

External Perceptions of Successful University Brands

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Abstract

Branding in universities has become an increasingly topical issue, with some institutions committing substantial financial resources to branding activities. The particular characteristics of the sector present challenges for those seeking to build brands and it therefore seems to be timely and appropriate to investigate the common approaches of those institutions perceived as having successful brands.

This study is exploratory in nature, seeking to investigate how successfully UK universities brand themselves, whether they are distinct and if the sector overall communicates effectively. This is approached through examining the perspective of opinion formers external to universities but closely involved with the sector – a key stakeholder group in UK higher education

Overall, the research's exploratory nature aims to further the debate on effective branding in UK higher education. The findings and conclusions identify some issues surrounding university branding activity; most UK universities were considered to be distinct from one another, but few were seen to have real fully formed brands. Although a number of institutions that were seen as having more 'successful' brands were identified, it was argued that whilst many UK universities communicate their brand well enough to key stakeholders, they fail to consistently do this across all audiences. It was also suggested that UK universities may concentrate on areas of perceived immediate strategic importance (in terms of branding) to an extent where others are neglected.

Introduction

It seems to be the case that higher and further education institutions are behaving increasingly as corporations, with increasing competition among universities, both internationally and nationally (Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton, 2004; Helmsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). It follows therefore that they may need to adopt a marketing orientation, including mastering brand management as a central competence (Louro and Cunha, 2001). The challenge for higher education institutions, however, is that application of branding theory and practice to specialist areas of marketing, such as education, is not necessarily fully developed. (Hankinson, 2004)

Previous research has examined which UK institutions were perceived to have ‘successful’ brands and the factors associated with those institutions (Chapleo, 2005). This work builds upon that, exploring the effectiveness of branding activity and individual brands in the UK HE (higher education) sector, but from the particular perspective of external opinion formers.

This research was therefore exploratory in nature, interviewing individuals who, whilst having roles that related strongly to UK universities, were external to the actual institutions themselves. The sample comprised twelve depth interviews with senior management within funding bodies, regional development agencies (RDAs), ‘blue chip’ companies and professional bodies,

The objectives were:

- To explore whether UK universities have true brands and are distinct from one another?
- To examine factors contributing to ‘successful’ UK HE brands.
- To explore whether the sector overall communicates effectively?
- To explore how ‘successfully branded’ universities are perceived to be distinct.
- To further practice on the issues surrounding university branding.

Terms of reference

A key term in need of clarification for the purpose of this paper is ‘success’ as applied to ‘university brands’.

The various definitions, in particular those of Doyle (1989) and De Chernatony et al (1998) were considered, and respondents, when asked to identify ‘successful brands, were asked to consider those that were clear and consistent (in demonstrating a competitive advantage) and congruous with needs of various customer groups.

The distinction between brand and reputation may also require some clarification. Some authors seem to infer a distinction between the two terms although this was by no means universally the case. Frost and Cooke (1999) argue that brand and reputation are “actually aspects of the same thing” and that people may find it useful to make a distinction but that “such distinctions are impractical” For this reason in this paper the term brand is generally used but where interviewees argued that the reputation of an institution differed greatly from that of the brand, this was explored.

Defining brands

There still seems to be no one accepted definition of a brand, despite considerable discussion. (Hankinson, 2001). However, it is evident that brand is more than just a logo, symbol or design. Hart and Murphy (1998) summarise this neatly, proposing that “the brand is a synthesis of all the elements, physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional”.

Although arguably simplifying matters somewhat, the branding literature can be broadly divided in terms of ‘rational’ aspects or the wider view of ‘rational plus emotional’ perspectives. There are attempts to define ‘university brands’, however – Bulotaite (2003) suggests that ‘when someone mentions the name of a university it will immediately evoke ‘associations, emotions, images and faces’ and that the role of university branding is to ‘build, manage and develop these impressions’.

Successful Brands

Marketing success is well defined as a concept, but no definitive source exists that focuses on brand success (De Chernatony et al, 1998). Some writers do go as far as actually suggesting a definition for a successful brand, stating that it is “a name, symbol, design, or some combination, which identifies the ‘product’ of a particular organisation as having a sustainable competitive advantage”(Doyle 1989, p5). De Chernatony et al (1998, p778) suggests that one of the defining characteristics between successful and failed brands is that successful brands show a greater degree of ‘fit’ between the values firms develop for their brands and the rational and emotional needs of their consumers.

This concept of values that meet consumers perceived needs is echoed by De Chernatony and McDonald (2000, p20) , who propose that a successful brand is “an identifiable product, service, person or place, augmented in such a way that the buyer or user perceives relevant unique added values which match their needs most closely”.

However, a common definition of a successful brand was necessary, and definitions, including those of Doyle (1989) and De Chernatony et al (1998) were considered and incorporated so that, for the purpose of the methodology, a successful brand was taken to be one that is ‘clear and consistent (in demonstrating a competitive advantage) and clearly fits with the needs of various customer groups’.

The concept of branding in higher education

Practitioners have increasingly embraced branding in higher education, although actually implementing techniques of marketing (including branding) may still be subject to some resistance (Temple, 2006). Some writers argue that branding as a concept applies as well to higher education institutions as to other organisations. Opoku, Abratt and Pitt (2006) consider that their brands are no different from any other brand and the classic functions that brands perform apply.

Others, however, argue that brands for higher education institutions are inherently more complex and that conventional brand management techniques are inadequate in this market (Jevons, 2006).

Stamp (2004) offers a number of factors which have driven the UK HE branding agenda including tuition fees, competitive differentiation, league tables, organisations attaining university status and the mis-match between brand perceptions and delivery. It seems that necessity is forcing UK universities to adopt the concepts and practices of branding, but there is doubt as whether branding is still fully embraced and understood – Temple (2006) argues that “much of what is described as branding in higher education would be better labelled as reputation management or even public relations”

What *does* lead to successful university brands

Bulotaite (2003) believes that university brands actually have the potential to create stronger feelings than most brands and that the key to doing this successfully is to create a ‘unique communicative identity’. He advocates doing this through capitalising upon heritage. Jevons (2006), however, argues that universities may talk of differentiation through their brands but that they fail to ‘practice what they preach’.

It has been suggested that HE brands need to be focussed on market related strengths, rather than generalist approaches, for them to be successful (Schubert, 2007). In summary, it seems that what existing work has been undertaken in the area of applying branding theory to HE institutions has largely been borrowed from non-education sectors (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006. Maringe, 2005) and little research has been undertaken to establish what underpins a successful university brand. In short, ‘what does lead to successful HEI brands?’ requires further exploration. This work is therefore considered timely and appropriate in furthering understanding in this field.

Methodology

The principal focus of the research was to ‘seek a deeper understanding of factors’ (Chisnall 2001, p195) involved in successfully branding UK universities. Interviews and smaller samples were therefore considered appropriate (Christy and Wood, 1999)

The sample size was appropriate for an exploratory qualitative study, and as such offers results that are *representative* but not necessarily *conclusive*. (De Chernatony et al, 1998)

Semi-structured interviews were considered to be suitable, as “complex and ambiguous issues can be penetrated” (Gummesson 2005, p. 309). 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 brand perceptions of the overall UK university sector, and commonalities between successful university brands.

Interviews were conducted among opinion former who, whilst having roles that related strongly to UK universities, were external to the actual institutions themselves. These were considered an appropriate group as they represented experts with a breadth of experience who can draw on their specialist knowledge to define the fundamental characteristics of relevant matters (Tremblay, 1982. De Chernatony and Segal Horn, 2003).

The interviewees comprised:

- 12 External Opinion Formers – senior management within funding bodies, regional development agencies (RDAs), ‘blue chip’ companies and professional bodies, interviewed between February and May 2008.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and content analysis conducted. (Goodman, 1999).

The average duration of interviews was 29 minutes.

The analysis was informed by Miles and Huberman (1994) who advocate coding that identifies any commonalities in responses, and the particular qualitative approach of Schilling (2006) in ‘reducing the material while preserving the essential contents’. Once an initial content analysis was completed, the results were checked by an independent researcher as providing an representative summary, and then findings were drawn out by viewing the summary in the context of the interview questions. Flick’s (2006) approach informed this part of the process and utilises the benefits of qualitative research by allowing a degree of subjective judgement on the part of the researcher and therefore data of a ‘richer’ nature is hopefully presented (Daymon and Holloway, 2004).

It is important to recognise that the anonymity demanded by some participants made attributing direct quotes challenging. Nevertheless, a number of pertinent quotes were assigned by generic job role in an attempt to partly address this issue.

Findings and discussion

How effectively do UK universities differentiate from one another ?

The consensus here was that in general institutions in the UK higher education sector *were* differentiated from one another. Some respondents alluded to differentiation within three sub sectors (which they termed 'Russell group', 'Redbrick' and 'post 1992'). As a number of the respondents e.g. Regional Development Agencies (RDA) had a regional focus, it was apparent that they principally perceived differentiation within the region. An example of this was "North east England, with 5 institutions with differing roles". It seemed that there was no one important differentiating factor, however, and certainly some institutions had progressed further along the path of differentiation than others.

One RDA interviewee suggested that "brand communication among universities may be poor overall". His view was that "universities were good at communicating brands to specific core audiences, such as students or perhaps RCUK" (Research Councils United Kingdom) , but that "brand communication is not good in the wider sense". This, it was suggested, linked to the broadness of the role of universities and the difficulty in communicating a succinct brand.

Do universities have 'real' brands?

Inevitably this question occasionally prompted discussion on definition of brand – in this case the definition synthesised from Doyle (1989) and De Chernatony et al (1998), as detailed in the literature review, was referred to. It is accepted that many varied definitions exist but this offered a clear and robust working example.

All respondents did feel that universities do to some extent possess brands but views varied on how fully formed these were and some respondents suggested that they may not be brands 'in the real commercial sense of the word'. It was even suggested by two respondents from Research Councils that in some cases the brand may 'go little deeper than a logo'.

Even those that interpreted university brands in a wider sense sometimes had reservations about their reach. This was exemplified by the view from 2 RDA interviewees that some universities 'may think that their brands are more strongly recognised than is the reality'.

How effectively do you think UK universities communicate with you? – What are the issues from your perspective?

This was an interesting question as clearly each respondent brings their own agenda. The point was made by RDA interviewees that universities are perhaps good at communicating to specific audiences such as students but that the "diversity of their role in society means that they struggle to define this role precisely", and that therefore communications in a wider sense are often "patchy". This was carried through to the branding issue, with an RDA interviewee arguing that brand communication may be clear for some audiences, but that it may be indistinct overall. It was suggested that, with limited resources, communication priorities are often driven by perceived immediate strategic priorities (such as Government targets) but that this can be detrimental to communication with other ' longer term' audiences.

Another interesting point was made by an RDA interviewee; that "the nature of universities is that they are very individual and they hold that very dear". The problem with this, it was suggested, is that "no one responds for the sector effectively". The argument is therefore that communication may be patchy at the micro level but it is also problematic at a macro level.

Views on strength of UK university brands in regional / national/ international contexts?

International branding was seen as a crucial area of future importance, but it was argued by several respondents that international branding therefore poses a great challenge for UK universities. The view was that 'there are comparatively few *real* international brands among UK

universities', but that a number of institutions had successfully branded at a national level. Most institutions, however, particularly newer universities, were thought to possess 'true brands' at a regional level only.

Those thought to have true international brands included perhaps obvious institutions such as Oxford, Cambridge, London Business School (LBS) and London School of Economics (LSE). Other less obvious examples were also discussed in some cases – individual respondents gave examples such as Nottingham (suggested to have 'a strong international agenda due to strong leadership') and some newer institutions such as Hertfordshire (who 'push their international agenda').

Some interesting points were made, however, with one RDA respondent talking of a perceived difference between 'brand' and 'impact'. The example of Durham was used to illustrate this, as 'to some extent it has an international *brand* but most of its *impact* is actually in its North East UK region'.

Space and scope did not allow, but this important area is undoubtedly worthy of closer investigation in its own right

Location as a factor in successful university brands

Location is clearly an important part in many 'successful' brands, but not across all institutions to an equal extent. Certainly the views of respondents of cities that have undergone some renaissance of image (e.g. Manchester), are considered desirable from a lifestyle perspective (e.g. Brighton) or indeed are global centres (e.g. London) were that location had a very important part to play on the success of the brand. Equally the examples of UK universities such as Keele or Loughborough were suggested, where there was little clear city brand and therefore location offered very limited brand advantage, and could actually be a 'problem in brand differentiation'.

One respondent talked of the unique power of a university brand to transform the city/ town brand they are located in, citing Warwick as such an example. Clearly the suggestion is that there can be a great deal of synergy between a successful university brand and the town/ city brand. One research council interviewee emphasised that in his view location was often becoming more important than subject area, with a distinct move towards selling a 'lifestyle choice' for e.g. south coast locations or cities such as Manchester. The academic quality, it was thought, may almost be "a given" and therefore not actively promoted as a differentiator.

Identification of 'successful' UK university brands, and justification of choice.

Interviewees were asked to identify and discuss a university, that, in their opinion, has a successful brand, as well as summarising why they believed this to be the case. A certain regional bias depending on location of interviewees was evident, but some interesting examples were given. Institutions suggested included:

Nottingham – international focus, location and size

Dundee – regionally significant, innovative and transformational.

Hertfordshire – has successfully raised profile, newer campus, and business focus.

Goldsmith's – distinct within the arts structure

University of West of England (UWE) - successful employment, strong advertising straplines and positioning statements surrounding this.

As well as these institutions, Warwick and Manchester were, (in common with Chapleo, 2005), mentioned as successful brands. Warwick in particular seems to be the most regularly cited 'successful' brand.

What do you consider leads to a successful university brand

This question sought the views of opinion formers on the key question of what underpins a successful university brand. Several factors in particular were discussed: a number of institutions talked of 'strong strategic agendas' or a 'clear vision' being crucial to a 'successful' brand. It was also considered that a chief executive could not only play a significant role in a successful brand, but that significant risk is posed by leadership that does not support the branding concept. It was suggested that 'the brand is vulnerable to personal whim of the chief executive to a greater extent than many commercial brands'.

‘Internal ‘buy-in’ among staff was, perhaps unsurprisingly, thought a challenge for universities, but also important to a consistent brand. In the view of several respondents this is closely akin to organisational culture, which forms the essence of brand. The example of a newer university was discussed by one RDA interviewee, suggesting that the challenge was to capture “ the ethos of teaching and research of the university and convey that consistently through all the processes of the institution such as administration and external relations”.

Conclusions

It was evident that most UK universities were seen by external opinion formers as distinct from one another, but few were considered to have real fully formed 'commercial- style' brands. (The point was made that commercial style brands may not be wholly applicable for the sector anyway). Although a number of institutions that were seen as having more 'successful' brands were identified, it was suggested that many UK universities communicate their brand well enough to key audiences such as students, but fail to consistently do this across all audiences. It may be argued that the broad role of universities makes this difficult, and it was also suggested that UK universities may 'undersell' themselves in key areas that they do not immediately see as of strategic importance.

Perhaps the factor that came through most strongly among the sample as being a prerequisite for a 'successful' brand, is the need for a clear vision and a purposeful longer-term strategy that supports that vision. It seemed that the institutions that were most strongly identified as having 'successful' brands were those that were considered to have a clear vision and purpose in place for some time. This was also reflected in a deliberate positioning strategy – those institutions that were considered aware of positioning and sought to manage this were seemingly more likely to have successful brands.

The greatest challenge for the future, however, appeared to be the building of true 'international brands'. This obviously affects some institutions more than others depending on their market focuses, but was considered to be an area where many institutions have considerable work to do.

Implications for practice

It is apparent that there are challenges facing UK universities in terms of brand management, but there are a number of positive steps that university leaders and marketers may take towards building successful brands:

Two factors in particular seem to be associated with successful university brands - *clear vision*, and the *support of leadership*, and, whilst there is clearly no 'quick fix' for these, an understanding of their importance can inform brand management planning.

It was also considered that UK universities can fail to consistently communicate across all audiences, and that strategic priorities (often driven by Government agendas) through necessity lead to a shorter term view of brand communication– perhaps a wider audit of stakeholders and a longer term view need to be considered here?

Further Research

This was an exploratory study and as such has provided indicative results which raise further questions:

- 1) International branding. This was identified as a particular issue, and certainly the perceptions of UK universities internationally are an area worthy of consideration.
- 2) The natural progression of this work is perhaps the ultimate aim of suggesting specific models for managing a brand in the particular context of higher education. As has already been argued, branding in universities is not particularly well served by established brand management models.

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