

Chapter 14

Exploring the Secret of Successful University Brands

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ABSTRACT

This chapter contributes to the topical area of higher education marketing by exploring how branding adds value to universities. The primary focus of exploring branding concepts associated with successful higher education brands in a UK context was chosen for this work with a view to later comparison with other countries such as the United States, where branding of universities has a longer practical and academic history. The concept of “successful” brands was explored through the extant literature, and the subsequent research identified constructs underpinning a successful university brand. These constructs were then tested among a larger sample of UK university stakeholders. The findings explored the variables associated with successful university brands and suggested significant relationships among these variables. A further stage involved qualitative exploration of current perceptions and practices in HE branding, designed to maintain currency and build ongoing research possibilities. Overall, the chapter offers suggestions for both academia and practice on what underpins a successful university brand, and the variables associated with these brands.

INTRODUCTION

Education is increasingly a quasi- commercial service industry (Brookes, 2003) and universities are behaving as corporations in many respects (Veloutsou et al, 2004; Bunzel, 2007).

With increased commercialization comes an associated focus on marketing and branding and the adoption of marketing as an ethos by diverse sectors, including education, is no longer under debate (Shepherd, 2005). The challenge for universities, however, is that effective application of marketing to specialist areas such as education is arguably not well developed (Hankinson, 2004).

As part of marketization it is argued that branding is a necessary organisational competence as competition increases (Louro & Cunha, 2001; Veloutsou et al, 2004; Helmsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In

UK higher education branding has become “ever more important given the huge shift in the HE environment since 2009” (Distinct, 2011).

Branding, as conceptualized in this research, comprises both the *rational* and the *emotional* elements common to many writers (Le Pla & Parker, 2002; Balmer & Greyser, 2003) and the authors accept the view that ‘the brand is a synthesis of all the physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional elements’ (Hart & Murphy, 1998, p.61).

To explore the essence of branding, however, may require researchers to question why some organizations are more successful than others in brand building (Urde, 2003)?

The contribution of this research is that it investigates the elements of brand *success*.

Whilst there has been a reasonable amount of work on what constitutes a successful brand in commercial organizations, and a growing body investigating components of university brands, the specific context of successful university brands addresses a gap in the literature at a time when this work is highly topical. It is accepted that *success* is a highly subjective term but this is explored through the literature and this paper is offered as a basis for further work to isolate the essence of successful branding in organizations such as universities, and to explore current approaches to building these brands.

The specific objectives of the paper were:

- To look for commonalities in brand related activity among universities suggested to have *successful* brands.
- To identify the brand components/ variables associated with *successful* UK university brands.
- To further the debate and inform practice on the issues surrounding branding in contexts other than commercial product marketing.

These objectives are linked by the common purpose of investigating the factors underpinning successful brands in universities and draw from existing literature on HE (Higher Education) branding in general and brand success in commercial contexts. The assertion that conventional branding techniques are inadequate in this market (Jevons, 2006) further supports the need for this research.

It is conceded that HE branding in the USA is generally more accepted and therefore advanced than the UK (Sevier, 2004) but the UK focus of this paper is considered appropriate as it is a interesting and rapidly changing HE market, and results may be valuable for subsequent comparison not only with the US, but with other countries where branding in HE is becoming commonplace but is at varying stages of implementation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review explores the concept of successful brands, central to this paper, and then goes on to consider the specific branding context of universities, the application of corporate branding to the sector and finally applies the concept of brand success to the HE sector.

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