

Trust in higher education: Do Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) communicate trust well?

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The changes in higher education financial structure and the proclaimed link of a higher education with person and societal economic benefits has put pressure on HEIs to attract students. Recruitment is often volatile due to changes to the market, either externally (fee hikes in the UK and reversals in Germany) or general historic and systematic decline (USA). In response, HEIs have embraced integrated and relational marketing, enrolment management and alumni relations to secure their revenues and support their reputations (in the UK the rate of growth in marketing professional well exceeds the growth in academic appointments, according to figures provided by the UK's Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA). These show growth in marketing-related positions of 25% between 2004/05 and 2010/11, compared to the 13% rise in academic appointments). In this milieu, institutions with a good reputation, highly qualified students and good prospects for elite employment (Milburn, 2012) have flourished, while others have struggled against ideological educational policy.

Marketing in higher education has grown from the information-giving function of the prospectus or year book into a range of communicative and relationship communication practices designed to attract student submissions to specific universities, in the same way as consumers are attracted to cars, iPads and foreign holidays. The tangible benefits of fun and the economic promise of a university education have dominated higher education communications. Universities have promoted education by offering hedonistic gratification and routes to careers and position education (as their product or service) as yet one more thing to be consumed (Lawlor, 2007). These activities run the risk of displaying overwhelming consumerism (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

The impact of these changes is summarised by Hassan, who observes:

the commercialization of the university is primarily an economic and political process of transformation that has little if anything to do with education, knowledge production and the well being of either staff or students. What is more, these changes are all being refracted through the prism of neo-liberal ideology. (2003: 77)

With consumerism changing students into customers (Woodall et al., 2014), and tutors into service providers (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett, 2013) and with ever-more vulnerable and naïve students being encouraged to enrol, competition rather than sector collaboration has become the higher education markets ethos. One consequence of such a change is that trust, once assumed of higher education (Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota, 2010) has been shaken by the uncertainty of the market and needs to be re-built.

All this seems straightforward and what one would expect from institutions that have internal trust and are trusted by the public (although questioned by Tierney, 2006, and

Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). According to Ghosh et al. (2001), who have argued that prospective 'students who trust a college are more likely to enrol or make non-contractual pre-commitments to attend the college' (2001: 324). Yet equally important is the use of 'puffry to recruit students to college may get them to visit and maybe enrol and attend. However, if the promises are not delivered upon, students' trust in the college may erode' (2001: 334). More recently, Bradley (2013) examined misleading marketing claims in UK university prospectuses. His work built on previous research suggesting that the imagery and language of university marketing can be misleading. Specifically, he considered the use of data and statistics by universities in their advertising in a way not readily verified by students. From a UK sample of university prospectuses he developed a typology of misleading data-based marketing comprised of nine categories: omission of facts and selective reporting; misleading wording; misleading inferences about an attribute; misleading associations between attributes; misleading endorsements; claim-fact discrepancies; falsehoods; carefully-crafted comparisons; and claims without a reference point. He concludes that 'because choosing a university is so important to students and because universities aspire to high ethical and scholarly standards, the issues raised by these findings are significant'. We agree and are more direct than Bradley, and would argue it is a breach of trust.

Moreover, within the perceived value of feelings there were two distinct constructs; the perceived representativeness of the feelings with respect to the target to be evaluated, and the perceived relevance of the feelings with respect to the judgment to be made. These issues are critical to how naive decision makers make sense of perceived ambiguity. Avnet et al. claim that 'Evidence of the role of trust in feelings as a distinct determinant of the information value of (and reliance on) feelings was found across six different studies' (2012: 732). They conclude that 'the construct of trust in feelings has important implications for our understanding of the broader role of affect and feelings in judgments and decisions' (2012: 734). We attempt to explore such a concept in our study.

The project

Our aims for this project are humble. We wish to know the level of perceived trust potential that pre-university students attribute to different forms and communication channels from which they gather information about universities in the UK, when asked about the source usefulness and trustworthiness. We are unaware of any such studies, although there have been some into the importance of communication channel. The study enriches the literature in that this is a practical example of choice making in a real world situation for students. In this it augments the work of both Avnet *et al.* (2012) and earlier work of Pham and associates (e.g. 1998, 2001 and 2012). We have also asked our participants to identify importance as well as trust, on the basis

that these two concepts are different and will appear so to pre-university students. We did not use the term 'credibility' for, as Eisend (2006) has indicated, this as a nebulous concept for those unaware of the structure of organisations. The differing ranking of source tends towards the support of such a conclusion.