

Internet-use for academic choice – The EDU-CON Study

Gertrud Hovestadt / Pia Niehues / Kristina Jäger

Future students are a complex target group for marketing activities. There is hardly any media channel one should not consider to reach them. Future academics read the newspaper, spend time on social networks and use the services of the Federal Employment Agency. But budgets are limited and need to be allocated in an optimal way. The new student generation grew up with the internet. The central role that the internet plays for academic choice has already been indicated by several studies (cf. CHE 2007: 13 ff.). But this information does not disclose operative recommendations for marketing activities. The internet can be used for uncountable marketing activities that vary in strategy and implementation. Furthermore the information landscape on the internet is changing at a high tempo and recently successful marketing strategies can quickly be out of date. The EDU-CON survey was implemented to gather solid data to develop marketing strategies for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Together with HEI marketing manager from four different countries EDU-CON discussed and developed new strategies. When doing so special attention was paid to meeting the challenge of the social media wave that influenced and changed young people's internet use these days. To ensure that these strategies are always updated and modified in the course of changing internet-use the EDU-CON study will be sent out again in 2011 and will also be subject of the next annual EDU-CON conference in fall 2011.

Concept of the survey

EDU-CON conducted a questionnaire for recently enrolled and future students. The questionnaire was sent out in September. This is the time of the year when decisions for academic programmes have been freshly made because German pre-university programmes finish in July and the academic year for most institute of higher education degree programmes start in October. The intention behind conducting the questionnaire, then, was to make answering questions about their academic decision making as easy as possible.

To reach as many (future) students as possible, the questionnaire was designed as an online-questionnaire. All internet channels that EDU-CON works with were used to reach the target group: Newsletter, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, company-owned websites and EDU-CONs online-community Edu-Port.

1440 people participated in the questionnaire. But for the evaluation process only those were considered who either showed intent to start their studies within the next two years or had started their studies no earlier than 2007. This limitation was founded on the

theory that the internet and its information sources before 2007 were too different to the present internet to allow for valid measurements.

In addition to exclusion based on date of initiation, those students who already hold an academic degree were excluded, because their academic choice for a postgraduate degree program is often too dependent on their first academic degree.

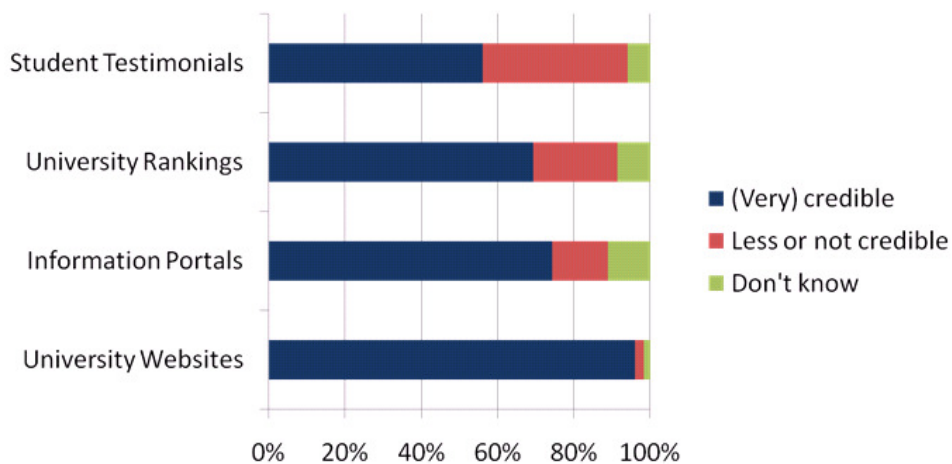
Furthermore, those who announced that they did not use the internet to aid in making their academic choice were excluded. After excluding these cases from the data, 966 analysable participants remained.

Credibility on the internet

Not all information sources on the internet are rated equally credible by users. In order to measure credibility rates, information sources on the internet were categorized into four different types: “Student testimonials”, “university rankings”, “information portals” and “university websites”. “Student Testimonials” are sources that can also be categorised as parts of “information portals” and “university websites”. Furthermore they include all sources of internet information from students who have already made their academic decision: Interviews with students, exchanges of experience in public forums, personal contacts on social networks.

Credibility of web based services

(n = 869)



869 participants rated the credibility of information sources they used to make their academic choice. The highest rate of credibility was given to university owned websites: 96 percent ranked the websites as credible. Also noteworthy is that only very few used the answer option “Don’t know”. University websites, therefore, seem to be well known as information sources and easy to rate. The high credibility rate indicates great potentials

that have to be tapped to the fullest. University websites, their design and content should be given the upmost attention.

Information portals were rated as credible by 74 percent. Here future students find information that is not presented from the perspective of a single university. The information is less likely to be seen as advertisement. Furthermore, information portals lead users to university websites.

University rankings are believed to be credible by 69 percent. This does not necessary mean that publishers of university rankings are less credible than publishers of information portals. It is also possible that (future) students doubt that rankings really reflect factors perceived as important to students when choosing a university. If the ranking consists of rather “unimportant” factors, individuals could disagree with the outcome. This would lead to a perceived discrepancy which could be the cause of lower credibility ratings for rankings.

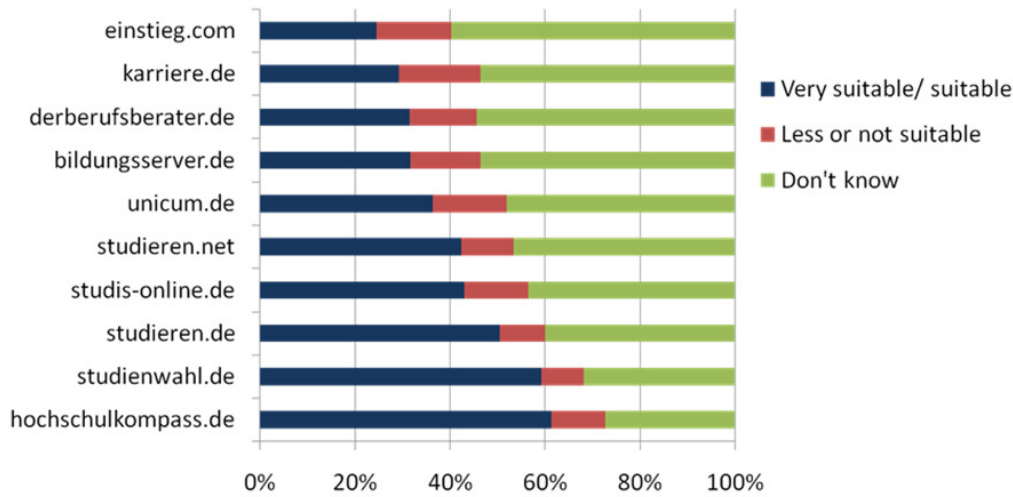
Student testimonials - as they can be found on information portals, communities, blogs, twitter etc. – are rated as credible by 56 percent. Though fewer gave this a high ranking, this information source is not to be disregarded. Unlike university websites or information portals student testimonials also contain negative aspects about a university or its study programs. It is widely-recognised marketing knowledge that one negative report from a consumer (student) has a much greater influence on the buying decision (academic choice) of a new potential consumer (potential student) than a positive report. When this is taken into consideration, student testimonials are of enormous relevance for universities. University rankings also contain negative aspects about universities, as they are partly aggregated student testimonials themselves. But they do not import the same risk as the usual, individual testimonials. Separate, individual opinions that are expressed in testimonials can be spread on the internet overnight. Universities sometimes realise these events much too slowly, and are unable to react quickly enough. Therefore, it is imperative to pay attention to information sources that contain the experiences and opinions of (future) students and are controlled / put online autonomously.

Each generation has to be informed and convinced all over again

The results above show that information portals, rated as credible sources, have an important role in future students academic decision making. Universities need to pay attention to their presence on the portals. To qualify value for marketing strategies, German information portals were ranked according to their importance for (future) students. Participants of the online-questionnaire were asked to rate the suitability of chosen information portals.

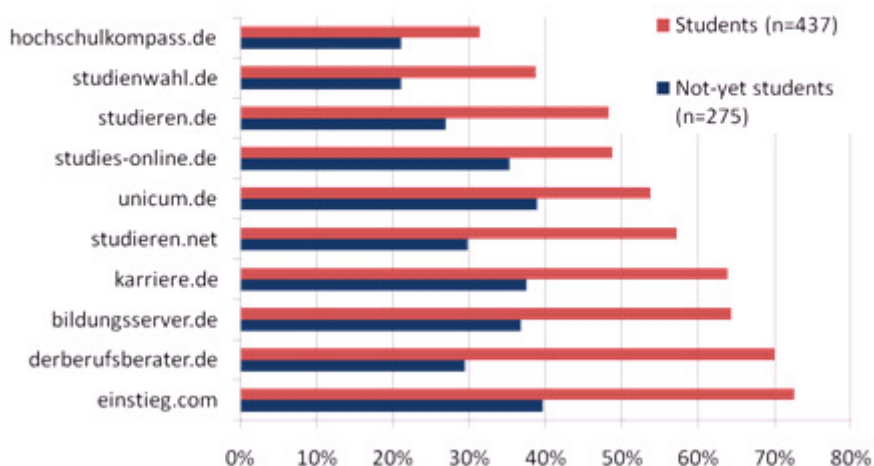
Suitability of **Portals** for information on degree programmes

(n=712)



As a by-product of the ranking, an additional outcome resulted from the question: participants who did not rate the portals as suitable or not suitable were offered the answer option “Don’t know”. Interestingly, the percentage rate of *future students* differed dramatically to the percentage rate of *already enrolled students* who chose “Don’t know” as an answer.

Students / Not-yet Students responded “Don’t know”



A possible explanation could be found in the capacity for memory: For future students the process of academic decision making is much more present than for already enrolled students. This also means that the different information portals might have been used in the months or weeks before the questionnaire was conducted. In contrast participants

who had already decided on their studies have fewer motives to visit and spend time on information portals. The particular websites they used for their own academic choice have already faded in their memories, which makes a rating of suitability hardly possible.

This interpretation leads to the conclusion that current students can not recommend specific websites as information sources for academic choice to the new student generations. Personal recommendations for study programmes and universities are often given forward to future students and are highly appreciated by them; but certain information portals have to generate their popularity annually. To universities and publishers of information portals this means an increased need for investment.

Outlook

The information landscape on the internet changes at a high rate. Contents change constantly, new publishers appear, and old ones vanish. New applications become available for gathering information and other search functions become out-dated. At the same time future students' internet use changes. To manage higher education marketing, trends have to be perceived quickly to allow timely reaction. The EDU-CON study on future students' internet use will be expanded and newly implemented in 2011. Through this long-term study, present developments can be observed and future developments more easily predicted.

Sources

Hachmeister, C./Harde M./Langer, M. (2007): Einflussfaktoren der Studienentscheidung
- Eine empirische Studie von CHE und EINSTIEG. Gütersloh.