Brands in Higher Education

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Challenges and Potential Strategies

Abstract: *This study explores the challenges of university branding and the qualities that make university branding different from commercial branding in terms of cultural issues, branding concepts and frameworks, and brands architecture. The literature about branding in the university sector is described and viewed in the context of exploratory interviews with 55 university managers. The results present the differences between university and commercial brandings as well as culture, brand concepts, and brand architecture. The study was conducted in U.K. universities, but similar issues in many other countries mean that the results are comparable internationally. Overall, the findings presented in this research offer a valuable contribution to our understanding of the complexities of higher education branding.*

Fundamental shifts in the past 20 years have seen increased competition in the global higher education market (Becher and Trowler 2001) and, consequently, have driven universities to adopt marketing practices, including branding. Although the topic of brands is contentious (Jevons 2006), many universities are embracing branding strategies, and this article examines the challenges in applying commercial branding strategies, given the specific characteristics of higher education. Good brands are key resources for generating competitive advantage, and brand management is a central organizational competence that organizations need to understand (Aaker 1996; Louro and Cunha 2001). However, models of higher education branding are still the subject of some debate. This research sought to explore the

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management landscape of U.K. higher education branding. Within this context, the specific objectives were to explore

1. perceptions of potential and actual challenges to branding among the management of U.K. universities;

2. branding structures in U.K. higher education, and in particular corporate and subbrands;

3. branding concepts and models in U.K. higher education; and

4. cultural issues and their relationship to brand implementation in U.K. universities.

The overall research aim, therefore, is to advance understanding of branding in higher education.

Branding in higher education

A growing number of higher education institutions are increasingly managed as corporate brands (Whelan and Wohlfeil 2006; Kotler and Kotler 1998). However, Johnson (2001) argued that universities had a long way to go in terms of incorporating the branding concept and, it may be argued,, that some twelve years later, only partial progress had been made toward a culture and infrastructure within universities that supports effective branding. This is also reflected in the view that branding has made little impression on the higher education marketing literature until recent times (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Bennett, Ali-Choudhury, and Savani 2007), although the last few years have seen a steady increase in the number of published articles. The debate on the desirability of a marketing culture within higher education continues (Jevons 2006) and it is therefore appropriate to begin with some discussion of the rationale for adoption of branding in higher education. This discussion is specifically approached from the U.K. context although convergence in global higher education has made the discussion generalizable to a high degree (Becher and Trowler 2001).

Branding was originally conceived as a technique to convey the prestige of manufacturers. However, this conception has evolved into the modern branding paradigm built upon abstraction and cultural engineering, where products embody consumer's ideals and are only tenuously linked to functional benefits (Holt 2002). Most conceptualizations of brand are clear when it comes to the advantages of branding, but generally relate to a commercial context. De Chernatony and McDonald (2005) assert that a successful brand delivers sustainable competitive advantage and invariably results in superior profitability and market performance. Holt (2002) argues that brands will be more valuable if they are offered as cultural resources and useful ingredients to produce the "self" one chooses.

Jevons (2006) believes that branding is a shorthand measure for the whole range of criteria that go to make up the quality of the university. Bennett et al. (2007) suggest that universities require strong brands to enhance awareness of their existence and course offerings.

Rationales for applying the principles of branding to higher education are, therefore, evident. However, actually quantifying benefits are somewhat more elusive, and a degree of debate on desirability continues. As current political and market forces increasingly make competition in education inevitable, brands can be both a strategic asset and a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Caldwell and Coshall 2002). However, a cautionary view is that branding in nonprofit organizations, such as universities, may create a spirit of unhealthy competition, prompting an expenditure that is of dubious benefit (Sargeant 2005).

Blumenthal and Bergstrom (2003) offer a more generous view of branding, suggesting that it can offer something "of substance" to make the consumer's choice process more effective. The ideal conceptualization of a brand as a clear shorthand for an organization that consumers trust to deliver on their needs could reasonably be argued to be desirable for universities as much as all organizations. The investigation of challenges to brand building in universities serves a real purpose: to help clarify not only underpinning conceptual assumptions but practical implementation in a sector that may struggle to implement overtly commercial approaches.

Brands

Brands are complex offerings that are conceived by organizations but ultimately reside in consumers' minds (de Chernatony 2010) and, therefore, "brand" is a somewhat subjective term where "no one is talking about precisely the same thing" (Kapferer 2001, 3). However, it was necessary to provide interviewees with a consistent understanding of what was meant by the term "brand," particularly as some of the respondents in this research did not have a marketing background. Many writers such as de Chernatony and McWilliam (1990), Pringle and Thompson (1999) and Caldwell and Freire (2004) suggest brand definitions are based on "emotional" and "rational" factors and, indeed, most definitions have a degree of resonance with this approach (Hart and Murphy 1998). De Chernatony and Riley (1998, 427) seem to summarize this assertion in succinct terms when they suggest that a brand is "a multidimensional construct whereby mangers augment products or services with values and this facilitates the process by which consumers confidently recognize and appreciate these values." This summary was the basis of the definition put to our interviewees.

Corporate branding

The move toward competition among universities has seen a corresponding quest for differentiation as part of the adoption of market-based models (Becher and Trowler 2001). Over time, however, products and services tend to become similar whereas organizations are inevitably very different (Aaker 2004). Indeed, many universities are intrinsically similar in the *products* they offer and arguably their corporate brand, rather than product brands (N.B. individual courses), is their basis for real possible differentiation.

Examination of the corporate branding literature reveals a degree of applicability and potential insight for higher education (Hatch and Schultz 2003). However, corporate branding requires a greater degree of sophistication in branding practices than product branding, in particular, the organizational structure and culture that support the meaning of the brand (Hatch and Schultz 2003). It is debatable whether some universities are organized to fully embrace corporate branding.

Aaker (2004) identifies the danger that too many corporate brands have no real value proposition and are simply large stable organizations with no point of distinction. This lack is a real risk for universities who may struggle to articulate real distinctiveness. Although functional benefits are considered best for corporate brands, emotional or self-expressive benefits can offer a basis for differentiation (Aaker 2004), and the latter would seem to provide resonance for university brands. Ultimately, the corporate brands most likely to succeed are those that connect strategic vision and organizational culture (Hatch and Schultz 2003).

Branding approaches

The discipline of brand architecture is a comparatively new academic topic (Aaker and Joachimstaler 2000). A key concern is the assessment of the extent to which brands and subbrands are *drivers* (the extent to which the brand drives the purchase decision). This decision leads toward one of four core brand relationship options: house of brands, endorser brands, subbrands, or a branded house (Aaker and Joachimstaler 2000). A deliberate and desired degree of consistency is important (Kitchen and Schultz 2001), and each of these approaches has its core applicability and advantages for different brand configurations. However, the issue is that none seems to quite fit the particular qualities of higher education. More to the point, it seems that the corporate branding literature has hardly explored brand architecture in a higher education context, and, given its importance for core marketing strategy, this seems a significant gap in the literature.

Challenges of brand building in universities

Building and maintaining strong brands are challenging in all sectors, but the pertinent question is whether specific and unique issues face universities in their attempts to build and maintain brands. From a U.K. perspective, in 2003 Bodoh and Mighall (23) argued that "brands present some real challenges in a sector that has been slow to embrace the basic principles of branding." Johnston (2001) summed up the consensus from practice when he argued that the higher education system certainly had a long way to go in terms of understanding and incorporating the branding concept, although the United States was seemingly ahead of the U.K. in the acceptance of branding as a concept in the sector (Sevier 2004; Kotler and Fox 1995). This lead may be because the United States went through a clash of cultures between market values and traditional academic values ten years earlier (Sanders 1999).

Brookes (2003) suggests that commercially focused activities, such as branding, are inherently difficult for universities and articulating real differentiation is often a challenge. Several branding models, such as Keller (2003); LePla and Parker's Integrated Brand Model (2002); De Chernatony and McWilliam's Brand Box Model (1990); and Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (1992), argue that identification of a clear "brand principle" is important, but this may be difficult to encapsulate for university brands (Hankinson 2001). Dibb and Simkin (1993) offer Harvard Business School as an example of a strong educational brand, arguing that it is strong because it has a clear position in consumer's minds, but in many institutions positioning has emerged in a somewhat ad hoc manner over time.

Cultural issues are one of the most significant challenges. The nature of marketing means that it permeates most areas of an organization and, therefore, marketing people may run into the strongly held views of other staff and departments (Low and Fullerton 1994) where underpinning marketing philosophies are "theoretically uncomfortable" for many academics (Brookes 2003). Organizational culture may be a source of competitive advantage, but only when brand values are respectful of that culture and embrace it as part of their brand (Hatch and Schultz 2003; Ghose 2009; Aurand, Gorchels, and Bishop 2005; Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005; Burmann and Zeplin 2004).

Overall, therefore, examination of the literature reveals that many areas of branding theory have some applicability for higher education. However, the particular cultural, management, and organizational issues of higher education mean that practical application is not straightforward or necessarily desirable. A closer examination of the topic is, therefore, pertinent.

Methodology

The main focus of the research was to seek a deeper understanding of factors (Chisnall 2001) that impact upon branding in universities. The results are based upon content analysis of 55 interviews comprising 15 chief executives of U.K. universities, targeted as a group with whom brand ownership lies (Free 1999), and 40 higher education marketing and communications professionals. These interviewees represented 32 different U.K. institutions and were approximately equally split between three groups that may be referred to as "newer" universities (post 1992), "redbricks," and "older" universities. However, as the analysis did not at this stage seek to differentiate between these groups, this split is not further explored. Interviews were conducted in stages, reaching completion in 2011.

The work embraced an "interpretivist" approach (Bryman and Bell 2003). The sample size was appropriate for an exploratory study and offered indicative results that are representative (Miles and Huberman 1994).

Semi-structured interviews were considered appropriate, as a picture of respondent's true feelings on an issue was desired (Chisnall 1992; Daymon and Holloway 2004) and is similar to that adopted by other studies on brands (Hankinson 2004). An interview guide was used to steer the discussion, but respondents were also allowed to expand upon ideas and concepts as they wished.

The particular questions explored in the context of the interviews linked back to the objectives of exploring current knowledge and opinion on issues affecting branding in universities, in particular exploring opinion formers' perceptions of potential and actual challenges to branding in their institutions. These are explicitly articulated in the introduction.

The interviews were transcribed and subjected to content analysis to look for commonalities in responses or trends through coding (Miles and Huberman 1994). It is important to emphasise that the anonymity required by respondents makes direct attribution of quotes difficult. However, a number of pertinent quotes were attributed by job role in an attempt to address this issue at least partially.

Findings

Challenges to successful brand management in higher education

Fundamental changes in the nature and management of higher education have forced universities to adopt many commercial practices and implement them in what are increasingly quasi-commercial organizations (Becher and Trowler 2001). Respondents were asked to talk freely about this practice, and some

went into considerable depth, reflecting upon the number of challenges they foresaw. Several particular themes emerged that are worthy of exploration.

Cultural issues

Universities, while subject to creeping marketization, do not have a culture that closely replicates a commercial organization; in fact, their culture is part of their unique identity (Becher and Trowler 2001). Some university marketing professionals talked of "cynicism of staff that impedes community and cohesion in branding," which was termed the "cultural issue" of branding by one marketer. Chief executives also referred to the "institutional culture" and "cultural legacy," which were seen as challenging in relation to branding. This may simply be indicative of the issues facing chief executives when trying to build a clear brand for a complex organization that has not historically had a commercial focus. It was felt that "the sector overall demonstrated a slowness to change" (chief executive). Several chief executives suggested that the language of branding was not "always comfortable" or even "culturally acceptable" within higher education.

There was variance in suggesting whether leaders' roles in brand management filtered down from the top or was built from the bottom up. For example, one chief executive suggested that "presenting and delivering the brand is the concern of the University Management Team." Another supported "development of common vision decided by all staff." The variance in defining the chief executive's role in the branding process was argued to be a factor that differentiated universities from commercial organizations, where the "role of the leader was thought to be more clearly defined in terms of brand custodian" (chief executive).

Another group clearly important in managing the university brand was the marketing department, but a distinction can be drawn here in terms of its role in the branding process. Approximately half of the chief executives suggested that their role was to oversee marketing professionals in managing the brand. Some chief executives suggested that marketing should "guide in brand construction." Others alluded more to "implementation" and even of "leaving it to marketing not being enough, as everyone in the university has to understand and involve themselves in our brand."

The changing pace of the external environment was argued to be a challenge by most respondents, with universities increasingly having to adapt and react to market conditions at a faster pace than they have culturally been equipped to do. However, some felt that this changing environment was forcing a cultural change internally, which has led to more competitive branding strategies being embraced. Overall, cultural resistance to branding, variable internal communication, and associated issues, such as subbranding, were challenges much in evidence from interviews.

Branding models and frameworks

Several chief executives suggested that, while they had a brand, it did not accurately reflect current reality. One summed up this point, arguing that his university "has a strong brand that comes out of the reputation but, para-doxically, one that relates very poorly to what we do now." The consensus was that universities are, by nature, complex and diverse institutions, and the task of neatly encapsulating this complexity in a set of simple brand values was very difficult. This finding resonates with work that argues that universities have plural identities (Lowrie 2007) that make articulating a simplistic identity challenging. Respondents in this research felt that the sector has staff with strong internal motivations but that the external brands do not always fully communicate these motivations.

Interviewees argued that latent potential was evident as people often had *their* university that was relevant to their lives. The key is tapping into this feeling as "clearly universities have the emotional resonance to connect strongly with most stakeholders—we just haven't quite got to grips with all the subtleties of rolling this up in a fully fledged brand yet" (marketing professional).

Brand architecture

It was argued that there is no evidence of a clear model for constructing a brand in institutions such as universities, particularly in relation to the cor-porate brand (overall university level) relationship to sub brands (school or faculty level). One chief executive asked, "Do we build one strong overall brand, which encompasses everything we do, or do we have a series of strong subbrands, which have a higher profile than the overall institutional brand?" This problem was echoed by marketing professionals who talked of commer-cial models being applied, but needing cultural adjustment and, therefore, not wholly fitting.

Several chief executives cited tension between institutional and school/ faculty brands as a hindrance to branding strategy, although this tension was tempered by others who confirmed it as an issue, but not necessarily a negative issue. Business schools were cited as an example of where the tension may actually be beneficial and it was suggested that with "distinct target audiences, there is a strong argument for allowing a business school to build a largely distinct brand". The difficulty is managing this process "so that it is not to the detriment of institution or school and there is limited precedent for doing this" (chief executive). Other interviewees were aware of this issue but felt that it did not affect their institutions, as the overall institutional brand was strong enough and individual subbrands would not threaten or detract from it.

Most respondents in the survey initially alluded to what is effectively a "branded house" (Aaker and Joachimstaler 2000) where the institutional brand was the driver and subbrands had a small driver role. However, upon questioning, other respondents revealed that viewing university brands as a "branded house" was an oversimplification. Often schools actually displayed many qualities of "subbrand descriptors," where they utilize the master brand profile but make that brand more credible for a specific target audience (Aaker and Joachimstaler 2000). Business schools and medical schools were brought up as examples. Initial instincts support the branded house approach as the most suitable for universities as it maximizes clarity and is the default brand architecture option (Aaker and Joachimstaler 2000). However, the particular nature of higher education means that this demands closer examination and may call for a bespoke model (marketing professional). One example of inconsistent branding was discussed by two Marketing Professionals, one of whom talked of "the university brand being important, but having very little direct resource, with marketing budgets largely devolved to schools." This is a paradox as talk of a 'branded house' structure is seen as suited to universities but in reality greater resource is often allocated to sub brands, as befits a 'house of brands' approach (Aaker and Joachimstaler 2000).

Discussion

The findings of this research resonate with current literature in a number of critical areas. Effective internal communication is important (Harris and de Chernatony 2001) in order that all employees understand and live a brand's values and have a consistent understanding about brand positioning (Aurand et al. 2005). Asif and Sargeant (2000) identify six important outcomes of effective internal communication: shared vision, job/personal satisfaction, development of a service focus, empowerment, commitment, and loyalty. The literature, therefore, reflects the importance of implementation of internal communication programs.

As Bulotaite (2003) argues, university brands actually have the potential to create stronger feelings than most brands. The key to realizing this potential successfully is to create a unique communicative identity. Jevons (2006, 467) argues that universities talk of differentiation through their brands but that they frequently fail to "practice what they preach."

When consumers have limited detailed knowledge of a sector, a brand name may be the most accessible and diagnostic cue available. Strong brands receive preferential attribute evaluation and, generally, a higher overall preference and can charge price premiums (Hoeffler and Keller 2003). The price premium theme may become increasingly relevant as many countries adopt a

market system for university tuition fees. However, it has been suggested that conventional brand management techniques are inadequate in higher education because of brand proliferation, media fragmentation, rising competition, greater scrutiny from "customers," and internal resistance to the concepts (Jevons 2006). It seems that universities have potential for strong brands (Bulotaite 2003), but there is a lack of a model that captures their essence.

Harris and de Chernatony (2001) suggest that a sustainable competitive advantage can better be achieved through unique emotional elements than through functional characteristics. These emotional values are not just communicated by advertising but also through employees' interactions with different stakeholders (Harris and de Chernatony 2001). Employees have to communicate the brand's promise across all contact points, where such behavior can become a competitive advantage if they deeply believe in the brand's values (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005). It may, therefore, be argued that the ideas of brand experience, or "moments of articulation," that shape brand identities, have potential in branding a university (Lowrie 2007).

The tension between the university and school brand—which the corporate branding literature seldom addresses—is likely to surface in branding efforts in a university context because of the strong tradition of school autonomy. It appears to be another area where there is no simple model or answer to suggest whether it has a positive or a negative impact and what the best practice should be within a higher education context. The individual schools or centers could be viewed as parts of a brand portfolio; assessment of their brand driver potential is key in exploring an organizing structure (Aaker and Joachimstaler 2000). In this case, anecdotal evidence would suggest that the institutional brand is the core driver and schools are secondary. However, the student audience, in particular, also identifies with the individual course as a driver, and there are examples of strong school brands (e.g., Cass Business School, London). The situation is not, therefore, clear-cut.

The concept of branding seemed to be supported by management in U.K. universities; to generate shared understanding of brand values is important as a management task (Vallaster and de Chernatony 2005). However, the interviews demonstrated that a number of issues are apparent that make building and maintaining fully developed brands in the commercial sense challenging.

Faculties or schools building sub brands in their own right may be considered occasionally problematic but actually illustrates that a brand architecture is something with which universities struggle; the 'branded house' structure seems most suitable (and universities show commonality with some of the corporate branding literature), but deeper investigation reveals that there really is no simple approach to brand management that wholly fits.

Universities often have difficulty in identification of a clear brand principle or point of differentiation. A consistent focus is intrinsic to branding, particularly with corporate brands, however this focus can be difficult to attain in universities that ultimately provide many similar 'products' and where some staff are yet to clearly understand and articulate where any genuine differentiation lies.

While leaders of U.K. universities are supportive of the concept of branding, the results indicate a degree of variance in terms of how these leaders perceive their role. Defining roles and relationships of leaders, senior management, marketing practitioners and 'everybody in the institution' in brand management is evidently a difficult issue.

While, as stated, management embraced branding concepts, this was not necessarily the case among all employees. Evidence of cultural resistance pointed to deeper issues needing more fundamental solutions and ongoing actions that support brand building rather than superficial 'lip service' were sometimes lacking. The culture of universities has evolved but still does not fit with a simplistic and wholly commercial model.

Conclusions

University identities are arguably too complex to express in a succinct brand proposition. They have a culture that does not easily support branding approaches, and they may lack the resources to implement branding strategies in a commercial approach. This recognition leads to the assertion that conventional brand management techniques may be inappropriate for this sector (Jevons 2006). Universities also have multiple stakeholders, including employees who may have limited allegiance to the organization but can potentially damage the brand (Roper and Davies 2007).

However, while it is possible to list many challenges to brand building, the research did suggest that those individuals who are involved in management of U.K. universities embrace the concept of brand management, see their role in this as key, and are keen to address the difficulties that are perceived. This move toward "branding culture awareness" is suggested to be the first step in the brand building process (Urde 1999). Continuing external pressures seem likely to catalyze this need for further investigation of the branding concept in universities.

Further research

While the study explored the opinions of an instrumental group of actors, the research would benefit from further empirical research among other stake-holding groups, such as customers. Further quantitative work to look

at desirable brand values and suitable communication channels could provide decision makers with more valuable information about how to formulate and apply their university brands. Finally, research into brand architecture structures in universities and their applicability may enhance our understanding of the field.

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