

Reputation and cultural influences – the constituents of reputation of the University of Jyväskylä for its international degree students and postgraduates

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The author of the paper has studied the perception of the reputation of the University of Jyväskylä (Finland) for its international degree students and postgraduates. She has also identified the intercultural aspects influencing these perceptions.

The findings show that the perceptions of the reputation consist of both positive and negative dimensions. They also illustrate the reasons for particular perceptions.

Five dimensions of cultural influences on perceptions of the University's reputation are identified as being influential in positive and negative ways. These dimensions are: (1) dealing with the unexpected; (2) hierarchical relationships; (3) group orientation; (4) feminine or masculine value orientation; and (5) culture-specific communication patterns.

The author suggests the necessity to revise from the interdisciplinary perspective the definitions of the concepts such as brand as brand, image, identity, reputation, and consumer satisfaction to be able to attribute them to universities as a specific type of organization.

Key words: reputation, culture, higher education institutions

Introduction

Nowadays identities, images and reputations of universities have gained attention for several reasons related to globalization, internationalization being one of them. The Bologna Declaration stresses the need for united European higher education that would become more attractive to students from other regions of the world (The Bologna Declaration ..., 2005). In order to attract students from all over the world, it is important for the universities to manage their reputation internationally.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand the added value of a particular higher education institution and how its reputation can be influenced by cultural backgrounds of the incoming students and the cultural environment where the university is located.

The aim of this research was to investigate the constituents of the reputation of the University of Jyväskylä for its specific target audience – international degree students and postgraduates – in order to see what builds the reputation in this particular case and to understand what kind of

intercultural aspects come into play. The objectives were to explore (1) what the constituents of the reputation of the University of Jyväskylä for its international degree students and postgraduates are; and (2) what kind of cultural aspects influence the reputation of the university for this particular target audience and how.

The author of the paper sees her research as one to follow the line where reputation is researched based on social expectations people have about the institution. However, in the scope of the interest, there is a very specific stakeholders' group who has prior knowledge about the organization. Their opinions that the author of the paper will explore, might therefore be based on previously held expectations that would or would not match the reality. But their expectations could also be shaped or changed during the process of studying and being part of the institution. The author of the paper sees expectations as an underlying stream influencing the opinions of students, but also as a stream which is variable in its content due to the fact that a particular stakeholders' group is in close relations with the institution. The fact that this group directly affects the quality of the product or service provided and holds part of responsibility for outcomes also makes their expectations variable.

Instead of focusing purely on estimations held by a particular target audience about certain aspects of the university, it is more valuable to concentrate on perceptions – how these aspects are perceived and why.

A corporate reputation embodies the general estimation in which a company is held by employees, customers, suppliers,

distributors, competitors, and the public. The key point, of course, is that reputation consists of perceptions – how others see you (Fombrun 1996: 59).

The informants have experienced different university-related aspects from the moment of choice to come and to study in this particular university or even before – while the informant studied for his/her previous degree at the home country or abroad. On the basis of their experience, informants have constructed certain perceptions which can be passed to their peers, both to the ones who study together with them and those who seek out the information to be able to make their choice and consider the University as one of their study options in future. The perceptions of the current students, therefore, build up the reputation of the University of Jyväskylä.

Considering higher education as a specific type of commodity, we have to keep in mind that people may have different expectations about the contents and the process of this commodity. At the same time, those expectations can be affected by many personal as well as cultural reasons which may determine, for instance, that it is not acceptable to involve certain types of relationships in the market when it comes to pursuing a higher education. De Vita and Case (2002) illustrate possible clashes between the market model of education and the Vedic or Islamic perspective:

“The clash between the student–teacher relationship embedded in the market model of education (where the student-as-customer is always right) and the spiritual model purported by the Vedic theory (where teachers are not only facilitators, but moral and

inspiring examples as well) is no unique. ... According to the Islamic perspective of education, for example, students are on a path to paradise and the teacher, whose task is to impart sacred or divine origin) and humanly acquired knowledge, is viewed as the inheritor of the prophets. Contrary to popular belief, the Koran also encourages questioning" (De Vita & Case 2002: 391).

Therefore, institutions of the higher education should be aware of particular cultural differences and should consider their reputation according to the target audience's particular cultural background.

The author of the paper locates cultural features that come into play when the reputation of the university is considered. The author chooses to follow the definitions of culture which distinguish the constituents of culture and emphasize the cultural values as an evitable part among them. The Finnish culture is interpreted according to the findings of different intercultural communication scholars. The views of Hofstede (2001), Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Trompenaars (2005) Schwartz (2004), Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1982, 1997), Salo-Lee (2007), and Kirra (2000) are taken as the cornerstones for interpreting the gained data.

Method

There were 16 informants chosen for in-depth interviews. The age of informants varied between 21 and 47. There were 10 Masters and 6 postgraduate students in the sample. The participants of the sample were coming from 13 countries: China (2), Germany (2), USA (2), Peru (1), Sweden (1), Poland (1), Russia (1), Italy (1), India

(1), Cameroon (1), Jordan (1), Japan (1), and Belgium (1). For most of them, except one, the country of origin matches the place where they got their previous degree and their nationality.

The Laddering Methodology developed by Reynolds and Gutman (1988) was originally intended to use for developing the interviewing strategy. The method seemed to be the most suitable for exploring the topic because it included searching for the true values people have behind their choices. As it is described by authors,

"laddering involves a tailored interviewing format using primarily a series of directed probes, typified by the "Why is that important to you?" question, with the express goal of determining sets of linkages between the key perceptual elements across the range of attributes (A), consequences (C), and values (V)." (Reynolds & Gutman 1988: 12).

Exploring attributes and consequences that students have regarding their choice of the university would give the possibility to spot the crucial reputation constituents of the university, while consequences, values, and additional information revealed in the interview could give an insight into the possible cultural influence. Although it has been successfully used before in the research in order to explore the values people attribute to higher education institutions, the author of the paper found that the method was inappropriate to use in intercultural setting and was more suitable for researching consumer choice of products than students' choice of a university.

To be able to identify the topics related to the perceived reputation of the Univer-

sity, the author of the paper firstly identified the components of the University, the reputation of which mattered to the overall reputation of the institution.

The author chose to construct interview topics so that all the main aspects related to the university would be covered and she would find out what the informants' experiences and opinions about them were. The data gained during the interviews were summarized and categorized so that the characterization of reputation constituents could be demonstratively seen.

Conclusions

A certain cultural orientation might be among the reasons restricting the opportunities to study abroad. The informants named competition, which stimulates young people to graduate in certain years and to enter the job market at a certain age and also to decide to study further only if being a brilliant student. The importance of competition might be linked to a more masculine society values orientation, namely, in the case of the research values of societies in Japan and People's Republic of China. The informants also mentioned family-related reasons signaling the influence of a particular group orientation, which in the case of this research was a more collectivist orientation of societies in India and Italy. The author of the paper, therefore, assumes that certain cultural value orientations can restrict (or stimulate) young people's wish to study abroad.

The research shows that the perceptions of reputation in the case of the University of Jyväskylä by its international degree students and postgraduates consist of both

positive and negative dimensions except for one aspect – the quality of laboratory equipment, which was perceived only positively.

Five dimensions of cultural influence on perceptions of the University's reputation can be identified and related to previously done researches used as the cornerstones for this research. These dimensions, namely, are dealing with the unexpected; hierarchical relationships; group orientation; feminine or masculine value orientation, and culture-specific communication patterns. The first four dimensions are related to theoretical work of Hofstede (2001), Hofstede and Hofstede (2005), Schwartz (2004), and Trompenaars (2005). The last dimension is based on theoretical work done by Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1982, 1997), Kirra (2000), and Salo-Lee (2007). The identified dimensions of cultural influences may influence the perceptions of reputation in both positive and negative ways.

Further in the text, the dimensions of cultural influence will be described and illustrated with quotes from informants. The coded number of informant and his/her country of origin will be shown next to quotation.

The cultural orientation of *dealing with the unexpected* may influence students' perceptions of the purposefulness of studies; perceptions of any kind of differences in teaching or other study encounters; perceptions of problems related to student service, particularly, medical care; perceptions related to the information flow related to university constituents in language they have not mastered.

Just it seems to me, and also I was shocked about it, that all the theories which are developed in Europe, let's say, here when you study them they seem to be really necessary. You see the purpose of studying the theory and even if I studied almost the same things in Moscow at my university, there they seem to be very far away from the real life... (4 – Russia).

Sometimes it just feels like students have to work everything out on their own... It is not really a learning process that I would say is a learning process. ... I am kind of missing this kind of teacher we had there [at school] that they are really teachers and not that you can be teacher yourself and stay at home and read books (2 – Germany).

Group orientation (individualistic or collectivistic) may influence the students' perception of atmosphere and cooperation in study settings. It is also related to the perceptions of social activities, and perceptions of individualistic characteristics of Finnish culture and Finland as a place for future life and carrier.

Many people say that [in Finland] it is a big difference when you are a student and when you are a worker. And I agree... Here you can't make easy friendships with your colleagues (6 – Italy).

People are very friendly. I have to say I do not have many Finnish friends, but also I am not in a Finnish environment. But this is not that there are bad feelings from any side, but Finnish people are just more distant. When I am here I am focusing on my studies, so I do not try to get to know some Finnish people very close. ... Here you have to work for it [for interaction with Finns], which I think is OK because if you do not need to speak you do not speak. You have this freedom to choose. That is the reason

why I do not have many relationships here because I am not pushed and I do not push because I am concentrating on something different (5 – Poland).

Cultural orientation in hierarchical relationships may influence students' perception of teaching quality; perceptions of interactions with professors and supervisors; and perceptions of working relations.

In Finland, professors respect more students' initiative. They do not look at them from up there. Of course, in Japan you have to kind of respect professors and you have to talk appropriately, you have to act appropriately. Sometimes it makes you rude if you say something straightly (13 – Japan).

[In Italy] hierarchy does not mean only giving and accepting orders. It means also the recognition of values and work. In Italy, you often need to rely on hidden or implicit promises with professors in order to get something done. Unfortunately, your work and value is not recognized (6 – Italy).

The masculine or feminine value orientation may influence the perceptions related to competition and the perceptions of social activities according to culturally bounded acceptable gender behaviours.

Competition is not encouraged here [at the University]. In the present demanding world, competition should be encouraged. ...I believe, nowadays in the political and economic world employers always want the best from their employees and usually the recruitment process is very tricky. I believe, the competition is one of the best ways to bring out the best from the students. It makes students work harder (8 – Cameroon).

Here [in Finland] is less competition, especially among doctoral students. PhD

students in Germany are always competing. ...I do not know if they have to, but they are. Here we are doing the same things and coping with the same problems. We are helping each other in the way that we do not try to hide from each other what we are doing. Or if we have some material or something, others can use it (15 – Germany).

I do not know people here because my university and my home – this is my place. So I cannot see the other side (7 – India).

Culture-specific communication patterns influence the perception of interaction with professors and supervisors; the perception of teaching style and interaction in classroom settings, and the perception of long-time relationships.

A foreigner should feel very comfortable here. ...I don't feel any pressure from others. I guess they somehow respect people here and don't pay too much attention to foreigners (4 – Russia).

Finnish people have a system in their life and they put a schedule for every week what they have to do. It is impossible to brake through this schedule, they do not let you in. If you have time, we can put you in the schedule for the next week or after that (11 – Jordan).

Nobody has time for social life. Too many people you know, but you cannot meet anybody because they all are busy. ...when I was in a big trouble I relied on my friends, I needed to speak with somebody. And the friend had an exam, so he was not available till the next week (6 – Italy).

...for me it is like they [Finnish people] respect more privacy and they do not put too much pressure on things (13 – Japan).

It should be admitted that the informants and, possibly, all the international degree students and postgraduates at the University are in a way an exceptional group. One might presume that nowadays people are generally more international and oriented towards exploring foreign countries. The EU student mobility programmes give more chances for undergraduates to study abroad. In fact, when it comes to the Master's level studies, the picture is quite different. Studies abroad still might not be accessible for several purely practical reasons such as a poor financial situation, the lack of language (English) skills, or the distance. In the case of the University reputation and attraction of international students, all these reasons can be influential.

The research identifies the current perceptions of the reputation and gives the answer not only to what the perceptions are, but also why they are like this, which, which is a benefit. Cultural influences on perceived reputation are identified as well. Based on qualitative data, the semantic differential scale for measuring the university reputation quantitatively can be elaborated and adapted further in order to measure the perceived reputation within a specific target audience – international degree students and postgraduates at the University.

further questions raised. The main weakness and limitation of the research is located in the usage of the concepts. Reputation in the theoretical stream is seen more as overall perceptions held by inner and outer audiences of an organization. However, it is pointed out that different audiences may have different perceptions and, therefore,

reputation can consist of a sum of reputations; the question remains and is related to an adequate definition and usage of the concept of reputation. The author of the paper approached perceived reputation as being created and determined by mouth-to-mouth communication: the reputation of the organization is what a specific audience says about the organization. However, as long as specific perceptions are examined, it leads to several related concepts that cannot be precisely isolated from one from another. It is necessary to revise the definitions of concepts such as brand as brand, image, identity, reputation, and consumer satisfaction from the interdisciplinary perspective, which would be applicable for a specific type of organization – universities.

Moreover, it might be useful to deepen the definition of reputation when exploring universities as a specific type of organization. The current mainstream understanding of reputation as overall perceptions may keep secret particular elements, which

create the attractiveness of a university in the eyes of specific target audiences.

This research has identified specific perceptions of different constituents of university. It serves as an overview of thoughts of a particular group of people that verbally transfer their perceptions to others and, therefore, contribute to the reputation of the University. It can be used for studying similar groups of international students in other universities as well as for predicting eventual issues universities might face with their international students. The research may also help the officials of the University to identify what exactly the strengths and weaknesses of the University are as related to international students and postgraduates and also to predict what kind of issues could be included in special events meant for introducing students from abroad to culture-specific aspects related to the study process and their life in Finland in general. It stimulates the cultural understanding between the University and its international students.

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REPUTACIJOS IR KULTŪROS ĮTAKA – JYVASKYLOS UNIVERSITETO REPUTACIJOS ĮTAKA STUDENTAMS IŠ UŽSIENIO IR ABSOLVENTAMS

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S a n t r a u k a

Mokslinio darbo autorė tiria, kaip Suomijos Jyvaskylos universiteto (University of Jyvaskylä) absolventai ir jame studijuojantys užsienio studentai suvokia reputaciją. Taip pat yra analizuojami tarpkultūriniai aspektai, kurie daro poveikį reputacijos suvokimui.

Įgyta informacija liudija tai, kad reputacijos suprantamumas įvairus, būdinga ir teigiama, ir neigiama dimensija. Tyrinėjimas atskleidžia pagrindimus, kodėl reputacija suvokiama koku nors konkrečiu pavidalu, – tai akivaizdus šio tyrinėjimo pranašumas.

Penkios dimensijos kultūros įtakai, kad universi-

teto reputacija būtų suvokiama būtent taip, identifikuojamos kaip įtakingos tiek teigiama, tiek neigiama prasme. Išskiriamos šios dimensijos: 1) pažiūra į netikėtą; 2) hierarchiniai santykiai; 3) grupių orientacija; 4) moteriškų ir vyriškų vertybių orientacija ir 5) kultūrai būdingos komunikacijos schemos.

Autorė siūlo peržiūrėti, remiantis tarpdalykine perspektyva, tokias teorines sąvokas kaip ženklas, įvaizdis, tapatybė, reputacija ir klientų pasitenkinimas, kad būtų galima jas taikyti universitetams, kaip ypatingo tipo organizacijoms.