Exploring the Brand Promise in a University Context

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Introduction and purpose

The increasing marketisation and globalisation of higher education is well documented. As higher education systems have expanded, putting pressure on the public purse, the need for universities to develop new income streams has become more acute. International competition for funding and students has also intensified. Against this background, the drive for distinctiveness and clear market positioning has fuelled interest in the use of brand strategies.

This study examines the concept of 'brand promises' in UK universities, and poses the question:

"To what extent can the manifestations of the 'brand promise' be identified and categorised, to determine its potential for application within a university context?"

The investigation seeks to determine what is meant when the term brand promise is used. It offers insight into the composition of brand promises, and establishes how university brand promises can be – and have been - identified and categorised.

Mapping the territory

The paper begins by mapping out the theoretical ideas and territory that frame this study. This presents a complex challenge, since very little brand management and services marketing literature addresses the prevalent contexts of a brand promise. A carefully crafted web of conceptual ideas is proposed, drawn from the fields of brand identity, brand image, services marketing and marketing communications. The inherent difficulty of applying private sector notions of brand promises to the university sector, is recognised.

Methodology and Findings

An analysis of 85 UK university websites informed the selection of four cases. Two long-established, 'research intensive' universities and two 'new' universities were chosen for in-depth, qualitative

investigation, according to their ability to inform the study. Within these, 33 interviews were undertaken with Marketing and Communications Managers, Academics and Brand Consultants. Documentary evidence including prospectuses, strategic plans and brand identity guidelines, additionally informed the case studies.

Although very different universities, the four case study institutions show some similarities in their approach to developing brand values and the brand promise. The approach can be conceptualised in three stages; an 'evolutionary' stage where the brand is not professionally 'managed', an 'engineered' stage where communications' professionals or consultants may be tasked with developing the brand and a 'refinement' stage where brand values and personality are reviewed.

Over time, the dimensions of the brand promise are increasingly aligned to the university's strategic goals. However these goals are typically complex and ambiguous. Particularly in research intensive universities, there are many tensions to negotiate; between 'heritage' and 'modernity', 'tradition' and 'innovation', between establishing reputation among the elite and supporting a mass higher education agenda.

Research outcomes

Drawing on findings from both the website analysis and the four cases, the paper concludes with a conceptualisation and categorisation of the manifestations of the brand promise in UK universities. This supports discussion of how effective brand promises might be developed in universities, in practice.

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