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Corporate Branding and Higher Education: A Contradiction In Terms?

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Corporate branding in universities can be utilised to not only clarify a university's position in the marketplace but to highlight the complexity of multi-faceted features (Chapleo, 2010). This is part of the basic issue for a university to try and communicate what may be a diverse and complex brand to multiple stakeholders (Balmer and Gray, 2003). It may be, for example, that some universities' understanding of branding may be very different from that of commercial organisations (Chapleo, 2011). Importance is attributed to issues surrounding the management and implementation of *corporate branding* (Jevons, 2006, Whisman, 2009). Notably, corporate identity needs to be clearly understood (Balmer, 2001; Kantanen, 2012; Herstein *et al*, 2007) in order to protect institutional reputation. Gutman and Miaoulis (2003) maintain that a positive brand image can be a key driver in influencing a student's decision to attend a particular university. With regard to student retention the more a university's values fit with those of the students the less likely they are to drop out (Jevons, 2006; Balmer and Liao, 2007). Specifically, personal values are those 'that underlie important goals of students' (Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003:106) and which can have a significant impact on the students' relationship with a university (Durvasula *et al*, 2011).

While some of these issues have been examined in different organisational contexts there is little empirical evidence of their use in the context of an educational setting. The key focus of commercial organisations tends to be that of profit whereas schools and universities often enjoy a *charitable status* and may not be comfortable with the idea of "corporate branding". This paper draws on our highly original research on the application of *corporate branding* to an educational setting at a university in the Republic of Ireland where major challenges are taking place both in Higher Education (HE) and in teacher education. As *corporate branding* is about positioning a product/service/organisation in the "eyes" of the customer/student (Curtis *et al*, 2009; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003) we explored the perspectives of both student and staff members. The research was therefore a 2-stage study. Research questions for *stage 1* considered perceptions of University staff, utilising qualitative methods, and asked:

What do employees in a university understand by 'corporate branding'?

How is corporate branding managed and implemented in a university?

Added to this, in *stage 2*, we obtained the perceptions of students via an electronic survey, the design of which incorporated the SERPVAL model (Lages and Fernandes, 2005), including such questions as:

What branding elements do students perceive as adding value to their University experience?

What values are important to students and are these affected by an overall perception of the University?

Methodology, Methods, Research Instruments or Sources Used

Stage 1: Qualitative

An insight was gained into perceptions from employees as several theorists stress the importance of understanding and making sense of the world we live in (Saunders et al, 2007, Cohen et al, 2007). A critical case study was developed which drew on ethnographic techniques and primary sourced data within a qualitative paradigm. In-depth interviews were conducted with key university stakeholders comprising several employees in the Department of Education and the Faculty of Education and Social Sciences and those who had an in-depth knowledge of the broader University context. Data was analysed inductively (Saunders et al, Bryman and Bell, 2007) and coding was adapted from Miles and Huberman (1994) revealing 38 codes from which 12 themes emerged. Patterns identified revealed a number of propositions which were augmented for stage 2.

Stage 2: Quantitative

A survey is currently being undertaken with university students (circa 300BE). A significant part of the questionnaire was built around the work of Lages and Fernandes (2005) who designed the SERPVAL model for research in a Portuguese commercial sector with a key focus on personal values. The data is yet to be formally analysed but initial analysis have revealed interesting and unexpected results.

Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

Results for stage 1 indicate that there are conflicting forces, including culture, priorities and values, between a university and that of a department. These inconsistencies appear to have been brought about by key demands from different operating environments which are affecting the successful implementation of a corporate brand. This situation is exacerbated by poor internal communications and an apparent lack of understanding as to what corporate branding is by senior managers. Employees are unsure as to what the University is trying to achieve and there appears to be little buy-in. What does appear to be evolving are departmental “sub-brands” and therefore the challenge for the University is how to pull together these disparate departmental brands into a unified and coherent corporate brand (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Balmer and Gray, 2003).

Preliminary analysis from both the qualitative and quantitative elements indicate that there is a misalignment of perspectives held by management, tutors and students which undermine a coherent and comprehensive branding and marketing strategy. This paper utilises these research findings to explore three levels of perceptions of corporate branding in a HE setting.

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Intent of Publication

Following the presentation, a key aim of the research is to generate new knowledge and contribute to understanding not only in marketing but also in Higher Education. It is believed that the information will inform not only the decision-making process (Hemsley-Brown, 2005) but help to fill a 'gap' (Brown and Oplatka, 2005: 424) that exists between practice and research.

Publication in the following journals will therefore be sought as follows:

British Educational Research Journal (BERJ): is interdisciplinary in approach, and includes reports of case studies and underlying assumptions in educational research.

Irish Educational Studies: the official journal of the Educational Studies Association of Ireland (ESAI); open to papers on a range of topics relevant to education, drawing on the full spectrum of disciplines that feed into educational theory and practice

The Journal of Brand Management: looks at all dimensions of branding, including current case studies which explore leading organisations' practical experiences, the problems faced and the lessons learned; targets brand strategists in both private and public sector organisations, and marketing academics in universities and business schools.

The Journal of Higher Education: founded in 1930, this is the leading scholarly journal of the Institution of Higher Education. Articles combine disciplinary methods with critical insight to investigate issues important to faculty, administrators, and programme managers.