From research excellence to brand relevance

An alternative model for strategic higher education reputation building

Abstract

In this article a novel approach to reputation development at higher education institutions is argued. Global reputation development at higher education institutions is largely driven by research excellence, predominantly measured by research output, and predominantly reflected in hierarchical university rankings which, in turn, is equated with brand equity. It is argued that the current approach to reputation development in higher education institutions is modernist and linear, strangely out of kilter with the complexities of a transforming society in flux, the demands of a diversity of stakeholders, and the drive towards transdisciplinarity, laterality, reflexivity and relevance in science itself. Whilst good research remains an important ingredient of a university's brand value, a case is made for brand relevance, co-created in collaboration with stakeholders, as an alternative, non-linear way of differentiation, in light of challenges in strategic science globally, as well as trends and shifts in the emerging paradigm of strategic communication. In applying strategic communication principles to current trends and issues in strategic science and the communication thereof, an alternative model for strategic reputation building at higher education institutions is developed.

Key words: research excellence, strategic research, strategic communication, brand relevance, stakeholders, social impact.

Introduction

The rise of the post-industrial knowledge economy has placed a high value on higher education (HE) institutions as 'engines of development'.[1] This has dramatically changed the role of HE institutions from elite systems (characterised by gross enrolment ratios of 15%) to universal systems where GER's have increased with up to 70% in some advanced economies.[2]

Governments increasingly see investment in HE and in research and development as essential for ensuring the knowledge base necessary for economic growth. Knowledge production is regarded as more important than capital or labour.[3]

As a result, competition in the HE sector has become intense. How to differentiate each institution from the rest has become the main challenge. It has become evident that the most powerful differentiator is research excellence, as research is a critical function in the production of new knowledge and the emancipation of society. As a result, reputation building at HE institutions has, to a large degree, become premised on the construct of research excellence. While it is acknowledged that other factors contribute to the reputation of HE institutions, such as teaching and learning, academic freedom, tradition, facilities, student experience and others, research excellence is widely regarded as the key reputation builder.[2-4]

At the same time research itself has come under intense scrutiny, as new challenges and issues impacting upon the relationship between science and society have arisen. Increasing tensions surrounding the democratisation of science and the re-contextualisation of science have forced science to become more reflexive as to its own role and impact in a complex society engaging with a multiplicity of stakeholders. Even the concept of research excellence has come under scrutiny. These forces have their own impact on HE institutions as knowledge producers in society, although not restricted to them.

HE institutions in South Africa are also struggling with their own set of challenges: remaining responsive to local problems while striving towards global competitiveness, and maintaining the balance between accessibility and global reputation. Resultant tensions between excellence and transformation imperatives were brought to the world's attention when the #RhodesMustFall campaign swept across the country, resulting not only in the removal of the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town, but also a name change of

Rhodes University, and the Open Stellenbosch campaign. All of these culminated in the #FeesMustFall student-protests which have significantly shifted the ground in the country, and irrevocably changed the climate in which HE institutions operate and are funded. High on the agenda are issues such as the decolonisation of knowledge, free education and others in a society fissured by educational inequalities.

While mindful of competing binaries, such as global vs. local, excellence vs. relevance and excellence vs. transformation, this article will argue that the current excellence approach to reputation building at HE institutions, is steeped in modernist, fixed and linear notions which are increasingly challenged not only as far as the role of science in society is concerned, but also as far as the emerging, multi-paradigmatic approach to strategic communication and reputation building is concerned. It will bring a novel concept of reputation building at HE institutions into the equation, that of brand relevance. Whilst HE institutions have been historically hesitant to embrace brand and business principles and profess themselves uncomfortable with the entire premise of university brand building, branding in the HE sector is not an entirely new concept. HE branding in the past, however, has been built around generic constructs or linear rankings, which all in turn led to similarity instead of differentiation of so-called HE 'brands' in the reputation race.

Research Objectives

One of the key research objectives of this conceptual and analytical article is to reflect on the coherence which emerges from the diverse and fragmented academic, meta-scientific and industry literature that are relevant for HE reputation building from a transdisciplinary perspective. Through the identification of trends and issues in strategic research, and trends and shifts in strategic communication, this article will adopt a multi-paradigmatic approach to reputation building and will propose an alternative model to reputation building. The purpose here is to contribute to the much needed higher-level understanding of the complex nature of HE reputation building not only in Africa, but globally, and to raise the possibility of further debate and research.

The approach will be structured in the following ways:

1. To consider key challenges and trends emerging in strategic research which affect the relationship between science and society, including the communication of science to society.
2. To compare these trends with key trends and shifts in the emerging paradigm of strategic communication, and to reflect on how challenges in science communication can be addressed by strategic communication.
3. To consider the implications of strategic communication for strategic branding and brand relevance from a multi-stakeholder perspective.
4. To examine research excellence as global reputation builder at research intensive HE institutions.
5. To build a case for the changing of discourse from brand excellence to brand relevance.
6. To propose an alternative model for reputation building at HE institutions, and for building a purposeful HE brand.

Strategic Research: Challenges and Issues

Strategic research, denoting 'applied research with a long term perspective',[5,6] gained momentum in the 1980s[5] due to the interest in the knowledge economy and in scientific technologies as an engine for economic growth.

Strategic research combines two principles, namely *excellence* and *relevance* which are not regarded as contradictory . The spread of theme-based, problem-orientated centres of research excellence and relevance across the globe bears evidence of how important strategic research has become. At the same time, a new set of challenges are emerging that have forced strategic researchers to reconsider the role of science in society as discussed below.

Research uptake

The EC-report[5] for monitoring activities of science in society express reservations as to whether strategic research has not, indeed, evolved into a type of basic research, and whether the gap between research and its eventual uptake has not become larger. Research results circulate mainly among researchers themselves, contributing to a reservoir of scientific knowledge, visible in the contents of scientific journals, with other researchers fishing in the reservoir and creating new combinations.

This may result in a somewhat incestuous cycle where the greatest impact of research is on researchers themselves, while others who may benefit from the results, remain out of the loop. Biswas and Kircherr[7] interestingly argue that 'the impact of most peer-reviewed publications even within the scientific community is miniscule', and that scholars' publications in the popular media must count as well as they are far more likely to shape public debates or influence policies.

Globally, and also on the continent of Africa, public or private sector funders of research and research chairs at HE institutions are increasingly engaging in evaluations in terms of the socio-economic impact of research.[8]. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, signed by a wide and diverse group of individuals and interest groups across the Global North, also calls for an improvement in the way research output is evaluated, by assessing research on its own merits, eliminating journal-based metrics and promoting practices that focus on the 'value' and 'influence' of specific research outputs.[9] Similarly, Vale in an article entitled 'Evaluating how we evaluate' calls for the evaluation of research quality instead of research quantity, and the need for researchers to also make contributions to community, society and education itself.[10]

Reflexive research

Reflexive research is a continuous, evolving process of observation of and reflection upon knowledge itself, and about its value and applicability to new, complex emerging contexts. [11]

Instead of a *linear* model of innovation, strong arguments are being made for a *lateral model* of innovation, where the transformative impact of research, especially in developing societies, guided by boundary spanning leadership, is now being emphasised.[5,8] Of particular relevance here is the reciprocal relationship between research and a variety of stakeholders.

Stakeholder theory as described in the influential work by Freeman[12] and others,[13] denotes the influence of multiple stakeholders that do not have a direct stake in the institution, but are viewed as active 'influencers' who can affect the actions of the institution.[14]

The stakeholder concept has clearly taken root in research as well. The influence of a multiplicity of stakeholders at all levels of research is such that science has been required to become much more *reflexive* regarding its nature, the contexts in which it operates and the stakeholders who affect and can be affected by research.[5] Not only has public scrutiny of research become a fact of life, but also a critical evaluation of expertise, and questions about how research can enhance society, as calls for the decolonisation of knowledge and 'Africa-rooted' evaluation models[15,16] indicate. Reflexive research has now become the mediator between stakeholder positions and scientific interests, via expert narratives linked to evidence robust enough for stakeholders in society.[5]

Re-contextualisation of science

Arguments for the re-contextualisation of science began with scholars[17,18] who argued that a number of changes has led to a Mode 2 of knowledge production characterised by fluidity, changing research teams, a more general distribution of research; contextualisation of application, transdisciplinarity ; new forms of quality control and social robustness as the new ideal.

Similarly, Cilliers[19] argues for complexity to connect with contextualised information; thereby the integration of the observer with the observed. The transdisciplinary approach has gained considerable ground, guided, as it is, by the argument that humanity requires an approach that transcends narrow disciplines in engaging complex and interlinked problems such as the logic and ethics of natural sciences, climate change, poverty, systemic unemployment etc. particularly with respect to its applicability in the continent of Africa.[20]

The debate has escalated with a growing tension between Western science and society, also referred to in the EC MASIS-report.[5] In some quarters Western science and notions of universality are regarded as ideology in itself.[21] 'The growing rupture in communication is, to a large extent the product of the exacerbation of rational thought, which manifests itself through the predominance of reductionism and of a binary and linear logic that, among other shortcomings, separates the observer from the observed'.[22]

Thus, while transdisciplinarity is an attempt at formulating an integrative, holistic process of knowledge production which goes beyond multi- or interdisciplinarity, it is in part a reaction

against the twentieth century occurrence of 'undeserved deference to authority', 'stifling disciplinary specialisation' and 'methodological commodification'[20]

The emerging trend is thus the need for a 're-contextualisation of science'[5] and the integration of knowledge paradigms involving a multiplicity of stakeholders.

Excellence, still relevant?

'Research excellence' experienced a major revival since 2000 with the establishment of research councils around the globe (particularly in the global North) with the mission to support excellence such as the German Excellenz Initiative; Australia's Group of Eight (CO8); the United States' Ivy League, the United Kingdom's Russell Group and China's C9 League. This revival gained momentum through the continuing emphasis on measurable research output (in ISI journals) in assessments and evaluations.

Excellence and relevance are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, the question remains whether a one-sided emphasis on excellence, or the choice of indicators for measuring excellence, is not endangering the pursuit of relevance[5].

> *'A case in point is the increasing importance of the ISI impact factor system which favours decontextualized and globalised science while context-related and more local research, dedicated to specific problem solving, is disadvantaged. Sciences could lose their link to practice resulting from the pressure to publish in international journals instead of engaging in local environments and problem solving. Thus there is a (perhaps unintended) tendency to bring science back to a more separated, perhaps isolated and more autonomous activity, following its own rules and hunting for impacts in the ISI system rather than in the "real world"'.[5]*

That relevant research must be good research, is not contested. However, the idea of excellence can be interpreted as 'being better than others in some competition, rather than being good'.[5]

Excellence has become the basis, indeed, upon which universities differentiate themselves from one another, as is evident in university rankings worldwide. Diversity, as a result, is 'often … seen through the lens of superior or inferior status, a phenomenon which is aggravated by the halo effect of global rankings'.[23]

This, in turn, relates directly to the linear, hierarchical approach to university reputational rankings around the globe, which is largely based on research output in accredited international journals.

Mouton[24] warns against this vertical approach as 'a scientometric discourse' that largely occurs on the descriptive level which describes what universities look like in terms of absolute scientific output. Instead, he claims that higher education differentiation is embedded in very different discourses. Is it a discourse about allocation of national resources, or redress and transformation, or competitiveness, or strategic positioning? Different discourses give priority to different criteria when measuring differentiation.

Communicating research

Emerging as one of the biggest challenges in research, is how to communicate research, and how to bridge the gap between knowledge production, policy and application. The issue is not the abundant supply of knowledge, but how to make this knowledge accessible to society and to engage in communication and dialogue on it. However, despite efforts to engage the public in these efforts, the practice of knowledge communication still appears to be unidirectional.[5] Furthermore, it has also become steeped in ideological debate with accusations that the global evolvement of knowledge (primarily flowing from the North) has influenced local knowledge paradigms, and that 'neo-liberal' concepts such as a 'knowledge economy' is primarily serving the interests of economies in the Global North.[25]

Compounding the issue of research communication is the age of interactivity. The development of web 2.0 technology and the rise of e-science have brought new opportunities, but also challenges, as to how public understanding of science can be improved. There are fears that scientists are still not realising the potential of the Worldwide Web, developed as a scientific collaborative work space by Berners-Lee in 1989. Advocates of 'open access' argue that the rise of e-science demands the means for open, immediate and free sharing of knowledge and peer-reviewed literature via the Web. That open access is not a luxury, but a necessity particularly in societies where educational inequality exists.[26] Not only could this improve the speed at which science moves to society, but help researchers to communicate online more rapidly and collaborate more effectively.[27]

The principle of open access is still resisted by many researchers, despite the new policies that higher education institutions now have in place (or are in the process of putting in place) in response to funder requirements. Many still regard the primary means of scientific communication as formal scientific publications, because individual career and institutional assessments are based on publications.[5,10] Internet content is also regarded as volatile and perishable, while scholarly journals, produced by prominent publishers, are regarded as more prestigious and lasting. Also, open access can provide public access to knowledge that might be misinterpreted and awaken the 'irrational masses'.[5]

How some of the above issues and challenges in strategic research are reflected in the emerging paradigm of strategic communication will be discussed in the following section.

Strategic Communication: Trends and Shifts

Inasmuch as research has become strategic and reflexive, communication has also become strategic and reflexive. Overton-de Klerk and Verwey[28] discuss the trends and shifts leading to the emerging paradigm of strategic communication against the backdrop of four key epistemological tenets which underlie postmodern knowledge and communication, and include *emergence*, *reflexivity,'difference'*, and *resistance*.[29-32]

Strategic communication, simply defined as 'purposeful communication to achieve a mission',[28,33] is essentially the result of the digital communication revolution, which has taken the control of information out of the hands of a limited elite and made it available to many.

A multitude of literature exists on the shifts that led to strategic communication[28] which are briefly summarised in Table 1. How these shifts are reflected in strategic science communication is also shown.

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(Place Table 1 here)

Shifts	As they manifest in Strategic Communication	As they manifest in Strategic Science Communication
From top down to bottom up	Linear one-way transmission has progressed to two-way transaction. [28,34] An 'evolving and emerging process of discourse and negotiations'. [35]	Remained stuck in transmission mode. [5,18,36] Prevailing contract top-down - science makes discoveries and makes them available to society. [37] Hidden agenda, according to some, to promote fascination for natural sciences and engineering. [5] 'Public understanding of science' nothing but marketing to promote economic and innovation interests.
From monologue to dialogue	Communication flow has progressed from one-way monologue from top management (aimed at ensuring compliance and agreement) to an inclusive and unpredictable dialogue between institutional stakeholders at all levels, [28] e.g. #FeesMustFall. Insistence on transparency, particularly amongst under 30 generation (50% + of world's generation). [38]	Increasing calls to produce research communication suitable for dialogue (e.g. transdisciplinary approach)[20] as a unidirectional flow is no longer sustainable. [5,36] Increasing demands for open access to science. [26,27]
From consensus to dissent	Communication not aimed at achieving consensus, but multiple voices and dissent, which is not only tolerated but encouraged. [26] Meaning created through *influence*, not power. Emphasis on *process* rather than outcomes of discourse. [39]	Allows debate in early stages but deliberations closed once consensus is reached. Conflicts are 'managed'. [5] Insistence for deliberations to remain open particularly when a diversity of stakeholders can be affected[5] (e.g. nanotechnology, fracking, Homo Naledi).
From control to self-organisation	Institutions can no longer control outcomes, but allow for creative solutions to spontaneously evolve bottom-up through active participation in dialogue, [28,35,40] e.g. IBM, GE, FNB. Emphasis on *sense-giving* and *sense-making* activities. [28]	Resonates with Gibbons' call for transparent, participative and self-organising contract between science and society, based upon the 'joint production of knowledge by science and society', [37], generating its own accountability and audit systems.
From social responsibility to accountability	Institutions no longer only responsible, but accountable, for contributions to society and environment. [41] Stakeholders *active* and *activist*. [42,43] Accountability not owned by institution, but granted by stakeholders - only earned via transparency and congruency between words and deeds. [44]	Increasing calls for 'social accountability of science, [36] and 'accountable systems of knowledge production'. [37] Accountability now measure of sustainability in HE institutions as harbingers of transformation in developing societies. [42]
From integration to co-creation	From one voice (integration)[45] to many diverse voices (co-creation)[28], also raised in consumer-generated media. [46] Institutions no longer in control of messaging and content,[38] allow for strategic co-creation in collaboration with stakeholders (important in institutional branding). Whole bigger than sum of the parts.	Has also occurred in research,[20] where multidisciplinary research (additive) has evolved into interdisciplinary research (integrative), and into transdisciplinary research (holistic, co-creative) which produces a single, sometimes complex, multidimensional result where the whole is different than the parts. [20]

Table 1: Shifts in Strategic Communication

In essence, all the shifts in strategic communication discussed in Table 1 indicate that in a digitally interactive era, the power has shifted from the institutional communicator to the individual recipient. Top down, unidirectional transmission of information aimed at achieving consensus are therefore no longer sustainable but must allow for creative solutions to evolve spontaneously, bottom-up through active participation in dialogue. These shifts in strategic communication, however, are not necessarily being equally reflected in the communication of strategic science, even if they feature in the scientific debate. Whilst strategic science have become more collaborative and reflexive, science communication, according to many scientists themselves, need to open up and to encourage more socially accountable, transparent and participatory modes of transaction between science and stakeholders in society.

Purposeful brands: the case for brand relevance

Brands are made up of a complex set of tangibles and intangibles, where the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts. Tangibles refer to the product itself (inherent value), whilst intangibles refer to the added value which is made up of all associations with the brand (perceived value). It is the latter that are the most vulnerable to risk, and can in a matter of days, if not hours, affect perceptions of the whole (as any number of South African HE institutions have experienced during the #FeesMust Fall protests).

The shifts in strategic communication have also exerted a profound influence on brands, the most important being that brands can no longer through the mass media control what stakeholders think of them. Stakeholders are now rewriting the script – often in consumer-generated media and via hash tag campaigns – placing the brand reputation, however carefully constructed, at risk. Institutions, as a result, are forced to engage in dialogue to minimise reputational risk. This need for dialogue, online and offline, is greatest among the so called 'millennials'[47], many of whom are enrolled at HE institutions.

Brands, in other words, can no longer rest on their laurels, and rely on reputations of excellence alone, when the very foundations on which those reputations are built, are increasingly being challenged and rocked to the core. Instead, brands are required to constantly reflect upon the values they represent, the value they add, and their purpose.[48] Who are we? What is it that we do? What difference do we make? To whom? In short, are we relevant?

While other definitions of brand relevance exist,[49,50] brand relevance, in this context, refers to brands that have a purpose which matters to all of their stakeholders.

Constantly reflecting upon a brand's relevance, has become the mantra for sustainable brands.

The Current Discourse: Research Excellence as Strategic Reputation Builder at Higher Education Institutions

An increasing number of higher education institutions world-wide aspire to research excellence and claim to be research intensive institutions. How research excellence is best defined, achieved and measured remains an open question and often presumes the exclusion of multi-stakeholder collaboration for the common good. This view is enforced by widely recognised global ranking systems of higher education institutions, such as Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, the Times Higher Education (THE) Rankings. Whilst softer indicators such as peer and employer reputation are sometimes included in the rankings, it is indisputable that all top ranked universities hold this position mainly due to their (international) published and measurable research output.[24,2,3]

However, when research excellence is understood too narrowly and defined solely by the rankings, which by consensus are biased and flawed,[51,52] there is considerable slippage between the value of research excellence as measurable indictor and its worth to society. This article focuses deliberately on the formulaic approach to excellence, in order to clearly juxtapose this one-sided view with the need to understand 'excellence' more broadly. In this narrow, ranking-focused approach to excellence, research-intensive universities usually have the following features:

Firstly, there is an emphasis on postgraduate training and research in order to shift from basic undergraduate education to the more high-powered stakes of postgraduate activity as the machine for innovation and engine room for research. As a result, innovative models of supervision are in place over and above classic one-on-one training and these new models capitalise on both supervisory capacity and the peer-learning capabilities of students. Committee-based supervision or team-based hubs where multiple PhD students work on a

common theme under one supervisor with the help of a mentor and postdoctoral fellow are good examples, also in disciplines that do not have a tradition of team-based research. The postgraduate enterprise is valorised and care is taken to deliver an optimal training experience. Students present papers at conferences and spend time at the universities of their supervisors' international research partners. The result is a next generation of potential academics that emerge from their studies already well networked and embedded into a global community of scholars. Such graduates are able to hold their own in any research environment and are ready to move into junior academic posts.

Secondly, strategic partnerships, particularly those of global reach, are a key ingredient. It is well-established[24] that publications that are co-authored with international collaborators are more visible and have a higher impact than single authored papers that are published in local journals. Research intensive universities seek out the most advantageous partnership agreements and prestigious research excellence networks. Agreements for research collaboration, co-supervision and the exchange of staff and students with *Ivy League Universities* across the world are obvious examples, as is the membership by invitation from networks such as the *Worldwide Universities Network* (WUN) and the *International Alliance of Research Universities* (IARU). The *Alliance of Research Universities in Africa* (ARUA) that was launched in March 2015 in Dakar is a more recent example. Besides prestige, the obvious value of such membership is the gearing effect of structured relations and dedicated funding. Such networks often create a virtuous circle of an enhanced postgraduate experience through joint training and exposure to multiple laboratory or fieldwork sites, strengthened relations between Principal Investigators that in turn lead to more co-authored publications and joint funding proposals.

A third key ingredient of universities that rely on research excellence as a defining factor is the clustering of expertise and critical mass to create theme-based, problem-focused centres of excellence. These hubs drive large-scale interdisciplinary projects around a common theme of global significance, such as climate change, poverty alleviation and sustainable environments. They have strong academic leadership and a team of researchers who spend at least 60% of their research time on related projects. As vehicles of collaboration, they drive international partnerships and leverage the biggest and best grants available globally. They train postgraduates and serve as knowledge incubators, thus creating a self-sustaining circle of excellence and productivity.

Fourthly, staff recruitment at institutions that chase the rankings is shaped by the passion for excellence. There is no time to nurture and slowly grow promising young scholars if they will slow down the generation of funding grants. The environment is far too competitive and under pressure to produce results for candidates with potential to be selected over and above those that are already flying high. In the South African context, where transformation of the science cohort is a priority, this creates tensions that some say are impossible to sustain.[53]

Lastly, visibility is essential in a globally connected world. This has led to dramatically increased investment from institutions over the past decade or so in web-based platforms and open access institutional repositories. Pockets of excellence and increased outputs are foregrounded and researcher profiles and the institution's infrastructure capabilities are promoted. Such online visibility stimulates the imagination about the scope and reach of research as an activity *per se*. Interactive web-based portals and 'brag' sites display researcher profiles and tell stories about paradigm shifting research findings; monthly or weekly e-research newsletters are widely distributed; there is a range of glossy promotional material. All project an image of world-changing excellence. In the dating game of international research partnerships, such visibility is a key requirement to assert a research-intensive identity. Indeed, the *Webometrics* ranking of higher education institutions has elevated the visibility of research excellence, increasing competition in this area, and making investment in visibility inseparable from investment in research itself, sometimes to the despair of university planners.

Claiming research excellence as defined by the rankings is therefore an expensive enterprise. Wealthy institutions in developed economies are in a position to pick and choose their students and research partners, whilst institutions in the developing world clamour for research excellence in order to vie for their place in the sun. The recently established Alliance for Research Universities in Africa (ARUA) is a case in point where research excellence is the suggested common denominator to make this a preferred network for global engagement. That all the member institutions are not necessarily the strongest research universities on the African continent seems immaterial in this context of building a Pan-African knowledge economy in a highly politicised environment. It is no wonder that seeking to strengthen the image of research excellence, aimed as it is at playing with the "big guns", is often seen to be to the detriment of social responsiveness and the common good. However, scorning 'excellence' as exclusive and elitist carries the risk of throwing out the baby with the

bathwater: it is essential to bring Southern perspectives to global challenges from a position of equity and strength and so to bring insights from Africa to bear on research questions of global reach.

It is therefore dangerously simplistic to equate research excellence with the 'capitalist project' and to ignore the essential role it plays in improving the quality of life of ordinary citizens. It remains necessary (but not sufficient) to retain research excellence and to move beyond that to the notion of brand relevance.

Changing the Reputation Discourse – from Research Excellence to Brand Relevance

From the previous discussion, it is evident that there is a direct correlation between research output and reputation building. Indeed, research excellence as defined by the ranking systems is widely regarded as the most important driver of a university's national and global stature. As a result, universities tend to direct resources into areas of high measureable output (such as research).

Rankings, in turn are perceived as a clear indication of a university's brand equity[2, 54] especially for universities with global aspirations. Basically, the argument is research output=research excellence=ranking=global reputation= brand equity.

Responding to the intense demand for higher education worldwide and the rise of the 'global university shopper', ranking systems are therefore used as a readymade shortcut to assess the brand value of a university. Universities are arranged in a highly structured manner, giving each an absolute position in a 'hierarchical order of things'.[2]

Strategic planning at universities is therefore focussing their energies and resources towards the requirements of the ranking systems, and upon increasing their research output and visibility where it matters.

It can be argued that the pursuit of research excellence remains critically important for higher education institutions, and represents to a large degree their *raison d'etre* in the pursuit of a knowledge economy. It can also be argued that rankings as such are important for all brands as they have a significant impact on what the market thinks of them. There are, however, a

few problems with the argument that ranking equals brand value. It is also highly questionable whether research excellence can be the basis for brand differentiation or brand excellence. This is *product thinking*, not *brand thinking*, and will lead to a sameness where ultimately few will survive. '…while rankings may give the impression of something fairly fixed, the jostling for places, by universities with aspirations, will make for some dramatic disturbances in ranking, and will make it increasingly difficult for a university to even remain in its current rank position'.[2]

 Most HE institutions tend to build their reputations around a cluster of generic constructs such as research excellence, academic reputation and tradition, leading them into a conformity trap (and lately into other forms of resistance). This is echoed by Teferra[52] who describes all of Africa's flagship universities as "identical twins." Muller argues that if universities are left to their own devices, they 'will tend to converge, because by competing with each other, they naturally tend to imitate the institutions perceived to be of higher status'[23] . This is further aggravated, according to Muller,[23] by the existence of traditional academic values. The stronger they are, the stronger the tendency towards imitation.

Indeed, it is surprising to note how modernist HE institutions' approach to reputation and brand building has remained and how fixed it still is in linear notions of top-down rankings signalling, according to some,[55] elitism instead of relevance. More and more voices are being raised in favour of a more lateral, horisontal mode of thinking where apples are compared with apples.[5,24, 55.] The recent announcement that plans are underway to differentiate South African HE institutions into universities, university colleges and tertiary colleges is therefore to be welcomed, however it is only the first step. It now becomes even more important for each of these institutions to find their brand purpose and craft their mission niche in collaboration with stakeholders.

In the final analysis the challenge at hand cannot be trivialised. '*Scientific research and knowledge production are complex enterprises and its measurement cannot be reduced to single indicators or even very limited ranking systems. We are currently still at the conceptual stage where the challenge is to develop a more refined set of measures that will be valid and reliable…as well as sensitive to the different policy and normative/evaluative discourses where these measures will be applied and used.*'[24]

Missing, still, in the current equations is the concept of purposeful university branding. Brand reputation is the perceived value added to the intrinsic value. Whilst intrinsic qualities of product excellence may be the minimum requirements to become a brand leader, they

remain brand *inputs*. To become brand leaders they must have a purpose and a relevance that resonate with their stakeholders and that transcend product qualities. Brand relevance is the great intangible, built on tangibles, that sets them apart from the pack.

Brand relevance is a way of re-contextualising research excellence in praxis.

Taking an example from the leading brands of our time (Apple, Coke, Nike), brand relevance should begin with the creation of a brand manifesto,[56] which involves the crafting of a mission niche which can be tied to specific areas of focus. It is a social contract with stakeholders for which the brand is held accountable. Given the needs of a society in transformation, such a brand manifesto needs to be co-created with a diversity of stakeholders, alert and responsive to the complex demands of a nascent democracy and continent at large.

Higher education branding can never be based upon research or peer reputation alone. This feeds into a somewhat incestuous cycle of reputation building, which places relevance and uptake into society at risk. Scientists are not the only ones to fish from the pond of knowledge. Society needs to be involved in the fishing too. Branding requires a *local* input where the difference it makes to its immediate surroundings is of key importance. For these reasons it may be important to include end-users (students) as well as other stakeholders (such as communities) in reputation measurement. Measuring *social impact* has become the new imperative.

(Place Figure 1 about here)

As shown in Figure 1, research publications, PhD training, global networks, centres and staff of excellence create largely measureable and necessary inputs towards research excellence in a HE institution. However, in order to differentiate itself, and find a clear positioning in a highly competitive environment, the concept of research excellence must be broadened and combined with the concept of brand relevance which is reflexive, inclusive and co-created bottom-up in collaboration with a number of internal and external stakeholders. The outputs of these interactive processes should be the crafting of a social contract (brand manifesto) including a mission niche, against which the institution can be held accountable and social impact can be measured (also via qualitative measures). The result is bigger than the sum of its parts; a purposeful HE brand that instil a sense of belonging with its stakeholders, especially those that are closest to it.

Conclusion

In this article it is argued that the power has shifted from the institutional communicator to the stakeholder, based on analysis of trends and shifts in strategic science and strategic communication. This requires a shift from a linear to a lateral, stakeholder-inclusive approach to strategic HE reputation building.

The sustainability of research excellence as basis for higher education reputation building is questionable for the following reasons:

- It is conceptualised in such a way that it can only be operationally measured by, and ranked according to, linear, singular indicators of research output which are no longer synchronous with new discourses in strategic science and strategic communication, and involves a limited number of stakeholders.
- It may lead to the conformity trap: as excellence is not sufficient to differentiate HE institutions, and can lead to convergence, sameness, and mediocrity.
- It can lead to the binary trap, thereby increasing reputational risk to the brand, due to exclusionary connotations associated with the concept excellence especially in transforming societies.

An alternative, lateral, stakeholder-centric reputation model is proposed, which focuses on the brand instead of the product, where the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts. Research excellence is regarded as a necessary product input (indicating intrinsic value), but the HE brand can only be differentiated by shifting the focus to the perceived value of the HE brand and reflection upon the HE brand relevance and purpose, in collaboration with a diversity of stakeholders including internal stakeholders, end-users and communities. The outputs should be the co-creation of a social contract between the HE institution and stakeholders, or a brand manifesto, against which the institution can be held accountable and the socio-economic impact - also of its research - can be tracked.

Whilst further work is required in refining the constructs of this model, it is hoped that the contribution it makes is original and heuristic and will stimulate further, much needed research and debate in a field where reflections upon strategic research and its relevance in

society, perhaps for the first time meet reflections upon strategic communication and the development of a purposeful higher educational brand.

A good reputation, like charity, begins at home. It is only when higher education institutions have found their niche, their purpose for being, and are able to measure their brands' role in driving long term social-economic value, that they can turn their attention towards building global reputation and excellence.

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