



## **STRENGTHENING THE BRAND OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN ETHIOPIA**

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### **Introduction**

The higher education landscape is undergoing significant change in the last few years in Ethiopia as a result of technological innovations and wide spread of information, while the conventional setting of the lecture hall will continue to form the bedrock of higher education systems, it will be enhanced by the integration of new tools and pedagogies, and it will be complemented by many more learning opportunities and a greater variety of providers in higher education. These approaches to education are already having a clear and positive impact on higher education in enhancing the quality and extend the reach of higher education across Ethiopia but however, there is enormous potential for widening access to higher education and increasing the diversity of the student population as the flexibility is essential for non-traditional learners and will enable a shift change in the engagement of higher education institutions in lifelong learning and continuing professional development, may provide an important tool to governments in ensuring a diversity of provision within higher education systems to meet the needs of all learners provided a particular brand to the higher education institutions in Ethiopia as to reach the global world

There remains a culture of conservatism within Ethiopian higher education which needs to change, demands strong leadership and vision from both public authorities and institutional

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leaders. While a broad range of good practice is already emerging across Ethiopia, this is happening to a large degree in an uncoordinated bottom-up approach. It is now time for governments and institutions to develop comprehensive strategies at both the national and institutional level for the adoption of new modes of learning and teaching within higher education. Governments need to decide on the mix of provision necessary across the system to meet the needs of all learners, and they must identify the support needed to deliver this. Above all, to respond to the concerns of the growing number of people involved – deans, university presidents, professors, directors of organizations. As it stands, most of them are already aware of the absolute necessity for branding. They know their institutions can no longer remain sequestered in ivory towers, separate from society, enveloped in a purely academic mindset – as they have so long been. They all understand that the best thing to do is publicize the uniqueness and strengths of their institutions. Whether it is to attract students (particularly from abroad), to recruit professors, to collaborate with companies, to raise funds, to mobilize alumni, or even to attract the attention of the general public... There is a simple reason for this: higher education has entered the era of competition. And the playing field can be local, national, or international. Everywhere, branding is necessary if a university wants to stay in the race, to stand out, to be visible and regarded positively. Academic excellence alone is no longer enough: one also needs to "get the message out." This means implementing an effective, professional brand.

### **Branding Higher Education Institutions**

A brand is a living system, not something virtual. In a competitive, globalized environment building one's brand identity is a strategic asset for a university. The brand relies on the university's concrete products and services, which must have the best possible visibility. The recognition of professors, student selectivity, recruiter satisfaction and the success of graduates, the brand must be able to meet everyone's aspirations. Attracting attention, arousing interest or curiosity, creating buzz, being a topic of conversation, crafting an image, and reinforcing status. All of this is essential in the increasingly competitive higher educational environment. And it all involves having an active communications policy that is applied internally as well as externally. But how does one undertake such a task? Where to begin? On which issues should a stand be taken? This paper is not intended to be a step-by-step guide, but rather to highlight certain key elements and necessary stages, which we have gathered from experience and discussions.

***First, a rule of thumb:*** in higher education, as in other sectors, the worst thing one can do is have a catch-as-catch-can approach. Nothing is more counterproductive than throwing together an image in two weeks; only to change it six months later instead a university that wants to strengthen its communications must focus its approach on the long term. The first step towards effective communications is not just to throw everything at the problem, but to take the time to reflect, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the institution, its main characteristics, its centers of excellence and its rate of development, to analyze, in detail, its positioning and what distinguishes it from the competition. In other words, everything that makes it stand out. Only by embarking on such a voyage of self-discovery and introspection can one devise a strategy and define a communications policy that corresponds with one's strategy.

## **1. The Fundamentals**

For the rest, the basic, essential principles for communications can be applied as easily to a university, Here, there are few ground rules we can follow:

***Think Long Term-***Change is slow to come about in communications. To craft an image one needs time, more time, patience and repetition, for this reason it is best to be sure of the strategy, and to avoid constantly changing course. If changes are required, it is best to do so gradually, rather than suddenly.

***Stress strengths*** -It is even more important to have clearly identified them – and to know if they will add lasting value. There is no point in communicating about an attribute that is of no interest, or one that the competition also has. In order to avoid this, one should have a system for monitoring the competition, perform regular benchmark assessments and analyze social trends... as well as student expectations.

***Offer Something Meaningful-***One must try, both beyond the institution and within it, to offer a compelling programme that emphasizes values. This reinforces the attractiveness of the institution in the eyes of potential students and stimulates internal cohesion (among professors, students, and all personnel).

## 2. Refining One's Image

Beyond the fundamentals, there are many ways for a university or school to rise on the national or international stage.

***Focus on the difference*** - What makes the university unique? What does it do more of, or better than the competition? Indeed, the best case scenario is having something to offer that no one else has. Although for many institutions, strangely, the goal is to imitate others. Conforming, like "good students," rather than strongly asserting their own personalities. Everything that expresses and emphasizes the difference, uniqueness, originality of the institution can be capitalized on: specialization in a discipline in which the competition is weak, placing the accent on one kind of programme or another, a prestigious partnership, innovative collaborations, teaching methods, programme organization, these are all opportunities to stand out from the crowd.

***Innovate*** - Using new technologies is an excellent option for communications, especially to reach students.

***Be dynamic***-Organizing regular events and publicizing various projects and announcements can make an institution seem active and dynamic, which will also be perceived in a positive light.

***Be sympathetic***- An institution can go out of its way to show that it is responsible (environmentally, for example), supportive (of developing countries, or disadvantaged students, for example), and sincere.

***Strive for excellence*** -In the academic world, a reputation for academic excellence is obviously a considerable advantage. But this is not an option for all institutions, another negative: quality is not immediately evident.

## 3. Brand Building

With the increase in competition, the concept of branding has worked its way into higher education. Today, there are many who accept that brand logic can inform the management, administration, and direction of a university. So what is a brand, really? It's a set of features of an organization, symbolized by a name which, if deftly managed, creates value and influence. Some

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of these attributes are easily identifiable: the name, logo, graphic style, and color, in other words, everything that is part of the visual identity and that is instantly recognized by the public.

But all of this is only the visible part of the iceberg that is a brand. A brand is also built on concrete characteristics: product (or programme) offering, price, market positioning relative to the competition, promotion policy, add to this a selection of intangible elements, such as status, attractiveness, perceived quality, emotional attachment and loyalty, reputation, image in the eyes of the audience, which may be large or small. All of these things combined – external expression + market positioning + image – are what constitutes a brand and can fuel a kind of positive spiral for a company – or an institution. A strong brand will attract more clients (or students) and will even make it possible to raise prices (or tuition). It is, therefore, an important competitive advantage. Clearly many of the basic ingredients of a brand, in one way or another, are already present in an institution of higher education. It is also clear that the fundamentals of brand management are the same in the academic world as they are in the world of consumer goods. But there are also very real differences between the two.

### **Higher Education: Another World**

First of all, higher education is about service, rather than production. Universities deal in the intangible. Measuring quality, evaluation, performance, is much more complex and subtle. And the price paid by the "consumer" – the tuition – often has little to do with the actual cost, this is not only because of the scholarship system, but also because it is difficult to establish an actual cost. Not to mention that profitability is not a priority, even though, as far as that is concerned, there are exceptions. Even the "client" concept is more complicated. Students are, in some ways, a university's clients, Therefore, although brand logic can be applied to higher education, it is nonetheless important to keep these differences in mind. Marketing a university is both more delicate and more complex than marketing consumer goods.

Looking at it in this way, how does an institution create a brand in the world of higher education? How is it launched? There are a few things worth emphasizing.

- I. A brand doesn't announce its own presence. This is even truer for higher education than other sectors. It requires **patient and rigorous effort**. Timing can be a decisive factor. The brand image of a university, on the other hand, can be quickly damaged due to a

crisis or miscommunication. A mediocre ranking, for example, is not catastrophic, but a series of low rankings can do long-term damage to the image.

- II. As in any service industry, it is very important to **keep promises**, particularly when it comes to the quality of the education provided. A brand image that is clear and regularly reinforced through communications is not enough. An institution must also have a set-up conducive to maintaining and improving quality.
- III. A school must also **demonstrate** that it is making progress. A task made more difficult because students are not an easy population to persuade. They don't buy lip service. The institution's communications must constantly be underpinned by facts, data, and irrefutable evidence: rankings, accreditations, applicant data (number and quality), recruitment of professors, placement of graduates, and agreements with prestigious partners, basically anything that demonstrates the quality, as the excellence of the institution helps craft and strengthens its brand.
- IV. It is essential to **ensure consistency** among positioning, identity, strategy, stated goals, communications... All of these must be in line; all must work in concert to promote the same image.
- V. It is also important to carefully monitor the consistency not only of the messages expressed by the communications department, but also those of the professors, students, governing authorities... They must all **speak with the same voice**.
- VI. There are many ways, some more ambitious than others, to contribute to the growth of a brand. Here are three:
  - a. Mobilizing the **alumni network**, for example, is feasible and not difficult. The alumni of a college or university are its best ambassadors. And better yet, they are volunteers. Although in some cases they are paid, since many of them participate in fundraising campaigns.
  - b. On another level, **merchandising** helps promote the brand. In this area, the possibilities are endless: clothing, t-shirts, pens, watches, bottles, various gadgets, even furniture – armchairs bearing the symbol of universities are very popular. The added bonus is that this merchandise generates income for the institution. Possessing these items creates an emotional tie to the school and generates recognition.

- c. Finally, **event organization** is a good way to mobilize the school or university community and strengthen the brand. There are plenty of opportunities: announcing an important agreement, launching a new programme, organizing a conference, gala, or forum for students and businesses, celebrating an anniversary, planning a graduation ceremony... The goal is to attract attention, preferably at regular intervals, to foster team spirit, and to create buzz.

## **Conclusion**

Of course, the quality of teaching and research, the creation of knowledge and academic excellence remain the primary concerns of universities. It is their "core mission." But it is no longer enough. With international competition, institutions that want to "get ahead" must find funding, come up with a strategy and implement an appropriate communications plan. And these three essential elements are and will continue to be, increasingly intertwined. If they fail to address these issues, they risk falling off the map. However, communicating effectively is impossible without adequate means – including financial means. Nor is it possible to succeed without establishing clear priorities and objectives, or without taking a professional approach. So when it comes to communications, universities face a dual challenge. They must work towards operating on a larger scale and at the same time, come up with a new model. In truth, higher education is entering the era of global competition. Global, because its scope now extends to the entire planet. It has to speak to students (and businesses) all over the world. And competition among institutions is now the norm on all five continents. Global, too, because it operates in multiple dimensions: brand strategies, corporate and informal communications, buzz marketing. To cover all this ground, it must use an increasingly wide range of channels and tools, and Internet has increased the number of possible options. Finally, it is global because it must mobilize all the stakeholders in every institution. Communications departments and managers, of course, but also students, professors, alumni and business partners.

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