The Importance of Scottish Universities’ Reputation
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Abstract
Universities must manage their reputations wisely to compete and survive amidst worldwide growth of higher education institutions. While universities understand the value of a good reputation, they vary in their use of public relations (PR) and other promotional techniques. Qualitative interviews with six Scottish universities on how they managed their reputations suggest that compared to older universities, newer universities build brands through advertising rather than PR, and concentrate less on promoting research and quality programmes. In contrast, older universities enhance or maintain their reputations through media coverage and good relations with stakeholders and public.

Keywords: university, reputation, public relations, advertising, Scottish

Introduction
Higher education institutions are rife and growing worldwide; the United States alone has over three thousand such institutions (Henderson, 2001). In Asia, Malaysia’s public universities nearly tripled from seven in the 1980s to 20 in 2007, in addition to its 18 private universities (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2007). There is similar European growth, such as in Poland and the United Kingdom (UK). Polish university students more than doubled from 1990 to 2002, with 250 additional private universities in Poland (Kolasinski, Kulig and Lisiecki, 2003). UK universities from the 1980s to 1990s, more than tripled from 40 to 128 universities (Jobbins, 2003).

Scottish universities grew from eight to 14 in the last thirty years and higher education accounts for about one in 33 Scottish jobs (Universities Scotland, 2007). However England’s introduction of top-up tuition fees, which let English universities charge up to £3,000 annually starting in 2006 as opposed to £1,125, will affect Scottish higher education. Top up fees could increase English universities’ income by £1.4 billion annually (Christie, 2003) and the universities plan to spend this extra income on staff, student bursaries and capital expenditures such as research (Kelly, 2003). These activities, in turn, may lure students away from Scottish and towards English universities.

To compete with other universities, especially the English, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which disseminates government funds to Higher Education Institutions(HEIs) outlined 2006-2009 objectives including enhancing international reputation for quality learning and research. To support this, £1 billion has been allocated to the HEIs in 2007/08 academic year (Scottish Funding Council, 2007). In addition, Scottish universities could charge £1,700 annually for most courses (Anonymous, 2006). However even with these measures, two Scottish universities announced plans to cut jobs to increase income (Anonymous, 2007a; Anonymous, 2007b). It is crucial that Scottish universities manage their reputation as their income, even with the new changes, might not be enough.

This paper reviews higher education in Scotland, particularly the importance of reputation management. Then the results of six qualitative interviews show how Scottish university
public relation officials differ concerning their universities’ reputation and managing that reputation. The paper closes with conclusions and directions for future research.

**Literature Review**

**Higher Education in Scotland**

Scotland’s 14 universities began in three eras. The four ancient universities of St Andrews, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh stemmed from the 15th and 16th centuries. The second era in the 1960s saw four universities – Strathclyde, Heriot-Watt, Dundee and Stirling – achieve university status. The current era began in the early 1990s with five universities – Napier, Paisley, Robert Gordon, Glasgow Caledonian and Abertay – followed by Queen Margaret University receiving university status in January 2007.

With more universities globally and English universities’ ability to access top-up fees, Scottish universities need to, together with other strategies, manage their reputation. English universities’ increased income from top up fees may lead to perceptions of better HEIs in England than in Scotland, as English HEIs could fund better facilities and brains (Scottish Executive, 2004). However with the SFC’s plans, the universities can compete with others and contribute to future well-being of Scotland (Scottish Funding Council, 2006). Yet a perception, right or wrong, of higher quality English universities could decrease enrolments in Scottish universities. To address this perception and growing competition, each university must battle for “students and research income, whether this is derived from the funding councils, local authority tuition fees, private industry and other public sector agencies, or from students themselves” (Ford et al., 1996, p. 11). Consequently, university marketing activities have increased, such as advertising. A survey of British universities’ advertising to potential undergraduate students found although older universities advertised less than their younger counterparts, advertising has increased since the younger universities formed in 1992 (Campbell, 1998).

The reasons students choose a particular university varies. In the United States, student choices stemmed mainly from a university’s academic reputation (Larsen, 2003). In Australia, the main criterion was a course students wanted, followed by academic reputation (Soutar and Turner, 2002). Last century, the key reason for choosing a UK university was course suitability (Hooley and Lynch, 1981). A later UK study showed almost two-thirds of the student sample preferred older universities as these universities seemed superior in reputation, prestige and staff (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998).

Reliance on prestige and age might change this century with more UK universities and subsequently, students relying on annual rankings by leading newspapers such as The Times (Anonymous, 2007c). Although these rankings might have little effect on student choices, as university quality and reputation are more important (Eccles, 2002), the rankings could affect perceptions of university quality and reputation eventually. For example, the rankings consider teacher-student ratios as a measure of quality.

The World University Rankings by The Times Higher Education Supplement draws half its score from peer and recruiter reviews. In 2006, only four Scottish universities, the ancient universities, made the top 200 (O’Leary, Quacquarelli and Ince, 2006). Age may relate to this measure and work against new universities, as the older universities are better known.
Another reason buttressing the Ancients’ high ratings could be they have more alumni and some reviewers might rate their alma maters (Larsen, 2003).

**Reputation Management**

Scottish universities, particularly the newer universities, must address perceptions of lower quality and reputation. This task normally falls on the shoulders of university’s public relations (PR) department; managing reputation is part of PR. A third (the highest number) of Fortune 500 company PR practitioners said reputation management was the most important role of corporate communication in their organisation (Hutton et al., 2001).

Furthermore, the relationship between public relations and marketing is changing. Davis (2003, p. 100) argued, “marketing is solely concerned with customers (external publics), whereas PR is about creating the most favourable overall conditions for the organization (external and internal publics).” Kitchen (1997), however, contended that both should work with rather than against the other. Much promotion is often via advertising, while PR often uses publicity. Advertising can control the delivery of the message, whereas there is uncertainty when using the media for PR. The message may come out right, wrong, or not at all; the media control the message. As the message source is important to persuade the audience and organisations cannot control which media source delivers the information, organisations often align the information to the source through targeted advertisements, press releases and interviews with the selected media source (Ruth and York, 2004).

Investigating the public relations practices of Scottish universities should shed light on whether the universities focus on media relations or advertising in managing their reputations, particularly how the older and younger differ in their approaches.

**Methodology**

Many studies of university PR are qualitative, in-depth case studies of a university’s practices (Hasseltine, 2002; Kolasinski, Kulig and Lisiecki, 2003). Qualitative studies of university PR also use interviews to unearth in depth views on particular issues (Hall, 2002; Larsen, 2003). General perceptions of university PR are usually the result of quantitative methods, such as questionnaires (Bakewell and Gibson-Sweet, 1998; Soutar and Turner, 2002). Qualitative interviews, which this study used, combine quantitative and qualitative elements in order to investigate the views and practice of multiple university PR professionals.

There are strengths and weaknesses of interviewing (Creswell, 1999). Once the interview starts, interviewees cannot back out as easily as throwing out a questionnaire. Secondly, unlike questionnaires, interviews are more informative and detailed because interviewees can elaborate on answers. Finally, interviewees can share publications or information that would remain hidden with other research methods. A key weakness is the interviewee might filter the information, consciously or unconsciously, to favour their university. In addition, this study had six participants and could not show statistical proof on particular issues. Lastly, as interviewees cannot be anonymous, they might censor their personal views associated with their respective universities.

Six interviews, from 30 minutes to one hour, with the heads of six PR offices ran from late May to mid June 2004. Using two universities from each category – ancient, 1960s and new – helps reflect the views of all Scottish universities. Follow up e-mails helped clarify issues.
Results and Discussions

Two new and a 1960s university seemed particularly conscious of their reputation and brand, having conducted formal research of public perceptions this century. All three universities were pleased with the results. The other three universities, two ancient and one 1960s, conducted no formal research regarding their reputations, and gave what they thought were images associated with their universities. Table 1 lists the associations linked to the universities and plans to enhance the universities’ reputations.

Table 1: University Images and Reputation Enhancement Plans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Images</th>
<th>Plans to enhance or maintain reputation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ancient University 1</td>
<td>(No research conducted)</td>
<td>▪ Further promote quality teaching and research using one corporate image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ancient University 2</td>
<td>(No research conducted)</td>
<td>▪ Promote research and programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Excellent historical reputation</td>
<td>▪ Want associations with: Relevant, Forward Thinking, Dynamic, Cutting-edge research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s University 1</td>
<td>(Informal feedback)</td>
<td>▪ Communicate effectively about academic quality, safe campus environment and research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Serious university and good research</td>
<td>▪ Want association with: Innovation and excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Slightly radical and relevant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Good Sports programme (niche)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s University 2</td>
<td>(Result of market research)</td>
<td>▪ Increase public’s awareness of the university through research and programmes’ promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Specialist university</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Niche university</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New University 1</td>
<td>(Result of market research)</td>
<td>▪ Promote two images in brand refinement exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Seen as a 1960s university</td>
<td>1. ‘Sunday Best’: Culture, Heritage, Tradition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. ‘Jeans and t-shirt’: Modern, Innovative, Dynamic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New University 2</td>
<td>(Result of market research)</td>
<td>▪ Run advertising campaigns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Transformer and Flexible</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ Accessible and Relevant</td>
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The ancient and 1960s universities promoted teaching and research via their cutting-edge, innovative research projects and high quality programmes. The new universities, however, sought a flexible, modern and accessible public image. New University 1 wanted two images – ‘Jeans and t-shirts’ to portray a young, informal and dynamic university and ‘Sunday best’ to show its collegiate heritage from the 19th century. Their advertising and PR aligned the image with the different publics, for instance the images for younger potential students was the ‘Jeans and t-shirts’ image, while ‘Sunday best’ was for the older generation, alumni and corporate publications. This university seemed proud that even though it was new, people associated them with the 1960s universities. According to New University 1, a leading Scottish newspaper featured the university among the 1960s and not the new universities.

Market research by the 1960s University 2 suggested some high school students avoided the ancient universities due to their perception as too academic and irrelevant. For example, “…you could do Spanish language at (Ancient University 2), but you are translating 16th century Spanish poetry or something, while at (this 1960s University) we’re learning Spanish by translating a newspaper … which is more relevant, and… (at) the new universities, you’ll be learning holiday Spanish.” This university felt confident in its position as “the best of both worlds … strong academic grounding … but not buried in 1600s poetry … we can have conversations and chat but not as loud as the perceived degree from (the new universities).”
The university was against advertising just for the sake of advertising, but wanted to let people know what programmes it had and how much it had invested in research, rather than have “a sign on the bus that says: Come and get your degree from (this 1960s University).”

All six PR offices listed media relations as a job function, however the two new universities wanted more synergy between PR and advertising. They stationed both marketing and media relations in one office, suggesting both new universities might rely more on advertising and less on media to improve their images. Another telling sign about preferences was that all universities except the two new universities considered the media as a top three target audience, alongside staff, current and potential students, politicians, alumni, and businesses.

Media management was more structured in the ancient universities. They each had three media officers, designated to proactively write about programmes and innovations in their colleges. The 1960s universities’ had only one media person that sent press releases, but had to cater for the entire university. The new universities had two media officers each, but there were more staff – from three to five people – designated for advertising than for media. Only new universities advertised, with one new university advertising around Edinburgh city, handing leaflets at train stations and printing sandwich bags for some city shops. The other new university used direct mailing to prospective students. All these promotional activities were mainly to compete with other universities.

Another area where they competed was fundraising and development activities. All universities actively sought funds to help survive, retain and gain quality students and staff, particularly in the long run against the English top-up fees. Their abilities to raise funds could be linked to their reputations as the images of the universities seen by potential donors, as well as the direct communication between the two parties, could determine the amounts of funds raised.

**Conclusion**

The newer universities differentiated themselves by brand building rather than promoting research and quality programmes. The newer universities resorted to advertising more than PR to build favourable reputations. The older universities enhanced and maintained their reputations by media coverage and good relations with stakeholders and publics. One concern was that the older universities – both ancients and one 1960s - did not know exactly what people associated their universities with, and hence which aspects of their reputations needed enhancement or maintenance. Formal research could unearth this information. All universities should also research their local, national and international images in order to strengthen their reputation as stated in the SFC’s 2006-2009 Corporate Plan.

This research only takes the universities’ perspectives. How the universities’ publics respond to university efforts to enhance their reputation merits exploration. How have university PR and advertising efforts enhanced their image? Future research should look at PR and advertising efforts of the selected universities. Studies should also gauge how publicity, advertising, or reputation influences students’ choices. Another study could examine the practice of PR in Scotland after five to ten years, to see how they fare, especially after the introduction of the top-up fees in England. A final study could test the prediction of a director from a new university – in the short term, students will come to Scotland, but in the long term, staff and students would go to English universities, if the Scottish universities were unable to get extra funding from the Scottish Executive and other sources.
Bibliography


