Branding a university? ; adding real value or 'smoke and mirrors'?

Abstract

In recent years UK higher education institutions (HEIs) have increasingly sought to differentiate from one another, often utilising the practice and techniques of branding and, controversially, expending considerable sums in doing so. The effectiveness of branding activity in UK higher education (HE) has traditionally received limited scrutiny among academics and there is little evidence of much debate on both the case for and against branding activity, and the applicability of various approaches. This paper seeks to take initial steps to remedy that situation, examining the rationale for branding as part of the 'marketisation' of UK higher education. This was undertaken through qualitative research among UK university management.

Conclusions were that the rationale for much current UK HE branding activity varied greatly. Although the role of branding as part of the marketisation of UK higher education is contentious, and simple application of commercial techniques may be difficult, to view it simply in these terms ignores a number of benefits that an understanding of brand can offer in defining and communicating the essence of the institution. If branding techniques are applied in a manner that is sensitive to the particular qualities of higher education it can support rather than be detrimental to the varied and complex role of universities. To do this, however, requires a specific approach to branding that is seemingly only partially embraced.

Introduction

The UK higher education (HE) market has seen institutions seek to differentiate from one another, often utilising the practice and techniques of branding as part of this process.

Whilst there is a general consensus among university management (Chapleo, 2004) that this is a necessary and legitimate process as part of the marketisation of higher education that universities have to embrace (Maringe, 2005) , this view is not without its critics; Jevons (2006) for example, argues that branding often has an unclear purpose and that large quantities of money are spent on branding activity without publicly available research on the efficiency or the outcomes of these investments.

The overall aim of this chapter is to examine both sides of this debate, considering the extant literature, and examining the findings of recent research by the author that explored the rationale for of branding UK universities, and the views of senior management of UK universities on issues surrounding branding their institutions.

Specific objectives of the chapter are to critically examine the rationale for branding UK universities, in particular to examine whether current approaches and techniques of branding are applicable to the UK university sector. This work is intended to further the debate on branding in the UK university sector.

Literature Review

Branding in Higher Education

There is a growing body of work involving marketing in higher education (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Brookes, 2003) that focuses on 'sub areas' such as marketing communications (Klassen, 2002), marketing planning (Maringe and Foskett, 2002), positioning and corporate identity (Gray et al , 2003; Melewar and Akel, 2005) university selection requirements (Beerli Palacio et al, 2002; Veloutsou et al ,2004) and, to some extent, the related discipline of branding. The academic literature concerning branding in higher education does seem to be limited, (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2008) despite branding's rise up the strategic agenda for UK universities (Rolfe, 2003). Certain aspects of branding have been explored however, including the role of the web in university branding (Opoku et al , 2006), the role of heritage (Bulotaite, 2003), the emergence of brand identities (Lowrie, 2007) and brand architecture 'harmonisation' of UK universities (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007).

It seems that university branding is an issue of strategic importance and universities are expending considerable amounts of resource on branding their institutions (Rolfe, 2003) but the literature on branding in higher education is limited, despite the view that higher education and branding go

back a long way (Temple, 2006).

Objectives of branding in higher education; **why is there a need to brand UK universities?**

Any examination of the objectives of branding for UK universities should the role of branding in a commercial context. Initially, branding was conceived as a means to establish a product's name and to convey the legitimacy, prestige and stability of the product. However, this evolved into the modern brand paradigm built upon abstraction and cultural engineering, where products embody ideal lifestyles and may be only tenuously linked to functional benefits (Holt, 2002).

Most conceptualisations of brand are reasonably explicit when it comes to the advantages of branding, but generally relate more to a commercial arena. De Chernatony and McDonald (2005) assert that a successful brand delivers sustainable competitive advantage and invariably results in superior profitability and market performance. These concepts, whilst arguably challenging to quantify in any sector, may be particularly so when applied to higher education. It may of course be argued that UK universities have always been branded to some extent (e.g. logos and heraldic crests), but most writers on branding would concur that true UK HE branding in its wider context (including external and internal branding) is a comparatively recent phenomenon.

Can branding in HE be measured through current models?

An examination of the benefits of branding may lead to the seemingly complex area of brand evaluation and metrics. It is generally agreed that it is important to measure brand performance, but that monitoring systems should suit the organisation in question (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2005 ; Keller, 2003). Keller (2003) offers the *brand value chain* as a means to ultimately understand the financial impact of brand marketing expenditure and other models such as Millward Brown's *Criteria to assess the strength of a brand* (1996) and Young and Rubicams *brand asset valuator* (1994) are widely known. However, whilst these models have a degree of applicability to the HE sector they are primarily focused on commercial brands and may not wholly suit the particular situation of universities. Variables such as 'market share', 'price premium' and 'loyalty' are examples of the metrics alluded to, which may need a degree of re-conceptualisation for the HE context.

The marketisation of UK higher education (Stamp, 2004) may change the way that branding activity is quantified, as price comes into the equation. When consumers have limited prior knowledge of a service category, brand name may be the most accessible and diagnostic cue available. Strong brands get preferential attribute evaluation, generally higher overall preference and can charge price premiums (Hoeffler and Keller, 2003). One key argument for brand expenditure in HE is that of price premiums (Ambler et al, 2002) that may become increasingly relevant as many countries, including the UK, adopt a market system for university tuition fees.

Despite the wealth of research on strong or successful brands, the literature is more limited when it comes to discussing the specific area of brand metrics or objectives of brand spending. This situation is exacerbated when it comes to considering specific objectives in less traditional marketing fields such as education. This is perhaps surprising when one considers that spending university budgets on branding activity can be controversial (Jevons, 2006).

It may be argued that the better university brands gain in terms of 'quality of student' and raise the overall academic standing (Bunzel, 2007) . Bunzel associates branding in US universities with

enhancing reputation and possibly positive influence on university ranking but concedes that there is little evidence in rankings to support a close link to branding activity.

However, one cannot ignore the relationship between university brands and league tables, particularly the extent to which branding activity seeks to influence league table position. It is debatable whether the presence of league tables changes the conception of branding in the sector, as there is an increasing focus on league table position as a measure of success among some target groups (HEFCE, 2008).

Effective branding can use considerable resources and it is therefore important for managers to use such resources effectively and monitor their brands. However, brands are complex, and any monitoring system should be tailored to suit the organisation's environment (De Chernatony and McDonald, 2005). Whether we should seek to quantify all branding activity in universities is therefore debatable, but is seems evident that whilst commercial branding techniques are utilised in HE, some appropriate metrics are desirable.

In summary, the literature reveals some work on measurement of branding activity in general, but very little for university branding programmes. The competitive situation in UK higher education has arguably forced UK universities to adopt a more professional approach to marketing activity (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998) but whether this extends to explicit objectives for branding is debatable. Whilst it is conceded that not all branding activity can be quantified, surely when it has been claimed that 'vast sums are spent without clear purpose' (Jevons, 2006) a clear rationale and linked metrics are necessary.

Branding as part of the 'marketisation' of the UK university sector

Before branding's role in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) can be examined, the implicit market principles that underpin it may be examined . The idea of offering higher education as a commodity is fundamentally questioned by Gibbs (2001) who argues that the adoption of a commercial market model for HEIs can be seen in the move towards consumable education through modularisation, semesterisation and self directed learning and manifests in the current accompanying 'discourse of marketing'. This view of the prevalence of the market and the ultimate quest for individual fulfilment conceives brands as tools to help one create the self one desires (Holt, 2002). A market view may turn students into consumers and educators into service providers, but, Gibbs (2001) argues, misses the point that higher education contributes to the social well being of its society, and that this ought to be preserved outside the market. It may be that if universities wholly adopt market forces and therefore offer purely what the current market demands rather than to 'stretch the thinking' of a society, then they will have failed in a fundamental role and compromised a key part of their distinctive benefits to society by becoming "a sponsored training park for accountants and gardeners" (Gibbs, 2001, p.91).

Whatever the view of marketisation of UK HE, it does seem that a marketing culture has yet to really permeate universities (Jevons, 2006) and it is open to conjecture whether this is due to a fundamental unsuitability of such a view of HE, where many believe that universities should not be in the business of marketing (Bunzel, 2007). Against such critique, it is arguable whether branding activity is simply part of the discourse of marketing or can seek to offer wider benefits for HEIs.

Within examination of the applicability of marketing concepts in HE, there is a growing body of

work that questions the suitability of commercial branding concepts in this sector (Jevons, 2006; Temple, 2006; Johnston, 2001; Waeraas and Solbakk, 2008) and indeed whether commercial style branding in universities can actually challenge their institutional integrity Waeraas and Solbakk, 2008).

Branding may even be considered "a hollow deception or superficial indulgence" (Mighall, 2009) where university customers "are *vulnerable*, especially if they are in an overseas country, to *branding* which is conveyed only through a web site or a prospectus and not by personal experience. Universities in the heart of cities can arguably seek to brand themselves as havens of rural peace without immediate repercussion" (Temple and Shattock, 2007).

The very effectiveness has also been challenged; in particular, whether university branding is worth the time and cost, as there is little evidence to show that a university branding program really creates a change in perception (Bunzel, 2007)?

What benefits can branding offer a university?

A cynical view may consider branding as something that is done 'to' an institution without any necessary responsibility to reflect a reality. A more sympathetic view would advocate, however, that if we think of 'brand' as the sum of ideas, emotions, and associations evoked by an institution, then it appears less sinister, arbitrary or extravagant (Mighall, 2009).

Various arguments have been offered for branding including congruence between student's values and those of the university, leading to reduced drop out rates (Jevons, 2006). Branding may be a shorthand measure for the whole range of criteria that go to make up the quality of the university (Jevons, 2006) and universities require strong brands to enhance awareness of their existence and course offerings, to differentiate themselves from rivals and to gain market share (Bennett, Ali-Choudhury and Savani, 2007).The concept of differential pricing strategies, linked to expansion of tuition fees has also been offered as an argument to support the application of commercial branding approaches (Ambler et al, 2002).

Improved league table positions have been offered as an objective of branding but there seems to be a role over and above a focus on league table positioning alone. HEFCE (2008, p54) argue that " league tables may be influential, but only part of the complex decision making process and often used to confirm a decision already made". A strong brand should communicate far more about strengths in key areas than the often narrow indicator of league table placing. If used appropriately, branding could build upon league table positioning by emphasising unique selling points but it may be argued that an institution that is comparatively lowly placed in the league tables can nevertheless have a successful brand with niche target audiences.

Whilst there may be arguments for and against investing in branding, these may be superfluous to some extent, as universities may have brands whether they like it or not if branding is the effective expression and management of how people think and feel about the institution. This conceptualisation is not about dreaming up hollow promises, but defining what an institution can authentically offer (Mighall, 2009).

A rationale for branding activity in HE can, it seems, be coherently argued for, but the more

fundamental issue may be what society requires of HE? ; All of the forgoing arguments for branding UK HEIs are to some extent reliant upon an implicit assumption that the adoption of market forces in the HE sector is a positive thing, and this, it seems, is still open to some debate.

In view of the limitations and seeming contradictions in the literature, it seems appropriate to examine the views of those with influence on the branding strategy of UK HEIs.

Methodology

An inductive approach was at the core of the work seeking to explore UK university branding activity through a 'deeper understanding of factors' (Christy and Wood, 1999; De Chernatony et al, 1998) .

Specific objectives of the research were explored earlier, but ultimately the aim was to investigate the degree to which branding is seen as an important strategic activity in UK universities, and the extent to which the value of such activity can be articulated by those who often drive it; university leaders and marketing professionals.

The sample involved two distinct stages: initially fourteen interviews with vice chancellors, followed by eighteen interviews with university heads of marketing or external relations, completed in 2008. The sample size is broadly in line with McGivern (2003) as appropriate to understand interviewees' collective views on a topic but it is conceded that results can only be argued to offer indicative results (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The sample in this research broadly reflected that in Chapleo (2005) where UK universities were segmented into three sub groups based on incorporation date and comprised new universities (1992 and post-1992), 'red-brick' middle group universities (1950s-1960s) and older universities (incorporated before 1950). Universities from these three disparate sectors were included in order to identify similarities and differences (Bennett, Ali-Choudhury and Savani, 2007). Within these categories the sample was one of convenience, making the most of opportunities to ask potentially useful informants where access can be difficult (Daymon and Holloway, 2004).

University leaders, senior marketing and careers personnel were selected as they represented experts who can draw on their specialist knowledge to define the fundamental characteristics of relevant matters (Tremblay, 1982 ; De Chernatony and Segal Horn, 2003).

Semi-structured interviews were utilised, as complex issues can be penetrated (Gummesson, 2005; Chisnall, 1992) in line with other branding studies (Hankinson, 2004). Whilst an interview guide was used, respondents were invited to expand upon ideas and concepts as they wished. The average duration of interviews was 37 minutes. The interviews were transcribed to assist content analysis (Goodman, 1999). Analysis was informed by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Schilling (2006), who advocate coding that attaches each statement or phrase to defined dimensions derived from theory and prior research. The results were assessed by an independent research assistant to maximise the benefits of qualitative research by allowing a degree of subjective judgement from the researcher (Flick, 2006) and hopefully therefore data of a 'richer' nature (Daymon and Holloway, 2004).

It should be stated that the anonymity required by some participants (in discussing specific details of marketing activity, for example) made the attribution of direct quotes awkward. A number of pertinent quotes were assigned by age category of university, however, in an attempt to

address this issue to some extent.

Findings and Discussion

Rationale for branding UK universities

There was a wide variance in the responses among senior marketing personnel, from broad benefits ("to achieve clarity" or "to be more competitive") to far more specific ("for stakeholders to recognise the university"). Several respondents talked of trying to "change a negative" or "undesirable" position. This has resonance of parallels with 'place brands' (Hankinson, 2004; Mighall, 2008), as institutions concerned also mentioned the negative or erroneous perception of their location city/ town. Whilst not the same, it seems there may be possibilities for universities to learn from work on place brands.

Respondents suggested a role for branding at a time when institutions may merge or be involved in takeovers (Manchester was suggested as an example) and another of the wish "to position the institution as world class in an international arena" indicative of the international competition UK universities now face (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003). Warwick was often mentioned as a successfully branded institution in this context.

Some senior marketers discussed the role of branding in their institutions in broader terms: There was talk of "communicating what the university does in all its breadth" (middle university), and one particularly interesting objective was to "capture stakeholders and get them 'on brand'; in other words to enable and encourage them to communicate the brand message" (new university). The new university marketer summarised this as "the role of branding used to be to try to maintain consistency of imagery and message, and to communicate to people what the university stands for, but today the aim is to get the stakeholders of the university to communicate the brand".

Finally, the need to "establish a unique/ clear position" was expressed by several institutions, seemingly driven by recent UK Government policy (Stamp, 2004).

Among HEI leaders there was also some variation in the understanding of the rationale for branding in the sector. The facts that they defined brand in slightly different ways, and sometimes overlapped it with 'reputation' are perhaps symptomatic of the differences in understanding of the purpose and rationale of branding activity. There was, however, a consensus that it is an important strategic activity for a university (and likely to remain so), driven by Government agendas, funding issues, tuition fees and mergers/ alliances. It seems that leaders and senior marketing personnel can, as would be expected, argue a coherent rationale for university branding activity in their institution, but that there is a variety in the understanding of why this is necessary and what it can/should achieve. The key reasons for branding a university evident in this work are summarised in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1

Is the purpose and value of branding clear?

The predominant view of senior marketing personnel was that the sector generally was not consistent concerning the objectives of branding, with talk of "misconceptions, even at a senior level" (new university)or that "the sector is totally unclear about it" (new university).

However, a number of respondents gave more positive responses about clarity of objectives, with

views that "there has been improvement, but there is still a long way to go" (new university). It may be argued that, whilst sector marketers suggest a rationale for branding this is by no means unanimous, especially outside marketing staff.

There was a sense among UK university leaders that branding was a necessary reaction to macro factors such as 'tuition fees, funding issues, Government push to differentiation and mergers'. The idea of institutions wishing 'to occupy a clear place in the market' was offered as the clearest purpose for branding among UK university leaders. A question that is seemingly evident is whether the rationale for branding HEIs is to some extent particular to the political landscape in the UK in the first decade of the twenty first century, and therefore assumptions that these driving forces translate internationally, or will persist in the UK are risky?

It is perhaps indicative of the sample, but there was a limited sense of questioning the value of branding among either group of interviewees. This perhaps demonstrates the widely varying expectation of what branding activity can and should achieve for the university. However, it was interesting (and surprising) that there was, despite these widely varying expectations of branding's benefits, comparatively little mention of linking back to overall university strategic objectives among senior marketing personnel (although university leaders were more inclined to make this link).

Whether seeking to brand UK a university adds 'real value'?

The majority of senior marketing respondents unequivocally thought that it is a necessary process, given current Government HE polices (middle university) or that, "whilst it can be seen as superficial, it is actually a necessary long term process" (new university). Several others were a little more ambiguous but were generally supportive of some aspect of the long-term value of branding activity, or saw it as closely related to reputation management.

However, a number of marketing respondents were more cynical, with one new university in particular arguing that it was 'a fad'. This is interesting when it is considered that the respondents are those who in general are likely to be 'championing' branding at the university management level but even here there was a degree of cynicism on the value of the branding process.

The other group perhaps likely to be critical to the branding agenda within universities are the leaders, but they generally viewed branding as an activity of strategic importance, and likely to remain so unless Government policy changes dramatically.

Ultimately, a key question in the applicability of branding concepts may be how they are conceived and conceptualised, which inevitably leads to questions on the applicability of the current branding models to the UK HE context.

Are the current approaches and techniques of branding applicable to the UK university sector?

When senior marketing professionals were interviewed on this topic, there were interesting comments that university branding "probably does not borrow or learn enough from commercial approaches" (middle university) although it was conceded by several respondents that there is a danger of trying to use inappropriate models for university branding, typified by a new university view that "some lessons can be learned", but that "intelligent application of branding theory" is

important due to the nature of the higher education sector.

Several marketing respondents suggested that some universities have tried simple application of commercial branding models, but that these are not wholly appropriate. UK university leaders echoed this view to some extent, suggesting that there is little evidence of a convincing model to construct and manage a brand in institutions such as universities. One chief executive of a 'middle group' university asked "do we build one overall institutional brand that encompasses all we do, or do we have a series of strong sub brands which have a stronger profile than the overall institutional brand?". It seems reasonable to conclude that whilst a lot can be learned from commercial branding practice, the particular nature of HEIs as large, complex, quasi commercial organisations founded on the principle of academic freedom, means that a branding approach that takes account of these qualities, whilst not easy to design or indeed to implement, is required.

Limitations and criticisms of branding activity in UK universities

As well as the discussed 'lack of a clear model to build an HE brand', other views of respondents on the general limitations of branding activity in UK universities were explored. Both senior marketing personnel and leaders were generally supportive of branding but it was conceded that it was a problematic business, with factors such as 'the lack of real differentiation in the sector', 'internal barriers to acceptance', and 'the particularly diverse nature of universities that is hard to encapsulate' being widely cited, particularly among university leaders. Some of these factors were discussed by senior marketing personnel, but this group were perhaps more consistently supportive of branding activity, although several did suggest that the current spate of branding activity was a 'management trend'?

It was notable that no one talked of any inherent unsuitability of marketing concepts; although it was conceded that within their universities others questioned the suitability. In reality some leaders hinted at questioning aspects of branding but suggested that the agenda was driven at a Government policy level. The criticisms and limitations of branding as applied to universities are summarised in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2.

Conclusions

Overall, many of the issues identified in relation to branding UK HE are seemingly influenced by UK political and economic agendas at the time of the research. This obviously makes conclusions UK specific to some extent and limits the extent to which they can be taken as representative for HEIs internationally. However, many countries are experiencing the marketisation of HE to some extent and therefore, whilst generalisations should be treated with caution, the issues should resonate with HEIs outside the UK. As long ago as 1999 it was suggested that the USA had already been through the clash of cultures that led to greater marketisation (Sanders, 1999) but many European countries are in a similar position to the UK to some degree.

Leaders of UK universities seemingly saw branding as an activity of strategic importance, and likely to remain so. There was a degree of overlap in their understanding of brand with that of

reputation, but most were able to articulate a rationale for branding, albeit often in broad terms. The sector marketing professionals were also able to articulate *a* rationale, as one would expect, but do not necessarily have a consistent view of this rationale. Whilst it is conceded that branding in any sector does not always have the same objectives, there seems to be a danger that in UK HE it becomes seen as a tool to fix all problems, or something that 'we should be doing'?

It was notable that there was limited mention of linking branding programmes to overall university strategic objectives, particularly among the senior marketing personnel. A link to institutional strategy would seem to be a natural underpinning of branding and although the sample was exploratory (and therefore to assume that this is always the case would be unfair to the HE marketing profession), it does seem curious and should perhaps be further investigated.

On the question of whether the current techniques of branding are applicable to the UK university sector, the lack of a clear model to facilitate building a brand in a university was identified as a problem. Any consensus seemed to suggest that simplistic application of commercial approaches is not helpful.

Overall, whilst there seemed to broad support for branding as a strategic activity and a general understanding of benefits, the consistency of views on this were limited. Many aspects of any degree of consensus, however, rely upon the implicit assumption that marketisation of UK HE is a good thing; an assumption that may be robustly challenged (Gibbs, 2001, p.93). A counter argument, however, may be underpinned by looking towards American Ivy League institutions and their market 'success'; perhaps UK HE can learn from aspects of their approach applied in a UK context.

Whilst UK Government policies push HE towards a market system, it seems reasonable to argue that aspects of branding can be beneficial in specific areas such as awareness of course offerings, differentiation and communicating strengths (Mighall, 2009). What is required, however, is perhaps a subtler bespoke approach to branding based upon an understanding of the diverse, complex and unique nature of UK universities. To simply apply commercial branding techniques and approaches without consideration of the nature of HE would logically seem to be inappropriate, and findings in this research seem to support this suggestion. This 'failure to domesticate marketing' and the corresponding simplistic use of borrowed wisdom from business may threaten the viability of activities such as branding and has contributed to negative attitudes, particularly among academics (Maringe, 2005).

The debate over branding in UK HE continues, but the fact that spending money on branding activity can be contentious suggests the need for further empirical investigation of both the suitability of many of the concepts and appropriate ways to measure the value of branding a university. This has to be based upon a fundamental examination of branding's role within the equally contentious trend towards the marketisation of UK higher education.

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Figure 1 : Identfied rationales for branding a UK HEI

[pic]

Figure 2: Perceived limitations of the branding concept in university sector.

Specific aims

Wider general rationales

Rationales for branding an HEI

Position as world class internationally

Increase stakeholder recognition

Amalgamate parts of merged HEI

Get stakeholders to communicate the brand

Establish clear position

To be more competitive

Communicate all that the HEI does

Clarity – clear place in the market

Limitations of branding

Lack of real differentiation in the HE sector

Possibly a management fad?

Lack of wholly appropriate branding models for HEIs.

Not linked to strategic objectives

Internal culture and barriers to acceptance

Seen as tool to 'fix all problems'?