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REMODELING THE UNIVERSITY AS AN INSTITUTION OF CHOICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the metaphor of *University Remodeling* as a framework for analysing students' choice of a private university and repositioning the university through rebranding of its professors. Remodeling the university involves reconstructing competencies and strengths of the institution. These elements are critical to the growth of the university. Managing growth requires understanding of the factors influencing students' choice of a university, institutional commitment towards improving these factors, and rebranding the university to differentiate itself from its competitors. The creation of a strong university brand is a strategic issue that requires close collaboration between university administrators and academicians, and should not be left alone to the marketing department.

INTRODUCTION

Most traditional universities need to rebrand themselves to seize opportunities or to thwart potential threats in the future. Proactive rebranding is necessary in response to expected growth and partnership opportunities. A rebranding exercise is essential for the university to appeal to a new audience who is increasingly more demanding and knowledgeable. Rebranding may not necessarily require an actual name change or logo change. It has to create an impact that competitors take note of. The exercise should help the university regain the foothold which it has lost and to give it a new facelift to react to competition. Rebranding necessitates a new way of running the business. Appealing to a wider customer base require careful planning of marketing and promotional activities and targeting the services and product offerings across a wide market segment. Effective product positioning requires a clear understanding of the customer needs so that proper communication channels are chosen to convey the message across to them. The marketing plan has to identify the key elements that differentiate the university from its competitors' product offerings. University administrators need to understand the drivers that influence students and see how these drivers could be implemented to attract more students. University programmes should be aligned with the economic needs of the society.

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This means that the programmes offered are relevant and meeting the demands of employers. While some universities may choose to be teaching universities and others to be research universities, the key to becoming a "university of excellence" is the reputation of its professors. Rebranding of professors is a message that distinguishes the university from its competitor. It entails change not only in the identity of the university but also leads to change within the university. It will facilitate change of perceptions of the image among external stakeholders such as students, businesses and government. The exercise may incur investments in professors to participate in more conferences and conduct research projects. The university could build its brand name around a small core group of distinguished professors. Capitalizing on skilled talent will help the university drive innovation and customer value. The branding of professors not only showcases the talents of the university but also gives the impression that the university is serious about investing in human capital and knowledge management. The concept of competency branding shows and markets the university's capabilities in certain fields where distinguished academicians add their market values to the organisation. Employee branding and positioning are closely linked when customers perceive that employees are closely connected to the product offerings. Our proposed framework consists of four elements of remodelling (Figure1). The four elements are: 1) structure; 2) culture; 3) rebranding; and 4) growth strategies. This paper will focus more on rebranding and growth strategies as key elements to attract and recruit students to the university.

The elements of Organizational Structure and Culture have been discussed by Yu (2016) in a paper entitled "Reculturing: The key to sustainability of private universities".
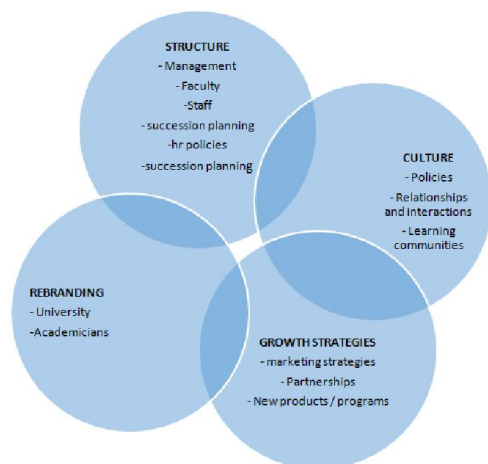

Figure 1. Elements of Remodeling

LITERATURE REVIEW

Choosing a university is a difficult choice. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) suggested a three phase model which showed that at every level, the interaction between individual and organizational factors produces outcomes which affect students' choice. The first phase is the "predisposition" phase where a student's decisions is affected by his ability, his achievement in high school, his socioeconomic status, parents, peer, education and school activities (Tillerry, 1973; Litten, 1982; Stage and Hossler, 1989; Somers et al., 1999). The second stage involves him finding out more information about the university and formulating a choice about the group of institutions that he wishes to apply. This second stage is called the "search" phase and is affected by his initial search activities about the university (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallahgher, 1987).The final phase is making the choice. Factors to consider include educational and occupational aspirations, costs and financial aid, and university courtship activities (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; John, 1990). The economic and sociologic theoretical frameworks have been widely used to examine factors of college choice (Hearn, 1984; Tierney, 1983; Somers, Haines & Keene, 2006). These frameworks focus on three approaches to modelling college choice: a) economic models, b) status-attainment models; and c) combined models. The economic model focuses on the assumptions that students think rationally and consider the costs and benefits when choosing a college (Hossler, Smith and Vesper, 1999). The status-attainment model states that students consider a variety of social and individual factors leading to educational aspirations (Jackson, 1982). The combined model considers both the economic models and status-attainment models. An important consideration for most students and parents is education costs. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) noted that tuition increase is negatively correlated with enrolment. Receiving financial aid is more important than the amount of aid received because providing aid sends a signal that the institution wants students to be part of its community (Jackson, 1982; Abrahamson & Hossler, 1990). Foskett et al., (2006) concluded that having flexibility in paying fees,

availability of financial aid, and reasonable accommodation costs exert a significant influence on students' choice of the institution. Houston, 1979; Krone et al., 1983; Webb, 1993 observed that programme related issues such as length of the programme and entry requirements were the most important consideration to the students in choosing a university. Krampf and Heinlein (1981) found that students compared programmes offered by various institutions to check their suitability. The availability of majors also influences the choice of institution (Choy and Ottinger 1998; Hossler et al., 1999). Entry requirements are viewed more importantly than the programme offerings (Bourke, 2000; Brennan 2001). Litten (1980), Tierney (1983) and Seneca and Taussig (1987) noted that academically-talented students evaluated their choice of university based on the quality of programmes while average students focused on factors such as physical facilities and social life. Facilities such as library, computer rooms, study areas all constitute important elements in students' decision-making process (Qureshi, 1995; Price et al., 2003). Students characteristics such as academic ability, educational aspirations, courses attended during high school and high school achievement all have influences over students' choice of institution (Chapman, 1981; Cabera and La Nasa, 2000). The location of the university is an important element in students' decision-making process. Jackson (1982) stressed that students generally consider institutions nearer to their homes that present no extra financial burdens.

The reputation of the institution has a significant impact on students' choice (Kotler and Fox, 1995). Higher education institutions need to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Paramewaran and Glowacka, 1995). Together, good quality and efficient branding, are important elements to attract students to the institution (Hall, 1993; Qureshi, 1995; Bourke, 2000). The academic reputation and prestige of the institution facilitate students' decision-making in choosing an institution (Krampf and Heinlein, 1981; Lin, 1997; Soutar and Turner, 2002).Branding in human resource is the concept of promoting the organisational capabilities. Employee branding facilitates the internalization of desired brand image and motivates the employees to project that image to customers (Miles and Mangold, 2004). A brand has a significant influence on the selection of a university in the highly competitive education sector (Mourad et al., 2011; Chen 2008).Providing good and relevant information to students will assist students in their choice of institution (Cleopatra et al., 2004).The information could include career prospects of the courses studied and the likelihood of securing a job within a year of graduation. Joseph and Joseph (1998, 200) reiterated that information about course and career prospects are the most important factors during students' selection process of an institution. Students' interactions with teachers during the counselling session on Open Days have an impact on their decision making in choosing an institution. Teachers' enthusiasms can be observed in two different ways (Kunter et al., 2011): first, the behavioural approach observed from gestures, tone or facial expressions (Collins, 1978; Sanders and Gosenpud, 1986); the second manifests the internal experiences of teachers' enthusiasms for teaching (Kunter et al., 2011) Studies by Chapman (1986) showed that high school personnel had a significant influence in students' choice process. In addition, family, friends, peers, teachers and

counsellors all have a certain degree of influence over students' decisions (Stefanie, 2006). Leslie et al., (1977) found that students are most likely to rely in their high school counsellor. They see counsellors as a source of information for their search.

RESEARCH QUESTION

From the literature review, a number of variables may influence students' choice of a university. This study aims to find out what factors influence students' choice of a private university in Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out on a new batch of students enrolling in a private Malaysia university in the second semester of 2016. The sample size consisted of 202 students enrolling in various diploma and degree programs. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data from the students. Students were asked to identify and determine the important factors influencing them to choose the university as their choice institution. The questionnaire constitutes 16 factors (program offerings, desired choice, housing, facilities, attraction, teachers profile, reputation, attention received, students' numbers) with response scale ranging from Highly important 1 to Unimportant 5. The second section of the questionnaire consists of 8 factors (student's choice, parents' choice, self-desire, fees, friends, entry requirements, advertisement, social media) with responses ranging from Strongly Agree 1 to Strongly Disagree 5 (Appendix 1).

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analyses involved several procedures conducted using SPSS 17. Data was analysed using factor analysis to determine the underlying components of twenty four items that represented possible preferences for choosing the university. Through factor analysis, a large set of items were scaled down to smaller, more manageable number of items. The reliability test was examined through Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient. The purpose of the reliability test is to measure the internal consistency of the set of items.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first section of the questionnaire showed a Cronbach Alpha of 0.995. This indicated a high level of internal consistency for our scale and meant that respondents who chose high scores for one item also chose high scores for others. The output from the rotated component matrix which related to the first section of the questionnaire showed that SPSS has extracted 3 factors. The first factor could be classified broadly as *Programs and Facilities,* the second as *Students and Faculty* and the third as *Curricular Activities.* The eigen values associated with each factor represent the variance explained by that particular component. Factor 1 explained 41.5% of total variances, followed by factor 2 with 8.9% and factor 3 with 6.4%. All the remaining factors are not significant (Table 1).

Table 1.

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	6.648	41.552	41.552	6.648	41.552	41.552	4.020	25.123	25.123
2	1.428	8.924	50.476	1.428	8.924	50.476	2.813	17.582	42.704
3	1.023	6.396	56.872	1.023	6.396	56.872	2.267	14.168	56.872
4	.936	5.849	62.720						
5	.832	5.200	67.921						
6	.754	4.711	72.631						
7	.709	4.434	77.065						
8	.624	3.901	80.967						
9	.521	3.253	84.220						
10	.486	3.035	87.255						
11	.444	2.772	90.028						
12	.418	2.611	92.638						
13	.330	2.063	94.701						
14	.322	2.010	96.711						
15	.266	1.661	98.372						
16	.260	1.628	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Table 2.

Total Variance Explained

Component	Initial Eigenvalues			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	2.783	34.786	34.786	2.783	34.786	34.786
2	1.240	15.497	50.283	1.240	15.497	50.283
3	.965	12.069	62.352			
4	.835	10.438	72.790			
5	.750	9.378	82.168			
6	.606	7.579	89.747			
7	.563	7.034	96.781			
8	.257	3.219	100.000			

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

The second section of the questionnaire also showed a high level of Cronbach Alpha with 0.72, again indicating a high level of consistency. For the second section of the questionnaire, the factors that load highly on factor 1 seem to relate to *Awareness*. The four questions that load highly on factor 1 relate to advertisements, social media and friends. The questions that load highly on factor 2 relate to fees and ease of entry. We could label this factor *Affordability and Accessibility*. The eigen values associated with factor 1 explained 34% of the variances and factor 2 with 15.5% (Table 2). *Facilities* and *Program Offerings* have a strong association with Factor 1 with loadings of 0.71and 0.64. *Students Numbers* and *Teachers Reputation* are substantially loaded on Factor 2. *Curricular Activities* and *Proximity* are substantially loaded on Factor 3. In the second section of the questionnaire, *Advertisement* and *Social Media* are substantially loaded on Factor 1 while *Fees* and *Ease of Entry* are substantially loaded on Factor 2.

The results of the factor analysis measured by Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) for section 1 (0.895) and section 2 (0.711) are both acceptable as they are higher than 0.5 (Tables 3 and 4). This indicates that the data were suitable for factor analysis. From the same tables, we see that the Bartlett's test of Sphericity are significant. That is, the associated probabilities are less than 0.05. The "means" of the all computed variables were below 3 indicating that most respondents agreed with the importance of the variables in the questionnaire. The variables "choice", "facilities", "proximity" and "ethnicity" ranks the lowest in means scores. The findings revealed that students placed great importance on the availability of good facilities. This is an area which the university management should pay particular attention to. The variable "choice" is closely related to "ethnicity" as the majority of the student population Chinese and are more comfortable with the Chinese-speaking environment of the university. Students were generally not too concerned with the housing facilities as most of them stay within the proximity of the university or possess their own transport.

Table 3.

KMO and Bartlett's Test (Section1)

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.895
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1373.265
	df	120
	Sig.	.000

Table 4.

KMO and Bartlett's Test (Section 2)

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.711
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	335.033
	df	28
	Sig.	.000

Most students rate affordable fees as an important factor. The desire to earn a degree ranks next. However, most students felt that there is a lack of brand awareness through social media and newspaper advertisements. These are areas of concerns as the awareness of the university is generally low. Many students did not hear about the university from their friends. This may be a sign that promotion through word of mouth and referral from alumni is at a low level.

Significance of the study

The findings of this study will enable the university to make better planning of its student recruitment efforts . With the understanding of the various factors influencing students' choice of a university, university administrators could restrategise their marketing and promotional efforts to compete with other universities in the changing education landscape.

Conclusion

Universities need to remodel themselves in the changing marketplace to maintain connectivity with its various stakeholders: students, staff, faculty, and community. The expectation that universities education should be aligned with the market needs implies that universities should promote the career opportunities of their program offerings to their students.

Students often consider their prospects of securing employment upon graduation as a proxy of the reputation of their universities. In line with the changing job market, universities have to introduce new programs which are relevant to the industries. These new programs should focus on developing new skill sets or new knowledge of students in preparation for careers in the changing marketplace. This study reveals that there are twenty four important factors which influence students' choice of a private university. These factors include programs offerings and facilities, composition of students and faculty reputation, and promotional activities and affordability.

All these factors comprise a university brand promise. Students are now better informed and are aware of the many alternative universities that they can apply to. The university should take a broader view of branding and not just limit itself to the usual activities of student recruitment, faculty engagement and student experience. It should revamp its brand image to meet the needs of the changing marketplace and to improve the engagement level with both student and staff to enhance their experiences. One key strategy for the university to differentiate itself is to rebrand its professors. Professors play key roles in delivering the university's brand promise. Distinguished professors could easily become their own brands and become ambassadors of the university. Professors can build the brand as an expert in a particular domain and this in turn can transcend the boundaries of their personal branding to institutional-wide branding.

The university should explore and adopt the concept of emotional branding in the changing education landscape. Emotional branding provides the means and methodology for connecting the university products to consumers in an emotionally profound way. It focuses on the desire to transcend personal satisfaction and experience emotional fulfilment. If carried out successfully, emotional branding encourages connectivity and intimacy with the university. This emotional aspect will be the key differentiator between the university and its competitors.

Appendix 1

WHY I CHOOSE TO STUDY AT THIS UNIVERSITTY

Major (Business, Engineering, Arts, English, etc) _____

Country or State you are from _____

Gender (Circle one)   Male   Female

	Highly Important	Important	Moderately Important	Little Important	Unimportant
SUC offers many Programs					
Found program of my choice					
Availability of Campus Housing					
Good campus facilities					
Campus Attractiveness					
Teacher Profile from website					
Faculty Reputation					
University Reputation					
Personal Attention received from counselors					
Cost of Tuition					
Scholarships availability					

	Highly Important	Important	Moderately Important	Little Important	Unimportant
Ethnic Composition (Chinese, Malay, Indian, etc)					
Location of university					
Near to my home					
Extra Curricular Activities					
Getting part time job on campus					
Possibility to study abroad on exchange program					

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
This university is my choice					
This university is my parents' choice					
My desire to have a college degree					
The tuition fee is cheaper than other universities					
I'm influenced by my friends to join university					
Easy to enter this university					
I learnt about university from advert in newspaper					
I learnt about university from social media					

Limitations of the study

The sampling process was carried out in one batch of new students in a private university and may not fully reflect the whole student population studying in Malaysia private universities. Out of the 300 questionnaires handed out, only 202 responded. This may be due to the respondents not having a full understanding of the purpose of the questionnaire or were unwilling to disclose their views and opinions with regards to certain items in the questionnaire. The study also did not investigate if there are any gender differences between male and female students when choosing universities. This gender differences may be insignificant as the university provides equal opportunities to all and its marketing and promotional efforts are targeted at all segments rather than to a specific market segment.

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