Reconciling and Radicalising Business School Stakeholder Engagement: Delivering on Brand Promise Through the Thinkubator® Challenge
Competitive Paper

Introduction

Radical times for the UK higher education (HE) sector and business schools in particular call for radical responses. The future for Business Schools has been characterised as facing the edge of a precipice (Carrington Crisp, 2014) due to the evolving fee regime, the changing student mind-set and the entry of new players into the market. Internationally, the expansion of global markets is intensifying competition (Hobsons, 2015). Further, technology has the potential to fundamentally shift the sector; Weise and Christensen (2014) note the disruptive potential of online competency-based education. In response to these radical conditions, HEIs have been urged to develop a stronger marketing orientation and brand identity (Furey et al., 2014; Pinar et al., 2014; Mourad *et al,* 2011), although it is acknowledged that this is not without its challenges (Chapleo, 2015).

In considering brand identity development in the HE sector, it is essential for institutional missions and aspirations to be communicated through a consistent set of brand promises, including delivering on student expectations, a differentiated offer, quality-related dimensions and something relevant to contemporary business education (Furey et al., 2014). Similarly, Naidoo and Wu (2011) note the importance of vision fit (where the strategy fits with the organisation's strategic goals) in determining successful HE marketing. According to Mourad *et al.* (2011) the most significant drivers of brand equity for HEIs from a student perspective include symbolic attributes; the image-related and personality dimensions which connect with this sense of institutional purpose. Further, as marketing more generally has been characterised by a wave of increased focus on the experiential dimension of its offering (Schmitt, 1999), similarly experiential learning methods are increasing in importance in business education (Brennan, 2014).

Additionally, to maintain the overall credibility of a business school it is important to also be able to demonstrate effective engagement with the business community, as highlighted by the Witty Review (2013) which considered how HE education and business schools in particular could support economic growth through engagement with small and growing businesses. However, it can be difficult for HEIs and small to medium enterprises (SMEs) to build and develop productive relationships, as SMEs often view HEIs as being problematic to navigate and remote from their needs; as Darabi and Clark, (2012: 490) note: "There is a need for a mechanism to 'take the pain' out of the bureaucratic system to make the relationship smoother for SMEs". The divisional structures adopted by most business schools can inhibit engagement with SMEs, where managers may characterise 'real world' problems as complex and uncertain, requiring the flexibility of an inter-disciplinary approach (Powell, 2012). In addition there is also a requirement for business schools to provide a range of service offers to SMEs which match the current and emerging needs of growing businesses (Boter and Lundstrom, 2005) and this requires a forum for on-going discussions.

Against this background the purpose of this paper is to explain how one UK University Business School has attempted to innovate in its marketing activities and improve relationships with the local SME community by responding to these challenges through an inventive and unique award-wining event. As highlighted above, a key emphasis for the School has been a focus on experiential learning, and this is central to the mission and brand promise of the School. However, for a large School with a diverse student population, this

brand promise can be challenging to deliver to all student groups effectively. The School's response has been to offer a large-scale event offered to some 800 students in which businesses are invited to submit challenges for cross-functional, cross-course and cross-level teams to investigate.

The paper will report on this innovation as follows: firstly, a background to the event will be presented, followed by consideration of its operations and impacts on both corporate and student customer groups. The paper will also present two short case studies, which aim to demonstrate its impact. The aim is to offer an overview an innovative application of an experientially-led brand development exercise in a business school context, with reflection on how the event can be improved.

Background: Thinkubator Challenge®

Thinkubator Challenge® is a unique event, developed to fulfil a number of promotional objectives for the school. It was awarded the silver award for Best Communications or PR Campaign and the bronze award for Best Community or Business Engagement Campaign at the 2015 Higher Education Information Services Trust (HEIST) Awards. The annual event sees the school dedicate all of its resources for one day to support the growth of local and national businesses. Now entering its third year, the Thinkubator Challenge® has seen businesses (and especially SMEs) embrace the concept of working and engaging with the school. In 2014 the event saw 1,000 people including academics, research students, business postgraduates and final year undergraduates provide tailored advice to 60 businesses looking for support with real issues facing their organisation and impacting on growth. Following a national call through a dedicated web site and targeted public relations activity, businesses from across the UK are invited to submit challenges which impact their opportunities for growth. Submissions typically cover the full range of business activity, including on a range of topics such as marketing, human resources and funding.

On the day, following a launch event, students are split into challenge "hubs" with two members of academic staff facilitating each group. Each "hub" is given one challenge and three hours to research, analyse and evaluate the problem, before preparing and finalising their recommendations. Participating businesses then receive a written report containing advice and practical next steps. A commitment is given to participating organisations that they will receive initial feedback on the day of the event, which adds to the energy and excitement on the day. In addition, to providing businesses with free expert advice and an achievable action plan Thinkubator Challenge® gives NBS students the chance to work with businesses and apply their learning, expertise and skills to a live brief. This offers them a unique personalised learning experience involves working closely with businesses in such a large scale over and above more usual channels of experiential learning.

Operational Developments

Thinkubator Challenge® was initially conceived as a way to generate interest and press activity showcasing the school and its capabilities to help and support business. The event would offer a clear focal point through which to welcome businesses in and offer a 'taster' session to demonstrate the expertise of staff and students. The initial desire was essentially to create a promotional spectacle with the visual appeal that would be attractive to various media. The event was widely promoted through national and local press, the university website and social media. The overall promotional motive was initially the main driver, which initially led to some scepticism amongst faculty. In particular, concern was raised about how much could be achieved within the time frame, and the raising of companies' expectations. As

a consequence, it was necessary to frame the offer away from 'problem solving'. The language around the promotional activity and the call to action for organisations wishing to participate had to be carefully selected in order to appeal to the target business audience, but also to ensure a fit with the perspective of academic stakeholders. After some discussion, terminology around 'challenges' was used, with a commitment that the teams would use their time to 'research, analyse and evaluate', and then offer 'recommendations'.

The timing of the event also raised some difficulties. November was selected as generally a good fit with the university's promotional calendar, and likely to be the optimal moment for student engagement. However, in the academic calendar this is a particularly critical part of the year, so staff time was potentially problematic. A key operational factor was therefore the involvement of the school as a whole and the suspension of normal classes for an afternoon. All challenges submitted are around the topic of growth, and in terms of challenges submitted, while other issues such as recruitment or finance were discussed as limiting factors, the most popular challenges tend to lean towards marketing, rather than other academic disciplines. Given the scale of the exercise, it was unrealistic to allocate challenges on a subject-specific basis. As a result hubs were comprised of mixed, cross faculty groups which delivered a wider range of expertise on the day, enabling the School to address the problems expressed above by Powell (2012).

Thinkubator Challenge® is intended as a distinctive, experiential learning opportunity, clearly different from normal taught sessions. With this in mind the emphasis for staff involved in the event was on facilitating, guiding and encouraging student engagement rather than a traditional pedagogic, delivery of knowledge. Again some colleagues were less comfortable with this approach, and with the inherent ambiguity and unpredictability. To counter this, interactive training sessions were arranged which offered faculty some tools and techniques to manage the process and help ensure consistency between the hub teams. Over the three years the operation of the team hubs has developed based on the experiences and feedback from all the stakeholders involved; the emphasis has moved away from a one day spectacle to an important tool in the development of both the students' understanding of real business issues, and an initial step in support of business seeking engagement with the school and the university. We have reduced the number of challenges and the number of challenge hubs which run on the day and have recently extended the time each hub is allowed to work on their analysis and recommendations. An important criterion in the selection of challenges is the availability of company personnel to come and present their issues to the students and hear their feedback at the end; this has proved an important aspect in feedback and satisfaction of both the student and the submitting companies; the interaction is greatly valued by both parties, and also helps to ensure a clarity of purpose and mutual understanding.

Key Learning: Thinkubator Challenge® and Students
The event has become a significant contributor to student experience and satisfaction, reinforcing the vision fit discussed earlier. Satisfaction rates with the event itself remain consistently high, with students commenting on how the event has enabled them to develop knowledge, creative skills, networks and ability to link theory with practice in a fun and relaxed setting. A typical comment received from one student referred to the: "Amazing experience! Such an incredible amount of ideas… [I] feel like a squeezed lemon!" Anecdotally, student feedback supports the findings of previous studies related to experiential learning projects, especially that it helps students develop confidence in dealing with business owners, looking at the business from an holistic perspective, and being able to offer a

professional opinion (Heriot *et al.* (2007) and that students are more engaged in learning by applying their learning to a live case, especially in using SMEs (Camarero *et al.*, 2009).

In terms of marketing, a student photo competition drove Twitter traffic using a 'thinkubator' hashtag. This not only captured the student voice and feedback, but raised the profile of the School around the event, with it being the top trending regional story on the day. The event has also become a key feature of the School's external marketing activity, especially in international markets where awareness of the event and its contribution to the School's brand promises is growing. Incoming international students are beginning to report awareness and recall of the event, and its significance in driving recruitment appears to be growing.

Key Learning: Thinkubator Challenge® and Corporate Relations

As previously noted, the numerous initiatives and faculties which characterise a typical university structure can be a hindrance to organisations wishing to identify support and knowledge transfer opportunities available through their local university. Feedback from previous outreach activities suggested that SMEs in particular had experienced difficulties in accessing university expertise. Thinkubator Challenge® provides a well-publicised gateway to that expertise. Promotion through local media, together with a prominent position on the university's home page meant that the purpose of the event and how to submit a challenge were clear and accessible. The submission process enabled requests for more information about companies and their issues, as well as clarification of key points. This activity was handled by the commercial teams, who were used to dealing with clients and an ensured that these early interactions were handled professionally. For several participating companies this was their first interaction with the university, although they may have been aware of the University as a familiar local landmark.

Attendees at the day itself were able to see the facilities, meet other companies and partners, and learn about the activities of the business school and the wider university. Whilst the hubs are working, companies are invited to a 'showcasing' and panel event, designed to offer taster sessions on current business issues from senior members of faculty. For those participants unfamiliar with an academic environment, who may have found the university context somewhat intimidating, the colourful and theatrical nature of the event was helpful. In addition being able to meet academics, support staff, masters and final year students, and have them all express an interest and an enthusiasm for their business was a very positive and welcoming experience.

An important aim, driven in part by its own mission, but also increasingly by national and local government business growth initiatives is to reach out and offer support to SMEs. Clearly Thinkubator Challenge® itself does this to a large extent. However, the pool of challenges submitted, the nature of the issues raised, the advice, feedback and even the language used by those submitting a challenge offers valuable insight into what support activities would be attractive to SMEs and how they should be characterised in promotional activities. As the event has developed the school, in conjunction with the wider university has developed a menu of potential activities, from funded short course programmes, placement students and more involved consultancy services to strengthen and develop these relationships.

Of the 60 businesses that took part, 80% were Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), compared to 97% in the previous year, and 80% came from Nottingham and the East Midlands. This demonstrates that there has been a marked increase in the number of larger scale businesses looking to engage in Business to Education (B2E) activity since the first

Thinkubator Challenge® in 2013. According to Universities UK, 90% of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) now have a university representative that aims to work with bigger businesses, not just SMEs. Both large and small businesses appreciate the value of consulting with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to share knowledge and solve problems affecting their companies. However, despite this increase, a significant majority of businesses looking to engage with HEIs are still SMEs. In addition locality remains a key factor in allowing these businesses to participate, as does active encouragement from the HEI involved.

The top three challenges facing business were in the arenas of marketing, HR management and financing. For the second year running, effective marketing, digital and otherwise, was the most prevalent problem facing SMEs. This was followed by HR issues like adequate recruitment and staff training in niche industry sectors and financial challenges such as access to traditional funding or alternative capital. Using marketing to ensure business growth remains a challenge for SMEs. Findings from the Department for Business, Innovation & Skill's Small Business Survey 2014 showed that the top three reasons why SMEs sought advice were business growth (39%), financial/general running of business (13%) and business efficiency/productivity (8%). An additional 7% sought marketing-specific advice. The Thinkubator Challenge® helped with these issues and as stated Marketing was again the largest challenge facing the businesses that participated in the second Thinkubator Challenge®. 63% of challenges submitted were asking for help in this area, compared to 41% in the 2013 event. The 2014 event offered ideas to businesses to help increase UK and international corporate brand awareness in the market place, communicate with potential customers, drive traffic to websites and engage customers via social media. Recommendations and advice were given on website re-launches, content production plans, and stakeholder identification.

Case Studies
The following more detailed case studies have been selected from the 2014 submissions for Thinkubator Challenge®, as typical examples of the types of interactions that the event has precipitated. The companies and their Directors have been given pseudonyms.

Crash Online Marketing is a digital marketing agency. Their clients include e-commerce retailers and home improvement stores. They help businesses with SEO, Pay-per-click advertising and Social Media. The company was formed in June 2010, and has grown organically through referrals and reputation to 17 staff with around 50 clients. Their challenge was around Marketing in order to boost traffic to their website. Callum Morgan is the Director:

"Over the last year we have grown, so we need staff that can cope with this growth. Therefore recruitment is our biggest challenge – there is a real skills gap in our industry. As we take on more clients, we have to recruit more staff to manage these accounts and struggle to quickly train new recruits to the standard required. It isn't simply a case of sending staff on training courses - there is very little formal training available in our subject matter, due to the relative infancy of the industry and its rapidly evolving nature. That was why we got involved with the Thinkubator Challenge® The staff and students got to grips with our problem very well, given they had no real context or history to the company outside of the short brief we could provide. The solutions they provided were excellent. Some of the ideas they came up with were avenues we were already considering exploring, but it is great to have a third party of business minds and experts reaffirm what you are already thinking. It gives you that confidence to proceed down that avenue of work. We have been delighted to work with the

University and their assistance has been invaluable. The genuine interest of their staff in our business and their thorough approach has meant we have a report full of actionable insight to improve our business, such as developing a strategic and integrated HR policy, which we're most grateful for."

FNOM Research is a qualitative market research agency. The company was due to go through a change as one of the partners was retiring and the office was being relocated. The new MD was attracted to Thinkubator Challenge® by the opportunity to share her ideas and gain some additional feedback for the business. Specifically she was looking to improve the website performance and grow the international capability of their organisation. Danielle Gould is the Managing Director:

"Having seen the Thinkubator Challenge talked about on Twitter, I decided to apply. It was the ideal time to take part, as we were about to go through a big change with myself becoming the sole working director. It felt right to have some fresh eyes look at the business and how it could move forward. The challenges I submitted to the Thinkubator Challenge were to look at our existing website and give advice and ideas for the new one, increase our use of social media and help us with promotion of the business in the local area and online. I was very impressed with the students and academics. There was a lot for them to understand in a short time, but they made some very thought out and honest suggestions, building upon my own ideas and providing fresh insight. This helped me to build the company's identity for the re-launch of the business. Nearly a year on we feel that we have a much better brand identity across different platforms, thanks to the comments made at Thinkubator Challenge®. The website is certainly much improved, and turnover has increased since the re-launch by 25-30%. I have since taken part in a MSc Consultancy project, which has further helped to provide suggestions to improve my business. The Thinkubator Challenge® was a great day and experience for all involved, and I hope the students found it as useful as we did."

Conclusions
This case provides a nationally-recognised example of how a Business School developed its brand profile by developing an event designed to fit with strategic goals, and which provides students with a unique experiential learning opportunity. For companies, the event provides a medium to take the first important steps towards developing longer term relationships with the school. As its reputation has grown, it is now anticipated by our partners and other local SMEs. It is also an opportunity for existing partners and clients, who may deal with the School in a specific capacity, to experience the wider business school community, making more connections thereby strengthening the relationship. For current students, there is growing evidence that the event contributes positively to student engagement and satisfaction, whilst there is some evidence that the event positively contributes to the strategic development of the brand for prospective students.

There is the potential for future empirical research to further consider a number of emergent themes: the role of the event as a driver of brand equity and raising the profile of the School; the contribution of the event to a progressive and intrinsically-motivated pedagogy; and how the relationships formed through the event develop over time to create value for both parties. Other schools may also consider the role of such radical event-based experiential activity in delivering on brand promises.

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