

Conclusions and Reflections on Branding and Marketing in Higher Education

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REVISITING HIGHER EDUCATION COMPETITION

National and international competition has been a catalyst for branding in higher education (Ng 2014). Therefore, managerial strategies, such as marketing and branding, have become a priority to higher education institutions. Higher education decision makers employ marketing and branding strategies to create an advantage for their institutions at the national, regional, and international level. Brand building is becoming a deliberate goal for higher education (Maringe and Gibbs 2009), although the sector lacks comprehensive theoretical models of higher education marketing and branding. The development of a set of clear brand principles may not be easy given the complexity of higher

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A. Papadimitriou (ed.), *Competition in Higher Education Branding and Marketing*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-58527-7_12

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education institutions. To fill some of the research gaps in a useful and influential way, the present volume has presented theoretical, empirical, and methodological contributions to higher education academics, professionals, and graduate students. The purpose has been to understand challenges and opportunities of branding and marketing within the global context of various higher education systems from Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America. The study of branding in higher education has not been explored widely, however, the topic of branding itself has been around for many years. Even though the branding of *product* may not be directly correspondent to branding in higher education, research on this topic provides valuable information that would be beneficial to higher education institutions and to their leaders for future actions as well as for marketing and management strategies.

It has been noted that branding is not altogether a new concept: “Branding began sometime around 1500 B.C., when the ancient Greeks marked their cattle,... however, branding initiatives relevant to an institutional enterprise began in 1931” (Muntean et al. 2009, p. 1066). Clifton et al. (2009) assumed “it was of course by burning that early man stamped ownership on his livestock, and with the development of trade buyers would use brands as a means of distinguishing between the cattle of one farmer and another” (p. 14). For centuries, people have used stamps on products to differentiate between brands of different regions in the world. These examples illustrate that branding has traditionally served a differentiating purpose. However, higher education branding has been described as a “sea of sameness” (Clayton et al. 2012, p. 182). These observations make the need for new examinations of marketing and branding in higher education more pressing. The comparative dimension allows the development of a more holistic understanding of marketing and branding. From a comparative point of view, this book explores the *brandscape* of global higher education. In the introduction, Blanco Ramírez opened the stage by integrating ideas about competition, globalization and marketing in the content of higher education. We will return to these ideas in the final section.

The first empirical chapter in this volume, by **Saichaie and Warshaw**, analyzed discourse on websites of Association of American Universities institutions. Historically, universities and industry have exchanged money, knowledge, and people to profit from markets. Moving students into the workforce could be the strongest economic contribution to such efforts. Therefore, the authors asked the following research question:

How do universities recruit prospective students into academe-industry links? Their analysis revealed that institutions: (1) showcased organizational developments that provided specialized knowledge for students to leverage for economic gain; (2) highlighted curricula to develop—and certify—student entrepreneurs; and (3) presented co-curricula as pathways to industry. Together, these themes suggest academic messaging that serves market interests, differentiating which students may benefit most. They suggest institutional leaders and administrators could consider shifting some of the focus in their academic marketing—and opportunities and outlets for students on campuses—to matters of equity, distinctiveness, and balance in institutional purpose and values. These messages may include emphasizing and actively portraying preparation and careers in public service, non-profit leadership, and public health, for example.

Subsequently, Chap. 3, by **Germán Álvarez-Mendiola and Miguel Alejandro González-Ledesma**, analyzes the relationship between marketing context and branding content of six private universities in Chile and Mexico. Conditions for placement and promotion of higher education and institutional efforts to design a marketing identity vary according to the degree of privatization, diversification and segmentation of higher education systems. Therefore, while in Mexico branding content is embedded in a low regulated framework for private sector, Chilean HEIs branding rests in a deeply institutionalized market environment. However, through a web content analysis, the authors identify three similar branding orientations in private universities: strengthening reputation, building reputation and catching-all. Branding targets high, middle or low-income audiences by highlighting symbolic values, economic messages and institutional features to influence audience's perceptions and mobilize economic decisions of current and potential users/customers.

Jelle Mampaey in Chap. 4 investigates similarities and differences in brand communication between different types of higher education institutions in Flanders (Belgium). Earlier research on HEIs branding have consistently focused on branding content, but this chapter provides a more holistic analysis by examining content- and style-related processes underlying brand communication. Theoretically, it approaches branding content by drawing from earlier research on communicated values in higher education. Branding style is conceptualized based on Searle's Speech Act Theory. Empirically, it focuses on the mission statements of 20 Flemish HEIs. The study identifies similarities in branding content

and style, as well as some subtle differences. Then it discusses its findings in light of recent debates in the higher education branding literature.

Then **Papadimitriou's** research captured a one-time (Summer, 2014) collection of data from ever-evolving, continuously updated website homepages from the Western Balkans public and private universities. Using a sequential mixed methods design, data revealed many factors about how each institution wished to publically position itself within the constraints of all the immediate stakeholders. The Western Balkans regional definition in this, as in other studies, includes the countries of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Data indicated a competitive, online marketplace where each institution sought new stakeholders through graphics, logos, special identity icons, and use of social media for advertising. Document analysis revealed exotericism and quality messages as well as use of English, however not in all HEIs. Papadimitriou suggests that more research on marketing and branding are needed in the region mostly by researchers understanding Western Balkan languages.

Chapter 6 by **Patrício V. Langa** and **Nelson C. Zavale** examines how Mozambican higher education institutions use branding to differentiate themselves, promote their image and gain advantage in an increasing competitive social field of higher education. They discuss the notions of brand and branding in higher education, while distinguishing from marketing. The authors provide the theoretical and methodological basis for examining branding in higher education. Drawing from the Mozambican case study, they examine some strategies used by higher education institutions to create and promote their brand to a variety of stakeholders. They identify four ways in which higher education institutions distinguish themselves from their competitors: years of existence, area of specialization, the services/facilities they provide, the pedagogical approach they use, and the images of personalities shown on their websites. Finally, they conclude that branding is becoming a strategy used by institutions to survive, pursue or even maintain competitive advantage.

Then **Chap. 7** by **Jenny Ngo** and **Decky A. Ismandoyo** examines the impacts of education brand on students' decisions through advertising brochures for higher education institutions in Surabaya Indonesia. The chapter uses a random sampling in selecting the accredited senior high schools in Surabaya as the target groups and two outstanding accredited universities, representing Information Technology and

Entrepreneurship programs as the objects. A questionnaire was administered to senior high school students in grade 12. The study indicated that attractive brochures helped students distinguish and define differences among the two universities. Moreover, the study found that the brand image of a university was significantly related to the student's decision to enroll. Student's good perceptions on the educational brand was a good model for predicting the students' decisions to enroll in the university.

In **Chap. 8**, the authors **Queenie Lam** and **Hayes H.H. Tang** observe that branding is a stated strategic priority of four out of seven public universities in Hong Kong. However, the branding activities they propose miss the essence—the alignment of their various identities. By adapting the concept of corporate branding to the analysis of their self-representations in four distinctive types of communication materials (strategic plans, vision and mission statements, student recruitment materials, and press releases), the authors introduce a new approach to university branding study by examining the content alignment in addition to the content itself. Findings show that while all Hong Kong universities have balanced their self-representations between excellence and uniqueness, new technical universities that openly state branding as a priority show more signs of alignment in the communication materials.

Noah D. Drezner in **Chap. 9** explores existing literature on why social identity should be considered in higher education marketing and provides recommendations for practice. University advancement officers are tasked with engaging the public in order to create and further relationships and to increase donations. There is a complex strategy at most US colleges and universities that leads to the engagement of alumni and others. These relationship strategies can be viewed as a form of marketing. Historically, American higher education, like much of the non-profit sector, engaged all of its constituencies in very similar ways, with some differences mattering on the size of donation. However, as higher education continues to diversify and becomes less homogeneous, more nuanced strategies, that take into account social identity and cultural difference, are needed. Drezner's chapter attempts to connect two different fields of study in ways that have not yet been done. By thinking of annual fund strategy as a form of relationship marketing, there is an opportunity not just for practice but for theoretical development. Too often higher education scholars shy away from the marketing literature due to its connection to the for-profit world. However, there is much more room for overlap while still maintaining the proper level of critique.

In **Chap. 10 Leon Cremonini and John Taylor** propose a framework to understand if and how hubs contribute to stronger positioning of higher education system in global competition, and they use the case of Qatar to draw conclusions. Increasingly, governments around the world invest in so-called “education hubs,” which host excellent tertiary providers. Hubs show how, on a global level, new forms of competition between higher education systems are evolving. By being home to top universities, hubs are believed to be both a country’s “branding tool” and a means for developing internal capacity. The analysis suggests that a hub does not necessarily strengthen the national position but may actually reinforce existing inequalities in perceived prestige between systems.

Chapter 11, written by **Gerald W. McLaughlin, Josetta S. McLaughlin, and Jacqueline E. McLaughlin**, focused on the importance of addressing two concerns before using the rankings—how rankings are used by stakeholders and whether the rankings are credible. Higher education institutions are ranked on almost every conceivable attribute. As a result, HEIs ranking has emerged as a robust marketing component in branding and is used extensively by institutions. This chapter provides an overview of whether stakeholders are influenced by HEIs rankings and a discussion of three important ranking issues—source legitimacy, data integrity, and methodology. A discussion of professional schools identifies the unique issues that surface when rankings focus on specialized programs. The authors conclude with a description of the International Ranking Expert Group initiative to create a framework for developing and evaluating credible rankings in higher education field.

MAIN THEMES IN THE BOOK

The point of departure in this volume was that marketing and branding in higher education responded to the pressures of competition like sailing competitions in rough water and under turbulence weather conditions (the cover of this volume). In this context, HEIs need to establish a sense of organizational identity and communicate this identity effectively, namely brand themselves. Having this common theme, the authors present variations that respond to the specific context of each study. As the chapters illustrate, research on marketing and branding in higher education is at a crossroads. Growing attention on these topics requires new and sophisticated methods to explore and analyze information.

The chapters in this book exemplify the struggles that researchers interested in marketing and branding in higher education face in order to adapt existing research approaches. As we can see, most researchers employ some form of socio-communicative research approach. The use of language and discourse as metaphors or methodological strategies is salient across the chapters. Another challenge lies in the analysis of unstructured data. Visual data presents particular challenges and several chapters in this book illustrate creative efforts to make sense of complex data.

Copyright and the use of intellectual property when researching marketing and branding in higher education is of particular concern. From a different perspective, but also involving ethical decisions is the issue of consent and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Given the extensive use of visual and digital data, it is often unclear whether research on marketing and branding in higher education fits traditional definitions of research with human participants. The use of social media further complicates these challenges because social media integrate individual and organizational identities in digital environment (Blanco Ramírez and Palu-ay 2015). Therefore, researchers focused on the topic need to develop guidelines of ethics and behavior that respect participants' rights, including privacy, and intellectual property.

In addition to ethics and copyright, the comparative perspective of this volume illustrates the challenges of multi-national and multi-lingual studies. The chapters illustrate the value of comparative and international studies. Local researchers, in under-represented countries and languages, are well positioned to contribute to the field by conducting research in their home languages as not all websites and documents are published in English.

CHALLENGES

Higher education institutions need to communicate their values to the public if they are to remain as relevant social institutions. For this reason, attention to marketing and branding is important. Critical perspectives are necessary in order to identify the abuses and perils of the marketization of higher education, while dismissal of the importance of marketing or disengagement from competition may prove devastating for the future of universities. While many challenges are ahead, three issues related to

higher education branding and marketing are particularly critical: (a) brand equity, (b) the role played by exclusivity, and (c) the risk of counterfeiting.

Brands rely on establishing positive associations (Lêncastre and Corte-Real 2013; Oswald 2012). As a result, marketing frequently relies on aspirational information and tends to augment the positive attributes of a product or service. Brand equity, or “the value that the consumer ascribes to the brand” (Mourad et al. 2011, p. 403) constitute a risk in higher education because brand equity can be completely disconnected from activities of the higher education institution (universities and colleges). In other words, a higher education institution with very high brand equity, namely with very good status, may not live up to its reputation.

Branding relies on differentiating one’s product from the competition. However, this idea operates well in the context of private goods. Higher education, in contrast, retains elements of a public good. While exclusivity may be a positive attribute for the branding of conventional products, exclusivity—or elitism—is not necessarily a positive attribute for higher education institutions or programs. Administrators and other higher education practitioners need to determine what boundaries should limit the influence of marketing and branding on their activities.

The third issue is related to the authenticity of brands and, conversely the risk of counterfeit. In a context of increased competition, some higher education institutions may want to profit from the good reputation of other institutions and utilize denotative brand elements, such as names, colors and logos in order to associate with well-established universities. This risk is particularly prominent in contexts where copyright enforcement is lax.

In this *brandscape* arena practitioners and higher education researchers need to collaborate like the captain and the crew, need to track the wave conditions, and find the optimum capacity in order to sail close to the true wind.

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