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Marketing Communication Models in Portuguese Public Universities

ABSTRACT

Our investigation discusses the use of marketing communication models in Portuguese public universities, since the 1990s. Through the case study of the University of Minho, we have looked for the correlation between organizational strategies and communication formats. The results suggested that the development of a market oriented approach in these institutions increased the emphasis on identity and communication management.

Using these empirical findings and other research data, we have reconstructed the history of communication in Portuguese universities, for the past century. From *elite communications models*, that have characterised the first half of the 20th century, public universities have changed to *marketing communication models* in the nineties, and then they have followed *integrated marketing communication* trends in recent years, with the purpose of controlling all messages and channels according its political strategies.

Our study has shown how Portuguese public universities have definitely entered the 'communication business' in the 21st century, using marketing strategies to create *hiper-imaginated communities*.

Keywords: marketing communication, organizational communication, to marketing communication models, branding universities

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the use of marketing communication models by Portuguese public universities in the two last decades and it aims to be a contribution to the ongoing debate about the *marketization of the higher education* sector. This terminology has been introduced to describe the new trends on higher education governance and attitude towards society. Cutbacks in state funding have forced universities worldwide to look for other sources of support and to reconsider or redefine their reasons for being.

Academic institutions, particularly public universities, used to be regarded as sacralised 'fountains of knowledge', above common interests and ordinary access. For centuries young men and women had to struggle to gain admission into these prestigious institutions. The changing status of the university sector worldwide began in the early 1970s and it was due to the growth of *knowledge society* (Jarvis, 2001; Simão *et al.*, 2002). These institutions have gone from training a select elite to educating a large proportion of the population. Their governing models have changed from an "administrative university" to a "strategic management university" (Clark, 1998). Their objectives have also been altered significantly, and they include now solving society's economic and social problems through the providence of lifelong education to the population. And its classical principles have been putted into question, as *autonomy*, *collegial democracy* or *free thinking*. Universities have become some kind of 'service provider', supplying training and technology development for the communities.

The centrality of the *knowledge economy* to the 21st century development, lead higher education to a role of unprecedented importance. Universities had been free knowledge-based institutions for centuries, but they are now considered vital to prepare tomorrow's professionals for a working life that demands "global literacy" (Freeman e Thomas, 2005). The *World Trade Organization* officially assumed in 1995 that higher education should be a labour-oriented activity taking place in a market environment, admitting for the first time the idea of an 'education market' (WTO, 1995). Some structural changes, happening in the last century, may explain this turnover: the globalization phenomenon has brought competitiveness to the higher education sector; governments began demanding more expertise to these institutions while reducing their financial support; demographic changes led to a decline on the number of students running for higher education; and the communities have been requesting a stronger sense of accountability to these institutions. As a result, during the 1980s and 1990s, established institutions on higher education began responding to these threats by adopting an *entrepreneurial spirit* (Clark, 1998): that

is expanding enrolments, increasing the variety of programmes and courses, cutting costs, acting competitively, entering the advertising and publicity arena.

Public institutions within the higher education sector were, also, advised to become more alike to corporate organizations by adopting strategic management programmes (Clark, 1998; Deem, 2001; Jarvis, 2001; Simão *et al.*, 2003; Freeman & Thomas, 2005). Since then, these organizations have been acquiring a promotional attitude, that is spending more and more time marketing themselves through 'product/service' development, advertising or branding activities. 'Marketization' in education refers precisely to the adoption of free market practices in running schools, including the business trends of cutting 'production costs', abandoning goods not in demand or producing only popular products (Askehave, 2007), but also leveraging the brands reputation through communication strategies (Chapleo, 2005).

Finally, the end of the 1990s witnessed the corporatization of public universities communication that became more promotional than informative (Bollag, 2002; Bulotaite, 2003; Boffo, 2004; McCleneghan, 2006; Osman, 2008). The introduction of a marketing communication model in these organizations was visible through the use of a new language code – 'market', 'clients' or 'consumers' became part of the universities vocabulary (Fairclough, 1993) – and through the employment of communication planning activities. Advertising prospectus started to use promotional elements, with slogans and 'models as students', in order to appeal to the best 'university experience' (Symes, 1996; Mcknight & Paugh, 1999; Askehave, 2007). Branding became a fundamental tool to marketing their products and services, including establishing a name, a distinct identity, a renewed design or a particular offer. And image management turn out to be a central governance issue.

Traditionally, public universities attend their social 'prestige' (Fuller *et al.* 2006) which was built on the quality of their education, measured on the results of their graduates and their performance in the careers they embraced upon graduation. As years passed, 'image' (Dowling, 1986) became a new value for universities and it was expected to be managed through communication programmes. Each university began looking for a strategy to promote its name, its logo, its 'perceived quality', as a way for creating 'a distinct brand personality'.

In short, towards the end of the 20th century, public universities have assumed a more corporate form and its communication functions have adopted innovative marketing

orientations, which became routine procedures through our century. These trends were also felt in Portugal, as we will explain in the next section.

THE PORTUGUESE CASE

The higher education sector in Portugal has been facing a major change throughout the two last decades, and its communication became increasingly commercial. This is the main conclusion of a study we have conducted on Portuguese public universities, through the close analysis of the University of Minho. This empirical research looked for the correlation between organizational strategies and communication formats, using the case study methodology that included elite interviews, document analysis and observational devices. The results suggested that the development of a market oriented approach in this institution increased the emphasis on identity and communication management (Ruão, 2008).

Using these empirical findings and other research data, we have reconstructed the history of communication in Portuguese public universities for the past century. In this process we emphasise some relevant trends: the increase on investments in communication, the development of marketing functions, the use of new media and the introduction of brands. These indicators suggest that these universities are paying a grater attention to *intangible assets*, as a consequence of the adoption of capitalist organizational models, throughout the nineties.

Portugal had an elite higher education system until the 1970s, with 100 thousand students in 1975/76 (Cabral, 2006). Since that decade, the number of public and private higher education institutions has increased enormously and the number of students in the system has tripled: the country has today 160 higher education organizations – with 14 public universities, most of them born after the middle seventies - and 300 thousand students in the system (Cabral, 2006; Portela *et al.*, 2007). However, regulating and financing this massive increase turned out to be a difficult task for the Portuguese governments, that began inducing quality regulation and economic self-sustainability during the 1980s and 1990s. The State believed that the best regulation model was the ‘market paradigm’, following international trends. Still, the Portuguese State kept an important role on the process, evaluating universities performances and controlling information gave to the market (CNAVES, 1994).

In spite of the weakness on the autonomy induced to public universities, the Portuguese State began introducing mechanisms for creating a market on higher education and 1995

can be pointed as the turn out moment (Amaral, 2005; Carvalho, 2003). Among those mechanisms we emphasize constant budget restraints, applied research orientations, competition encouragements and pressures to corporate governance. These measures, supported by international developments, had economic origins - forcing institutions to a more efficient management - but they faced strong reluctances especially among older universities.

To market environment, economic restrains and pressures to strategic governance, Portuguese public universities responded with the cautious development of mass communication and marketing activities, beginning in the middle nineties (Amaral, 2005, 2008; Ruão, 2008). Communication purposes were redefined, and attracting students and funds turned into the most important message intention. The *intangible* factors became crucial to distinguish services and increase attractiveness. The classic public relations departments (with protocol and administrative communication functions) began sharing responsibilities or were replaced by marketing functions. This change on structures and communication perspectives led to some radical transformations on universities' traditional communication models. Communication became a new strategic tool to leverage cultural transformation, to enhance image, to attract students and funds, or in short to react to change pressures. Within the communication mix, Portuguese universities selected advertising, exhibitions, promotional prospectus, online channels, brand names and logos as their main instruments to fight for identity awareness and trust status.

These marketing communication efforts began weakly, with internal resistances, inadequate collaborations with PR functions, 'hybrid' promotional practices (Fairclough, 1993) and with no correspondence within institutional identity and culture. Portuguese universities were changing as a reaction to external pressures while its internal environment was still very conservative and elitist. Branding and advertising were seen as 'heresies' by some members of the academies, but the forces to change were too strong to resist. Within this context some university leaders and opinion makers began defending strategic planning and marketing communication as the only way to survive (Amaral, 2005, 2008). By the end of the 1990s, national media started to publish rankings that evaluated the quality of these institutions based on poorly constructed models, but with a considerable impact on public opinion. At that moment, and after some collective institutional negative reactions (through the *Counsel of Deans of Portuguese Universities*, CRUP), public universities became aware of the inevitable change on their communication classical paradigm.

The publics of higher education institutions started being perceived as 'stakeholders' and their importance ranking changed. *Students* became the university's most important public (and also their parents) while in the past they were ranked on a minor position, after *state lobbying* or *peer relations*. They also began to be perceived as relevant vehicles of information, generating *worth of mouth* comments (which are, according to some empirical studies, strong mechanisms to image development on higher education; Ivy, 2001; Kazoleas *et al.*, 2001). *Evaluation commissions* became a new very important public, as they decide fund raising and reputation. Next to them, emerged *mass media* and *opinion leaders* as relevant intermediary publics to modelling public perceptions on 'education quality', 'brand value' or 'employment rates'. *Companies* were converted into strategic publics, with whom these institutions developed close communications tactics: they became clients, advisers, allies and investors. *Local communities* and *authorities, state rulers, competitors* and *staff members* continued to be considered as relevant audiences, but the pressure to immediate success changed the communication axes to publics understood as clients/consumers, opinion makers and fund providers.

DISCUSSION

Portuguese public universities communication models have indeed changed in the last decades. Our research has defined 'communication model' as the format adopted by an organization to arrange its communication activities, having in consideration three comparison factors: (1) communication purposes; (2) communication publics; and (3) communication practices.

Following this conceptualization, our analysis has identified three phases on the communication formats of Portuguese public universities. The first one was an *elite communication model*, from the early 1900s to 1980s, and it was characterized by information and prestige purposes, privileging institutional publics and using public relations practices. The second format, was identified has a *marketing communication model*, because these institutions assumed image and commercial purposes, became 'client oriented' and began using a more extended communication mix (including advertising and direct marketing). The last configuration was classified has an *integrated marketing communication model*, as public universities began looking for controlling all message sending, to all publics and through the all channels (with identity manuals and brand regulations).

In the 21st century, Portuguese universities assumed a globally widespread talk about 'clients', 'consumers', 'stakeholders' and 'customers'. The old coats of arms were replaced by modern logos. Advertising was applied to a wide variety of contexts, including newspapers, television or public places. Slogans were adopted, celebrating the old virtues of knowledge but also referring to more mundane and tangible values. Prospectuses, once important information vehicles, were modernised catching the concerns of the new students. However, in the internal contexts, these institutions still had conservative approaches and values, with no correspondence on the communicated identity. The internal marketing was left to a secondary place, because the external pressure to 'look different' was too strong to ignore.

CONCLUSION

Since the 1990s, Portuguese public universities entered the 'communication business' (Christensen & Cheney, 2000) and its messages became more pragmatic, instrumental and mercantile. Through corporate iconography, merchandising, brochures or websites, these organizations looked for more aggressive promotional strategies with consequences on management efficiency. Such a behaviour demanded competent marketers and communicators, able to transform classical institutions into brand names. However, this is still an unexplored field for marketing professionals and communication agencies in Portugal. As our research has showed, the marketing efforts on this sector remain immature, while Portuguese public universities are forced to acknowledge that their future depends on their abilities to create *hiper-imaginated communities* (Anderson, 1991), following the Oxford or Harvard examples.

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