

0131

Reality, Parody or Cliché? - "The best education in the world": international students' reasons for choosing a UK university

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Background

There has been a paradigm shift in the governance of the higher education (HE) system throughout the world over the last decade, and marketisation policies and market-type mechanisms have been introduced in countries previously characterised by a high degree of government control (Jongbloed 2003). The literature indicates that the higher education market is now well established as a global phenomenon, especially in the major-English speaking nations: Canada, the US, Australia and the UK (Binsardi & Ekwulugo 2003) and the literature provides evidence of marketisation and the deregulation of universities in the US (Allen & Shen 1999; Dill 2003) Canada (Kwong 2000; Young 2002) the UK (Adams & Bumgardner 1991; Middleton 1996; Williams 1997; Gibbs 2001; Taylor 2003) Australia (Baldwin & James, 2000) and New Zealand (Ford, Joseph, & Joseph 1999). However, governments have also turned to deregulatory policies in Japan (Arimoto 1997), Russia (Hare & Lugachev 1999) the Eastern Bloc (Czarniawska & Genell 2002), Holland (Jongbloed 2003); Spain (Mora 1997); Israel (Oplatka 2002) China (Adams & Bumgardner 1991; Williams, Liu, & Shi 1997; Mok 1999; Mok 2000), Asia (Gray, Fam, & Llanes 2003) and Africa (Ivy 2001; Maringe & Foskett 2002; Maringe & Carter 2007).

Throughout these rapid developments the British Council has worked collaboratively with most British universities to promote higher education in Britain and British education as a whole. This form of collaborative partnership is now increasingly common throughout the world, where countries are seeking to attract increasing numbers of overseas students to study in their countries. For example, although the British Council has been established for over 70 years (OBHE, 2007) Australia, Canada, and New Zealand, have created non-profit organizations within the last fifteen years to promote the internationalization of HE in their countries: the Australian Education International (AEI); Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE); and Education New Zealand (ENZ) respectively. This partnership is a form of co-branding, and shows cooperation between two distinct brands - individual universities in each country and the non-profit organisation, to leverage the assets of both. In a co-branding strategy, brands work as partners to create a market presence that neither brand alone could readily achieve (Bizjournals, 2007).

Research Questions

Despite these rapid changes worldwide, although there is considerable research which attempts to explore international student choice in HE markets (Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor 2005; Gatfield & Ching-huei 2006; Liang-Hsuan 2008; Salisbury et al. 2009) and higher education marketing (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka 2006) searches reveal that there is little or no research exploring the influence of the British Council or other agencies on these decisions (with the possible exception of Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana (2007)). Research thus far has concentrated almost exclusively on the direct relationship between the student-chooser and the university.

The key factors which emerged from previous research on student choice of higher education were firstly, factors associated with the institution or the location of the institution (Gormley & Murphy 2006; Drewes & Michael 2006): the facilities provided (Price et al. 2003); suitability; academic reputation; job prospects and teaching quality (Soutar & Turner 2002); and geographical or travel considerations (Kemp & Madden 1998; Moogan, Baron, & Harris 1999; Moogan, Baron, & Bainbridge 2001). Secondly factors associated with the individual consumer: social and ethnic factors (Ball et al. 2002); financial constraints (Pasternak 2005; Briggs & Wilson 2007); and family influences (Pugsley & Coffey 2002; Pimpa 2003).

Methods

This paper is based on the findings from a qualitative research study, of post graduate applications to one case study Business School in England. A simple random sampling process using SPSS enabled the researcher to identify a final sample of 30 ID numbers of applicants applying online (60 IDs are identified initially to allow for some which might not be fully accessible on the system). The data for analysis consists of coded qualitative data from the personal statements of students containing quotes specifically relating to branding and referring to the University and School.

Frame

Personal statements were analysed and coded using a grounded theory approach to explore perceptions of the university brand, and the business school sub-brand and these were compared with the British Council's promotional information and the university website and prospectus. Only statements which relate to the brand and the sub-brand were used for analysis - using open, axial and selective coding. The analysis was conducted based on thematically coded extracts. The paper further explores the ostensive and covert meanings revealed in the personal statements provided by applicants in the study (what the statements are explicitly communicating and what are they implying).

Research findings

Findings indicate that potential applicants to the university from overseas tended to quote promotional statements made by the British Council, regarding a British education, in their personal statements. For example the British Council website claims that: "Quality standards for UK institutions are among the best in the world; (...) wherever you choose to study, you will be able to study relevant, world-class qualifications of exceptional quality" (British Council, 2006).

The findings indicated that applicants had relied on the advertising statements from the University's marketing communications and the British Council websites to write their personal statements: "I chose the UK as my destination because Britain provides the best education in the world". Although there are some prosaic reasons for using these phrases (e.g. the convenience and time-saving of plagiarism) the authors argue that the personal statements contain phrases designed to convey 'what applicants think admissions tutors want to hear'; as well as to reveal dreams, hopes and future career aspirations as purported truth, but which become - through repetition - parody and cliché. In terms of the co-branding relationship, the authors further argue that the differences between the university brand and the school sub-brand were not clearly defined in the applicants' minds, but the strength of the brand of a "British" education, promoted through the British Council seems to provide endorsement, and inspires confidence in the case study university, whether in reality or merely as temporary self-persuasion.