

Branding in higher education - just how feasible is distinctiveness?

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In competitive times, universities are being encouraged to create more distinct brand identities. But how compatible is this with the existing measures of excellence?



What would you do to stand out from the crowd? Photograph: Alex Hofford/EPA

At last week's CASE Europe conference on distinctiveness in higher education, co-hosted by the Distinct Project, it quickly became clear that universities are in a bit of a pickle: they have to be able to stand out in a marketplace where all the other competitors offer the same basic service - teaching and research. And they have to make the case that they're doing their own thing when the entire system for measuring excellence (which, in turn, influences student choice) sets out to compare one institution to another.

Tuesday's conference set out to share the outcomes from a two-year investigation into what distinctiveness looks like, both within and beyond the HE sector. Led by Oxford Brookes University and funded by the Higher Education Funding Council (Hefce), the research defined distinctiveness as "the vehicle which enables an organisation to achieve many of its strategic goals through being memorable, authentic, and clearly articulating what it has to offer to the people that are important to it".

The crux of the matter is that the very survival of universities rests upon their ability to be clear about who they are and then to use that knowledge to attract students, partners and ultimately, funding. Internally, a distinctiveness strategy is also credited with improving staff motivation and loyalty.

The conference presented a course of action through the Distinct Framework for universities that are soul-searching (there was many a mention of the "squeezed middle" and what to do if that's where your institution finds itself) but in doing so, it raised many more questions - notably around leadership, rankings and mission group membership.

Conflict exists between standardisation and distinctiveness - branding without being branded. Bob Burgess, the vice chancellor of the University of Leicester spoke of the recurring challenge of developing strengths, such as widening participation, that sit at odds with league tables. He was highlighting the fact that these rankings are measurements of success which, on the whole, only reflect well for those at the top.

The issue has been raised before on the network. Edward Peck, VC of the University of Birmingham, wrote about "a tendency to standardisation" while, at the same time, universities are "sensitive to the nuances in the hierarchy of apparent status that we seem to have internalised". He goes on to say: "The paradox of diversity in HE in the UK is that we have given too much sway to the traditional idea of the university without wanting either to face up

to the hierarchy that is therefore implied or to pursue the distinctiveness that would make such a hierarchy largely irrelevant."

And that is just one of the paradoxes. If, as the Distinct Project suggests, the future survival of an institution will come down to whether or not it has a strong brand, or personal identity, then where does that leave the mission groups - where commonality takes precedence over individuality?

Distinctiveness also invariably presents a challenge for leaders: do you pursue distinctiveness (excellence in teaching and close links with regional economy, for example) and find success in your niche or do you strive to mimic those institutions who have been identified as the best (by focusing on research, for example) and risk piling into insignificance? Do you continue with the status quo, hoping to ride the wave of policy changes and come out on the other end relatively unscathed or accept that distinctiveness may require a cultural shift and lots of unpopular change to succeed?

So what to do? The answer from the conference, in part, seems to lie in a pragmatic definition of distinctiveness, one which is less about being unique (in a stand alone sort of way) and more about being able to effectively communicate what you do. It is more about gleaming from the subject tables, or other specific categories in the ranking, what improvements can be made, rather than lamenting your overall position.

Not that a steadfast commitment to distinctiveness is without its benefits, Teeside University is a good case study. Its VC, Graham Henderson, told a compelling story of how, through focusing on the needs of the regional economy and by responding quickly to policy priorities (a strategy he calls 'responsive repositioning') the institution has grown from 8,000 students in 1992 to 30,000 in 2008. It is also the only modern university to be named Times Higher Education University of the year. But he conceded that his strategy, though consultative, was driven by leadership mandate and staff had to be supported if they felt they couldn't buy into the agenda and chose to move on.

So distinctiveness works. But it costs. How much an institution is willing to pay is, I guess, determined by how at risk it feels in these challenging times. And how at risk it is comes down to the strength of its brand..and that takes us neatly back to the start of the blog.

Fonte: The Guardian, 19 June 2012. [Portal] Disponível em: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/jun/19/distinctiveness-in-higher-education>>. Acesso em: 19 June 2012.