

Branding Higher Education: Academic Struggles with Promotional Work

Rajani Naidoo

Reform including the construction of quasi-markets and global competition has transformed universities into organisational actors responsible for the management of reputation. This has led to the perception of the university brand as a valuable asset which requires construction and maintenance through various forms of promotional work.

While branding is becoming prevalent in higher education, little empirical research has been conducted on the interaction of branding practices with the organizational characteristics and culture of higher education. I draw on the interdisciplinary literature from Marketing, Cultural Studies and Higher Education to conceptualise branding as a strategic asset which distils and projects intended organisational attributes and values at the interface of relationships between producers, consumers and brand-workers for cultural value and competitive advantage (Hatch and Schultz, 2008). Branding is conceptualised as constructing relationships with external stakeholders but it is simultaneously a management practice with the potential to shape meanings, values and practices within higher education.

The empirical focus in this paper is on business schools, conceptualised as located in a disciplinary field characterised by fragmented adhocracy with a high degree on dependence on other scientific fields and on various audiences for legitimacy (Whitley, 1984). Our hypothesis is that business schools would be the most active of all faculties in rising to the branding challenge. I draw on a multi-case research project to analyse how business school brands are constructed, consumed and resisted intra-organisationally and the extent to which ethics and the responsibilities of business schools to the wider society influence these interactions.

A two stage analysis is undertaken. I develop a socio-historical analysis to show how traditional reputation enhancing strategies drew on criteria and practices that were based on internal academic criteria and the hierarchical ordering of universities. This was then projected outwards and accepted as legitimate by external stakeholders.

In present times, pressures for massification, the requirement for performative excellence, national and global quasi-markets and the positioning of students as consumers have combined to propel universities to engage with corporate forms of marketing practices (Naidoo, Shankar and Veer, 2011). Contemporary branding practices therefore introduce an outer directed process of conscious organisational projection, packaged and distributed according to external performance measures and market criteria.

The second level of analysis is empirical and begins by outlining the main trends from an international project on branding in Business Schools. I then develop an in-depth analysis of a case study of a Business School in the United Kingdom.

Institutional documents and web based material as well as visual and other statements related to branding were analysed. In-depth interviews with senior academic managers and academic faculty at different levels of seniority representing various disciplines were also utilised.

The theoretical framework draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical and empirical work on higher education particularly his concepts of 'field', 'capital' and 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1996). The institutional field perspective is a useful theoretical frame as it provides an analytical perspective and a mediating context linking the Business School to the external environment. It also provides a relational approach which focuses on interactive processes between and within business schools. Bourdieu's framework is combined with theories of institutional work (Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca, 2011) to introduce conscious intention and organisational transformation.

The findings show that for senior managers, branding functioned to articulate and legitimise the Business School's position within the hierarchy of institutions. An analysis of the website, promotional material and interviews with senior managers reveal that the key intended features of the brand include multiple and competing attributes related to rankings, employability, blue skies research, knowledge capitalisation and the role of business schools in society. Managers grappled with these attributes and did not attempt to resolve multiple branding claims; rather the competing claims appeared to assist managers in responding to competing internal and external pressures for legitimacy.

There was a range of responses from academic faculty pointing to a fluid engagement with the idea of promotional work. For some, the concept of branding took on negative connotations as they perceived it as the inappropriate influence of business ideology on academia. However, respondents also varied their accounts depending on the kind of messages they were trying to convey. In managerial and promotional work for the School the brand was actively embraced – perhaps because of the sense of legitimacy it brought to this work. In high status research work, most closely associated with academic identity, drawing on the brand was mocked as superficial and as undermining of scholarly seriousness. There were also disciplinary and age differences. Younger academics were more adept at self-branding and made explicit use of brand-related materials in order to leverage their own profile. Most importantly, however, debates on branding functioned as a locus for discussions and conflicts relating to the responsibilities of business schools in society.

In conclusion, the findings reveal that responses to the promotional work associated with the brand are shaped by both individual agency and the organisational structure and culture of higher education. There were multiple, ambiguous and contradictory voices involved in the construction of brands, even within a faculty in the university that was expected to be most open to branding. The study revealed that branding was also a bottom-up process which was influenced by academics who maintained, embraced, consumed and resisted branding constructions on a daily basis. Branding simultaneously paved the way for new ambitions, introduced conflict and attempted to provide discursive closure.

Rather than seeing this as potentially dysfunctional, presenting many organisational faces to different audiences was presented as crucial in accommodating the diverse and competing interests of external and internal stakeholders in order to gain widespread legitimacy. Indeed, the majority of faculty welcomed the heterogeneous branding approach of the school as they felt that this resulted in the protection of academic autonomy and allowed discussions around aims and ethics. At the same time ethical dilemmas relating to the image that the brand was conveying in relation to substance were articulated.

The paper concludes by outlining important consequences of branding for academic and managerial practices and the wider contributions of higher education to society.

References

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