

COMMUNICATION: A KEY ASPECT OF THE STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Globalisation, internationalisation and growing economic competition are requiring public and private higher education institutions to adapt to change, just like traditional businesses, so that they can respond better to a complex, demanding and increasingly competitive environment.

This all-encompassing process of change covers a wide range of spheres and raises many fundamental issues, leading to a questioning of the missions of these institutions and opening up new perspectives.

How are the changes that are occurring in OECD countries affecting communication and internal and external relations? What effects are the changes having on the image of institutions? What is their impact on the missions, perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders? What significant developments and trends are emerging?

These were the issues addressed by the IMHE-OECD Conference held 26 and 27 August 2004 on the theme "Communicating Higher Education: Image and Reality". This conference brought together some 130 participants and provided an opportunity for in-depth and fruitful discussions about the conditions under which institutions work and their ability to rise to the challenges that they face.

This article summarises some of the key points discussed at the conference.

Universities and other higher education institutions are not businesses. They are more than that. They have a history, traditions, values and a formidable range of expertise, all of which are assets that they must exploit, but which no longer suffice in today's competitive world. They must also make

full use of all means of communication, promote their image and defend their reputation.

These institutions must meet their own core commitments (teaching and research) while adapting continuously to a series of new situations and challenges, such as *maintaining standards of excellence, finding the financial resources that they need to preserve their independence and managing partnerships on a new scale with other institutions. Lastly, they must be competitive on national and international education markets.*

However, higher education institution must also demonstrate that the status they claim is justified and they must promote their policy choices while maintaining the credibility of their reputation. These new imperatives will require them:

- to organise the on-going monitoring of the internal and external environments so as to decipher the slightest signal and make clear the desires, expectations and demands of new players and stakeholders.
- to mobilise their staff and focus all their energies on the new challenges of change and the vision embodied in the collective project so as to ensure that goals, initiatives, messages and values are communicated in such a way that they are understood and shared by the education community.
- to forge ties of a new kind with the media, ranking agencies, pressure groups and other influential networks in order to ensure that these relations are as beneficial as possible and to anticipate potential problems.

■ Marketing: managing a necessary evil

A great deal of marketing¹ is already going on in the higher education institutions of most OECD countries,

even though it may not seem sufficiently sophisticated to the advocates of the marketisation of education, according to Steven Schwartz. Students choose their university mainly on the basis of their impressions and emotions. The messages communicated appeal to their dreams. This is why, in his view, all universities claim to be highly ranked and have the best teachers, exceptional research programmes and motivated students who are doing well and will go on to remarkable careers after they graduate. Steven Schwartz added that they invariably show a picture of students in a sunny, green setting engaged in respectful dialogue with charismatic, knowledgeable teachers who are, as they should be, highly dedicated.

In his view, marketing seeks to promote a model of success, curriculum and facilities together with a stimulating and supportive environment in order to convince people that the image truly reflects the reality. Its purpose is also and above all *to succeed in this intense competition in the struggle for the resources necessary to achieve our objectives.*

The studies presenting the rankings of the best universities are also a powerful promotional tool. All institutions want to be highly ranked, if possible among the top schools. However, these rankings are sometimes questionable. In some countries, ranking agencies use indicators and methods that vary over time. This can sometimes have startling effects on the rankings, and the newspapers then pass on this information that they know will be of interest to their readers. Institutions can sometimes rise or fall

1. This definition cited by John Taylor in his presentation, was taken from Philip Kotler: "Marketing is the analysis, planning, implementation and control of programmes carefully defined as value-added services and dedicated to these target markets for the purpose of achieving institutional objectives...".

■ ■ ■ several steps in the ranking tables without any significant change having occurred to justify it. According to Chris Duke, *the pressure of rankings can be destructive and place the university in a position that is at odds with its fundamental missions. What can be done to minimise this risk?*

For Ann Downsett-Johnston, *not everything that counts can be counted.* However, rankings can be very useful when they measure things that are measurable, and they can be useful when they are based on objective indicators and stable methods. *The challenge will be to go from a system based on responses provided by institutions to one based on the collection of cross-tabulated and verified data.* The comparative approaches of this type of study promote dialogue between internal and/or external players, and help to evaluate the progress made. *Everyone stands to gain from joining in a strategy of transparency.*

■ Ethics to ensure more accountable marketing

Marketing is indispensable *since it is vital to communicate effectively with very differentiated target audiences,* as Steven Schwartz affirmed. In his view, *efforts in the field of marketing and public relations must endeavour to present accurate and honest information about educational programmes to consumers, who will be able to make fully informed choices.*

For Richard Morrill, it is important to focus on the risk that universities would run if they adopted the traditional corporate marketing model directly. This model uses vocabulary and specific types of symbols that are at odds with the academic image. In addition, as a number of speakers pointed out, *marketing changes the university from within* and the transition from *amateur to professional marketing raises basic questions about values.*

To reap the benefits that marketing can provide, universities must adapt it to their specific context, characteristics, culture and values. When it is in line with these values, marketing can be a powerful tool for defining and promoting the university's image over time.

In the view of Steven Schwartz, marketing should be accountable, accurate and also ethical. He believes that *an ethical code should define clear ethical commitments and indicate the good conduct that should characterise the institution's relations with all stakeholders: students, teachers, partners, government and contractors.* This kind of code, which is useful for everyone, would be a formidable tool for promoting the values of the education system as well as an internal unifying tool for developing and improving good practices.

In summary, ethical marketing comprises three key aspects:

1. marketing materials that are trustworthy.
2. outcomes that are verifiable and consistent with the intended messages.
3. inter-university comparisons that are verifiable, objective and updated.

Studies are expensive and students are a specific consumer group. *Attracting financing is not an objective* in itself and marketing management² can make it possible to communicate effectively and to reconcile values and missions while taking environmental constraints into account.

■ Communicating an image: a strategic challenge...

For Maurits van Rooijen, an institution's image is more than brochures and booklets. *The proper image must be forged over time.* Communication must continually target many different kinds of concerns. *It must provide information on key decisions, mobilise staff and sustain values, and provide support and reassurance.* However, the purposes of communication vary depending on whether the aim is to address a public of education specialists, try to reach a mass audience, communicate with the media, engage in dialogue with companies or communicate with players on international markets.

These purposes must be defined, formulated and shared and different approaches and skills will be required to adapt the message closely to the target audiences. This is all the more important since all players are permanently exposed to a broad range of influences, it is a system. Ethics alone, perhaps, cannot be influenced.

■ ... and a lever for managing change

Universities think in the long term, but the changes that affect the world of education often have major impacts that require flexibility and the ability to react rapidly, appropriately and effectively. Universities have undergone remarkable changes over a period of a few years. The scope for action, methods of co-operation, new forms of governance implemented, particularly in decision-making processes, and increasingly professional attitudes are all signs and effective illustrations of the changes that have taken place and the adaptability of higher education institutions.

■ Looking ahead

Institutions must perpetually demonstrate their excellence. To this end, they must communicate continuously in order to enhance and promote their image. Whether they were founded centuries ago or only a few years ago, universities have shown a formidable ability to adapt their missions and to respond to the never-ending challenges that have marked their history.

From the Middle Ages until today, they have always lived up to their commitments, and in particular the task of designing curricula that are closely adapted to the changing world and that of educating and training large masses of students in response to the demand of states, industries, businesses and individuals.

Universities and the education community as a whole are going through an **exciting period of transition.** There can be no doubt that this phase will continue for quite some time, and we shall therefore leave the last word to Seneca: "If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable."

Some bibliographical references regarding authors mentioned.
The Fifth Discipline, 1st Edition, Oct. 94, Peter Senge.
Marketing for Educational Institutions, 2nd Edition, Philip Kotler.

Written by Mahmoud Amara, Consultant.

2. Marketing management consists of planning and implementing the development, pricing, promotion and distribution of an idea, product or service with a view to a mutually satisfactory exchange for both organisations and individuals.

ime NEWS

The IMHE welcomes the following new members:

- > University of Wollongong - Australia
- > Hogeschool Gent - Belgium
- > African Virtual University - Kenya
- > Technische Universiteit Eindhoven - Netherlands
- > Agricultural University of Norway - Norway
- > University of Primorska - Slovenia
- > Universitat Oberta de Catalunya - Spain

The 2004 IMHE General Conference was held at the OECD Headquarters in Paris on 13-15 September 2004. The overall theme was "Choices and Responsibilities: Higher Education in the Knowledge Society". Some 200 participants came from over 40 countries. Organised by IMHE every two years, this conference offers higher education institutions an opportunity to address



themes of topical interest. This year, the conference focused on new funding and governance mechanisms; access and equity, the impact of the knowledge society on institutional management; new missions and strategies for institutions; new knowledge, research and knowledge creation; and human resources issues. The next general conference will be held in September 2006. www.oecd.org/edu/imhegeneralconference2004

Elsewhere in OECD

■ **An international seminar on Information and Communications Technology and Educational Property Management** was held on 31 October to 3 November 2004, in Montreal, Canada. The seminar looked at how ICT can be made an integral part of managing educational property. The event was organised by the OECD Programme on Educational Building and the Association of Institutional Property Managers, with the participation of the Quebec Ministry of Education and the Quebec Energy Efficiency Agency.

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■ Reviews of City and Regional Development Agencies

Many cities and regions have development agencies that they want to review and re-organise. Very few, however, know how to do this well. The Programme on Local Economic and Employment Development LEED is initiating a series of reviews based on a current study to develop a diagnostic tool

for how a city or region can review and re-empower (or close down) the development agency that they have. After several Agencies have been reviewed a synthesis report will be prepared which further elaborates on the existing 'tool kit'.

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■ Third PEB Compendium

The OECD Programme on Educational Building (PEB) plans a third compendium of exemplary educational facilities following the success of the first two editions. The project will consist of a full-colour book and exhibition which will present school and university buildings from around the world with the aim of promoting good design, use and management. PEB will call for submissions in early 2005, and information will be posted at www.oecd.org/edu/facilities. Organisations or companies interested in sponsoring this widely-disseminated and influential project are invited to contact the Secretariat.

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PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST



University Research Management: Meeting the Institutional Challenge

Helen Connell, editor.
OECD Publications 2004,
ISBN 9264017437

Governments are placing unprecedented emphasis on research as a key motor for driving the knowledge society and economy. It is not surprising then that higher education institutions are turning their focus to research, their reputation in the field, their capacity to carry it out and the funding they receive.



On the Edge. Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education

OECD Publications 2004,
ISBN 9264108211

(free on line : www.oecd.org/edu/higher)

As higher education has grown and state funding has been constrained, the financial sustainability of institutions of higher education has become an issue for policy makers and for those who govern and manage these institutions. This report examines the conditions needed to secure a financially sustainable future from the national (policy) and institutional (management) perspectives. It focuses on the big messages, which are relevant in most national and institutional contexts. It suggests that a new form of partnership is needed between institutions and the State which supports increasingly autonomous universities in taking a more strategic view of their role. For their part, institutions need to adopt some of the strategic governance arrangements and financial management skills seen in the commercial sector.

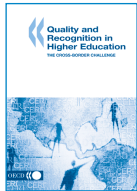


Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

OECD Publications 2004,
ISBN 9264015043

In the last decade, we have witnessed new forms of cross-border post-secondary education. These forms not only include international student

mobility, but also the mobility of educational programmes and institutions across borders. Until now, however, there has been no comprehensive account of these activities at the global level. This book fills the gap by bringing together up-to-date statistics, case studies and policy reports.

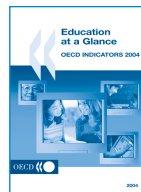


Quality and Recognition in Higher Education: The Cross-border Challenge

OECD Publications 2004, ISBN 9264015086

Cross-border education is undergoing new and growing developments. These changes are challenging existing national quality assurance and accreditation frameworks and agencies. At the same time,

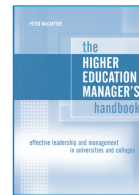
increasing student and professional mobility across borders has emphasised the importance of mutual recognition of academic and professional qualifications.



Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2004 Edition

OECD Publications 2004, ISBN 9264015671

This 2004 edition enables countries to see themselves in the light of other countries' performance. It provides a rich, comparable and up-to-date array of indicators on the performance of education systems that represent the consensus of professional thinking on how to measure the current state of education internationally.



The Higher Education Manager's Handbook: Effective Leadership and Management in Universities and Colleges

Peter McCaffery,

RoutledgeFalmer, 2004, ISBN 0-415-33507-8

This book offers practical advice and guidance on all aspects of the higher education manager's role. Drawing on professional best practice and the examples of international university innovators, it tackles all the key areas central to the job of managing in higher education, from understanding the culture of your university and the role it plays to providing effective leadership and managing change.

IMHE CALENDAR 2005

24-27 April

APPA/IMHE/PEB symposium on *Planning, Designing and Managing Higher Education Institutions*, San José, USA.
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9-11 May

Funding, Financial Monitoring and Research Management organised jointly with the China National Institute for Education Research, Beijing, China.
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25-26 August

"What works" seminar on *Management of Human Resources*, OECD, Paris.
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October

Seminar on *The Regional Role of HEIs*, in collaboration with NUAS and NUS (Nordic rectors and registrars), Karlstad, Sweden.
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Autumn

Seminar on *University Public Relations*, Hong Kong, China.
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OTHER MEETING OF INTEREST

3-5 February

EUA Joint Seminar *Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society*, Salzburg, Austria.
www.eua.be

11-12 February

EUA Workshop *Research Management: Exploring and Managing Interdisciplinary Research Projects*, Aachen, Germany. www.eua.be

17-19 May

Conference of European Education Ministers, Bergen, Norway.
<http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>

28-31 August

27th Annual EAIR Forum *Enduring Values and New Challenges in Higher Education*. Riga, Latvia.
www.eair.nl/riga

14-17 September

EAIE Conference, Kraków, Poland
www.eaie.nl/krakow



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