Determining Brand Image Dimensions of Malaysian Research Universities: A Qualitative Approach

Noordini Abdullah, Dr Nooraini Mohamad Sherrif, Dr Norzaidi Mohd Daud

1Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School Universiti Teknologi MARA 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
2Arshad Ayub Graduate Business School Universiti Teknologi MARA 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
3Institute of Business Excellence/Faculty of Business Management/Accounting Research Institute Universiti Teknologi MARA 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the determinants of brand image of research universities among postgraduate students. Experts in research universities in Malaysia were interviewed to establish their opinion regarding the dimensions of brand image for a research university deemed relevant to students. By using qualitative approach, this study suggested that supervisor quality, teaching quality, productivity or excellent outcome, program quality, research culture, learning and research support services/facilities, availability of research grant, information source on institutions were potential dimensions of research university brand image. This study is perhaps one of the first to investigate determinants of Malaysian research universities brand image. The results provide insights on how the Malaysia research universities could improve their brand images.

Key words: Brand image, research university, qualitative approach, Malaysia

Introduction

In this era of globalization, nations have to adjust to new realities in high education and Malaysia is of no exception. The time has come for Malaysia to produce more innovative, creative and knowledgeable human resources which capable of generating wealth in the country with the purpose of improving the quality of life. Therefore, the National Vision stresses the need to develop a knowledge-based economy whereby research and development (RandD) is considered an important agenda. Consistent with the National Vision, developing the image of a world class university is of paramount importance. With strong intention to become world class, local universities are now being closely scrutinized for their ability to face a diversity of challenges. Among them are to consistently increase the number of postgraduate students. Having a specified number of postgraduate students is a requirement of being a Research university.

In view of these challenges, the Malaysian government has structured the Public universities into three categories, namely, research university, focused university (the technical education, management and defense universities) and comprehensive university. There are presently 20 public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) of which five are Research Universities, four Comprehensive Universities and eleven Focused Universities. The four Research Universities which are University of Malaya (UM): Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM): Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) all of which were announced as Research university under the 9th Malaysia Plan. University Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) was announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak as the country’s fifth Research university during the unveiling of the 10th Malaysia Plan on June 10th, 2010 (Mohd Farhaan, 2010). Research universities are expected to be the model of Malaysian universities focusing on research activities with emphasis at knowledge creation through research and publications (Rohaty, 2008).

Although much has been written about the factors that influence the brand image of universities, no study had been done to investigate the image of Research university. A majority of previous literature has not been able to distinguish the differences in the attributes of Research university from the traditional university as they have focus on the generic framework of universities attributes (Ivy, 2001). Some of the models or framework used to discuss university image seem to be incompatible with the nature of a Research university. Hence, there is no agreement as to what constitutes the key brand image dimensions of a Research university. A study is much needed to clearly define the attributes of brand image of Research university.

A comprehensive model reflecting the brand image of a Research university would include a spectrum of indicators namely supervisor quality, teaching quality, research laboratories, library and others that are...
compatible with a university based on research. This parallels the key tasks of a Research university that encompassed research activities. Thus an empirical study to confirm this is important as research has a critical impact in this era of globalization.

According to Ivy (2001): the brand image portrayed by HEIs will impact on a student’s willingness to enroll in a particular institution or university. There has been a number of efforts to understand the complexities associated with the brand image of a university. Numerous studies address specific image issues such as brand image based on services provided by universities, sporting facilities and qualities of teaching (Krampf and Heinlein, 1981; Peters, 1992; Hall, 1993; Qureshi, 1995; Mazzarol and Hosie, 1996; Lin, 1997; Mazzarol, 1998; Turner, 1998; Ford et al., 1999; Ivy, 2001; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 2001; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Srikatanyoo and Gnoth, 2002; Gutman and Miaoulis, 2003; Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003; Price et al., 2003, Cubillo, Sánchez and Cerviño, 2005; Sofiah et al., 2009). Although these studies have enhanced our understanding on the processes and outcomes associated with a university, nevertheless they have made only limited attempts to focus on university-based research criteria.

Therefore, to fill this gap, this study will further identify the unique attributes of brand image dimensions relevant to a Research university. The next section reviews pertinent literatures that have garnered impressive theoretical and practical support.

Literature review:

Image Concept:

Dichter (1985) defined image as the overall impression made on the minds of customers. It was further described by Solomon (1985) that image is related to tradition, reputation, business name, ideology, variety of services, and to the impression of quality communicated by each person interacting with customers. In the services marketing literature, image has been described as having the potential of influencing customer perception of quality (Gronroos 1984,1990; Lehtinen and Lehtinen, 1991). According to Kennedy (1977) and Martineau (1958): image is made up of two principal components. First, the functional component or technical quality (Gronroos 1984, 1990): which is related to tangible characteristics that can be easily measured. Second, the emotional component or functional quality (Gronroos 1984,1990) which is associated with psychological dimensions that are manifested by feelings and attitudes towards a company. These feelings are derived from individual experiences with a company and from the processing of information on the attributes that constitute functional indicators of image. In the same manner, Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) proposed three major types of quality dimensions, namely physical quality, interactive quality, and corporate quality. Physical quality relates to the environment and the equipment which is used to produce the service, while interactive quality involves the interactions between the customer and the contact personnel during access to service. Corporate quality is associated with the image of the service organization and link the corporate identity.

Corporate Image / Brand Image:

Keller (2003) defined brand image as the perception of a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory. Brand associations are a key component of brand identity because they form consumer’s view of a brand (Aaker 1996). Therefore brand image is a reflection of brand associations and perceptions. Park, Jaworski and MacInnis (1986) also brought up an important point that brand image is the “understanding consumers derive form the total set of brand-related activities engaged by the firm” (p.135).

Therefore, from literature it is obvious that there has been a lack of agreement about the definition of corporate image and how this term should be operationalised (Gioia et al., 2000; Balmer, 2001). Each definition puts emphasis on different aspects (Pruyn, 1999) and the concept of image is applicable not only to corporate brands, but also to products, individual brands, events and people. The choice of operationalisation of the concept is therefore highly dependent on the research problem at hand.

As the focus of the study is on brand image of research university, the definition provided by Aaker (1997) is considered to be the most useful here: Aaker (1997) defined image as the net result of all the experiences, impressions, beliefs, feelings and knowledge that people have about a company. This definition shows that brand image consists of several factors and that these factors influence the behaviour of individuals towards the organization or institution. Furthermore, several empirical findings have confirmed that a favorable image (i.e. brand, store/retail) will link to loyalty (e.g. Koo, 2003; Kandampully and Suhartanto, 2000; Nguyen and LeBlanc, 1998): brand equity (Faircloth, Capella, and Alford, 2001; Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993): purchase behavior (Hsieh et al., 2004) and brand performance (Roth, 1995).
Experts’ definitions of research university brand image:

Literature has postulated research as a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue (Creswell, 2008) while a university is an institution dedicated to not only the quest and dissemination of knowledge, but also the creation of new knowledge. It is an idea that continues to evolve: “it is a place where the fullest and most exact knowledge of times is given” (Bryce, 1914). Furthermore, Boys, et al., (1988) advocates that universities are not limited to the acquisition of technical knowledge, but will also includes other types of capabilities, such as creativity, leadership, and team spirit among others.

There are no exact definitions what is a Research university. According to Prof. Dr Kurunathan a/l Ratnavelu, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Development) University of Malaya, “Research is one of the MAIN core businesses of any university which wishes to claim itself as world class.” (ICPE-4)

Are Research Universities distinguished from other universities by virtue of their core business that is research and their target of being a world class University?

The interview began with open-ended questions. The first question focused on the experts understanding of research university and definition of Research university. Based on the interview sessions with the experts, most of them mentioned that research university has a high degree of involvement in research where the outcome of research would create new knowledge thus can innovate and can serve the community. The findings also indicate that it is critical for academic staff to be involved in research activities. According to one of the experts, universities are judged by research performance not only at local level but also at global level in order to be a world class university and leading in the specific field.

A Research university therefore can best be understood as an institution for Creation of New Knowledge, to promote Creativity and Innovation, Preservation, Dissemination of New Knowledge and to establish leadership expertise in individuals to work within a professional context and to meet the specific needs of a professional group external to the University. Alba and Hutchinson (1987) define expertise “as the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully”. In this context, expertise is to be found in a person who has the ability to perform service-related tasks successfully. In other words, an expert is a leader who can influence the behavior of other people towards the goal of the organization.

Research methodology:

Differing perspective of the brand image have implications for the brand strategy. To understand the most up-to-date insights on Research university brand image, the following were undertaken.

Benchmarking on the procedure for conducting expert interviews by Meuser and Nagel (2002): discussions were held with the respondents on topics within their fields of expertise. Interviews with experts are less likely to stray into unproductive subject areas (Flick, 2006): but rely on the interviewee being genuinely knowledgeable about the subject in hand. Individual rather than focus group interviews had been undertaken because the lecturers lived and worked in widely dispersed geographical districts and are busy people whose time was at a premium. A ‘semi-standardized’ interview methodology (Groeben, 1990) has been applied, which is suitable for situations where the interviewee has a ‘complex stock of knowledge about the topic under study’ (Flick 2006 p.155). This knowledge enables the respondents to spontaneously express their views on open-ended questions.

The interview began by asking respondents to state in general terms his or her views on the meaning of research university as seen by a potential student (open-ended one). Then, the interviewees were asked to specify, what he or she believed that postgraduate students regarded as the main indicators of a university image (open-ended two). For each of the primary items mentioned, the respondents were then requested to explain ‘Why did you select this item?’ Questioning of this nature allegedly identifies fundamental issues through ‘forcing meaningful elaboration’ (Lazarus 1989 p.49). The interview has been audio taped in order to ensure that the discussions were transcribed accurately. The definition of Research university became a guide to the discussion for open-ended item two, to avoid from straying on to issues deviating from the scope of the study.

The data were then analysed by reading and re-reading the data in depth to search for differences and patterns in the informants’ experiences regarding customer satisfaction and retention (Gerber, 2001).

Findings:

The following gives a summary of the main responses to the open-ended item 2 concerning the brand image indicators that the interviewees deemed most important to the image of Research university. The variables were identified as Learning and Research Support Services/Facilities, Research Culture/Healthy Learning Organization, Information Source on Institution, Productivity/Excellent Outcome, Supervisor Quality, Teaching
Quality, Program Quality and Availability of Research Grant. The following are the review of the factors or variables and some have “excerpts”.

(a) **Research Support Services/ Facilities:**

Lovitts (1996) and Gardner (2009) stated that higher education institutions should also provide services that facilitate the postgraduate in research process. Research students are aware of the facilities and services provided by universities that could also facilitate the research process. However, there was little study that assessed the efficacy of the research support services provided at universities. A recent study by Arambewela and Hall (2008) reports that most postgraduate require constant use of computers since some of the subjects require computer applications and analysis. Furthermore, with the promises made by universities through their promotional material and website in regard to the availability of core facilities such as modern computer equipment in adequate quantities, high expectations are formed by students and enhance the attractiveness of universities among students’ especially international students. Harvey (2001) draws our attention to considers easy access to computer lab since this variable becomes a service expected by students enrolled at universities and to be important in the formation of student satisfaction. Therefore, a better study should focus on the basic need of research student that relevant to them.

(b) **Productivity / Excellence Outcome:**

Research Universities are concerned whether ranking and total publication since research is their core business. Therefore Research Universities need to play to their strengths or situate themselves around aspects for which they become excellent. One of the experts stressed the important of publish the paper.

"... Some lectures said that they do research. But do they publish the paper? Who read your research? Some read and not cite your paper."

"... another thing. How many thesis students that supervisors manage to produce research grant?"

The following also indicate that how Research university could increase the image of Research university through publication.

"... This university requires ISI publication to get PhD, students are scared to come. It is ok. Eventually the best student will come.

In addition, there has been highlighted in the studies by the Bureau of Industry Economics (1989) that the attraction of a university lies with its reputation as a recognized institution. However, recognition of an institution that is perceived by students partly depends on the strengths and capabilities of the university to deliver what is expected. Moreover high international image and prestige of a university is an attraction to postgraduate students as it is expected that such image and prestige would open up better career opportunities for them.

(c) **Research Culture / Healthy Learning Organization:**

Many international students consider interaction with students of other nationalities, university lecturers, administrators, and the local community as part of their learning experience (Arambewela and Hall, 2008). Even more important, according to LeBlanc and Nguyen, (1996): the environment of Research Universities is deemed to influence perceptions of image. Further, Arambewela (2003) indicate that creation of a suitable environment whereby students are able to interact with their lecturers and friends will be important. The following illustrates one expert’s response justifying the image of Research university.

"... should be very healthy learning organization, in the sense that the professor academics, student must be very inquisitive, love for new knowledge all the time, the atmosphere must be healthy and encouraging intellectual exchange, seminars being conducted, there are a lot of colloquium...."

Therefore, it is important for Research university to have a culture of research such as High Impact Journal Paper Writing Seminars, workshop and courses related to the research.

(d) **Supervisor Quality:**

Supervisor’s role has been mentioned by Vilkinas (2002) to be similar to manager’s role. Both play an important role for the success of organizations or institutions. Therefore supervisors are expected to be skillful in their specific subject matter field, research knowledge and interpersonal skills (Beasley, 1999). They are also encouraged to develop supportive relationship. When a question of human factor for research university.

"... supervisor also. If the students did not satisfied, they try to switch. Two levels terminate the study and go elsewhere or they follow until they finish the studies and go elsewhere for future study."

(e) **Teaching Quality:**
This study has highlighted the importance of teaching quality and the role of the teaching staff in generating student satisfaction. It was evident that lecturers remained the primary contact of the students for both academic and non-academic issues. Research of higher degree (Murphy, N., Bain J. D., and Conrad, L., 2007) mentioned that research supervision is not a matter of research only but also teaching and learning as well. Therefore attention should be paid to the teaching character of supervision as to the methods and outcomes of the research involved. According to one of the experts:

"Some programs have courses work. Not only look at supervision part of it. This university got compulsory courses. Coursework basically pass or fail and they don’t earn any credit but they have to go through that coursework. The program also been structured. The purpose is to provide students with fundamental research skills. More prepared to independent research."

Therefore, it was suggested to consider the differences between two kinds of attributes in this study. Both supervision and teaching is important for the image of Research university. One of the experts had suggested referring on Brand Index in Higher Education.

"Look at brand index of Higher Education, under institutions factor. Eg. availability of highly qualified of lectures or quality of teaching. But you might one to break-up the two. Not all lectures becoming good supervisors."

(f) Program Quality:

The following indicate expert opinions on program quality that create the image of research university.

"We are focusing on niche area and related to the needs of their country"

Program quality is referring to course offered by faculty. In other words university aims to strengthen their offering in this area. In the long run, the university will compete with itself to be an excellent institution. According to Joseph and Joseph (1998): an excellent institution will have reputable degree program. While degree offered by an excellent institution are known for their academic value. This means the university could highlight these attributes or resources to develop image and to position these image to the potential students.

(g) Availability and Access ability to Research Grant:

In 2006, research universities received an additional RM100 million each for research, development and commercialization activities (Ng, 2006). This gives an impression of making Malaysia a preferred destination of higher study in local and global student market. For research students, funding will help them in research and to present work-in progress in seminars and conference. Maguire and Lay (1981) identified financial aid as one of the most important factors in choosing an educational institution (Joseph and Joseph, 2000)

(h) Information Source on Information:

Image creation is dependent on communication (Kennedy, 1977; Plummer, 1984). Do institutions effectively communicate vision to the stakeholders? Students mainly collect information on respective colleges prior to making a choice. Nuraida (2009) found that information satisfaction exerts a significant positive influence on college choice. Additionally, the expectations of the image and prestige are based on the information gathered about the university, its courses, teachers and comparative ranking with other universities. Some universities have built up a reputation for certain academic. Therefore it can be implied that effective communication is dependent on the information provided by respective institutions. Hence, the way institutions communicate to the stakeholders will exert great impact on brand image and eventually lead to behavior intention such as purchase intention or loyalty intention.

The above findings from the experts view, indicate generally the image of research university brand, and suggest several attributes that may contributes to make research university distinctive.

Conclusion and future research plan:

This research focuses on exploring and determination of the dimension of research university image from experts or academic views. The qualitative phase of the research provided in-depth and rich information about academics’ views and understanding of the research university image. Furthermore, this study was an initial attempt to explore the dimension of research university image and the ability of such dimensions to predict overall image ratings. Eight factors were established namely, productivity or excellence outcome, program quality, supervisor quality, teaching quality, research culture of university, learning and research support services, Availability of Research Grant and Information source on institutions. These factors should be further tested for their endurance across other samples including students especially postgraduates. It would be
interesting to know which items fall when assessed by different group of student such as local and international student.

References


Maguire, J. and R. Lay, 1981. Modelling the college choice: image and decision', College


