Do Universities Have “Successful” Brands?

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Abstract

Branding in universities is a topical issue, but arguably few UK universities have fully developed “successful” brands in the manner of commercial organizations. This qualitative paper explores the opinions of 40 opinion formers on which UK universities have successful brands and the associations these brands have. Current literature on what constitutes a successful brand and current branding theory and practice in higher education is examined to give context to the work. Findings identify comparatively few institutions with “successful” brands, but those that are suggested are considered for attributes, and limited commonality is found; areas such as marketing communications, reputation, location, and public relations are all argued to be contributory to successful brands. Perhaps more

importantly, this research identifies certain institutions worthy of closer qualitative investigation toward generating a model of successful branding in higher education.

Keywords:

brands, branding, reputation, universities, higher education

Introduction

In UK higher education (HE) there appears to be increased recognition by both managers and academics of the significance of brands as sources of sustained competitive advantage,¹ and this has seen branding widely discussed in the education press.² Indeed, many institutions are investing considerable sums in development and management of their brands.³

However, the whole discipline of brand management has been described as “a cacophony of simultaneously competing and overlapping approaches,”⁴ and it seems reasonable to suggest that this may be exacerbated by the complexity of branding in the HE context. Exploratory investigation of whether higher education institutions have successfully developed brands, and what common properties any

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successful institutions share, therefore seems both timely and appropriate.

This research builds on the author’s earlier work on branding in higher education that considered the extent to which marketing as a discipline had developed in UK HE and the extent to which university vice-chancellors and chief executives understood and embraced branding. This work appears as papers in the CASE/IJEA journals.⁵

Objectives

The objectives of this research were:

- to identify whether any UK higher education institutions were perceived to have “successful” brands;
- to explore the factors that were perceived to be associated with success of identified institutions;
- to further the debate on the importance and role of brand management in UK universities.

Terms of reference

A key term in need of clarification for the purpose of this paper is *success* as applied to “successful university brands.” While the long-term aim of subsequent research is to identify what constructs comprise and underpin successful university brands, this research considered which institutions had successful brands.

The various definitions, in particular those of Doyle and De Chernatony *et al.*,⁶ were incorporated and adapted for the purpose of this research so that respondents, when asked to identify “successful brands,” were asked to consider those that are *clear* and *consistent* (in demonstrating a *competitive advantage*) and *congruous* with needs of various customer groups.

It is acknowledged that this may be a somewhat limited tool with a subjective

term such as branding, but as this work merely sought to explore opinion formers’ views on which institutions were worthy of closer examination, it was considered reasonable. The whole subject area of “success” among brands is an area of academic research in its own right.

A further term may require some clarification: a number of respondents suggested distinctions between the perceived success of university *brand* and *reputation*. This implies a distinction between the two terms although this was by no means universally the case. This is perhaps again an area worthy of exploration in its own right, but that is not within the scope of this paper. Some issues are explored by Frost and Cooke who conclude 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.”⁷ For this reason in this paper the term *brand* is generally used but where interviewees argued that the reputation of their institution differed greatly from that of the brand, that is stated.

Literature Review

What are brands?

There seems to be no simple answer to the question of what a brand actually is. The concepts surrounding brands are unusual in that, despite considerable discussion, there are still limited agreed common models or practice. Indeed, Hankinson argues that there is no one accepted definition of a brand.⁸

A survey of literature reveals certain commonalities but also wide variance among the definitions. Kapferer stops short of actually attempting to neatly encapsulate the term “brand” in a short phrase, in 2001 stating “brand is a

deceptively simple concept ... but very few people are able to propose a satisfying definition.”⁹ Aaker, perhaps representing a US perspective, suggests that a brand is concerned with thoughts, feelings, and imagery and that these are mentally linked to that brand in the consumer’s memory.¹⁰

Despite the suggestion that Kapferer and Aaker represent somewhat different perspectives on branding,¹¹ both these writers discuss brand in wide terms, encompassing what could be termed the “rational” and the “emotional.” This interpretation, however, is not wholly embraced by all writers; Andreasen and Kotler seem to allude to a definition of brand that is more focused on the rational than the emotional,¹² although in other writings Kotler does appear to embrace both approaches.¹³ Van Auken cites a seemingly rational definition of brand but qualifies this when he states that “more importantly, a brand is the source of a promise for the consumer.”¹⁴

A survey of the literature would therefore seem to indicate that a number of sources focus on the rational aspects of the brand, but further exploration suggests that this is not generally the case. Despite the variation in definitions which is increasingly apparent, it is evident that there is agreement among most writers that brand is more than just a logo, symbol, or design. Hart and Murphy summarize this neatly, proposing that “the brand is a synthesis of all the elements, physical, aesthetic, rational and emotional.”¹⁵ This wider view is endorsed by Le Pla and Parker, Balmer and Greyser, Ellwood, and Hankinson and Cowking, who all talk of rational aspects but qualify this by also referring to emotional aspects such as “personality.”¹⁶

The branding literature can, therefore, be broadly divided in terms of “rational”

aspects or the wider view of “rational plus emotional” perspectives. The latter appears to be generally embraced,¹⁷ but this is still a long way from actually agreeing a brand definition. Patterson and De Chernatony and Riley consider that there are numerous overlapping definitions.¹⁸

In their paper aiming to summarize and conclude on the varying and sometimes confusing perspectives of branding, De Chernatony *et al.* refer to the recent academic literature which advocates brands as complex entities blending both tangible and intangible elements.¹⁹

In conclusion, when tackling the whole difficult area of defining brands and branding, it is perhaps pertinent to conclude by restating Kapferer’s view that “in reality, no one is talking about precisely the same thing.”²⁰ In the context of this research, however, there was a need to offer some consistency, not only in definition of a brand, but also in a “successful brand,” as explored below.

Successful brands

The concept of “success” in any aspect of the organizational and business arena is subjective, and it is particularly so when applied to a concept as intangible as brand management. Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that some brands are more “successful” than others. Urde states that throughout his research he is “continually asking why some organisations are more successful than others when it comes to brand building.”²¹ The idea of “success” in brands is explicitly explored by De Chernatony *et al.* who argue that marketing success is well defined as a concept, but that no definitive source exists that focuses on brand success.²²

There are, however, sources of literature on brand success worthy of exploration. Doyle notably suggests 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."²³ The idea of a sustainable competitive advantage certainly seems to have relevance in seeking a definition of a successful brand in UK HE, but it can perhaps be built upon by Doyle's later comments when he opines that successful brands are those which create an image or personality by encouraging customers to perceive the attributes they aspire to as being strongly associated with the brand. These attributes, according to Doyle, may be real and objective or abstract and emotional; a definition which has strong resonance with earlier talk of "functionality" and "personality."

Faulkner and Bowman distinguish between an organization's *internal* and *external* success criteria and this concept can be extended to consider the *business-based* measures of brand success and the *consumer-based* measures.²⁴ De Chernatony *et al.* considered these measures, and the relationship between consumer-based criteria and market share, and argued that the results indicated that "successful" brands do not differ in how well people regard them or how loyal their buyers are, but in the number of buyers they have and in how many people regard them well. They therefore proposed that "brand success is a multi-dimensional construct comprising both business based and consumer based criteria."²⁵ Adapting these views into practical terms, it can be argued that one of the discriminating characteristics between successful and failed brands is that successful brands show a greater degree of congruence between the values firms develop for their brands and the rational and emotional needs of their consumers.

Succinct overall definitions of successful brands do exist, however; De Chernatony and McDonald 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."²⁶ The various definitions, in particular those of Doyle and of De Chernatony *et al.*,²⁷ were considered and adapted for the purpose of this research so that respondents, when asked to identify "successful brands," were asked to consider those that are "clear and consistent (in demonstrating a competitive advantage) and congruous with needs of various customer groups."

Trends in the concept of branding in higher education

The concept of brands and brand management in the wider nonprofit sector has been a focus of academic research for some years, with writers such as Hankinson and Cowking, De Chernatony and McDonald, and Kapferer exploring these areas.²⁸ However, while marketing in education in its wider context is discussed by academic papers such as Brookes,²⁹ there appears to be limited discussion of branding as a specific area.

Conversely, branding in the context of higher education is an area which has been on the agenda of practitioners for some time. Bodoh and Mighall suggest that "branding is emerging as a hot topic for those who want to consolidate their positions or save their skins," but suggest that "brands will present some real challenges in a sector that has been slow to embrace the basic principles of branding."³⁰ While the branding issue has become more topical in very recent years, writings in 2000-01 could imply that addressing the issues is a faltering process;

Johnston sums up the consensus from practice journals when he states, “the higher education system certainly has a long way to go in terms of understanding and incorporating the branding concept.”³¹ Bean suggests that “ironically, as an industry sector education has the least sophisticated brands with which to relate to its target groups.”³²

The USA appears to be ahead of the UK in the acceptance and implementation of branding as a concept in higher education. One suggested reason for this is that the USA has gone through the clash of cultures between traditional academic values and market-focused values 10 years earlier.³³ Work by writers such as Sevier and Kotler demonstrate this,³⁴ suggesting that branding in HE has become accepted practice. It seems that the UK is following in the US footsteps in this respect and it is timely and appropriate to investigate further aspects of branding in the UK higher education context.

Methodology

This work is essentially a qualitative review using literature and findings to begin the ultimate process of developing a model for viewing branding in the education sector. The initial stage of the research involves qualitative interviews with key opinion former groups to identify target institutions perceived as having “successful” brands.

Qualitative research was therefore considered appropriate as it “is diagnostic; it seeks to discover what may account for certain kinds of behaviour; for example brand loyalty. It seeks deeper understanding of factors,”³⁵ in particular in-depth interviews, which enable a more accurate picture of respondents’ true feelings on an issue to be deduced. The approach of conducting interviews with

opinion makers and decision takers is one adapted from a “delphi technique” which focuses on future trends, using trendsetters in any market as a barometer and can aid in “identifying the value system.”³⁶

Semistructured interviews, primarily by telephone, were conducted with 40 opinion formers, randomly selected from across UK universities and colleges, as follows:

- 20 “marketing opinion formers” (MOFs): senior managers in HE marketing/external relations;
- 20 “careers opinion formers” (COFs): senior career advisors (half from higher education and half from further education).

Findings

Which UK universities were perceived to have a successful brand?

A number of institutions were cited as having “successful brands” to some extent:

Warwick: this institution was the mostly commonly suggested as an example of a successful brand. Fifteen MOFs mentioned Warwick although far fewer COFs did so.

Manchester University: the comparatively recently merged Manchester University was the second most frequently cited example, with six MOFs and six COFs suggesting it as an example.

Middlesex: this was joint third most frequently cited, by six MOFs but no COFs.

Oxford Brookes: joint third most frequently cited, again entirely by MOFs (6).

City: City was cited by four MOFs and two COFs.

Luton: Luton is perhaps something of an anomaly among these brands, being suggested by four MOFs and two COFs as having a clear brand, but not necessarily a successful one, although views on this varied widely, as is explored later.

A number of other institutions are worthy of mention, but formed a marked second tier where they were cited by between two and four respondents:

London School of Economics (LSE)
Loughborough
Nottingham
Salford
Bath
South Bank
Open University
Cranfield
London Metropolitan University.

Obviously the samples are not of sufficient size to be able to draw even preliminary quantitative conclusions; however, these particular institutions are perhaps worthy of further investigation, especially those most frequently cited.

Respondents’ associations with these brands

Respondents were asked to elaborate on why they perceived the institutions they cited as having “successful brands.”

Warwick

Warwick was the most frequently suggested as having a “successful” brand, but this was almost entirely the opinion of MOFs rather than COFs. Its brand was thought to “have a clear differentiator in its high involvement with industry” (MOF) and its business school was suggested as the driving force behind the differentiation, as it “deliberately manages its public profile” (MOF). A number of

respondents, however, could not suggest why they perceived Warwick as having a successful brand. Its peer group was suggested among older universities, one respondent arguing that it was grouped with other institutions of this era “but not sure how they are different” (MOF).

Manchester

It was suggested that the comparatively recent merger means it has a high profile, but that it was “too early to call” on the brand (MOF). Others suggested that specific values included “historic but dynamic—good reputation academically—masses of students—social and cultural life” (COF). One respondent argued that while it had a high profile, it was “questionable how far the actual brand has developed” (COF).

Middlesex

This institution was apparently cited largely due to visual awareness or marketing communications. The visual identity was argued to be “pushed through clearly and consistently” (MOF), and the fact that Middlesex have “changed their logo and deliberately do spend money” was cited. The international aspect to their marketing communications was cited by several respondents and it was thought that “they tie in visual brand very well, especially from the overseas point of view” (MOF). It was interesting that in common with Warwick, it was marketing professionals (MOFs) who regarded them as having a successful brand, raising the question as to whether this is registering to the same extent with customer groups rather than peers.

Oxford Brookes

Oxford Brookes were thought to be “clear and confident where they are going”

(MOF) and particular values were cited as “innovative brand that communicated two clear brand values: employability and feel of city/town (COF).” This aspect of the town or city brand being partially inseparable with the university brand was also mentioned in the context of other cities such as Manchester and City University.

City

City was suggested to have a differentiated brand through its location and mission. Clearly, though, visual communications were important with this institution as “strong visual identity” was mentioned (COF). City was suggested to be “not a typical university because of its situation” and it was thought that the brand has “cachet” but is “less to do with student experience than taking advantage of location and links to career ladders” (COF).

Luton

This was an interesting brand as it seemed to have varying connotations in the minds of respondents. In general those MOFs that cited it thought of it as doing a good job and having positives associated with the brand despite difficulties. As one put it, “it works hard and has done well despite bad publicity” (MOF). There was also talk of it being a brand that “aligns reputation and brand well” (MOF). Although only two COFs cited Luton, their perceptions were rather more negative and there was talk of it being a weak brand (COF). This seems to suggest that bad PR is important, but again points towards a difference in perception between marketers and careers professionals.

LSE

This was considered a “good” and “clear” brand although also suggested to be a

“niche brand.” The factors suggested to account for this concerned “history and leveraging” (MOF).

Reputation or brand

A number of institutions were considered to have clear “reputations,” but not necessarily “brands.” One interviewee justified this by stating that they are “not really brands as they don’t think across audiences” (MOF). Although it was suggested that “none of the ‘old guard’ have differentiated brands” (MOF), Oxford and Cambridge in particular were interesting; interviewees generally thought of these as having “reputations” not “brands,” but three interviewees thought they did have brands by default, suggesting that they “have a brand but don’t manage it” (MOF). In summary, one interviewee asked the intriguing question: “Are universities situated to generic brands, or better to generic reputation? The reputation and brand of many universities aren’t necessarily in alignment” (COF).

Overall points

A number of key themes became apparent that can be summarized through particular qualitative quotes.

Little real differentiation

The general consensus is that there is comparatively little real brand differentiation in the UK HE sector. As one MOF suggested, “there are 128 universities and few are different.” While the majority of interviewees could suggest some institutions that in their opinion had “successful brands,” comparatively few could suggest more than three or four names. This was particularly the case with COFs, and it was argued that “there are few national brands,” although there was a notable trend for COFs to discuss

regional brands to a greater extent than MOFs. It was suggested that “newer universities tend to do better at branding” (MOF) although it was also thought that the Russell Group (a group of 19 prestigious research-led UK universities) has an overall brand and institutions are rather homogenous within this (COF).

Not “geared” for branding—internally or externally

Generally participants viewed universities’ internal structure and resources as not aiding any real branding effort. One interviewee considered that “infrastructure and budgets don’t really allow commercial style branding” (MOF) and another that when universities try to build clear brands they “run into problems quite quickly” (MOF). This may well be partly due to resource constraints but it was also considered that the internal culture had a part to play in this, as there is resistance to the very process in some institutions. One interviewee thought that a “strong brand is anathema in a university” (MOF).

Silo mentality

The issue that parts of universities can sometimes build strong subbrands, and arguably these can have higher visibility than the overall institution, was emphasized by the interviewees in this sample. One interviewee described this as “the silo mentality, where faculty marketing is often conflicting with the university brand” (MOF). Business schools were thought to be particularly prone to this in the UK higher education sector (MOF).

Buyer behavior

Several respondents argued that brand building in a commercial style is hindered

by the fact that “buyer behavior does not fit the same way” (MOF). This was not expanded upon but factors such as the increasing importance of parents in the decision-making process were given as examples.

Location

Several interviewees thought that “location does come into brand but perhaps shouldn’t” (MOF). The overall consensus appears to be that the image or brand of the city is to some degree inseparable from that of the university. One interviewee elaborated on this with examples: “city location is crucial to brand perception—Bristol, Manchester, and Leeds have benefited from the city’s brand while Exeter, Birmingham, and Liverpool have not benefited in the same way” (COF).

Conclusions

The purpose of this research was to identify institutions that were perceived to have successful brands and begin to explore what made them so. Although the exploratory nature means that no hard conclusions can be made, there appears to be little commonality in those institutions that are perceived to be further along the road towards “successful branding.” A number of factors are, however, worthy of further exploration.

Relationship between brand and reputation

There is clearly some overlap between these factors, and it is interesting that those institutions cited as having “successful brands” were largely seen as having good reputations as well. It is therefore sensible to presume that a good reputation is certainly advantageous in building a successful brand if capitalized upon.

Public relations strategy

A number of interviewees talked of institutions with successful brands “leveraging the brand” through dialogue with stakeholders—it seems that working with publics to keep a consistent message though a high media profile may be important to successful brands.

Manchester and Warwick were cited as examples of this, although Manchester’s comparatively recent merger has undoubtedly been advantageous in maintaining a media profile.

Little real differentiation

The research suggests that there is little substantial differentiation between UK universities at present, and that the current nature of universities does not aid identification of real points of differentiation. As one marketing head stated “a clear differentiator helps in building a successful brand, but is hard to do.”

Budgets and culture do not support branding

Related to the above point is the argument that various factors hinder building successful brands. Key among these are the often limited (in comparison with commercial brands) budgets, and the internal culture, which was suggested sometimes to amount to “resistance to the branding process.”

Location and institutional brand

The consensus was that location is to some degree inseparable from the university brand, although this may not be welcomed by senior management. Therefore UK cities that were seen to have undergone a “renaissance” and be seen to some extent as “fashionable” conferred some of those advantages on their universities. Manchester, Bristol, and

Leeds were cited as examples of this, but it was thought that cities such as Exeter, Birmingham, and York had not yet benefited to the same extent.

Consistent visual identity

While the consensus is that brand is much more than visual identity alone, interviewees frequently mentioned the visual element in “successful brands” and it can be argued that consistent, clear, and appropriate visual identity and communications goes some way to help promote a clear brand image. Middlesex was cited as an example of a successful visual communicator.

Further Research

The exploratory nature of this research naturally leads to possible further areas worthy of investigation:

- What are the constituent elements of university brands perceived as “successful”? Initially, exploration of the constructs associated with those brands perceived as successful may be an appropriate progression. Once these constructs have been isolated, more quantitative measurement of the degree to which successful brands demonstrate these may begin to construct an index of the relative strength of respective university brands.
- Can a model for university brand analysis and management be developed? This would be the ultimate rationale and aim of exploration of successful university brands. This is based upon the proposed hypothesis that current models do not wholly address the particular issues of university brands, and examination of constituent elements of those brands perceived as “successful” may offer common properties or traits which may form a foundation for any proposed model.

Implications for Practice

This research suggests that real brand building in UK universities has scope for considerable development and is inherently difficult. Nevertheless, a number of key points may be worthy of consideration by practitioners:

- University branding budgets, internal culture, and patterns of buyer behavior are not the same as for many commercial brands, and therefore to expect to construct and manage brands in a similar manner may be unrealistic. A new approach to brand building specific to the sector needs to evolve.
- City/town brands are to some extent inseparable from the institution brand, and practitioners should as much as possible embrace and consider location in management of the university brand.
- This research strongly suggests that there is little real differentiation in the sector's brands. Marketing practitioners should try to look for real differentiators although it is acknowledged that this may be very difficult in a sector that offers inherently similar products.
- Consistency and clarity in marketing communications, while acknowledged not to form a brand alone, appear to be important to perceptions of a successful brand.
- Public relations is an important part of any branding strategy, as it is intrinsically linked to reputation, and reputation in turn often appears to have an important part to play in branding.

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