributed through online networks, encompassing an array of questions related to a student's image. The descriptive, cross-sectional research design allowed us to effectively capture students' opinions and provide valuable insights for cultivating a positive student image in higher education institutions.

Results

In this section, we present the key findings obtained during our research. These results serve as the building blocks for our analysis and discussion, enabling us to deepen our understanding of the issue at hand and identify potential directions for change and decision-making. Our aim is to provide the reader with a vivid, persuasive, and detailed picture of the detected patterns, trends, and relationships, based on a thorough analysis of the collected data and conducted experiments.

The majority of respondents (219 people, or 84.6%) recognize the importance of a student's appearance. Almost all interviewees believe that students must comply with proper conduct: 133 people (51.2%) consider it very important, while 122 people (46.9%) view it as important.

Respondents' attitudes towards visible tattoos among future professionals were distributed as follows: 129 people (49.6%) were indifferent, 51 people (19.6%) had a positive attitude, and 80 people (30.8%) disapproved of visible tattoos.

The use of obscene language by students concerned the majority of respondents (155 people, or 59.6%), while 63 people (24.2%) were indifferent to such remarks and 42 people (16.2%) were not bothered by them.

According to 197 respondents (77.6%), the use of personal electronic devices during the educational process positively affects academic success. Twenty-eight people (11%) perceived a negative impact from gadgets, and 29 people (11.4%) believed that the use of these devices did not affect academic performance. However, during the current global pandemic and martial law in Ukraine, the role of personal electronic devices (computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc.) is becoming significantly more important. Their benefits are difficult to overestimate.

It is reassuring that the majority of respondents (242 people, or 94.9%) acknowledged the importance of communication with fellow

students. Only 13 people (5.1%) indicated that communicating with peers was not important to them.

In terms of the importance of being an active student, responses were as follows: very important – 66 people (26%), important – 159 people (62.6%), and not important – 29 people (11.4%).

Unfortunately, the vast majority of surveyed future specialists do not consistently adhere to a healthy lifestyle (157 people, or 61.4%), while 17 people (6.6%) neglect it entirely. Only 82 people (32%) always follow the principles of a healthy lifestyle.

Cultural and entertainment events were frequently attended by 51 respondents (19.9%), occasionally by 190 (74.2%), and never by 15 (5.9%).

Regarding the educational process at the university, 159 respondents (62.1%) believed that students should take the initiative. According to 93 people (36.3%), active participation was necessary, while 4 people (1.6%) thought it was enough to be a passive observer in the educational process.

A total of 240 respondents (93.4%) valued the knowledge of foreign languages in addition to their native tongue.

The findings from this study offer crucial insights into how students' images within higher education institutions are perceived, which is vital to help shape a more inclusive and supportive academic environment. By understanding the attitudes and preferences concerning students' appearances and self-expression, decision-makers and educational institutions can develop better strategies for maximizing their development, engagement, and success (Oh & Choi, 2020). Taking these results into account, administrators and educators can establish policies and guidance that consider the diverse ways in which students express themselves. By fostering an inclusive atmosphere that embraces various forms of self-expression, higher education institutions can empower their students, improve their experience, and ultimately enhance overall student outcomes.

Respondents in our research display an overall open-minded and accepting attitude towards different types of body modifications, excluding implants. The modifications that participants reacted to more favorably included make-up, tattoos, piercings, and nail art. These forms of self-expression are increasingly common in contemporary society, with many people utilizing them to convey their individuality, personality, and values. As cultural norms evolve, the acceptance of body

modifications like tattoos and piercings has grown significantly. These trends may also be affecting societal perceptions of student images in higher education institutions, possibly leading to more inclusive and diverse environments. However, it is crucial to acknowledge and respect the diverse opinions regarding body modifications within communities (Cristiana, 2016), as well as the potential implications they may have on academic and professional settings. By understanding the implications of these attitudes, educators and institutions can work towards fostering an inclusive atmosphere that respects and embraces individuals' unique forms of self-expression.

Regarding the positive image traits in students, there is a considerable diversity of opinions, underscoring the multifaceted and integrated nature of a university student's image. Nevertheless, almost all respondents prioritize proper appearance (neat attire, clean footwear, well-groomed hair, subtle makeup, and unobtrusive jewelry) as a key factor in forming a positive image.

The second most important aspect is personal character traits, such as politeness, restraint, elegance, tolerance, patience, empathy, modesty, honesty, kindness, and respect for elders. These attributes not only contribute to a positive environment but also promote healthy relationships among students and faculty members (Rusticus, Pashootan, & Mah, 2023). Fostering and encouraging the development of these character traits in students is crucial for building a cohesive and collaborative community within academia. The cultivation of these qualities can lead to improved outcomes in various aspects of higher education, such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence. Additionally, nurturing these attributes contributes to the holistic growth and personal development of students, preparing them for success in future employment and social interactions.

Responsibility and personal initiative (e.g., discipline, proactiveness, punctuality, motivation, perseverance, self-reliance, diligence, intellectual curiosity, and determination) also contribute to the positive image of a university student. Discipline and responsibility lay the foundation for academic success by providing stability and organization in tackling tasks and decisions (Ali et al., 2021). Proactiveness and punctuality help students handle unpredictable situations and adapt to changes quickly. Motivation and perseverance facilitate progress towards educational and personal goals, while self-reliance and diligence aid in problem-solving and the development of self-learning skills. Intellectual curiosity and determination contribute to

interdisciplinary learning and research advancements, nurturing a student's intellectual growth and academic progression.

Cultivating and showcasing these qualities is vital for a university student's successful journey and positive integration into the educational community. Students possessing these qualities often become indispensable members of their academic environment.

Another notable aspect of a university student's positive image is a strong commitment to learning (Lu, 2021). This commitment is exemplified by traits such as being hardworking, goal-oriented, confident, diligent, inquisitive, conscientious, attentive, and eager to acquire knowledge. These attributes foster academic growth and intellectual development, ensuring that students actively engage in their education and make the most of their time at university (Volpe et al., 2020). Furthermore, such qualities enable students to contribute effectively to group projects, discussions, and research activities, thereby establishing a cooperative and productive learning environment. Ultimately, cultivating these characteristics fosters personal and professional advancement, as well as enriching the broader academic community.

Respondents also emphasized the importance of well-developed communication skills, which include speech and interpersonal etiquette, sense of humor, cheerfulness, friendliness, and tolerance.

Furthermore, participants in the discussion highlighted the significance of additional attributes such as creativity, self-assurance, ambition, and initiative, which are instrumental in shaping a well-rounded university student. Creativity fosters innovative problem-solving skills (Livotov, 2020) and improves critical thinking, while self-assurance enables students to face challenges with confidence, promoting overall personal growth. Ambition drives students to aspire for greater achievements, pushing them to reach their full potential. Lastly, initiative empowers students to take charge of their learning process, promoting a proactive and self-directed educational experience. These qualities, in conjunction with the aforementioned traits, contribute to the development of a successful and positive image for university students.

Upon analyzing the responses, we were able to identify the activities and behaviors that contribute to a negative image among university students. These include using offensive language, engaging in unhealthy habits, displaying unwillingness to learn, negligence, indifference to academics, aggression, hypocrisy, irresponsibility, self-importance, exhibiting dysfunctional behavior, ignoring conduct rules

during educational processes, tardiness, breaching etiquette, displaying a negative attitude toward instructors, being judgmental, demonstrating absent-mindedness, deceptiveness, impulsiveness, dishonesty, insolence, insensibility, and incoherence. Having excessive numbers of tattoos or other body modifications also contributed to the negative perception.

Also, we identified various problematic areas in the context of enhancing the student image in higher education institutions and propose potential solutions to address these challenges (Table 1).

Table 1. Addressing Problematic Areas in Higher Education: Potential Solutions for Enhancing the Student Image

	Problematic Areas	Potential Solutions
1	Lack of focus on non-academic skills: higher education institutions often place heavy emphasis on academic performance, while neglecting the importance of developing non-academic skills such as communication, leadership, teamwork, and emotional intelligence.	Implement holistic educational programs that incorporate skill-building workshops and extracurricular activities, fostering well-rounded students who excel in various aspects of their lives.
2	Insufficient engagement with the local community: students may not optimize opportunities to create a positive image through collaborative projects and community engagement.	Encourage students to participate in volunteer work, internships, and local community projects, boosting both their personal development and the institution's reputation.
3	Financial constraints inhibiting personal growth: some students are unable to pursue self-improvement initiatives or participate in extracurricular activities due to financial limitations.	Universities should consider providing financial assistance or scholarships to deserving students, enabling them to broaden their horizons.
4	Mental health concerns affecting student image: a	Create comprehensive mental health support

	notable percentage of university students face mental health challenges, which may negatively impact their ability to maintain a positive student image.	services within the institution, offering counseling, workshops, peer support groups, and stress management resources.
5	Lack of centralization in image-enhancement efforts: there is an absence of a cohesive structure guiding and coordinating strategies to improve the overall university student image.	Establish a coordinating body that plans and implements image-enhancement initiatives, regularly evaluating the status and effectiveness of such initiatives within the institution.

By addressing these problematic areas, higher education institutions can effectively contribute to the overall enhancement of the student image. This improvement in perception leads to a marked increase in student confidence as they feel more competent in their abilities and better prepared to face future challenges. As a result, students engage more actively in their academic and extracurricular pursuits, demonstrating a higher degree of motivation and dedication towards their goals. Furthermore, by tackling these challenges, institutions will be able to create a supportive academic environment, fostering a sense of community and belonging among students. This atmosphere encourages collaboration, open communication, and an appreciation for diversity in thought, culture, and ideas. Additionally, students will be more likely to develop a healthy balance between their academic, personal, and social lives, leading to a better overall wellbeing.

In order to establish this supportive academic environment, higher education institutions should strive to prioritize non-academic skills within their curriculum design, offer dedicated services and facilities for personal and professional development, and promote extracurricular engagement to expand students' perspectives beyond the classroom.

Ultimately, by addressing the identified problematic areas and implementing proposed solutions, higher education institutions can bolster the positive image of their students, enhance the educational experience, and prepare the next generation of well-rounded, capable individuals who will thrive in their future endeavors.

Discussions and Conclusions

In this study, we aimed to examine the current status of the student image in higher education institutions and explore possible directions for its future enhancement. Our hypothesis posits that the development and nurturing of specific personal and academic qualities in university students lead to a more positive image, subsequently benefiting both the students and the higher education institutions they attend.

Throughout our research, we identified several key attributes that contribute to the positive image of a university student, including responsibility, personal initiative, commitment to learning, creativity, self-assurance, ambition, and initiative. The importance of these qualities was supported by the majority of our study participants, implying a strong correlation between the development of these traits and the enhanced reputation of students within higher education institutions.

When comparing our findings to existing literature on the subject, our results show a significant alignment with the prevailing themes in other research papers, emphasizing the universal importance of nurturing such qualities in university students. Researchers Pak and Yablonskykh (2016) argue that students should be motivated to create their own positive image. This process is influenced by several factors: students' knowledge of employers' requirements for higher education graduates, awareness of the need to form a positive image as a component of success, and the motivation to develop self-image skills by considering high professional standards and various spheres of reality. Additionally, it is crucial for students to manifest their subjective position when working on their image and engaging in self-improvement. Young individuals should correct their behavior, self-esteem, social status, and communication methods (professional, business, interpersonal) based on timely self-diagnosis and reflection (p. 171).

Stankiewicz and Bortnowska (2016) connect the need to create a positive student image with social expectations, which comprise the norms and requirements of the social environment that individuals must navigate at specific stages of their lives. These expectations develop their necessary social roles. Social expectations involve the following aspects: (1) an individual's awareness of the behaviors others expect of them, (2) anticipation of possible reactions from others regarding the individual's behavior, and (3) the acceptance of the requirements imposed on the person concerning social status. Social expectations play an essential role in the process of self-regulation.

University attendance is a critical period in a person's life, characterized by intensive personal development and the accumulation of life values (Cunha et al., 2006). Art and fashion trends often influence a young person's worldview, encouraging them to actively search for their own image and incorporate fashionable changes to conform to current societal requirements.

In our opinion, this motivation should guide students in creating their professional image while considering their future professional activity and the impact of their profession on their prestigious position in society. Indicators of a prestigious image include a well-groomed appearance, stable health, proper speech, good manners, and other signs of social prestige.

Modern students are not detached from the ongoing changes in public life (Frączkowska, 2019). Like the majority of young people, they follow fashion trends and place great importance on their appearance. A prevailing notion among students is that being fashionable primarily involves keeping up with clothing trends. Consequently, many dedicate substantial resources to constructing a fashionable image, spending on expensive clothing, footwear, elite fragrances, high-end cosmetics, the latest mobile gadgets, intricate hairstyles, tattoos, and more. However, they may underestimate the importance of dressing appropriately and tastefully, as well as the value of cultivating an individual style that aligns with fashion trends. In addition, contemporary young people not only emphasize a presentable appearance but also value the moral and professional qualities integral for the future specialist. They appreciate effective communication skills, problem-solving abilities, and constructive collaboration with colleagues. A considerable demand exists in all spheres of society for individuals with expertise in information technology, foreign languages, management, and marketing.

Participation in international educational programs, academic mobility, and educational tourism significantly contribute to fostering these valuable qualities. Engagement in such initiatives can broaden students' horizons and expose them to diverse perspectives, helping them adapt to an increasingly globalized world.

It is essential for higher education institutions to recognize and address these multifaceted dimensions of student development, providing support and resources to cultivate their individuality, professional competencies, and moral values. In doing so, students' overall image will align with the expectations of both the educational institutions and the society as a whole. Collaborative efforts between

students and educators can ensure that future specialists are well-prepared to contribute positively to the workforce and the world.

In light of modern requirements and rapid scientific progress, particularly the powerful information environment, individuals and future specialists are tasked with ongoing self-improvement. The fast-paced civilizational processes and innovative perspectives of student youth have prompted us to conduct this research. The expectations of those who will rely on the professional services of university students are of utmost importance. In the context of European integration, the international community places high demands on specialists in any field, including a high level of education, general culture, and fluency in foreign languages.

Based on the survey responses, we have drawn the following conclusions. A positive image of a higher education student encompasses characteristics that we have systematized into the following groups: education, responsibility, discipline, and sociability. From the perspective of the respondents who participated in the survey, a student image that invites condemnation and significantly undermines the quality of the educational process includes irresponsibility, overconfidence, tardiness, disregard for behavioral rules during the educational process, indifference, and disrespect for instructors.

Considering employer expectations, future professionals must continually work on crafting a positive self-image and seek personal growth. A well-groomed appearance, stable health, proper speech, good manners, and other indicators of social prestige are traditionally viewed as signs of a prestigious position in society.

Future research perspectives could explore additional factors that influence student self-image, as well as investigate how educational institutions might further support the cultivation of a positive self-image. The importance of this research for both global academia and practical application lies in its potential to contribute to better-prepared, well-rounded graduates who can effectively navigate the demands of the international workforce, ultimately promoting a higher standard of professionalism and expertise worldwide.

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