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Brand identity in Finnish Higher Education Institutions

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ABSTRACT

KYMENLAAKSO UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES

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Brand Identity in Finnish Higher Education Institutions

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Keywords

brand identity, Finnish higher education, international students, recruitment

The study purpose is exploring the phenomenon brand identity in Finnish tertiary education; the influence factors to prospective students' perception in choosing an institution and the actual impact of branding communication to their final choice. The study focus on presenting answers and suggestions to the question: "How to build up brand identity that has most influence toward effective enrolment and recruitment in Finnish higher education?"

The theoretical framework shows how to define new concepts of emerging the brand identity philosophy in tertiary education sector and evaluating the actual impact of marketing communication practices to both internal and external resources to meet foreign students' satisfaction. A qualitative approach with in-depth interviews was conducted as main method due to the complexity and differs from case to case of the new concepts. The sample was selected non-random 24 foreign students between 18 to 30 years old from different type of programmes with the average age of 23, 7.

The result reveals that marketing efforts based on merging brand identical could lead to positive attitudes and significant students' commitments. A detail suggestion of future improvement was given by interviewees. Regarding to the outcomes, the vital issue in transferring brand image to student's perspectives is successful monitoring suitable communicating messages accordingly suitable time and strategies which can enhance its brand identity, be consistent and viable. The limitations of the study are also pointed out.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the first section of the study paper we present overall the situation of higher education market at present; objective, research questions and the structure of the research.

1.1. Background of final thesis

Globalisation which is defining briefly as “the integration of commodity, capital, and labour markets” (Gürüz, 2008) has brought to many nations worldwide not only opportunities for expanding economy scale but also give a challenge with variety issues from stronger competition, lack of “faculty expertise” (Morey, 2000) who can deal with culture diverse, social and political issues in international environment. Furthermore, Gürüz (2008) states that the radical transformation of technology and commercialized in R&D is critical in outsourcing the knowledge and innovation. The baby booming and aging population has turned the labour market to massive, competitive and more demanding. Therefore, the key asset of the global economy in digital age is the multicultural and well-educated work forces. The evolution of the knowledge-base economy can be seen as a “push” factor that higher education institutions needed to response by reforming models and practices (Bird et al., 1998; Kwiek, 2001; Mok, 2003).

It has become more difficult to find any decent job without a diploma from a college/university or even certification from higher levels such as Master’s, Doctor’s degree. Certainly, the competition is getting stiffer not only to students but also greater emphasis towards higher education institutions in consideration of educational metrics, legal and cost factors. Be able to distinguish your image from the competitors is important to retain the loyalty and long term relationships. However, only being different is not enough to ensure the success. In education sector, effective marketing communication strategy influence by enormous counterparts. Especially in international environment, the errors can caused either by the ignorance of branding, unbalance of resources, or misinterpreted under reflection of the cultural and ethnic value in target market.

The trend of foreign students' enrolment from 2000 to 2006 is steadily growing which more than 80% of total enrolment destination is among OECD countries (OECD, 2008). The rankings, reputation and investments for future career are listed as main reasons that influence to a majority of Asian or African students' mobility to OECD countries. Among these OECD countries (the list of OECD countries is shown in figure 1) Australia, United States and United Kingdom are recognized as popular "English speaking environment destination" with traditionally long term reputation for providing high quality standard, respected sciences and engineering research. The Bologna framework and the Lisbon Strategy present as core guidance to transforming the higher education system: "the encouragement of efficiency and excellence with the promotion of equity and access"; monitoring education quality insurance in global context in "sustainable perspective"(OECD, 2009).

Table 1 Trends in the number of foreign students enrolled outside their country of origin (2000 to 2006)

Source: OECD 2008, Education at a Glance 2008: OECD Indicators, 373

Year	Foreign students enrolled worldwide	Foreign students Enrolled in OECD Countries
2000	1,894,792	1,583,744
2001	1,972,111	1,642,676
2002	2,267,627	1,897,866
2003	2,507,931	2,085,263
2004	2,697,759	2,265,135
2005	2,847,536	2,368,931
2006	2,924,679	2,440,657

Not only globalisation and digitalisation but also the privatization of higher education in many European countries and the introduction of charging tuition fees to non EU/EEA students recently (Nicolescu 2009, 35) are the driving force requiring the institutions to reshape. It is recommended in various studies that the image and reputation of an educational institution should be examined regularly. Additionally, Pop et al (2008) say that, it is a “good practice” in focusing in diminishing bright and talent international students in larger quantities but also a “difficult task” to “imply compromises in quantity’s favour with the risk of reducing the education quality’s level”. However, the opportunities and challenges will be different from case to case.

 Australia	 Austria
 Belgium	 Canada
 Chile	 Czech Republic
 Denmark	 Estonia
 Finland	 France
 Germany	 Greece
 Hungary	 Iceland
 Ireland	 Israel
 Italy	 Japan
 Korea	 Luxembourg
 Mexico	 Netherlands
 New Zealand	 Norway
 Poland	 Portugal
 Slovak Republic	 Slovenia
 Spain	 Sweden
 Switzerland	 Turkey
 United Kingdom	 United States

Figure 1 List of OECD countries

Sources: OECD homepage at: <http://www.oecd.org/>

[Accessed 02 March 2011]

One of the latest changes effect to the Finnish higher education sector is the new Universities Act, submitted by the new Finnish Government on 1st August 2009. According to the Ministry of Education (2009), the objective of the new reform is providing more flexibility to enable the institution to become more competitive, as compared to their foreign counterparts in international education market. Universities will continue to perform their public mission but no longer belong to government budgeting system. The annual budget will be received based on executing the tasks assigned. Under the new legal status, Finnish higher education institutions will be able to acquire external funding, direct their investments to areas of strategic importance, acquire shares and other property, as well as pursue business ventures and allocate possible surplus to strategically important activities and operations. The Finnish higher education has embraced a more business-style thinking in their operations and making impressive efforts to internationalize their system. It would seem that the upcoming trend of investing for research and development was supported from many sources in order to explore the sustainable marketing strategies to compete with neighbourhood rivalries will continue growing (Varis, 2007).

1.2. Objectives of the thesis

In United Kingdom, United States, Australia, higher education is considered as “significant valuable exporting industry remarkably” in international trade (Coate, 2009). In Australia education sector was the third largest exporter in 2007; while it is the fifth largest exporter with the contribution \$13.5 billion per year in USA; and approximately US\$20 billion revenue from international students in UK each year (Cheung et al., 2011). At the same time, the upgrading and development direction of local-side education in all level through adjusting government policies among Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and especially China makes the competition even stronger. Stepping up and investigating the formula how institutions perceived effective recruitment regarding to competition, market share and internationalisation were highlighted. Without a solid database, an effective brand strategy cannot exist. For this reason, not only does this study provide important insights essential baseline of foreign students’ perceptions, but it contributes how institutions identity perceived and the gap between theory and practices.

Gürüz, K. (2008, 36-37) sum up the major forces put pressure in transforming the model and structures of higher education institutions are the idealist “sharing cost” to reduce public funding, the changing patterns and policies of governance legislation and international education competition. Defining values and characteristics of branding in higher education section will help the institutions to design a sustainable marketing strategy and identical profile. Also, in order to transfer effectively brand promise to external, it is vital to involve employees’ commitments. The more internal staffs well understand about brand identity of the organisation and process communications in appropriate manner to audience, the greater positive feedback will be received.

To conclude, the main objective of this final thesis is exploring the branding management as competence in higher education context especially communication strategy; understanding relevance connection between the applicable marketing tools and effective recruitment influence factors within Finnish Higher Education context. Due to the intangible and intellectual values of education, it has a lot of arguments and debates of whether or not borrowing brand phenomenon to function and how to evaluate the actual results of emerging strategic marketing plan into higher education managerial operations. This study will base on theoretical findings, academic articles and research results up till now to explain a clear picture of the phenomena to answer for questions: *who* is target customer, *what* need to pay attention to, the reason *why* they are important, and *how* to process successfully. In this case, it is necessary to identify the actual impact of how marketing activities concerned operating brand identity to foreign students’ perceptions and its relation to effectiveness of recruitment in institutions. Carrying out interviews is vital to ensure consistency and understanding which reflected under literature review.

Personally, as a foreign student myself in Finland it is interesting to collect the opinions from students ‘perspective in describing how universities can use branding identity and promotion strategy to create image as attractive destination in international market share. Students are able to contribute comments which may directly or indirectly influence to their job performance, satisfaction, commitment and future direction. The outcome of the study will hopefully be useful in

developing “communication & interaction” between institutions and international students.

1.3. Research Question

The preliminary research question is: which critical concepts concerned brand identities which reflected through communications have most influence toward effective enrolment and recruitment in Finnish higher education?

In order to reach an answer for this I aim to use the following questions:

- What values and characteristics in brand identity in higher education are needed to take in consideration?
- What is student’s attitude towards merging marketing activities in higher education?
- Which channels are considered as popular and trustable?
- How to apply implementations and tactics to ensure successful of communication that influences to students’ final decision?
- What are recommendations for short term or long-term objectives in future development?

1.4. Structure of the thesis

Figure 2 describes the journey which the research has gone through. The thesis begins with presenting the introduction of the thesis backgrounds with higher education competition and the major forces that cause the changes globally in Finland. The first chapter also outlines the objectives and research questions. Chapter two indicates conjointly the theory exploring the phenomenon definition and elements that strongly influence to the research problem and the reason why process this study. The theoretical framework is based on main concepts of branding concepts, the target audience, brand identity and internal branding in higher education context. It aims to explain the characteristics of the new concepts and interactions between major factors that influence to foreign students’ perceptions. Overview of Finnish Higher Education system and the recent situation are reflected

in chapter three. The fourth chapter illustrates the research methods and data collection process. The qualitative method was chosen as the research approach. The primary data source collected from semi-structured interviews. In addition, the validity, reliability and limitations are also pointed out. In the fifth chapter, the research's result was introduced, analyzed and discussed in detail. The chapter visualizes the outcome of the empirical study with recommendation for future development. Finally, the conclusion and suggestions for further experiments are highlighted in chapter six.



Figure 2 Structure of the thesis

2. MERGING BRAND IDENTITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

This part reviews the combinations of the concepts and key challenges concerned merging branding in higher education platform. The theoretical background explores brand identity and critical fundamentals that can be adopted by institutions.

2.1. Branding in higher education context

The definition of a brand from the American Marketing Association (AMA, 2011) is “a customer experience represented by a collection of images and ideas; often, it refers to a symbol such as a name, logo, slogan, and design scheme. Brand recognition and other reactions are created by the accumulation of experiences with the specific product or service, both directly relating to its use, and through the influence of advertising, design, and media commentary”. Similarly Jobber (1995, 246) consider branding process as “developing individual identity” to reach customer’s demand and satisfaction in efficient and effective manner. In short, a brand is called a combination of corporate behaviour, technical values and intangible promise the company instils offer to customers. Within similar idea, other authors illustrated branding as “a cultural process, performed in an interplay between art and business, production and consumption, images and stories, design and communication” (Salser and Strannegård 2004; Schroeder 2005 cited in Schroeder & Salser, 2006).

Gürüz (2008) estimates that the number of foreign student enrolment worldwide around 2.5 million while the quantities of territories and higher education institutes are also expanding to more than seventeen thousand. The exchange knowledge and networking cross border in higher education institutions in over the world can be seen as key asset of development communication and co-operation between nations (OECD 2009, 18-19). However, at the same time, the competition turns to be massive. What make students are in favour in filling in their application to some particular institutes and what make them ignore others? Daw and Cone (2011, 27-28) regard “branding can be a winning strategy to raise image, strengthen relationships, build loyalty, grow community support and achieve important social goals”, the essential approach of adopting marketing practice in management

strategy to efficiently delivery the academic core value and mission(Knapp and Siegel 2009, 21-21). The role of university branding is to build, manage and develop impressions such as “associations, emotions, images and faces” (Bulotaite, 2003 cited in Chapleo, 2010). Many famous institutions have already built up for themselves the strategic plan to ground who they are and what they stand for.

Due to the notable values that higher education characterized, the differences in different culture contexts, sometimes it is difficult for administrators and faculty to strongly support for the branding foundation. The hesitancy comes from the fear of criticism of destroying the institutes portrait and reputation of the professional learning provider – education in public attitudes. Indeed, since a long run of mankind history, knowledge is seen as a part of the culture, and participates in improving society life standard so it is very challenging to transfer this image to be more economical. The endless arguments between educationalists about whether or not to borrow a business model in order to increase the competitive advantage in strategic and effective foreign students’ recruitment (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007, 942-943) is going on but there is not yet available a solid and unarguable statement to define how to generate of this phenomenon in higher education industry.

2.2. Target audience

Many authors suggest that higher education is a service sector but in many countries it is also a non-profit factor (Nicolescu, 2009). Thus, the new image of institutions created through marketing activities and branding concept must be accepted by large audience. Drawing upon in service section, client centric is number one principle towards direction of the marketing activities in merging brand concept to education sector. However, within the tertiary education sector it requires many identical values set to communicate to different stakeholders. The most challenging task in here is whether or not the identical image of the institution could be able to communicate and meet the expectation from variety of stakeholders and public.

Hemsley-Brown & Goonawardana (2007), Nicolescu (2009) find that students either can be seen as “the main and immediate customers” or “main stakeholders of the

higher education services while employers can be seen as secondary or indirect consumers” (Stensaker & D’Andrea, 2007). Students who are ambitious searching for overseas degree can consider as “active consumers” (Nicolescu, 2009), so their expectations can value as a rich source of database. Waeraas and Solbakk (2008, 453) goes on to argue that branding is a complex disciplines which should have a limited set of values to identify the identical image of the organization. Patty (1999) addresses interesting question of whether or not to refer students to the notion “customer”. The author agrees that understanding the student’s perspective is important to improve the efficiency and quality of the program offers; but student has multiple compulsory roles in participating and fulfilment during studying process such as following particular courses, present at school, pass the exam, so on. It is possible to consider student either as “raw material” or even as “employees because they must be actively engaged in their jobs, be motivated to perform and performance expectations” should be met in some level. Some others claim that it is not moral to compare the intangible value of knowledge with the money terms. But in other hands, either they cannot deny the strong impact of the marketing tactics and approach toward communication strategy, advertising and public relation.

In my opinion, I would prefer partially applying the branding flag tag to tertiary education with the idealist “do it and learn it”. The barriers against developing this foundation actually can see as strategic advantage; the more careful the academia test this phenomenon the better outcomes it would lead to. Figure 3 clearly show that higher education has multi-customers: students and other various beneficiaries such as alumni, family friends, faculty and staffs, employers, stakeholders, sponsors, society and government. However, within the timeline and geographic destination, the study only focus on understand students and more specific foreign students ‘perspective and their engagement towards branding higher education institution.

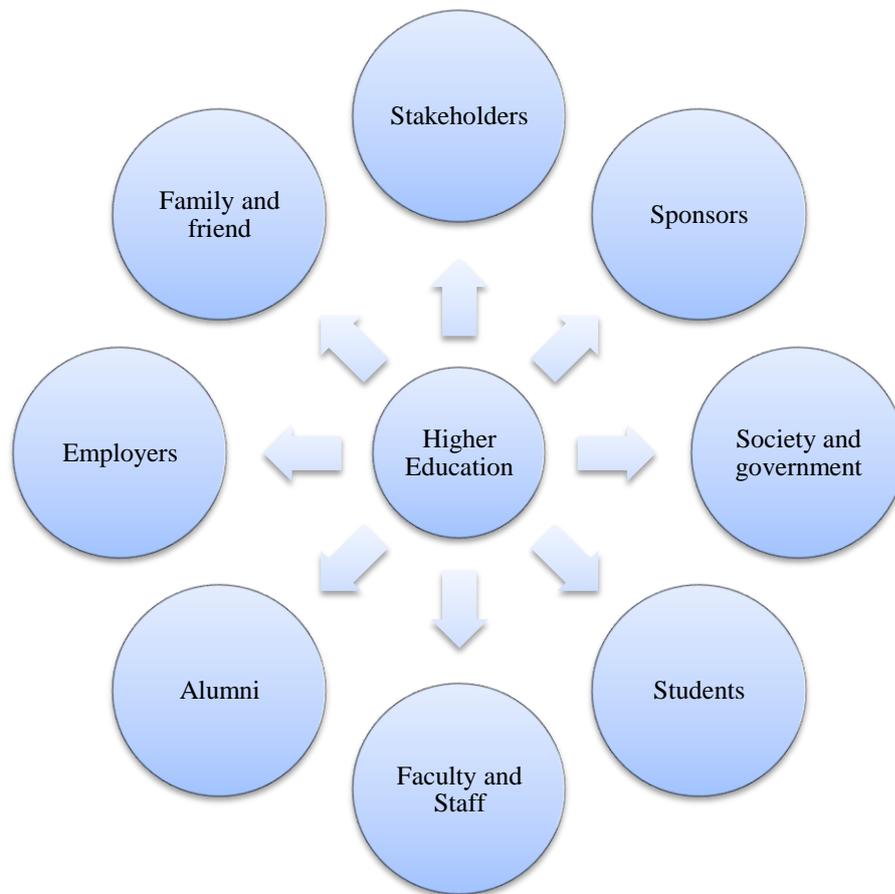


Figure 3 Target audience of higher education institution

(Adapt from Nicolescu, 2009)

2.3. Brand Identity

Each organization needs to emphasize its identity essential and unique characteristics to develop and maintain the competitive advantage in market share. Ghodeswar (2008, 5) states that a strong brand identity only can be reach by well understood and experienced by loyal customers; the trust and commitments will distinguish it from the competitors. However, organization identity is seen as dynamic variable that must reflect the solid mission of the institution (ground its existence), so it is difficult to monitor and evaluate it. The identity in higher education is no longer only presenting the visual graphic and identification but it also defines including the vision, mission and reflects culture environment of the institution (Curtis, Abratt, Minor 2009, 406).

Having variety of target audience (students, family and friends, alumni, sponsors, stakeholders, employers, internal faculty and staff, society and government) with different characteristics and concerned variable, it is difficult for higher education to generate the statement in consistent manner and be accepted by society (Curtis, Abratt, Minor 2009); moreover, measuring and evaluating its effectiveness is complex. Thus according to Lowrie (2007, 997-998) in university marketing practices, it is important to focus on the language construction plural identities; continue to fight “within the antagonistic relationship” in order to “delineate” it is consider as important part in the process of construction and development to the more suitable identities in tertiary education. The author suggests pragmatic approach of merging brand identity needed also “consider how brands construct antagonistic identities” as well.

Personally, I’m in favour seeing the brand identity concept under Schroeder and Salser-Mörling (2006, 115) review illustrated in figure 4 with main four assumptions under brand management and social theory: defined by brand strategist; enduring and stable; essential; distinction between internal-external. The authors analyze the metaphors under management literature and involved into social and cultural inheritance reflection.

In business environment in general and higher education sector, organizations tend to fail into the trap of “self-absorbed” due to too much concentrated on brand identity strategy but forgetting that the audience perceptions are actually the most important counterpart which gradually build the final outcome of identity. Thus, adapted to Schroeder and Salser-Mörling (2006) students, alumni, admissions, stakeholders, other donors and public (for instance in summer programs, evening training courses, and social responsibility) can be seen as co-production of institution’s brand identity. Brand identity is often called as genetic brand structure (Schroeder and Salser-Mörling, 2006); it is something assumed to be stable and enduring. Instead, as mentioned above it is suggested that the institutions need to have “fluid identities” to adapt different audience attitudes, rapid changes and dynamic in social, culture environments.

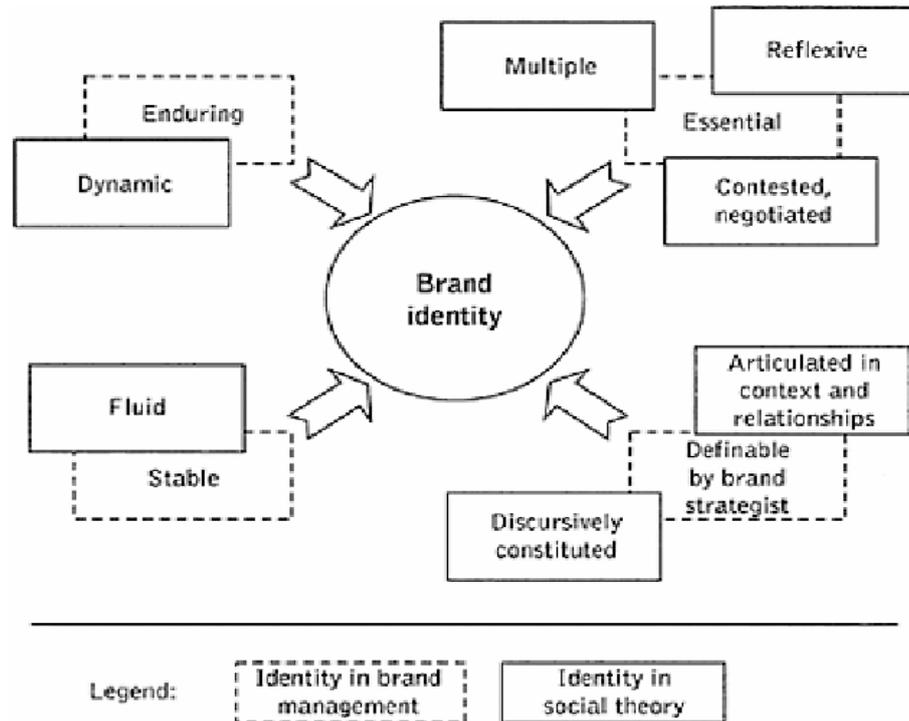


Figure 4 Concept of identity in brand management and social theory

Source: Schroeder and Salser Mörling 2006, 115

The essential in brand identity in other words is the representation of institution which strengthens prestige reputation; broadens name recognition; academia success and achievements; develops facility resources; and attracts sponsorships. The authors also highlight the relevance of constructing assumptions in brand identity especially in distinction between internal and external according to the dynamic and complex issues in mix-culture, globalization driven and ethnic interpretation. The purpose of this thesis is to focus on improving effectiveness of the recruitment and enrolments of foreign students so that the identity brand must be communicated and perceived values by diverse audiences from different ethnic cultures. Beside, in global market it is challenging task to identify the clear image from others without misleads decoding in communications.

In summary, the benefit of a strong brand identity performance is competitive advantage to attract appropriate applicants in students' enrolment and staff recruitment; increases alumni associations and contributions; attains investments and

partnerships (Judson et al., 2009). Curtis, Abratt, Minor (2009, 409) conduct an analysis of popular statements that found among university's mission and core value to identify its unique strategic competence in table 2. From this collection in the table, it is easily found that there is quite limited set of statements that the academia can use to identify their image among competitors. The nature of higher education values and its relationship to economic factors, politic factors, environment factors and culture/ethnic/religious factors made it even harder to describe in short and simple words.

Table 2 List of popular statements used in brand identity

Source: Curtis, Abratt, Minor (2009, 409)

University	Education, career-driven, field training, knowledge, global, research, serious students
Best	Elite, advance, expert, driving force, dominate, skilled, most respected, prestigious, specialists, top-of-the-line, competitive.
Innovators	High-aptitude, high-degree, high-pressure, high-speed, high-tech, modern, cutting edge, future leaders, state-of-the-art
Military	Army, Navy, Air Force, ROTC training
Eco-friendly	Environment science, solar energy, green, alternative fuel sources
Global	Culturally diverse, international
Historical	Traditional, generational, notable, memorable, famous, legendary

2.3.1. Brand Promise

The term “brand promise” is often referring to whole package which includes customers’ benefits oriented, emotional and functional prospective. The target is creating value added to strengthen brand image and increase the customer engagement. However, in many cases the organizations either overlap their promise, or underestimate the importance of keeping it; leading to unsatisfied customers. Nowadays, in service sector, only competing to gain market share is no longer enough; the best method is mutual benefit, gaining trust from customers and become loyalty. Particularly in higher education boundary, the two way communication that helps to develop both internal and external relationships is vital. The content of promise must be reached in some level, evidence based and delivery in consistent manner.

During the process of defining the brand promise, it is vital to analyze four questions who, what, how and why. A successful brand promise “must be bold yet credible”, reflects the vision and core values (Ehret, 2008 cited in Black, 2009), being focus and dynamic. The following list points out eight characteristics a brand promise should have (adapted from webpage <http://www.brandidentityguru.com> , accessed on 30 November 2010).

- 1) Based in the brand’s core values
- 2) Clear, relevant and engaging to the target market
- 3) Able to create strong positive emotions from stakeholders
- 4) Repeated both internal and external
- 5) Continually reinforced
- 6) Consistent through marketing activities
- 7) Adaptable to the business climate
- 8) Known and echoed by the business partners

Dr Black (2009) recommends an instructive process to create and develop brand promise in higher education context in figure 5. The first step in this process is analyzing the desired characteristics that are relevant to brand promise. Living in the brand promise requires the loyalty engagement of internal human resources and the

positive organizational culture. It's important that the employees have the confidence to talk about the brand vision to surroundings environment. In the next step, operating the brand promise, institution needs to identify its unique characteristics through service offer, business transactions, R&D and media networking. The media channels selected to reach to target audience either can be traditional marketing and media such as television, radio, newspapers and magazines; or the online webpage, blogs, forums, online-advertising. During the whole process, delivering consistently brand promise can create the strength of institutions' brand. The final step is measuring how effective it has perceived from audience. The feedback from communication is essential to managers of institutions to avoid errors and mapping the development in future. It provides the knowledge how audience understands the message and what is their experience on brand delivering this promise. Conducting the result also shows the root of relationship between institutions and students. The lessons conducted will allow the institution to adapt and adjust to the external changes and balance the internal to ensure successful delivery of the brand promise to target audience.

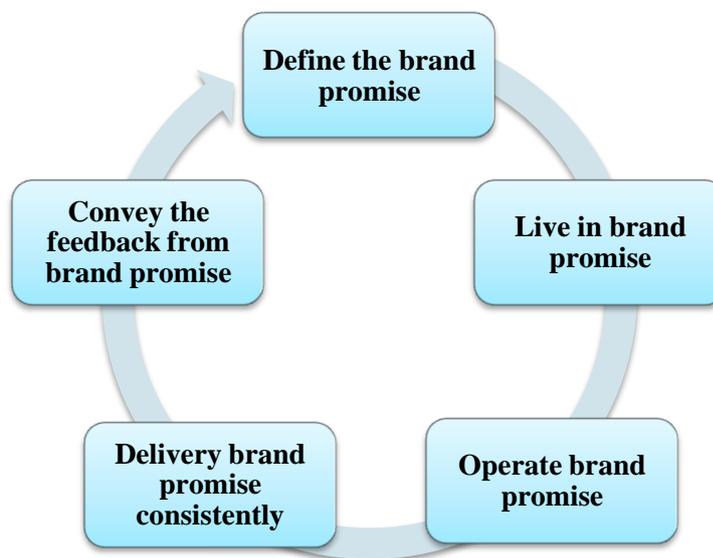


Figure 5 Process of delivering brand promise

Source: Black J., 2009 [online] [Accessed 01 April 2011]

2.3.2. Integrated Marketing communication

The communication process is the bridge that connects the institutes to both external and internal constituents. The successful communication can establish the potential engagement in enrolment and secure the image of the institute in the longer term. However, first we must understand how it functions. The communication process can be described in a simple model in figure 6 which adapted from communication process model of Kotler (1994). It consists of the two major parties as higher education institution and its target audience. Communication tools are message which must reflect core vision, goal and strategy of institution culture; and message delivery channel. The other elements: encoding, decoding, reputations and image, response, feedback are the functions of communication. The noise element can affect to the whole process of communication.

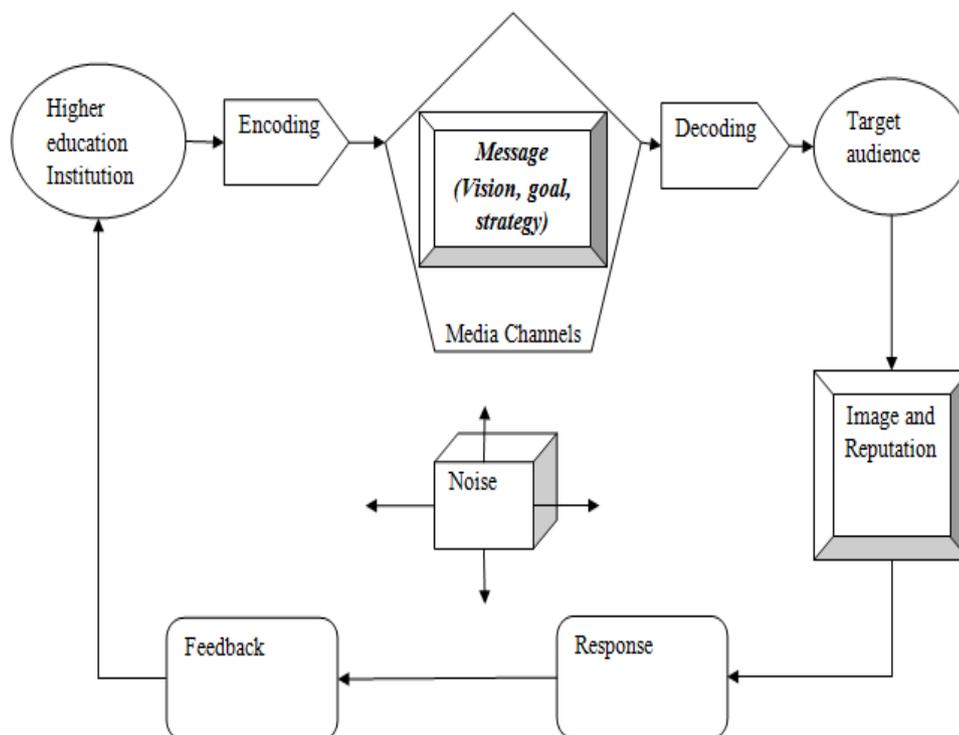


Figure 6 Model of communication process in higher education context

(Adapted from Kotler 1994, 597)

The problem is sometimes the message decoding is not the same as the encoding due to ethnic or culture differences. Therefore, the larger the target audience and geographic scale of market share, the more important it is to design an effective message. In other words, the message which has “language of mix equivalence” (Curtis, Abratt, Minor 2009) as backbone to construct the identical differences; will raising stakeholders’ recognition, clarity its position, create value- add and enhancing the reputation. Also, the effective message must be organized, informative, emotional and consistent.

Brewer and Zhao (2010) mention that the history of reputation also influence to communication process; indeed, it is more difficult to change poor reputation from brand image. Vice versa, the good reputation shadows will guarantee a successful brand. Nowadays, with the development of information technology, there is variety of channels that institution can reach to their target audience. There is no longer the time only available traditional print advertising, radio or basic channels TV; majority of people can have cable TV with hundreds of channel from all over the world, the internet, mobile phone, and so on. Gray, Farn and Llanes (2003, 111) acknowledged that “students had different media preferences which might be related to differences in cultural values, levels of Westernization and communications infrastructure in their home countries”. Institution can use at the same time different instrument to communicate to different public to inform, remind and persuade student’s selective decision as table 3.

Table 3 List of popular promotion tools used in higher education sector

Promotion tools can use in higher education
Advertising (print and online)
Agency
Email/ Newsletters
Event Marketing/Exhibitions
Higher Education Fairs Conferences 3rd party events

Folders | Brochures | Student Guides & Prospectus
Interactive Web Components | Social Networking | Online
Marketing
Movie & TV Spots | Radio
Merchandising and rewards
Multimedia Marketing
Search Engines | Directories
Personal Communication | direct & indirect
Poster | Banners | Postcards
Press Release
Public Relations
Sponsorships
Telephone support
Website

Social media is seen as an efficient branding tool in strategic brand management to create interaction between organization and loyal customers. The outcomes from many social media platforms and blogs recently have proved that the main advantages are increasing customer awareness and two way dialogues with the target audience. The evolution of Internet nowadays bring the most powerful tool to help organization increasing operational effectiveness or strategic positioning aim at delivery better and unique value to customer in different ways (Porter, 2001). Any customer can access and distribute their opinions to organizations. Thus, by sharing information and getting feedback from customers, the organization gains the knowledge of customer's database to ensure the strategic management activities.

Over the past year, the social traffic is recorded continually climbing in growing trend with online engagement and fan loyalty. In figure 7, Stelzner (2011) reports that social sharing on the web which used by experience marketers is driven by Facebook with 92% while Twitter, LinkedIn, Blogs and YouTube were close behind with 84%, 71%, 68% and 56%.

Commonly used social media tools

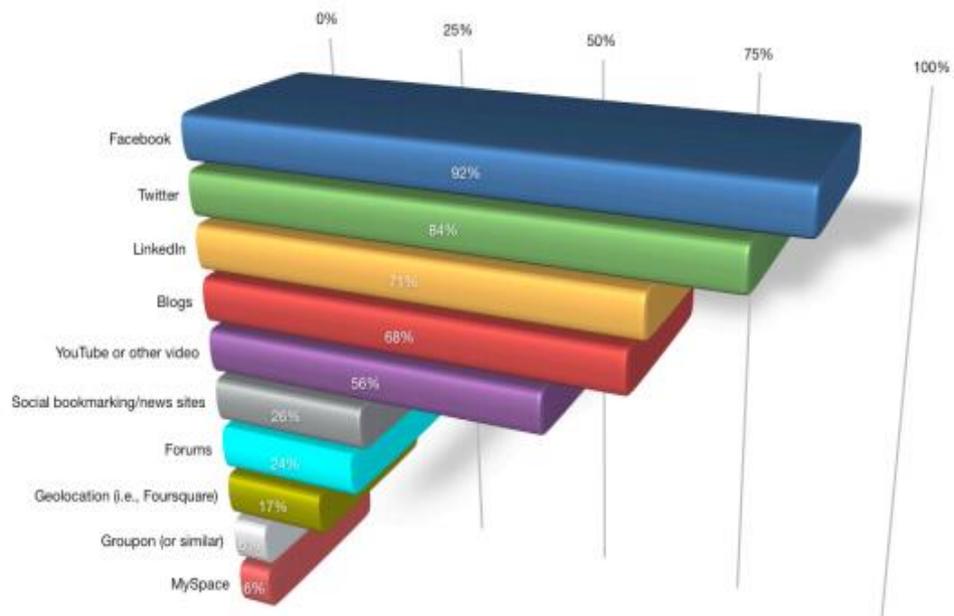


Figure 7 Share of comment media tools on the web

Source: Stelzner, 2011

The potential benefits of using social media as communicating channel will expose the institution's image from public awareness; increase traffic and subscribers; improve search rankings; promoting potential partnerships and networking while reducing marketing expenses (Stelzner, 2011) thus it is strongly recommended to test the validity and operate the suitable strategy of the use of internet social media platforms. In addition, top four other popular forms were listed: email marketing, search engine optimization, event marketing and press releases.

2.3.3. Internal branding

To transmit the brand message coherence to external audience, Balmer and Gray (2003 cited in Curtis, Abratt and Minor 2009, 405) summon that employees are

“brand ambassadors” who directly delivery services to customers; building brand identity start first from inside organization and requiring coordination from communication efforts (Judson et al., 2009). These authors also emphasize that enhancing internal communications will lead to promoting the messages externally in the higher education paradigm. Only satisfied work forces can perform their duties to meet customer’s expectation. In order to achieve the satisfaction of customer, the organization needs to ensure that the satisfaction and ability of employees in delivering the marketing messages through recruiting, training, motivating, rewarding and providing equipment and technology (Punjaisri, Evanschitzky and Wilson, 2009).

Collins (1999) rejects the old adage “People are your most important asset” and insist “the right people are your most important asset” as their desired attitudes and characteristics are suit to the organization core value. The best practices in how to provide service and communicate with customers will result to the best brand experience and loyalty relationship. The quality and expertise of staff was examined as critical success factor. The organizational cultural plays the important role as it reflects the core values of belief of institution; in brief, without the effective internal branding process the brand promises are almost uncertain when delivering externally.

3. OVERVIEW FINNISH HIGHER EDUCATION

Finland education system has good reputation especially since the result from the PISA put it top in overall in mathematics, reading and science in 2000, 2003 and 2006. PISA is a three-yearly program for International Student Assessment which is a joint survey of the OECD member countries and a number of other countries. The results will be promising a larger demand for Finnish education in the world. In table 4, based upon the population size Finnish higher education research and evaluation is regarding as high quality and achieved top 6 in world ranking, only after United States, Australia, Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland.

Table 4 World rankings and population size (per top 500-list university in 2008)

Source: OECD 2009, higher education to 2030: globalization, volume 2

Population per top 500 listed University in 2008	
Sweden	822,000
Finland	874,000
Switzerland	948,000
Norway	1,161,000
Denmark	1,371,000
Australia	1,373,000
United States	1,900,000

Higher education has significant role in contributing towards knowledge of society. Finnish higher education system comprises of two complementary sectors: university and university of applied sciences (regard known as polytechnic). According to Centre for International Mobility CIMO, Studying in Finland homepage (accessed on 04 May 2011) the university sector consists of 16 universities which promoting research, scientific artistic learning whereas 25 universities of applied sciences focus on “practical oriented alternative” compared to traditional university education through skills learned both from work-related experience and theoretical knowledge base on the field.

In figure 8, it would seem that university sector confer Bachelor's, Master's, licentiate and doctoral degrees while universities of applied sciences offer Bachelor's from three and a half to four and a half years depend on the field and requirement of minimum of three years working experience concerned the field to continue for professional Master' programmer. All awards carry ECTS credits.

Besides, there are plenty of exchange programmers available to ensure the international studying environment such as Erasmus, FIRST, Nordplus, ISEP, North2Noth, EU-Asia, EU-Canada, etc. The exchange opportunities focus mainly to undergraduate level that is offered to International students in English language.

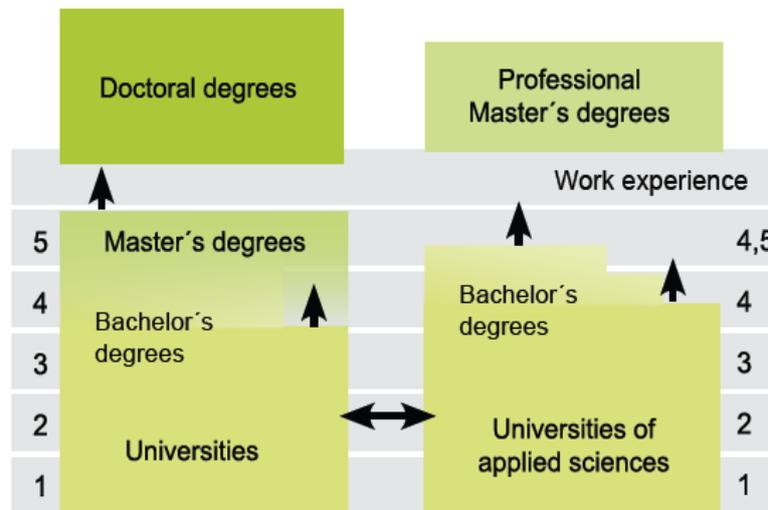


Figure 8 Overall Finnish Higher Education system

Source: Naturally Finland-Universities of Applied Sciences in Finland [online]

Available at: www.pinnet.fi [Accessed 14 January 2011]

The Finnish higher education has undergone significant changes by both internal and external pressures. Pressures of development for future competence of the 21st (Varis, 2007) consist of:

- Globalisation
- Demographic changes
- Science and technology
- Changes in knowledge and competence
- Changes in work and people's mental resources
- Changes in the cultural environment
- Governance and safety and security

Furthermore, in strategy for the Internationalisation of Higher education institutions in Finland 2009-2015 launched by Ministry of education 2009, the initial and most important goal is constructing to become “a genuinely international higher education community” with the challenging task is improving the quality standard and attractiveness of opportunities for non- Finnish students and researcher working and studying in national destination context; other competitive alternative is exporting of expertise thus indirectly raise the reputation and prestige of Finnish higher education

to abroad ; besides supporting a multicultural society provide a stronger and solid internationalization studying environment at home base on existing immigrant population; last but not least is the participating and supporting the activities concerned ethical, environmental, sustainable issues in global effects (Ministry of education, 2009).

Participating in OECD, Finnish higher education is also adapted to the changes and reform accordingly to the ideal from Bologna framework and globally competition. As can be seen from the chart in figure 9, the mobility of foreign students who come to Finland is sharp rising from 2000 to 2008, while the trend of numbers of Finnish students who participate overseas studying grows steadily until a dip in 2007 and recovery back in 2008. The new legislation University Act allows higher education institutions to become more autonomous in financing access and administration monitoring. In other words, the new law provides institutions more “flexible scope” in emerging businesses, external funding in research and innovation (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2009). The goal is reducing in the number and increasing the size of education institutions. This may bring the Finnish higher education to world class ranking and higher reputation in global competition.



Figure 9 Development of mobility in higher education institutions 2000 - 2008

Source: Faktaa- Facts and figures 3/2009[Accessed 02 March 2011]

There are several education institutions have taken actions beyond this concept through merging the units. There has been significant increased in mutual co-operation and division of works in different fields. A number of institutions have been incorporated into larger entities. Units have been reorganized, existing organizations have been reformed (FINHEEC, 2010); for instance, Haaga and Helia, which merged into Haaga-Helia in 2007; three metropolitan universities named Helsinki University of Technology, Helsinki School of Economics and University of Art and Design Helsinki, have also announced to a new Aalto University in August 2009.

Partnerships between universities and universities are developing. Merging is seen as competitive advantage in order to retaining brand reputation in both national and international context, and at the same time to increase the effectiveness especially in financial terms (Saarti & Juntunen 2010, 184). However, it is costly and upon on various critical encounters such as “the interaction of governmental macro-politics and institutional micro-politics as well as geographical distance” (Ursin, Aittola & Välimaa, 2010). Additionally, the new change would not only bring opportunities in development but also threats in conflict of ethic institutions’ culture among academic personnel.

Besides the major changes in the sizes and merging operations, the institutions in Finland are step by step merging the branding concept to identify their image in public especially through the new media channels for instance Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The digital mass media recently is seen as effective tool for attracting attention from large audience to either big organization or small businesses because it has widespread reach and is cost saving marketing tool. But higher education sector in Finland is more likely hard to being seen with commercial activities. Thus, the credibility and actual effects of these marketing activities in higher education context towards the students’ recruitment through online mass media may need to be issued.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Outlined in this chapter are the research approach used; reliability and validity of qualitative research and continuing with explanation of data collection procedures during conducting process in the study.

4.1. Research Approach

Several dimensions are important to take in consideration in defining unit of the study are the scope and characteristics of the approach. Ghauri and Gronhaug (2005) explain that research methods refer to systematically focus on obtaining information through orderly collection of data in order to solve or answer a particular research problem. The main difference between qualitative and quantitative research is not of “quality” but of procedure.

The deductive or quantitative approach emphasizes on statistical comparisons through testing and verification protocols in investigations such as surveys, interviews and case studies. The objective is “outsider view” distant from data resulted in hypothesis testing. The inductive or qualitative approach on the other hand “focus more on rich description of a phenomenon than on its quantification “uncover and understand a new phenomenon” in specific setting; and have common used in studies related to social and behavioural sciences (Weathington et al. 2010, 525-526).

In this case the research purpose is to understand a debated phenomenon and gain in-depth insight to students’ opinions which only can get through a qualitative study. It was essential to understand the applications and impact of branding phenomenon in higher education context. Hence, qualitative method will provide a dynamic in analyzing and a rich information outcome instead of a quantitative.

4.2. Reliability and validity of qualitative Research

To ensure the reliability in qualitative research “trustworthiness is crucial” and it requires “a degree of control and manipulation of phenomena” (Cohen, Manion and

Morrison 2007, 148). Poppe (2000 cited in Golafshani 2003) defines reliability is accurate performance of study results which are consistent over time within the specific population and its results can be reproduced under similar studying method.

Disregarded from the suggestion that term “understanding” is more suitable than “validity” in qualitative research; Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, 135) idealized “people’s perspectives are equally as valid” and the most important is the meanings of subjects- the reasons why need to process the research and outcomes withdrawn from the data but not the data or methods of research. The concept of validity of qualitative research can be stated as “a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects” (Winter 2000 cited in Golafshani 2003, 602).

The trustworthiness of this study bases on real life contextualization, authenticity, transferability, dependability, conformability. The study findings reflect honesty in-depth and meaningful data baseline to society or specific interest communities.

4.3. Data collection procedures

A semi standardized interview to maintain the specific content of the study but also flexible to open potential ability and recommendation. In this case, due to the complexity of the phenomenon, the researcher has chosen semi structures interviews to exploring the respondents’ perceptions which links the merging identity branding toward recruitments. Questioning techniques were employed either alternatively or collaterally which includes the use of open questions to allow participants to define and describe specific information in detail.

The selected respondents consist of alumni, students who is participating either exchange program or full-time degree. The criteria for the sample selection were that non Finnish students between ages 18 and 30, with the average age of 23.7.

Interviews were implemented personally, face to face or by phone with total 24 respondents.

Due to the physical distance and difficulty in arranging timetable for a face-to-face interview several interviews was conducted with the help of e-mail. The benefit of e-mail interviewing is seen as relevance including saving cost for travel, avoiding scheduling problem with participants; and increasing the quality of the responses (Bampton & Cowton, 2002), and provide more time and freedom to response. The respondents who have e-mail interviews also received extra 10 minutes in chat for extra explanations. The telephone interviews are lack of analyzing the body language and facial reactions. Thus the researcher must pay high concentrate level to the voice and words during the discussion. Using this type of method required well prepared questions as a map.

The interviews were conducted in English as the appropriated language used widespread in studying environment. The language used during the interview is not complex grammatical type but easy to understand to avoid error in interpreting information. The data has been collected separately in the study process within four months period since November 2010 to February 2011.

4.4. Thesis limitations

The research is based on gaining exploration of the subject through qualitative approach can be influenced by different authors perspectives due to the source of theoretical foundations of branding in higher education is seeing as in early stage of developing and constructing and lacking actual examination the elastic and validity of the concept. However, the success and growing trend of emerging marketing tools in higher education has proved its essentials and validity in exporting education countries for instance United States, United Kingdom, or Australia. In order to achieving the present success, these countries have made major efforts to construct appropriate brand strategy and policies regulations to tailor accordingly market's demand.

Besides, it is possible to make errors caused either from the interview environment or misinterpreting the interviewee's answers. To avoid these errors, the emotion and body language should be paid attention and requesting for additional explanations if necessary. During interviews, the interviewer kept neutral attitude, environment was

warm and welcoming. Considering the time frame of the thesis within four months investigating, sample size of selected students within background profile, it is difficult to generalize the results to the entire community. The age and size of universities in Finland is variable to compare. The program titles and the demand of labour market for each are relevant. Besides, issues concerning ethnicity and social class have been disregarded in the interview process.

5. FINDINGS ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings of the study. The data collected regarding the research questions, followed by an analysis and comparison with the theory on branding in education context.

5.1. Factors influencing final enrolment

Following two figures show the characteristics of the interview sample. Majority of respondents are from Asia 62%, from EU countries with 25% and 13% are from neighbourhood country Russia. . Ethnic background is important because it would lead to the differences in expectations and values perceived. Among total sample 54% of interviewed students attended the full degree programs while the rest had gone through Erasmus exchange programs. At the same time, as table 5 shows, at 62, 5% International Business and management programme is in top of the list in studying field, followed after is Business Information Technology. In other field, Media with 2 students (8, 33%) while there is only one respondent in each of the following fields: Tourism, Nursing, Communication and Administration (4, 17%).

Ethnic group of students

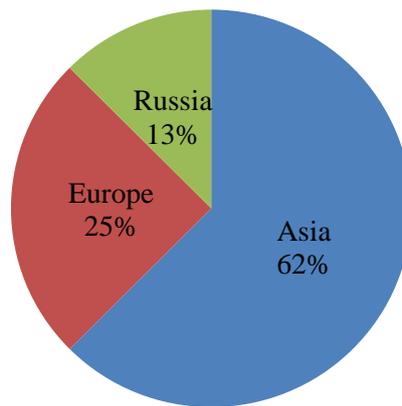


Figure 10 Ethnic group of total respondent

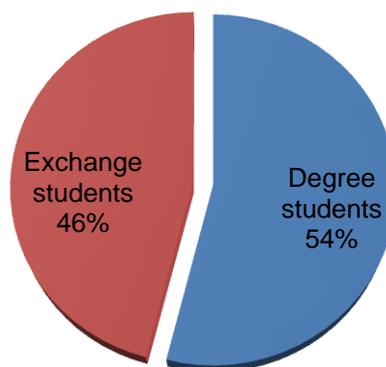


Figure 11 Full-time (degree) students versus exchange student

Table 5 Respondents' field of study

Field of study	Respondents	Percent (%)
Business Information Technology	4	16,67%
International Business, Management	15	62,5%
Tourism	1	4,17%
Media	2	8,33%
Nursing	1	4,17%
Communication & Administration	1	4,17%
Total	24	100%

The overall objectives and influencing factors to interviewees' final decision before applying to the program or higher education institution are summed up in figure 12. Most of the Asian responses who participated in full-time degrees see that overseas courses have better quality than local ones or career skills, languages skills obtained in Western cultures through international education are the main motivations.

The ease of accessing information and the credibility of the sources about the host country is seen as positive determining factor. The easier to find recommendation about the host country or awareness of surrounding environment; the more consideration students will give to that country. Due to the host country with a high international profile will provide better opportunities for students in the labour market after graduation.

Among the respondents who stress for their true ability in handling career techniques, language fluency, and dynamic changes in potential business working life; experience in working with European employers, or even chance for immigration by working contract after graduation is evaluated as crucial. These respondents tend to favour the reputation, image awareness, school ranking or a particular program which suite to them.

In the opposite, the starting point of exchange students who spent a short period from 6 months to one year in Finland can be described as no special expectation but only the compatible education standard which fit to studying program in home country, "convenient studying environment", "enjoy new culture", "having good time" in student life and "building social network". However, at the end of exchange period, most of the respondents express that the experience is over their expectations. Kindly lectures, efficiency small classes, helpful staffs, suitable counselling and scheduling tasks' performance are the list of satisfaction elements. Besides, the schedules of the activities and programmes were fond of due to the rich student life organizing allow foreign student discover the beauty in sightseeing, Finnish culture and local students' activities.

Personal background and cultural integration have a strong affect to students. If European students might favour Finland simply cause of *“favour of the climate”*, *“has link to home institution”* of the country or *“neighbourhood geographic location”*; Asian students see *“the safety”*, *“high technology”*, *“school reputation”*, *“good teachers”* extremely important. A students claim that *“the specific program I was looking for, were not yet available in home country, plus gaining self-independent in overseas students’ life is obviously a brick building to be successive”*. Two respondents, in other hand, declare that they are fond of the country where their qualifications are recognised.

Respect and trust toward personal recommendations from friends, family or professors from local well-known university without a doubt was highly recorded. In Asian background students that received majority the support from family and the characteristics of culture, the impact of parent was direct and more powerful than students from Russia or EU countries. The indirectly remarks from local academia agency in Asia and Russia which operates as individual enterprises was point out.

Besides, to some respondent the cost factor is crucial which included the living expenses, social costs, travel costs, possibility for casual job, and migration issues. Thus, *“being able to afford”* is rather a starting principle. Students who come from developing countries emphasis one of the reasons of choosing studying Finland were *“high quality European tertiary education standard with no tuition fees”*.

Online application procedure, information sources providing, response and bureaucracy of institutions were stated as smoothly, efficiency and easy of follow. The banking system is likewise, seen as *“trustable and not too complicated to confront”*. In the future context, for sustainable development of exporting education or introducing tuition payment to non-Finnish citizens, the educators must sort out the solution for payment method and cooperation with banking system.

The respondents who actively participate in school activities, contributing to department, students clubs feel proud of their achievements during studying time and desired being a piece of institutions. Others, in opposite, were seen with low level of satisfaction and sense of belongingness. The reasons can be addressed: *“lack*

of understanding and information sources from home country lead to insufficient decision”, disappointed and insecurity with new environment with less suburban and too quiet, or need of part-time job. A young respondent represented the belief “the tide is high” or “hard to achieve” might attract a lot of students’ application in particularly the ones wanted to challenge their personal development and efforts. One International Business student from Haaga-Helia University of applied sciences comments:

“It looks like the recruitment requirements from Haaga-Helia are more strict and demanding. It is not possible to take entrance exam abroad. Attendants are more selective and talented. If some acquainted person randomly met me, knowing that I’m studying International Business, they tend to have the same question in the first meeting: are you study in Haaga-Helia? For challenging, probably it’s the main motivation”

One unexpected and interesting motivation findings from an interviewee in second year in University of Vaasa; he said:

“I regard the excellent quality in the master degree in Intercultural Studies in Communication and Administration in University of Vaasa. And it will be my choice again because it is the only institution that offers this program without requiring three years working in field”.

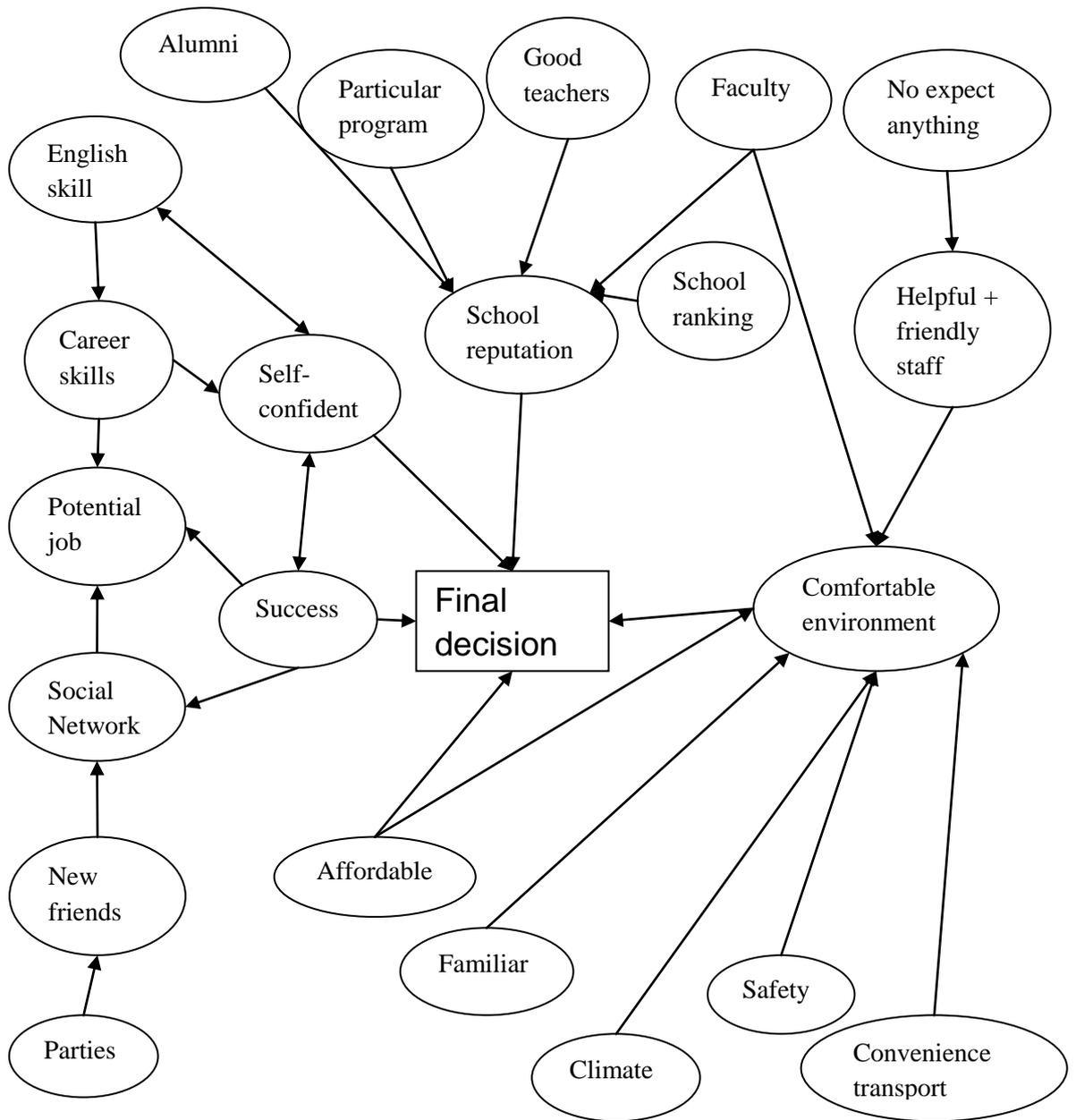


Figure 12 Major factors influence students' decision in choosing institution

5.2. Effects of emerging identity brand in recruitment

5.2.1. Identity image - Gap between theory and practices

As mention in the previous part, total respondents delighted that the image of Finland is “*safety*” country, “*high technology*” and “*high profile education system*”; especially the qualifications especially in engineering and IT programs were considered as well-recognized. The results indicate that there is no significant well-known reputation of a particular Finnish institution but overall Finnish HE quality standard image which has impact in the early stage of recognition in selecting overseas institution process.

The EU and Russian students have more direct access to information about the institution before making their final decision made, compared to Asian students. Many students asked the advice from family, friends and recommendations from personal relationships in surroundings. Most of Asian students receive financial support from their parents and family, these students only using the access to information in internet as extra material for preference. They make up their mind based on the trust first from local well-known institutions, private agencies, and parents’ contribution.

The list in table 6 is collection of logos and statements acknowledged from homepage of the respondents’ institutions. The list was used to compare the actual understanding of foreign students toward their institutions identity. The answers of students about their feeling of belonging to institutions will be tested by compared with the list to show how deep the connection of these brand promise might affect to foreign students’ opinions. The attitudes are either neutral, or a fan. 100% of respondents admitted having facebook profile and joined institution ‘community online. However, full degree students can describe more close about institution image than exchange students. This may explain by longer term of actively participated of degree students while exchange students tried to participate most of the activities but only lasted few months.

The comments about institutions' visual identification are positive in overall but it was also noted that there is uncertain of the actual differences in practices. The promise statement can perceive with strong emotions resulted from various marketing activities in the case of International Business Programmer in Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences even though "mature demand from industry". The engineering and IT degree in opposite receive highly satisfaction not only about career skills but mainly about future opportunities in labour market.

Table 6 List of logos and statement from institutions

Sources: collected from homepage of institutions

Name of institution	LOGO	Statements in brand identified
Arcada University of Applied Sciences		<p>"Live, learn, university of Applied Life" "Make the most of your valuable student years", "prepare for working life in a safe and friendly environment", "parallel programs maximize the learning experience", "take your profession to a new level"</p>
Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences		<p>" We want you", "an environmentally responsible Haaga-Helia", "the new Porvoo campus represents the latest in eco-technology", "Responsible Haaga-Helia project"</p>
Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences		<p>"Achievers of success- come and join us!", "Play your cards right", "Our strengths are a multidisciplinary nature, stable and diversified expertise and extensive cooperation networks", "come and</p>

		study!”, “Bring us your individuals, teams – or the whole company!”, “KyAMK- right on target!”
Laurea University of Applied Sciences	 The logo for Laurea University of Applied Sciences features a stylized blue bird-like shape on the left and the text 'LAUREA UNIVERSITY OF APPLIED SCIENCES' in blue on the right.	“New competence to the changing and internationalizing working life”, “ From Laurea you will graduate as future expert”, “From Laurea you will get the best employment opportunities”, “Laurea Library- Creating Passion For Knowledge”
Metropolia University of Applied Sciences	 The logo for Metropolia Helsinki University of Applied Sciences features a stylized orange 'M' on the left and the text 'Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences' in white on a black background.	“We’re ready for the future. Thank you Metropolia!”, “Expertise and insight for the future”, “Expertise- our passion, High quality- our target, Community spirit- our source of strength, Transparency- our operating policy”, “High-quality results with consistent ways of working- the Metropolia way”
University of Vaasa	 The logo for the University of Vaasa features a stylized figure holding a torch on the left and the text 'UNIVERSITY of VAASA' in black on the right.	“International and Innovative”, “The university of Vaasa is an internationally and nationally successful, efficiently networked multidisciplinary, business-oriented university”, “development of the individual, sense of community, the success of society”

5.2.2. Critical factors in integrated communication

Internal support is very important factor to most of respondents. The hardest part when arriving to a new country was getting friends and being able to catch up the study. Counselling and orientation support are mentioned as initial and major fundamental to meet students' need.

To overcome the very first "culture shock" Asian respondents point out the best method is seeking advice from local students and interact with lectures and senior students. One respondent from Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences remembered:

"The most fear in my first thought was being lonely in the new country. Everything was a little strange and confusing but in general, people are friendly and helpful. I still remembered, my counsellor and other staff working in university were helping me very much in choosing the right classes, enrolment for courses, maps and even the bus route or where to lend a bike "...

Indicated from present respondents, word-of-mouth and mass media advertising are the most affective channels to access to respondents at this moment. Students were encouraged to join the university alumni, small communities in Facebook, Twitter, and different discussion blogs. Several Finnish Higher Institutions have aware of the advantage from social media networks and start to take their first steps to explore the power of social media tool in their marketing strategy. Most of respondents spend at least 3 to 10 hours per week in social platforms, contributing in different blogs and being fan of their institution's communities in online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn or VKontakte (a Russian popular social media network). The attitude of respondents towards the statements is positive in overall and vary depend on the studying field.

People feel more open to ask the matter from senior students who have passed similar encounters before. Thus, social media networks were defined as potential channels to attract the overseas audience who are seeking studying abroad

programmers. Finding advice from a large population community, the potential students can achieve rich sources of information from many individuals and at the same time, create the social network even before arriving to the country. In brief, using social media can both provide empowerment factors and word-of-mouth effect. Nevertheless, the relevance of its impact toward recruitment selection in large scale is not examined yet. But there is a fact to prove the advantage of its usage is the increasing quantity of students joining to the network who can recall the brand image of the institution.

In the research outcomes, recognition from alumni performances, coordination of institution networking and community relations are list as secondary influencing factors in mapping brand identity for institution. One student who has changed from previous institution to Haaga-Helia with reason *“having diploma from universities of applied science in metropolitan district with more exciting life”* and in addition:

“The institution also has the strong alumni network and link with famous university in London, UK. My intension is applying for one year exchange program in English education next year.”

The effect of merging identical image to institution through marketing activities has more impact to degree students than short-term period students. While some of degree respondents suggested *“creating more intangible value to school’s image”*, *“emphases the small class benefits and feel free to express your opinion in studying atmosphere”*, *“It might stay with some personality”*; other hands, one Germany exchange student remarks:

“Finish education can also communicate the superiority to other famous education system such as the UK. The UK and the States have excellent and world famous research shaping their image and attracting students. But in reality this research does not tickle down to the student and has zero or sometimes even a negative effect on teaching. In the face of the current budget cuts, foreign students are more and more "cash cows" and are treated accordingly. I think in Finland this is not the case yet”

5.3. Recommendation for development

The Asian respondents expressed welcoming attitudes to exporting higher education or implement tuition fee provision to foreigner in Finland. However, the scholarships, internships as *“knowledge is not only what you learn from book, it must be useful in real working life”*; the institute should not only gaze at problem but take actions beyond. Among respondents who got introducing about the institutions from host country, one student suggested about change for co-branding possibility. There is still large demand in Asian countries where not so many middle income families can afford for tuition fee and expenses.

In Finland even in undergraduate degree, there is no tuition fee charge to foreign student yet, but the living expense critical to the pocket money to foreign students especially one from developing countries. The possibility of getting a part time job is tight. In the future, if Finland wants to exporting education with tuition fees it is recommended to enact a new model which is combination of study loan with suitable repayment model, scholarships and internships offer. The rewards are positive and attractive destination image and a rich source of skilful workers.

Resident requirements, undoubtedly, are a hidden layer of spectacles in term of potential students. The chance of studying can be denied or inconvenient, serious position caused by various troubles coming from the legal, political and financial. One individual who wished to seek employment after graduation, claimed: *“One year permission for stay up searching for suitable position in labour force has been introduced in several countries. Why it is not in Finland?”*

In a related case, respondent claimed that *“in Helsinki region, residence permission waiting period is 6 months while every year students must reapply the new visa. Meanwhile the visa processing time in Kotka region is within 2 weeks and in Espoo are less than a week”*. Definitely, regulations between municipals to foreign students’ residence permission should be generated in reasonable and fair circumstance. The high queuing number of applications in metropolitan areas

especially in Helsinki is obviously hard to solve in shorter time, but it is a must in longer run. The municipals and government role is absolutely necessary.

In the contribution of the effective method to be able to reach and communicate, responses with Asian background emphasised that:

“Traditional advertising in print such as in posters, brochures, newspaper, magazines remain strong impact (especially to parents, family) while online advertising influence direct to students”

“Engage and enrich alumni population” was evoked by majority of respondents due to trust can be built easier upon on personal relationships. The need for agencies or co-branding universities is strongly recommended. There are two main reasons for hiring agency instead of operating in-house: the outsider has objective attitudes in analyzing market situation; it is easier for local people to understand and monitor the best suitable method to communicate with each other. Hiring agency is important element in overseas recruitment especially in Asian countries.

Email or newsletters are often used to inform the stakeholders and students of institution news, events or exchange information. Participating in event marketing, exhibitions, high education fairs, conference, 3 rd party events, so on for instance project “protect Baltic Sea” create positive image of the institution as” responsibility to society and environmental friendly”.

Access to lecture and support materials are increasingly available online in Moodle and Virtual courses. Most of degree students are fond of online courses or virtual courses however; they claim that “the curriculum may change with visible of more virtual courses or online courses”, in addition, there are not so many options yet in the courses module and the quality standard between courses are vary. Thus, more specific development of standardization of courses and widen its boundaries will promise lifelong learning environment.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1. Summary evaluation

Initially, I hesitate and confuse a lot while writing this research paper as of course the complexity of the new phenomenon in pioneer stage not mentioned to the challenging task in interpreting individual cross-cultural international students attitudes. However, advantage from researcher position-as international business student, is mainly in guiding interviewee to express openly and deeper explanatory beyond the concept; likewise, the data analysis procedures base strictly upon the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability to decrease researcher's personal bias.

Unfortunately, at this point of this studying, data was collected in small scale with twenty four attendants from six different higher education institutions. Majority of the sample is International Business and Management programmes (62, 5%). So that, the similarity and no significant difference in education quality standard can refer to international business field but vary in other field depend on each field.

Needless to say, the role of leadership is crucial in targeting brand strategy. The dean or president must have visionary view of market changed environment, as well as empowering enthusiasms from internal staffs, stakeholders, external sponsors and other parties in communities. With regard to the culture and ethnic issues, creating value added in merging brand identity in educational framework is proposed arguments both for the advantage and disadvantages. Broadly, the focusing point for institutions to profile themselves involved four elements:

- A clear vision of management strategy
- Engagement of students and internal staffs
- A consistent brand promise
- A strong, widespread social networking

Last but not least, the responses expressed variety the reasons and empowerment factors of applying Finnish higher education institutions ranging from the personal

recommendations; trustable information online and printing sources as well as awareness from promotion activities such as exhibitions, events or associations network; moreover, through online framework of application procedures to internal support from specific institutions about living and studying information relevance before departure. The identical image of Finnish higher education at this moment is shaping as “friendly, safe and high technology destination”. However, for future development especially in promoting exporting education alternative, Finnish government could pay attention more the direction of how to enact the change in regulations especially in study loan and internship offers, student resident permission bureaucracy still vary between municipals, opportunities seeking job after graduation.

6.2. Suggestion for further research

The international higher education research field is dynamic so in time, changes in various aspects of provisions and deregulations can affect to result of this report. The literature grounding which is still in early stage of development, the actual validity of testing this concepts in large scale can possible lead to different outcomes. There are still a number of concepts associated with branding concept remain un-explored in higher education sector. For example, analyzing lessons learned from the joint themes and strategic implementations of cooperating network between institutions and regional organization. Obviously, evaluating the quality and content of the merging for raising the understanding level in brand management and communication tools in strategic target is vital task.

Furthermore, different administration units have individual objectives, organization culture, strengths and challenges. More research which emphasis separately each institutions based on marketing mix, identical image, promotion activities; comparing between mission drawn upon from the leaders, managers and the gap in practices with students’ expectations. In research method, the alternative of using the mix-method research with data collection in national level is highly recommended to analyzing how to shape a solid quality estimate overall Finnish higher education as a unit and at the same time and testing the hypothesis between variables. Among various issues, the social responsibilities, ethic perceptions, moral philosophy particularly in internal branding needed more empirical examination.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1- INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Short introduction in the research

Could you introduce about yourself? What is your degree title? Your school name?

Strategic questions

- 1) What is the main objectives when you planning for overseas studying? Could you list main factors that influence to your decision in applying to this university? And why Finland?
- 2) From whom or which channel you get information about the university/degree?
- 3) Which information sources you consider as the best method to reach you? Explain why?
- 4) What do you think about the concept branding identity in higher education in general and in your institution context? Support, against or neutral? Why?
- 5) Do you think your institutions/program selected is distinguishing within the field?
- 6) Are you proud or fond of being a member in the institution/ program?
- 7) What is your expectation before applying for a degree and how it resulted in reality? Do you satisfy? The gap between them?
- 8) Can you suggest how to improve the image of institutions in Finnish Higher Education? What information needs to know more about? How to do it?

Finnish

Do you have anything need to add or remark? Would you recommend your friends or people you know about your university/ this program in the future?

APPENDIX 2- RESPONDENT SELECTION

	Interviewee's Origin Country	Interviewee's Institution	Interviewee's Programme	Type of contact
4 students	Viet Nam, India, China, Germany	Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences	Business Information Technology, Tourism, International Business	Phone interview, face-to face interview, email
12 students	China, Viet Nam, Bulgaria, Russia, Germany, Indonesia, Spain, Austria, Netherland	Kymenlaakso University of Applied Sciences	International Business	phone interviews, e- mails, face to face interviews
2 students	Viet Nam, China	Metropolia	Information Technology, Media Engineering	face to face interview, phone interview
3 students	Viet Nam, Korea	Laurea	Business Management, Business Information Technology	e-mail, phone interview
2 student	Bangladesh, Russia	Arcada	Media Management, Bachelor in Nursing	e-mail
1 student	Japan	Vaasa University	Intercultural Studies in Communication and Administration	face to face interview