
Branding higher education institutions: challenges and potential strategies

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Abstract: This study is based on the general review of the challenges faced by HEIs during the branding process and further recommends suitable strategies for branding universities. The most prominent challenges facing the HEIs to brand themselves are their inability to create the brand identity, difficulties in communicating the brand through appropriate brand-building activities, cultural issues affecting HEIs, pros, and cons of making alliances and partnerships, and insufficient infrastructural facilities to showcase its brand value. The strategies suggested includes: 1) designing creative logos and slogans; 2) identifying the competitive advantage and communicate it to its stakeholders through appropriate channels; 3) inculcating 'institutional brand' as a culture among employees; 4) establishing strategic partnerships with other universities; 5) providing start-of-art digital platforms and online presence. These strategies would also help HEIs develop appropriate brand management practices and position themselves to achieve a competitive advantage in the global market.

Keywords: branding; challenges; higher education institutions; HEIs; strategies.

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1 Introduction

Globalisation has made higher education a tradable commodity, and higher education institutions (HEIs) have to market themselves to sustain in a climate of international competition (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; OECD, 2009). Increased competition in the global higher education market has motivated HEIs to choose an appropriate marketing strategy in the form of branding (Chapleo, 2015). Branding provides an identity for the institution and distinguishes it from the competition (Curtis et al., 2009; Gupta and Singh, 2010; Judson et al., 2009). The brand impacts and reduces the risks under competitive conditions and gives the institution the advantages to gain stability in the market (Beneke, 2011). Generally, a brand is the representation of a HEI's academic reputation, and the key advantage of branding is the attraction it brings to a HEI (Gupta and Singh, 2010). In HEIs, the power of a brand is expressed by all thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, and experiences that become linked to the brand in customers' minds, and what consumers have heard, observed, visualised, and realised about the brand over time (Harsha and Shah, 2011). Above and beyond, HEIs are providing major resources to standardise their images, reputations, and core messages to attract target audiences (students, staff, faculty, alumni, donors, government, the media, friends of the university, etc.) (Frost, 2010). Recently, Natale and Doran (2012) stated that the students are generally considered as the customers of HEIs, and the programs offered by HEIs are the products consumed by them. A previous study also highlighted that HEIs could involve the students in branding since those are their customers (Valtere, 2012).

Brand building is not a simple task to accomplish as it is associated with what students experience and what stabilises in their minds (Al Shorafa, 2017). Besides students' experience, the involvement of other stakeholders such as alumni, employers, and parents are paramount in building a brand image of HEIs (Ballantyne et al., 2006; Bansal, 2014). Karadag (2016) stated that the branding of HEIs is more associated with the people and is not constricted with a product or not a service provided in the market. Unlike the commercial sector, the application of branding to the higher education sector is quite different since it deals with 'who we are' rather than "what the particular product offers to the marketplace" (Gupta and Singh, 2010). An earlier study by Brookes (2003) recommended that branding being a commercially focused task, innately hard for HEIs, and expressing actual differentiation is often a challenge (Chapleo, 2015). Though branding is a popular strategy to differentiate an institution from its competitors, it is a more challenging task in the case of higher education due to its complex nature than in traditional, commercial settings (Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014). Such complexity might be because marketing in higher education differs from commercial agencies, and it is presented with features such as programs, price, promotion, placement, personnel, process, and prominence (Ivy, 2008). Further, in the traditional, commercial contexts, uniformity in brand delivery needs the frontline staff, who interacts with stakeholders efficiently to minimise the heterogeneous interactions. However, this consistency is neither desirable nor enforceable in the higher education sector, predominantly in faculty and student interactions. Contrasting to commercial products, HEIs can enhance its brand equity using selectivity if those HEIs admits only the most academically competent students (Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014). Considering the complexities of branding HEIs, it is paramount to understand the challenges involved in the branding process so that educational administrators can manage it. Therefore, the authors conducted this study with three-fold objectives to

- 1 conduct a general review to address the importance of branding HEIs
- 2 review the challenges faced by HEIs during the branding process
- 3 suggest suitable and appropriate strategies for branding universities to improve their quality and ranking position.

2 Importance of branding for HEIs

A university's brand carries a promise of a particular level of service to fulfil customer's needs and student outcomes (Clarke, 2009). Several studies have highlighted the importance of branding HEIs.

2.1 HEI itself

As HEIs differ according to the type, working contexts, infrastructure, and motives in maintaining the quality of education, branding becomes paramount for its growth and survival as it influences the selection of students and faculty members, attracting resources and creating goodwill (Harsha and Shah, 2011). Bhayani (2010) stated that branding is significant in attracting and retaining the students to a specific HEI. The factors that logically attract the students to a HEI are historically well-established brand, attractive educational environment, the existence of internationally known faculty and researchers, familiar products, and people's insight as well-established HEIs are opt for educating the young generations (Bhayani, 2010).

Moreover, branding help HEIs to counteract falling enrolments, reduce retention, overcome opposition, enhance image and reputation; increase financial assets; honour charitable donors; attain mission alignment; or indicate their unions with other institutions (Toma et al., 2005; Williams and Omar, 2014a). The branding of HEIs also improves the institution's reputation and bring extra income through the sale of their products (Lambo, 2011).

2.2 Students and community

Chapleo (2011) indicated that the branding of universities is essential to communicate to all the different audiences on the various facets of the university to create a competitive advantage. It allows the community and prospective students to identify and differentiate their university from other universities and is easily located in the social world (Lambo, 2011). As a result, students are likely to identify themselves based on the university they study and graduate (Hysi and Shyle, 2015).

2.3 Graduate student employability

Branding provides the graduates with an identity and a way to express themselves as both customers and life-long members of a university brand community (Balmer and Liao, 2007; Williams and Omar, 2014b). Presently, the reputation and image of a HEI have been recognised by the industry sector as a key element while employing a graduate student. For instance, the hospitality industry identified the educational brand as an attractive and decisive factor while selecting a student as its employee. Given the industry

sector, a strong education brand has qualities and benefits that meet the industry requirements through employing a graduate student (Wang and Tsai, 2014). Students also acknowledged that the brand image of their HEIs directly influences graduate employability (Naidoo et al., 2014).

2.4 Employers

Employability skills are perceived as vital by the students as well as the industry. Employers observe the personal image, communication skills, and core skills as significant employability elements (Ruetzler et al., 2014; Saunders and Zuzel, 2010). In recent years, HEIs utilised these students' employability elements as its brand by warranting that their graduates obtain the abilities required in the labour market and for professional enhancement (Wang and Tsai, 2014).

2.5 Alumni

A positive university brand would help the university recruit and retain the best students and faculty and develop and maintain extensive public, governmental, alumni, and donors' support (Shaari et al., 2012). An earlier study also indicated that HEIs recognise the importance of branding to improve the alumni links (Scarborough, 2007).

2.6 Building alliances and partnerships

University brand image is viewed as an immediate mental picture that an individual has about the university (Foroudi et al., 2014). HEIs built their brand image through partnerships and co-branding with universities in different parts of the world to identify what those HEIs stand for and reveal all stakeholders' perceptions towards them (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Through branding, HEIs desire to obtain support from the business zone (Baker et al., 2005). Besides the above factors, there is a need for creating brand value for the HEIs because environmental variations such as privatisation, devolution, divergence, globalisation, and augmented rivalry are usual to most nations (Harsha and Shah, 2011). HEIs are also becoming increasingly aware of these factors' importance due to the increasing number of students entering educational institutions (Al Kuwaiti and Subbarayalu, 2015).

In recent times, universities begin to utilise global rankings as a promotion tool to showcase their education, research, or business excellence, and students tend to visit the ranking websites to choose appropriate universities (Al Kuwaiti et al., 2019). Thus, to compete in this global competition and attract international students, it is paramount for HEIs to adopt suitable branding strategies to position themselves in the world league ranking table. While doing so, it is essential to understand the challenges faced by HEIs in building a 'brand' in itself and develop suitable strategies to accomplish it.

3 Challenges encountered during the branding of HEIs

HEIs use branding as a strategy to differentiate it from its competition; however, higher education's complexity makes branding an even more difficult task than in traditional and

commercial contexts (Dholakia and Acciardo, 2014). On general review of the existing literature, the authors list some of the common challenges encountered by the HEIs.

3.1 Creating a brand identity

The brand identity should focus on differentiation points that offer a sustainable competitive advantage to the organisation (Ghodeswar, 2008). A recent study by Hemsley-Brown et al. (2016) stated that a university's identity should be more attractive to attain reliable identification by students, which results in shared goals, values, and identities between the university and the students.

Moreover, the slogans and branding for most HEIs are remarkably alike. There is a need for marketing in HEI to inform what makes them a perfect destination for students exactly. HEIs require a solid brand identity to achieve this state, where it is essential to focus on what makes them different and unique (QS Digital Marketing, 2018). A common problem encountered by HEIs during university branding is choosing non-identifiable, meaningfulness taglines/slogans to accompany their logos. Such slogans seem to be inspirational on the surface, but it failed to tell what it stands for, and there is no depth, no meaning, and no emotion in it. Hence, HEIs should stop the boring slogans in their branding (Harvey, 2018). Further, it should be more cautious while developing a logo since any rework or redesign attracts stakeholders' resistance to logo change (Ellis, 2010; Nisen, 2013; Peterson, 2014). Such resistance to a logo redesign might lead to consumer dissatisfaction, consumer boycotts, and revenue loss (Walsh et al., 2019). It is noteworthy to mention that it is challenging to create a reliable brand identity for a multi-campus HEIs with local centres established at several locations (Suomi et al., 2013; Suomi, 2014). Dean et al. (2016) stated that the composite environment of tertiary education emphasises the part of the internal market and marketing in recognising the brand identity, developing an encounter for creating a shared brand meaning. The internal branding should be ongoing to guarantee that staffs remain to connect the preferred brand identity via their behaviour and turn into brand ambassadors (Ind, 2001; Whisman, 2009; Yu et al., 2016).

3.2 Brand building

The next significant challenge facing HEIs is creating an effective communication channel and other brand-building activities to develop a brand identity that aids with the implementation and the brand-defining process. An earlier study indicated that productive brand building activities should alter customer perceptions, reinforce attitudes, and create loyalty. One way to do so would be to consider alternative media along with advertising (Aaker and Joachimsthaler, 2000). To facilitate that, HEIs have to identify its strength that aligns with instigators to attend the target audience. Once the unique strength is recognised, HEIs can examine their brand positioning and disclose these qualities to be distinctive in the competitive environment (Hanover Research, 2015). As a business-oriented one, branding becomes naturally tricky for universities, and pronouncing real difference is usually a challenge (Brookes, 2003; Chapleo, 2015). Despite these difficulties, HEIs use branding as a strategy to differentiate it from its competition.

In this social web era, the audiences of HEIs are actively engaged in Facebook, and its vital role in brand-building should not be ignored. Further, HEIs must possess a clear

vision and leadership support being the significant factors that aid positive brand building (Al Shorafa, 2017). Besides, employees' internal branding plays a significant role in the brand building of HEIs, which describes the brand building from the inside and how it provided and attained the brand promise. Such internal branding is related to the employees' loyalty and commitment, which is being reflected in the delivery of brand promise (Dean et al., 2016; Baron et al., 2009). Any lack of clear vision, leadership support, social media utility, and employees' commitment may become challenges and impede the brand-building process of HEIs.

3.3 *Cultural issues*

Cultural issues are considered one of the key challenges in branding HEIs (Chapleo, 2015). It influences brand building as the process of creating and delivering brand value is strongly influenced by cultural codes (Schroeder, 2009). As culture is not static but continually evolving, cultural ideas may have different characters such as residual (based on past issues), dominant (based on the present, mainstream issues), or emergent (based on new, fresh, emerging issues) (Oswald, 2012). All brands are set in a cultural context because they carry a specific meaning coded in the brand name, language, logo, and visual identity. Nevertheless, some organisations decide to directly express their involvement in specific cultural issues by making those issues cornerstones of their brand strategies (Hajdas, 2017). Besides, it influences brand equity dimensions, such as brand awareness, brand association, perceived quality, and brand loyalty (Aaker, 1991). A positive organisational culture is essential for building and sustaining brands, and it provides a basis for differentiating a brand in a way that customers often welcomed (De Chernatony et al., 2006).

Cultural issues also play a role in brand equity. A recent study by Filieri et al. (2019) stated that culturally contextualised brand equity dimensions (i.e., brand awareness, brand loyalty, brand mianzi, and perceived quality) are better than the traditional ones (i.e., brand associations, brand awareness, brand loyalty and perceived quality), and brand equity frameworks should be adapted to the country's culture. The researchers have also highlighted the significance of cultural factors in branding activities in emerging markets (Filieri et al., 2019). Thus, HEIs need to rely on their country's culture while branding their image.

3.4 *Need for alliances and partnerships*

Making partnerships with the right one would help an organisation attract more customers and improve its brand identity through association. Partnerships enable HEIs to graduate students and future leaders more effectively. In turn, such business partners gain access to students or prospective employees (hires) and introduce their organisation brand and culture (Weybrecht, 2015). Strategic partnerships offer a legitimate opportunity to find and preserve academic programs that shape the brand on both institutions, or, in the case of a narrower program-based affiliation not driven purely by growth goals, to identify the faculty, curricular, and marketing strengths to be highlighted (Samels and Martin, 2017). As such, HEIs can find national/regional/international partnerships to attract more students, improve brand identity, recognise the valuable academic programs, and improve graduate employability.

In the higher education sector, institutions collaborate to do innovation in curriculum, increase mobility (staff and student), enhance reputation, add values to student degrees, and expand the existing market. A brand alliance is more successful if there are high awareness and high perceived quality of the partner brands and if the fit between the partner brands and their product categories is high (Kalafatis et al., 2016). Singh et al. (2011) also concluded that the institutional fit between the collaborating HEIs significantly influenced the students' attitude towards a joint degree (delivered through the brand alliance between HEIs) irrespective of HEIs' relative ranks. A lack of fit between partner brands can make the customers have a negative attitude over the alliance (Lafferty et al., 2004; Simonin and Ruth, 1998). Besides, the customers' opinions of the co-branded product can be strongly influenced by the country of origin of HEIs offering the program content and/or qualification accreditation. Ultimately, this condition could regulate the alliance's success or failure (Chee et al., 2016). In certain instances, the reputation and country of origin status might be utilised as a substitute for institutional status and reputation. Customer appraisals of an unfamiliar brand from a different nation are commonly more affirmative if a brand ally is utilised (Voss and Tansuhaj, 1999). Chan and Cheng (2012) also stated that it is essential for less familiar brands to seek highly familiar brands while developing alliances. Also, universities must distribute funds to marketing actions to attain auspicious brand associations to guarantee competitive advantages in the market.

In contrast, if the brand alliances are not made properly, it might damage both the partner brands' reputation and image (Cornelis, 2010; Farquhar, 1994). There is a possibility of high risk if both brands are presented on the product and, thus, the failure of an alliance product can weaken the original brands' equity and reputation (Roedder et al., 1998). Moreover, both partner brands' images could get damaged if any confusion resulted from their association between them (Park et al., 1996). Even though the brand alliance is beneficial, HEIs must choose a highly familiar brand and allocate resources to get positive brand associations, thereby expand their market exposure and brand reputation.

3.5 Inability to effectively communicate with stakeholders

Another critical challenge faced by universities is their inability to communicate the brand identity with the stakeholders effectively. It is paramount to showcase good practices to academic communities through appropriate channels (Royo-Vela and Hünermund, 2016). A study by Chapleo (2009) stated that though many UK universities have more successful brands and communicated it effectively to their primary audiences (students), they failed reliably to do the same across all their audiences.

3.6 Inadequate university infrastructure

A brand name for educational institutions is defined by one of the intangible factors, i.e., availability of infrastructural facilities. Promising state of the art infrastructure is one of the fundamental issues on which an educational institute must concentrate to be reputed (Bansal, 2014). An earlier study also observed that the university's educational facilities and services have a significant and positive effect on higher education brand equity (Moghaddam et al., 2013). The existence of technology infrastructure would help to improve the brand value of a university.

4 Strategies suggested for branding HEIs

Universities often use marketing campaigns and the adoption of unique quality assurance mechanisms to differentiate themselves from potential competitors (Knight, 2007). Such strategies would help HEIs differentiate and position themselves globally while analysing their strengths and weaknesses to identify their unique selling points. Based on the exploration of published studies and an extensive review of the literature, the author suggested the following strategies for branding HEIs.

4.1 *Designing a creative and unique logo*

Logos are the primary signifier of brand identity. It is used to reflect the integrity of University branding and to promote the consistency of the brand. Usually, the university logo combines two critical elements: ‘the icon block’ and ‘the wordmark’. It is advisable to create a suitable logo that reflects the identity of each respective university. Necessary arrangements should be made to include either the university logo, the tagline logo, or a unit logo in all university communications (Brand Guidelines of the University of Tennessee, 2019). Besides, it is noteworthy that brand building should not be restricted to implementing a new logo or a tagline; indeed, the active brand building should proceed with a holistic view of the institute and exploit its strengths and distinctive qualities (Bansal, 2014). Before designing a logo, the university realises its strengths and distinct attributes, leading to a unique and innovative logo.

4.2 *Avoid the boring slogans*

The most common problem in university branding is the tendency adopted by the HEIs to choose non-identifiable, meaningless taglines to accompany their logos. Some slogans look inspirational on the surface but failed to convey to the stakeholders’ anything about the university or what it stands for. While drafting slogans, it is essential to highlight the strengths and convey those values in a way to represent the university’s identity in all branding materials (Mattis, 2019). In addition, HEIs should provide more concrete evidence to support their right using logos, words, images, and slogans if they desire to create a strong brand identity (Hoang and Rojas-Lizana, 2015). Creating a motivating slogan with enough evidence to support it would strengthen HEIs and differentiate them from others.

4.3 *Identify the exact strengths of the institution and communicate to both internal and external audience*

The term ‘strength’ of an HEI could be a specific area of study, an explicit degree which is offered only in that university, a particular course which is highly regarded in the higher education sector, or a department/research unit which is well appreciated (QS Digital Marketing, 2018). Sometimes, it may be related to a particular aspect of the degree program that focuses on developing hands-on work experience, employability skills, or fieldwork, which may help students during their early careers. Moreover, universities can build their strength through enhanced students’ experience by offering students exchange programs, overseas study opportunities, and other unique extra-curricular activities. Additional resources such as research facilities, state-of-the-art

libraries, and international collaborations will help the university to create a strong brand identity. Furthermore, it is essential to recognise its strengths, what it stands for, and how it is unique prior to developing the university's brand. The university should know how the brand wants to be observed (Renspie, 2015).

In addition, internal branding is commonly applied to communicate, explicit and embed brand values among employees. It links to employee behaviour with brand values (Sujchaphong et al., 2015). Internal communications, training and development, a brand book, and other manuals are considered key means for employees to recognise and offer the brand (Ind, 2007; Karmark, 2005; van Riel, 1995). Internal branding includes innovative communication of the brand to employees and training sessions for them concerning brand-strengthening behaviours. It also comprises rewards for those activities to support the brand. It engages the employees to care and nurture the brand (Simoes and Dibb, 2001). Also, internal branding in HEIs and its significances from a marketing and communication-oriented perspective, together with its related core mechanisms (i.e., the impacts of internal branding elements), is significant to entirely understand how a brand can reflect all its stakeholders (Sujchaphong et al., 2015).

4.4 Designing an innovative, user-friendly website

University websites are observed as one of the leading brand touchpoints for various stakeholders (Shaari et al., 2012). A well-designed website might help the universities to build their brand image, reputation, and culture, and it is often used as a marketing tool to attract, communicate with, and retain web visitors (Foroudi et al., 2014; Melewar et al., 2017). Moreover, it is a front gate for students. It should provide all that information they seek in a user-friendly manner with pleasant internet experience, which has a positive perception of the university (Barnes and Vidgen, 2014). The university website should be designed in such a way to provide quick access to users with hassle-free navigation and options for searching the required information (Bilgihan and Bujisic, 2015; Foroudi et al., 2014). HEIs recognise their websites as a global shop window, but several find it challenging to imitate an exact brand that displays individual departments' strengths. A digital solution can only be productive by actually knowing and explaining each department's goals within the HEI. HEI's website offers endless opportunities for policymakers to create and personalise landing pages by preserving overall brand coherence. Distinct homepages could be developed for diverse user groups and personalities, i.e., freshers, staff, international visitors, and investors (Barr, 2012).

4.5 Instill brand as a culture; not campaign

Tierney (1988) defines organisational culture's essentials in a HEI by the following framework: environment, mission, socialisation, information, strategy, and leadership. Each HEI has a culture, but it can be challenging to bring to the surface. An essential step in the branding process is to spend time communicating the organisational culture with stakeholders of the entire institution to understand their perspectives. If the organisational culture communicated clearly, all those key stakeholders can formulate better and solve the organisation's problems to improve its performance. This would help to identify the core principles and drivers that stimulate the entire organisation.

Moreover, when the customer's organisational culture is realised by the marketing organisations, they could clearly guide the customer to the market and rapidly adjust as

required to achieve the demands and aims of the customer. Marketers should be subtle towards the difficulties of organisational culture and work carefully with organisational growth practitioners. Such marketers are in need to understand the organisational culture while considering branding, brand assurances, and customer service schemes (Wilson, 2001). Thus, HEIs should make their marketing agencies understand their organisational culture to aid an effective branding process.

4.6 Build a positive brand behaviour

Behaviours of employees are critical to building great brands. Brand behaviours must be well-defined, circulated, and rewarded. Customer satisfaction and organisations' success are the rewards that reinforce these behaviours, creating a cycle of growing brand strength (Pasternak, 2017).

In HEIs context, faculty and staff (employees) play a primary role in the branding process (Sujchaphong et al., 2015). Employees are more significant in presenting universities to common people with regard to scientific output, high-quality teaching, and staff reputation (Ivy, 2001; Naude and Ivy, 1999). Employees' activities might positively resonate with their values compared to the HEI's brand values when they failed to realise the HEI's brand values (Jevons, 2006). Also, the institution's brand becomes unreliable when its characteristics are not being presented by the employees (Stensaker, 2005). Judson et al. (2006) stated that the brand meaning would lose its reliability if it is not reinforced by aligned employee behaviour. Therefore, there is a prerequisite for HEIs to align employee behaviour with brand values (Sujchaphong et al., 2015). Such alignment of employees' attitudes and behaviour with the brand values is being considered as the primary task of internal branding in universities (Judson et al., 2006). When internal branding efforts are applied in HEIs, employees would clearly understand their own universities' brand values and are competent to utilise them in their daily tasks (Judson et al., 2006). From the policymakers' perspective, these internal branding actions positively influence their behaviour in doing their task, how they tackle their employees and how their employees utilise the brand in routine work (Judson et al., 2009).

4.7 Build partnerships

Establishing partnerships is one of the ways for universities to strengthen their brand and appealability. Such partnerships could be between universities and employers that focus on employability and alumni outcomes (Mattis, 2019). Such effort aid students to make decisions in choosing an appropriate institution which values their post-education prospects. Odon (2015) stated that an effective international partnership might help create a university's brand at the national and international levels. It also develops new revenue generation schemes whenever the institutions encounter funding crisis. Moreover, building partnerships and co-branding with other universities worldwide can help universities develop their brand image, explore what they stand for, and reveal all stakeholders' opinions over them (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016).

4.8 Establishing effective external communications

Universities can communicate their key messages and accomplishments with external stakeholders regularly and periodically, and such a practice would improve the

university's national and international profile (Mattis, 2019). Previous studies stated that external communication produces a significant effect not only on external stakeholders but also on employees (i.e., internal stakeholders), with strong impacts on employees' identification, attitudes, motivation, and subsequent behaviour (Burmahn and Zeplin, 2005; De Chernatony et al., 2006; Hughes, 2013). Thus, in addition to the internal brand management (IBM) practices such as brand-oriented leadership and human resources management and internal communication, administrators should utilise the power of external communication and recognise their employees as the second audience of their external communication. Such attempts would influence the IBM consequences, such as employees' brand understanding, brand commitment, and brand-related employee behaviour (Piehler et al., 2019). Therefore, in addition to internal stakeholders, HEIs need to find new means to communicate their brand efficiently to external stakeholders. This task is usually carried out by the university's public relations department, which handles creating awareness of a brand and advertising its brand identity and guarantees to customers (i.e., external stakeholders) to develop an affirmative brand image (Piehler et al., 2019). Even though this practice is common in marketing for universities, online communication channels play a significant role in getting worldwide impact through the university's stakeholders, ministry, or the media directly. In some universities, awareness has been given to faculty and academic staff to establish such communications through their social media networks (Mattis, 2019). Social media have turned into a key channel for HEIs to increase awareness concerning their brand image and raise brand loyalty (Capano, 2009). It delivers big and complete data regarding students' and other stakeholders' behaviour and on the efficacy of marketing campaigns. To utilise social media efficiently, it is essential to gather the existing data and assess them to obtain insight on which to base a proper social media strategy (Maresova et al., 2020).

HEIs often utilise other external communications, namely event marketing, promotion, or sponsoring, and these are mainly focusing on developing brand awareness and communicating a brand's identity. These communications assure customers (i.e., external stakeholders) to create an affirmative brand image. Such exclusive emphasis on external stakeholders overlooks the full capability as external communications have often-overlooked influences on employees as a second audience. Thus, it is a prerequisite to confirm that employees are often uncovered to external communications by internally announcing the external communications before commencing the external launch. Such announcements would influence the employees' cognitive and behavioural levels and improve their brand understanding and brand-consistent behaviour. Organisations could address both internal and external stakeholders with a single organisational practice, thereby improving external communications (Piehler, 2018).

4.9 Improving digital platforms and online presence

In this digital era, students are using the media, mobile applications, and other digital devices for information searches and media communication (Royo-Vela and Hünermund, 2016). Universities should concentrate on enhancing their digital platforms and online existence to show their distinctiveness. External consulting firms can be hired to improve the online platforms. These firms offer a broad range of solutions and brand augmentation services to the client university by analysing all online communications, including social media. Further, these firms evaluated each university's performance in terms of online successes and interactions with the primary audiences. Such information

is vital to develop recommendations for online developments and improvements (Mattis, 2019). Universities could also recognise keywords for website development, frame appropriate strategies for main online marketing spaces, valuation of current funds for online marketing and training sessions (Mattis, 2019).

4.10 Improving facilities and infrastructure

The existence of start-of-art infrastructure and facilities would aid in developing a unique brand for HEIs. These facilities, especially in scientific research, are the essential ones to attract research-intensive international academics to collaborate and offer universities a base for speedy knowledge creation. Such arrangements would provide scope for more collaborative research work, which in turn helps to build branding. Moreover, improving facilities can positively influence student decision-making when choosing a particular location to study (Mattis, 2019). Javani (2016) also stated that HEI branding should focus on combining the infrastructure with other aspects with culture, history, economic growth, social development, architecture and landscape, and environment to develop a comprehensible and passionate brand identity is recognised by all target audiences.

5 Conclusions

This study's findings address two critical issues related to branding HEIs, i.e., its importance and challenges faced by the HEIs in branding its educational products and processes. Some of the challenges encountered by the HEIs include the inability to create the brand identity through appropriate logos and slogans; the difficulty to communicate the brand through appropriate brand-building activities; cultural issues affecting HEIs to build a brand in itself; making alliances and partnerships, and inadequate infrastructural facilities to showcase its brand value. The authors suggested suitable strategies for branding universities based on a thorough exploration of the good practices focusing on branding HEIs. Some of the strategies include:

- Designing creative logos and slogans that highlight the strengths and convey the organisational values to the stakeholders.
- Identifying the competitive advantage and communicate effectively to both internal and external stakeholders through appropriate channels.
- Inculcating 'institutional brand' as a culture by building positive brand behaviour among employees through the formulation of the core principles and drivers that stimulate the entire organisation.
- Establishing strategic partnerships with other universities to strengthen brand image and appealability.
- Providing start-of-art facilities and improving both digital platforms and online presence to show the distinctiveness of each university.

6 Limitations and recommendations

This study provides challenges encountered while branding HEIs and strategies to overcome them based on the good practices taken from published literature. However, future studies can focus on gathering primary data from internal and external stakeholders' voices using interviews and qualitative analysis to reveal the challenges facing the branding of HEIs and design an appropriate strategic plan for branding universities.

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