HOW TO MAKE HUNGARIAN UNIVERSITIES' BRANDING COMPELLING FOR THE PURPOSE OF RECRUITING AMERICAN STUDENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last few decades, globalization has fundamentally reshaped higher education. It opened doors and borders, led to a rise in cross-border research and academic cooperation, and a surge in international student flow. While in 2000 there were 2.1 million international students studying worldwide, by 2019 this number has grown to over 5 million.

American student mobility is also on the rise, largely due to the skyrocketing of US tuition and educational costs. American students are looking for more affordable educational opportunities, where they can acquire globally transferrable skills and international cultural experiences.

This surge in mobility created a plethora of opportunities for universities to internationalize their activities in order to seek new sources of revenues and increase their reputation as centers of academic excellence. As a result, there is now a fierce global competition between higher educational institutions to recruit international students. Students have also become more deliberate in knowing what they want from educational institutions. They are evaluating the employability of their degrees, the value of education, and are looking for concrete benefits based on which they can decide which university to select.

Universities now must think about their brands more strategically than ever before. They must differentiate themselves from their competitors by effectively positioning their institutions in the global market. Differentiation refers to the process of identifying a university's unique selling proposition (USP), i.e. the factors that make that university and its services unique and different from those of the competitors. It is the single most important factor that will distinguish great university brands from generic or mediocre ones.

Universities that fail to articulate their unique identity and find differentiating features run the risk of blending into a mass of identical organizations. They will be unable to raise awareness of their offerings, and thus will lag behind in the global race for international students.

Hungarian universities compete in the same international arena as other educational institutions and thus carry the same burden of having to find effective strategies of differentiating and positioning.

Moreover, Hungarian higher educational institutions face unique challenges as well, especially compared to Western European competitors. A lack of brand awareness in the United States, potentially negative assumptions, and a general delay in the internationalization process in Hungary make university branding a highly pressing issue. Fortunately, there are also certain opportunities as well as potential competitive advantages that could help generate momentum for Hungarian universities, allowing them to become more visible alternatives for US students.

Creating a strong university brand is a complex process that involves research, strategic insights, as well as creativity. The most important branding task for Hungarian universities is to move beyond general messages and identify their specific and tangible strengths and competitive advantages.

Once the USPs and the brand fundamentals are identified, they must be clearly communicated across the various university platforms and displayed in all communications and marketing materials. Focusing on digital communications, innovative tools, and eye-catching visual imagery is crucial to capturing the current generation of American students.

Another essential part of effective university brand communications is developing a long-term plan aimed at strategic brand building. Creating partnerships with relevant stakeholders (including universities, faculty, career services, educational organizations, businesses, NGOs), launching flagship courses and short-term study programs, focusing on location branding and starting international Study in Hungary promotional campaigns, specifically targeting Hungarian Americans, and increasing networking opportunities are projects that may yield results only in the long run, but are nevertheless critical to successful Hungarian university branding.

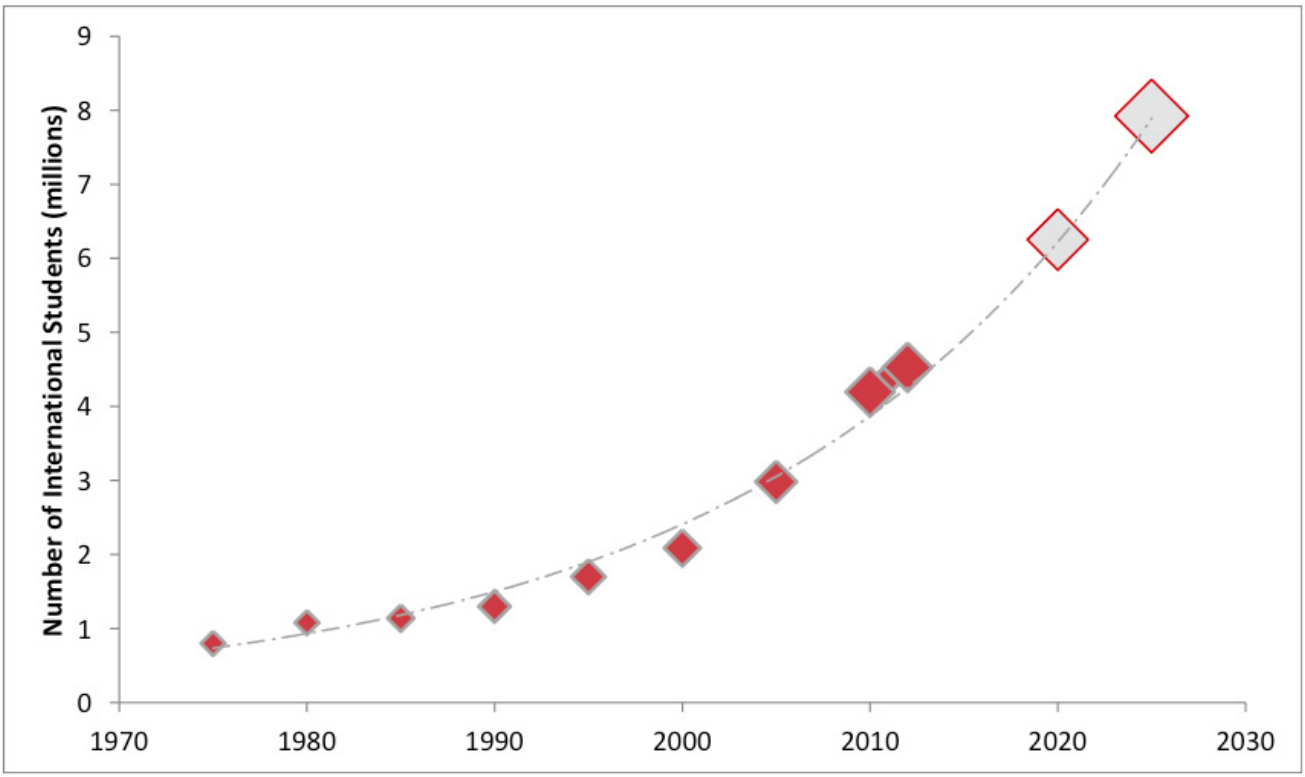
I. THE CHALLENGES

1. A competitive landscape

In the last few decades, globalization has fundamentally reshaped higher education. The political, social, economic, and technological changes led to global demand for a higher educated and skilled workforce, a proliferation of educational institutions, a rise in cross-border research and academic cooperation, and a surge in international student flow.

Student mobility is undeniably on the rise. While in 2000 there were 2.1 million international students studying worldwide, by 2019 this number has grown to over 5 million. According to the estimation of UNESCO, by 2025 there will be 8 million international students studying abroad. The forces of globalization opened doors and borders, increased student mobility, and created a plethora of opportunities for universities to attract international students.

Trend of the number of students enrolled outside their country of origin 1975-2030



Source: Internationalization and Innovation in Higher Education Study Group at Harvard University based on OECD and UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data

However, these new opportunities came with new challenges. Higher educational institutions (HEIs) must face diminishing state funding and a pressure to offset lost revenues, among other modern challenges. Universities increasingly pursue strategies like recruiting international students, internationalizing their activities, and building partnerships with universities and educational centers abroad in order to seek new sources of revenues and increase their reputation as centers of academic excellence.

As a result, there is now fierce competition among higher educational institutions for resources, funds, grants, skilled teachers, and, most importantly, international students. The competition is no longer a local or regional issue – it went global and also virtual in a way, considering the increasing popularity of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs).

Another major challenge universities face is the changing student expectations and attitudes towards higher education. The rising cost of education made students substantially more alert to the risks of making the right choice. While higher education has always been regarded as a reliable way of upward social and economic mobility, nowadays the practical value of a degree is not that certain anymore. People are reevaluating the value of higher education, the employability of their degrees, whether certain subjects and disciplines will return the investment, as well as how much they are willing to pay, and what they are getting in exchange. Students are looking for solid reasons and evidence based on which they can decide which university to select.

Thus, on one end, there are more than 26,000 universities in the world, most of them competing for the same students. Many of them offer international educational opportunities, often in the same subject – the services offered by educational institutions are often very similar. On the other end are the students who have become a lot more deliberate in knowing what they want from educational institutions and are seeking concrete, tangible benefits.

This new situation demands new solutions. Universities must differentiate themselves from their competitors by effectively positioning their institutions in the global market, and recreating their brands to attract international students. University branding is crucial in making the otherwise elusive concept of higher education more tangible. With proper branding, universities can effectively communicate why they are different from the thousands of other universities, and how exactly choosing the particular university over the others will benefit the students.

Universities that fail to articulate their unique identity and find differentiating features run the risk of blending into a mass of identical organizations. They will be unable to raise awareness of their offerings, and thus will lag behind in the global race for international students.

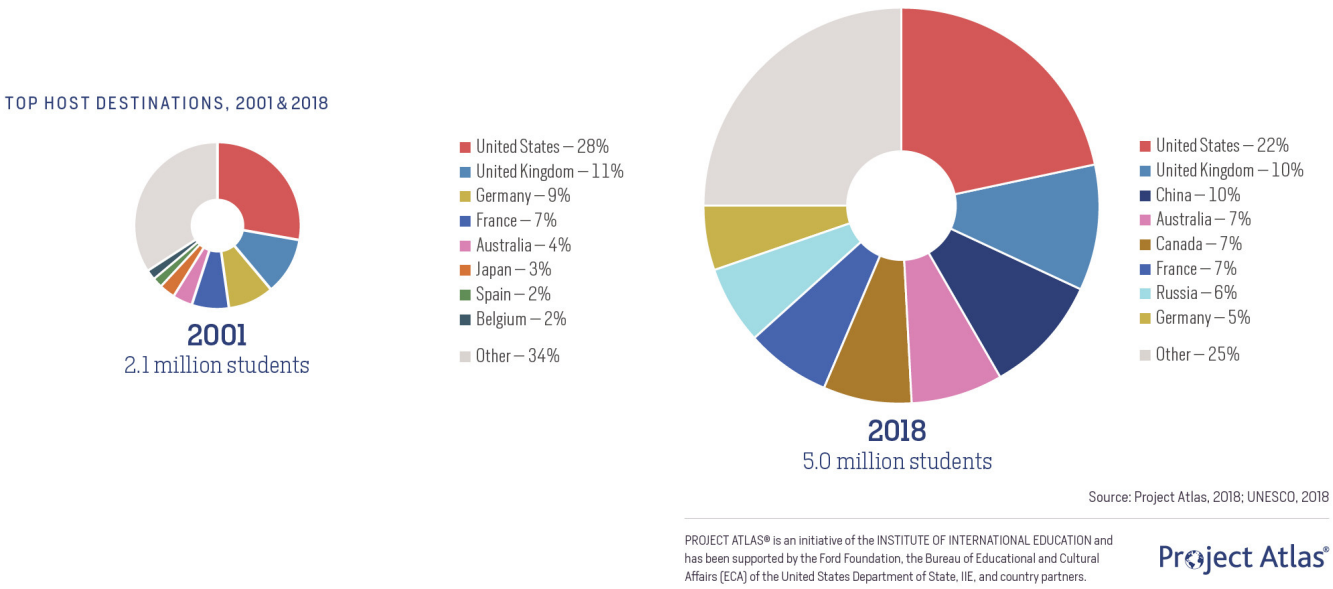
2. International student mobility trends

The number of international students has more than doubled since 2000, while both the destination countries and the countries of origin have diversified. The 5+ million international students can be divided into two main groups:

- Degree mobility refers to students who are pursuing a degree (undergraduate, graduate, or Ph.D.) or other official qualification, outside their country of residence.
- Credit mobility refers to students in non-degree qualifying educational programs, outside their country of residence (e.g. student exchange programs, summer programs, credit programs).

The most popular destinations in 2018 were:

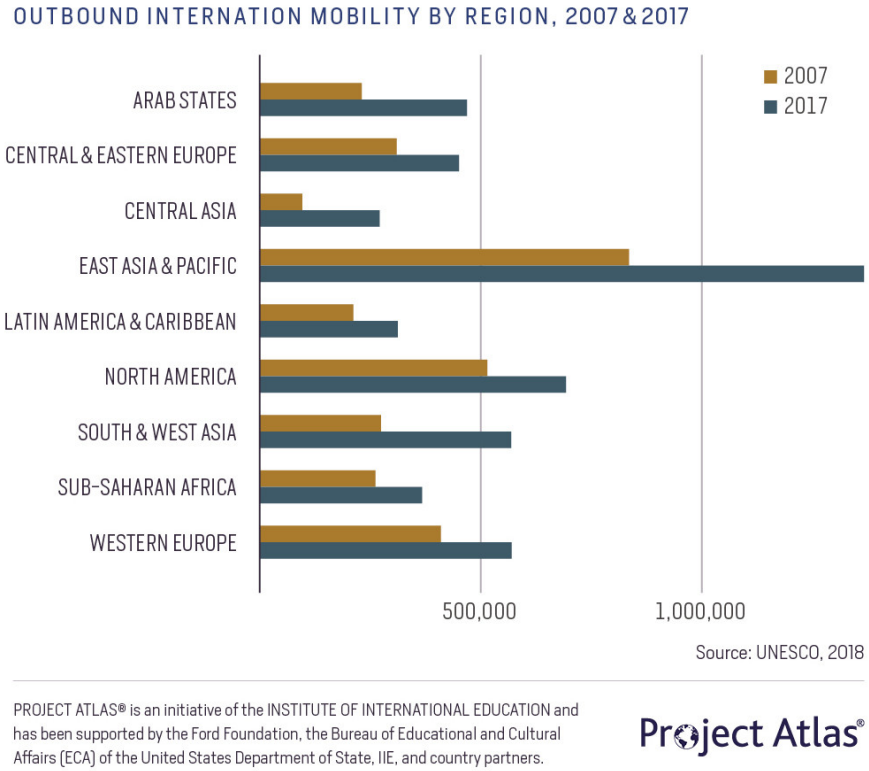
1. United States
2. United Kingdom
3. China
4. Australia
5. Canada



Source: IIE Project Atlas

While the US and the UK retained their number 1 and 2 positions respectively in the last two decades, China and Canada are relative newcomers in the global host countries elite – in 2001, neither country made it into the TOP 8.

Most international students come from the East Asia & Pacific region, with China sending the most students (largely to the US). North America is second, followed by Western Europe and South & West Asia.



Source: IIE Project Atlas

3. American student mobility trends

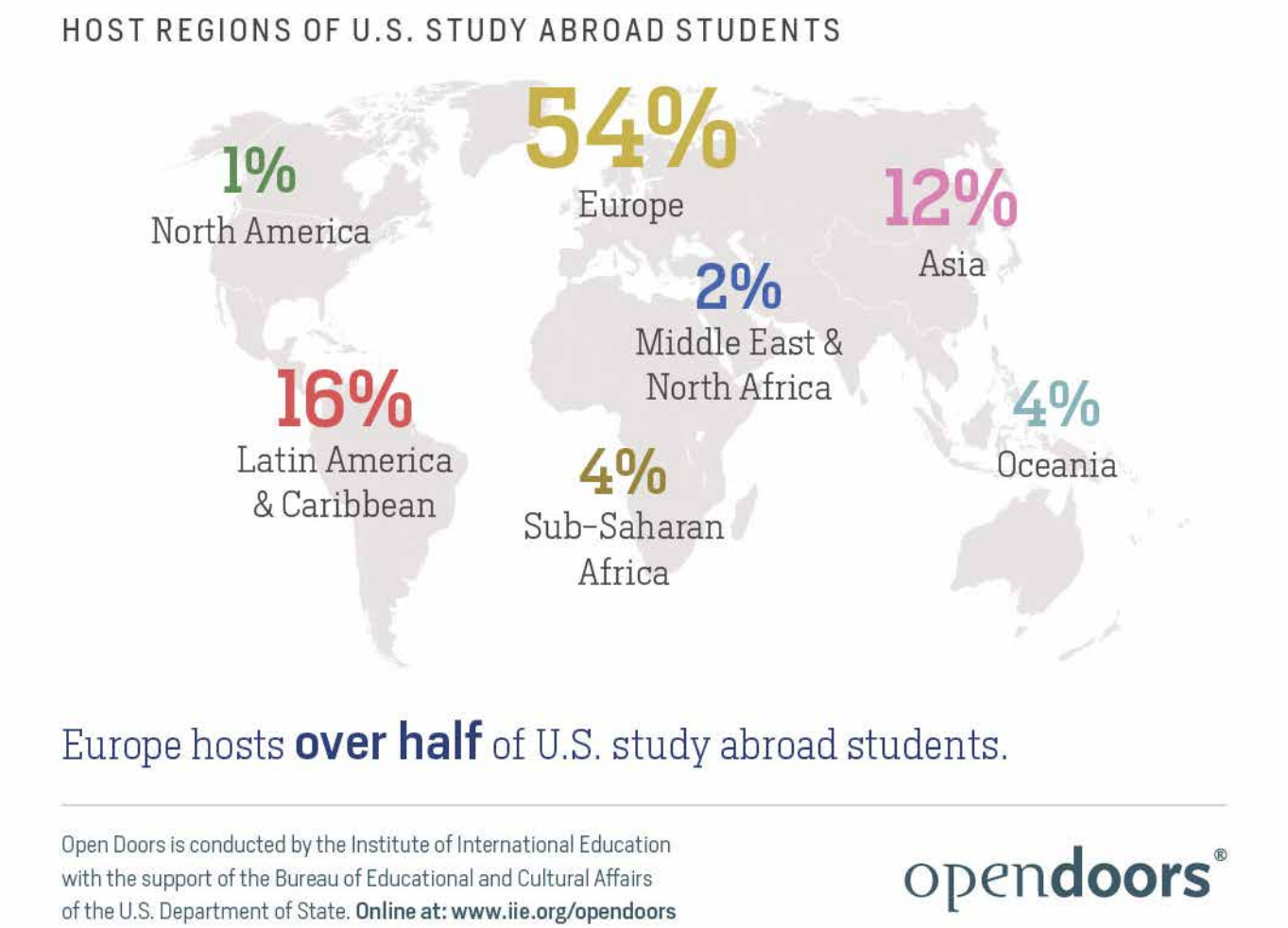
According to the Institute of International Education's (IIE) 2018 Open Doors report, 332,727 American students studied abroad in the 2016/17 academic year. The data from the last two decades show a strong increase in mobility, but there is still ample room for growth.

The top 10 leading destinations for American students are:

1. UK *(12 %)*
2. ITALY *(10.6 %)*
3. SPAIN *(9.4 %)*
4. FRANCE *(4.9 %)*
5. GERMANY *(3.8 %)*
6. CHINA *(3.6 %)*
7. IRELAND *(3.5 %)*
8. AUSTRALIA *(3.1 %)*
9. COSTA RICA *(2.5 %)*
10. JAPAN *(2.3 %)*

Europe is still the leading destination region by large, accounting for more than 50% of American students, but Asia, Latin America and Oceania (mainly because of Australia) show significant growth.

The number of American students coming to Hungary has increased in recent years, but the approximately 1,000 current students mean there is still significant growth potential.



Source: IIE Open Doors 2018

65% of American students choose shorter or summer programs, approximately a third of the students spend one semester, or one or two quarters abroad, and only 2% opt for an entire academic year or longer.

In terms of field of study, most American students are taking STEM subjects, Business & Management, and Social Sciences followed by Foreign Language & International Studies, and Fine & Applied Arts.

While the number of American students studying abroad is growing all across the country, there are a couple of educational institutions that pay special attention to promoting international study abroad programs. Close cooperation with these institutions could prove very beneficial for Hungarian universities.

LEADING INSTITUTIONS BY STUDY ABROAD

1. New York University
2. Texas A&M University
3. University of Michigan
4. University of Texas
5. San Diego State University
6. Indiana University
7. Ohio State University
8. Michigan State University
9. University of Minnesota
10. Arizona State University

II. THE FUNDAMENTALS OF BRANDING

1. A brand is more than a logo

While nowadays there is a general consensus that HEIs must think strategically about their brand as it can be a great competitive advantage and an essential factor for the successful recruitment of international students, there is often still some confusion about the term. There are many definitions that focus on different aspects of a brand and the branding process, making it quite difficult to establish a shared understanding of what a brand is.

For example, the American Marketing Association defines brand as

"a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."

This design-centric conceptual framework is conspicuous in a lot of recent university branding campaigns, where the main focus is on redesigning the traditional university emblems and mottos and repackaging them in modern visual forms. And while a strong visual identity is an important part of branding, it is only one part of it. Universities that focus exclusively on the visual aspects misunderstand the essence of branding and miss out on opportunities to construct an overarching identity and truly connect with their audience.

A brand is more than a fancy logo or a catchy slogan. It is a combination of verbal, written, visual, conceptual, and emotional attributes and associations that ultimately define, identify, and differentiate a product, service, or company. As such, it is a result of both internal (controlled) and external (uncontrolled) processes. The controlled part of the brand-building process includes the definition of the brand values, the unique selling proposition, the main messages, the positioning vis-à-vis the competition, the strategy, and the many avenues of communication. The uncontrolled aspects of a brand are born out of personal experiences, stakeholder, influencer, media, and social media commentary, and word-of-mouth.

This latter aspect is just as crucial for universities as formulating a clear branding strategy: if the universities' values, messages, and self-defined image are not aligned with public perception and personal experiences, it can severely harm their chances of recruiting students.

2. What makes a university brand compelling?

Creating a strong university brand is a complex process that involves research, strategic insights, as well as creativity. In general, creating a strong university brand is mainly a matter of:

› UNDERSTANDING

Universities must understand their environment, students' expectations and the factors that influence their decision-making process of choosing a university. They also must be aware of their current brand image, what the various stakeholders (including students, faculty, high school guidance counselors, international partners, the media, academia, etc.) think of their brand, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. Research and analysis are essential to getting the brand foundations right.

› DIFFERENTIATION AND POSITIONING

Effective differentiation and positioning are the foundations of a good university branding strategy (and often the most difficult things to get right). Differentiation refers to the process of identifying a university's unique selling proposition, i.e. the factors that make that university and its services unique and different from those of the competitors. It is the single most important factor that will distinguish great university brands from generic or mediocre ones.

Identifying the unique strengths (unique value proposition – USP) must be based on an accurate understanding of the university's strengths and the competitive landscape. Determining a university's USP will help position the institution in relation to the main competitors.

The differentiating attributes also have to be realistic (based on the university's strengths) and very concrete – too general or vague messages are not enough anymore to effectively grasp students' attention.

› AUTHENTICITY

It is important to understand that branding goes way beyond communication. The brand values and promises must permeate the university's culture and overall operations. If real-life experiences are not aligned with the brand values, the institution's reputation and brand will suffer. That is why it is so important to base the brand on realistic attributes and strengths and create a genuine and honest brand image. Clever messaging will not hide systematic flaws. Especially in the age of 24-hour news cycles, social media, and the increased importance of word-of-mouth and peer reviews, if a brand doesn't deliver on its promises, people will know about it. Authenticity is also crucial to developing loyalty and effectively recruiting people to act as brand ambassadors.

› CONSISTENCY

Consistency is key to successful branding – consistency in messaging (communicating the brand values and promises across all platforms) and consistency in delivering those values and promises.

› CREATIVITY

Consistent messaging does not equal endless, impersonal recitations of the same facts all the time. It must be paired with creative execution: messages must be adapted to different communication platforms and provide a series of memorable experiences.

Creativity is also vital because Millennials and Gen Z that take up most of today's student cohort are generally more resistant to traditional ways of advertising and communication. They are very digital-savvy; they crave creative and innovative messages and want to connect to brands through emotions and experiences.

III. THE EVOLUTION OF UNIVERSITY BRANDING

1. A new era of university branding

University branding has a remarkable dichotomy. On one hand, the dedicated practice of university branding is relatively new and only recently became a part of mainstream branding discussions and a significant area of focus for higher educational institutions. On the other hand, universities are some of the oldest brands in the world.

Long before branding experts started to systematically position institutions and craft messages, some universities organically emerged as globally known household names. Aided by centuries-long history, traditions, and heritage, universities like Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard or Yale became university superbrands, recognized universally as the embodiments of academic excellence, prestige, and leadership.

THE MOST RESPECTED UNIVERSITIES IN THE WORD

1. Harvard University
2. Massachusetts Institute of Technology
3. University of Cambridge
4. University of Oxford
5. University of California, Berkeley
6. Stanford University
7. Princeton University
8. University of California, Los Angeles
9. The University of Tokyo
10. Yale University

Source: THE World Reputation Rankings 2018

This legacy brand aspect is still important today, but nowhere near enough anymore. The proliferation of HEIs, the above-detailed new challenges, the changing nature of student expectations regarding the value of academics and degrees, and the fierce competition for students have forced universities to pay more attention to their respective brands and how they can stand out from the crowd. As a result, university branding became a special branding field on its own.

While some people still hold that education cannot be commodified and treating universities as brands and education as a product undermines the value of academics, the emerging consensus is that branding is something universities cannot ignore anymore. University branding, if done well, will not lead to the depreciation of education and academics; it is simply a modern response to modern challenges.

In the last decade and a half, more and more universities doubled down on their branding initiatives to carve out a competitive position in the worldwide race for students and funds. While this brand-based differentiation is still a relatively new strategy in the higher education scene, a couple of distinct trends are already apparent.

2. University branding trends

› THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF UNIVERSITY BRANDING

Universities take a more professional approach to branding, often enlisting the help of outside branding experts and companies both in the strategy (identifying the unique competitive advantages, messaging) and the execution (copywriting, campaign management, content creation) phase. While university branding is a unique area, it still utilizes corporate branding best practices and adopts a similar market-oriented and professional attitude. The professionalization of university branding also entails the use of data-driven research, stakeholder surveys, and student choice research in assessing the current brand situation and identifying unique selling points. Branding is also becoming more institutionalized with dedicated branding and marketing offices within the university structure.

› PRECISE POSITIONING VS. GENERIC MESSAGES

A common problem of university branding is that despite the organizational efforts to articulate their brand identity and launch (often expensive) branding initiatives and rebranding campaigns, many brands still look eerily similar, and basically interchangeable. References to academic excellence, leadership, diversity, community, historical traditions, employability, world-class education, visual imagery of happy students and enthusiastic professors on campus may seem inspirational. However, in reality, these are very vague messages and do not really offer concrete information for students on why they should choose that particular institution over others.

This sea of branding sameness often stems from still-prevailing traditionalist notions about what educational values are (or should be), a lack of research regarding student expectations, or a fundamental misunderstanding of what branding really is. The universities that can move beyond these general messages and identify specific and tangible strengths, competitive advantages, and student benefits will be the ones that can position themselves effectively and thus stand out from the crowd.

› LOCAL AND NATIONAL PLACE BRANDING CAMPAIGNS

While location may not be the most important factor in selecting a university, it is still an important factor a lot of students consider. For this reason, some universities started to infuse place branding in their strategy and launched joint campaigns with city leadership and tourism boards in order to attract students. This trend is particularly strong in the case of „university towns". For example, Eindhoven's long-term branding strategy aims at positioning the city as the European leader of creative innovation, a world-class design and high-tech hub, and the Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) plays an important part in the strategy.

Another variant of location branding is when there is an official nationwide effort to brand the country as an educational hub. The UK government launched a Study UK campaign through the British Council to effectively position UK HEIs and attract more international students. Canada followed a similar strategy and launched a national brand for education to increase international student recruitment (EduCanada).

Source: Study UK

The national education brand approach is a special field with both opportunities and risks. On one hand, a collective, nation-wide effort is able to send a strong, unified message about the benefits of studying in that particular country. It also means there are more resources and platforms helping international recruitment. However, the harmonization of different university brands is not easy and the special characteristics of different universities often get lost in the process. (This dual branding challenge is also relevant regarding the branding of a university and separate schools/departments within the institution). In case there is a national initiative to brand HEIs, it is crucial to create separate macro and micro-level strategies and harmonize the national brand with the separate university brands in order to maximize efficiency.

› GOING DIGITAL

While face-to-face interaction and offline communication are still crucial parts of branding and recruiting, a large part of the communication and branding efforts is now taking place in the digital realm. Universities must use a 21st century toolkit and the latest technological innovations in order to effectively reach students.

The hub of this digital communication is the university website, which must be mobile responsive, UX (user experience) focused, easy to navigate, and rich in engaging (often visual) content. The website is the number 1 source of information for many prospective students. Its importance is even more significant in the case of international students – universities targeting foreign students must provide an even more detailed description of what they offer. Foreign students often have less prior knowledge and seek out different information than local students. Apart from the academic details, they need practical information regarding the administrative process of applying and onboarding, a clear branding message of the university and what it promises to students, as well as a compelling image of the experience they will have as students in a foreign country.

› DEDICATED INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS AND CONTENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS

In 2019, social media channels are one of the most effective tools in the brand-building arsenal. However, simply being present on the most important platforms is not enough – universities need strategies and innovative campaigns in order to cut through the digital noise. Many universities have started creating social media content and campaigns specifically aimed at recruiting international students – introducing their brand, showcasing student experience, and using visual storytelling to build relationships, while also providing practical information.

The University of Sheffield started the #weareinternational campaign to highlight the importance of international students. International students Facebook groups are used to connect students, but also, if they are public, are important recruitment tools as well (Aalto International).

› STORYTELLING

Storytelling is one of the most powerful ways to showcase a university brand and connect with prospective students. Institutions are creating compelling stories – increasingly in visual forms – to educate their audience about their identity and invite students to be a part of their story. Storytelling campaigns are not about the history of the school, though – it is about using storytelling tools, narratives, and emotional cues to showcase the university's brand personality, differentiate itself, and highlight the most important brand messages.

The University of Manchester used the storytelling technique to welcome new students to the University. The University of Leeds uses stories to share all kinds of information with students, from financial aid to study abroad programs. Western Sidney University used the power of storytelling and innovative visual imagery in their rebranding campaign.

IV. DECISIVE FACTORS IN CHOOSING A UNIVERSITY

1. Choice research

Understanding the students' university selection process, as well as their priorities and motivations is a valuable insight and very useful for the university branding strategy. The choice of university is a highly complex issue, including several decisions, stakeholders and emotional, as well as rational choice processes (Johnston, 2010). There is extensive literature on the various theoretical conceptualizations of how (future) students choose universities and an endless number of categorization of these factors. The most famous ones are the economic, sociological, and psychological models/factors and newer, hybrid versions of these.

Students are usually expected to take into account three types of benefits: lifetime, long-term, and short-term benefits. According to Perna, "…individuals decide to invest in additional education based on a comparison of the expected lifetime benefits with the expected costs." Long-term benefits include "more fulfilling work environments, better health, longer life, more informed purchases, and lower probabilities of unemployment." Short-term benefits are usually considered to be the "enjoyment of the learning experience, involvement in extracurricular activities, participation in social and cultural events, and enhancement of social status (Perna, 2006).

An important categorization of these factors for our purposes is grouping together those that are related to students' personal contexts (e.g. socioeconomic status, academic ability, race and ethnicity, parental education), and those that are university-related, institutional characteristics (e.g. price, location, etc.).

The following part under no circumstances aims to provide an extensive review of the existing choice research literature or show the most important theoretical debates within this field. It rather intends to provide a useful and practical list of (mostly institutional) factors that are either given (e.g. location) and could be played as strengths, or can likely be influenced by universities (e.g. student experience). This checklist can help universities think about their unique selling points, thereby leading to better positioning, and overall better marketing and branding efforts.

The most commonly mentioned factors are the following: **academic reputation** (Webb, 1993), **marketability of the degree** (Webb, 1993), **job prospects** (Maringe, 2006), **value of international study abroad experience** (Pope, 2014), **costs and options for financial aid** (Webb, 1993, Shanka et al., 2005, Kallio, 1995, Hoyt and Brown, 2003, Perna, 2006, Scarr, 2016, Avery and Hoxby, 2004, Kane, 1999, 2004, Titus, 2004), **quality of faculty** (Chapman, 1993, Shanka, et al., 2005, Coccari and Javalgi, 1995), **size of the institution** (Kallio, 1995), **variety of offerings, courses and degree programs** (Coccari and Javalgi, 1995, Holdsworth and Nind, 2006, Kallio, 1995), **attractiveness and marketing of campus facilities** (Hoyt and Brown, 2003, Johnston, 2010), **accreditation** (Webb, 1993), **admission requirements** (Hoyt and Brown, 2003, Scarr, 2016), **location characteristics – proximity, infrastructure, accommodation, safety** (Webb, 1993, Hackney, 2012, Holdsworth and Nind, 2006, Shanka et al., 2005), **expected quality of extracurricular and social life** (Hoyt and Brown, 2003, Scarr, 2016), **personal contacts, family, university representatives and peer-to-peer communications** (Donnellan, 2012, Johnston, 2010).

In addition, a couple of important conclusions can be drawn from the existing choice research literature:

- These factors are important and should be viewed as critical elements of a good branding strategy. However, they should not be treated as differentiating features. Messages like "our university is a highly respected academic institution" or "our students have great prospects at finding jobs after they graduate" are too generic. Universities must provide concrete evidence for these statements.
- Different target groups have different priorities. Therefore, universities should conduct their own choice research in order to understand what motivates the students they are trying to target. Moreover, specific

majors and programs can be very different and serve the needs of very different target groups. Universities should make sure to plan and strategize separately for each of the different programs.

- Universities must strategically select a couple of factors to focus on in their brand strategy. It is a much better strategy to prioritize and excel in one or two areas than trying to compete in all of them.
- Universities should be aware of how the immediate competitors position themselves, especially in relation to specific subjects, and emphasize the uniqueness not only in general but also in the specific field.

2. Hungarian university branding – special challenges and opportunities

Hungarian universities compete in the same international arena as other educational institutions and thus carry the same burden of having to find effective strategies of differentiating and positioning.

Moreover, Hungarian HEIs face unique challenges as well, especially compared to Western European competitors. Lower international rankings, a lack of brand awareness in the United States, potentially negative assumptions, and a general delay in the internationalization process in Hungary make university branding a highly pressing issue. Fortunately, there are also certain opportunities that could help generate momentum for Hungarian universities, allowing them to become more visible alternatives for international students.

CHALLENGES

› INTERNATIONAL RANKINGS

As of 2019, six Hungarian universities are included in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings list, with the University of Szeged achieving the best ranking at #470. Another list compiled by Times Higher Education (THE), ranks seven Hungarian universities, the best being the Semmelweis University (#401-500).

University rankings are not the only factors that students consider when choosing a university, but they matter. Rankings are closely monitored and many people view them as indicators of academic quality, as well as future employability. This does not mean that universities with a lesser ranking cannot create compelling brands or be viewed as good options. However, the ranking challenge must be taken seriously when creating branding and recruitment strategies.

› AWARENESS AND NAME RECOGNITION

While Hungary is rapidly gaining international attention as a destination (see opportunities), as a smaller country, it still must make extra efforts to raise awareness of its educational opportunities. It is not rare that American students lack basic factual knowledge or make negative assumptions about Hungary (for instance that living conditions here are lower than in the US). Brand awareness and refuting negative stereotypes are major challenges facing Hungarian HEIs.

› POSITIONING AND SPECIALIZATION

As noted in Chapter III, a frequent problem of university branding is the too generic messages and the lack of strategic positioning. This issue can be detected in the case of Hungarian universities as well: they must emphasize their specific and unique differentiating features a lot more in their communication.

While the fact that many Hungarian universities offer a variety of courses can be viewed as an opportunity (see below), this also means that it is more difficult and requires more effort to position Hungarian HEIs as specialized intuitions.

OPPORTUNITIES

SUBJECT RANKINGS

In the cases of subject and special rankings, Hungarian universities have much more favorable numbers. Semmelweis University is #308 on the QS Life Sciences and Medicine list, Eötvös Loránd University is #340 on the QS Natural Science list, and Semmelweis University and the University of Szeged are both included at #101-200 on the Times Higher Education's University Impact Rankings. Eleven Hungarian universities have made it onto the QS emerging Europe and Central Asia regional list, with five of them being in the Top 50. These data can be used as reference points when positioning the universities.

HUNGARY AS AN EMERGING TOP DESTINATION IN EUROPE

In the last few years, Hungary has received a lot of attention as one of the top-rated tourist destinations in Europe and this coverage definitely helps raise awareness of the country. Currently, the main beneficiary of this attention is still Budapest, but the National Tourism Agency has recently started branding campaigns to promote the countryside as well. This strategic focus on country branding could be an important asset for universities as well, especially, if there would be more education-centered promotional campaigns.

A couple of Hungarian attributes could serve as unique selling points for location branding:

- Adaptability skills and multicultural experiences are always great selling points for employers. For students who are interested in studying in Europe, but want something more unique than the destinations traditionally preferred by Americans (e.g. UK), Hungary could be an ideal choice.
- Hungarian campuses are different from American ones. Students are not isolated but are either in the capital or in university towns. They have access to a variety of social, art, and business opportunities: they can go out, attend events, take internships, and meet new people. Social and cultural events are significantly more affordable than in the United States or Western Europe.
- Literally any place can be reached from Hungary – students can easily travel across Europe.
- Many international companies are present in Hungary – it is a lot easier for students to approach them and take internships in Hungary than it is in London or New York. Internships are beneficial to the companies as well, as they are usually greatly invested in finding educated, skilled talent.

AFFORDABLE TUITION AND LIVING COST

The affordability of education in Hungary is an important strength, especially compared to popular destinations like the UK, France, or Australia. When financial considerations play a critical part in the university selection process, Hungary, with lower tuitions and overall living costs, clearly has a competitive advantage.

A WIDE SELECTION OF ENGLISH-LANGUAGE COURSES AND DEGREES

American students can choose from a wide array of English language courses and degrees, which can be an important asset in the regional competition between universities. Most Hungarian degrees are also accepted and accredited in the EU.

EASIER ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

Complying with the admission requirements is often much easier in Europe than in the US. Standardized test scores (e.g. SAT, GRE, GMAT, LSAT) are often not required by European colleges. Furthermore, US (and certain European) universities usually require a comprehensive admission package including resumes, cover letters, reference letters, full transcripts and application fees - unlike Hungarian universities. Thus, making the admission process less complicated can be an advantageous strategy for Hungarian universities.

V. HOW TO CREATE A UNIVERSITY BRAND

University branding is a complex process as it affects many different stakeholders and organizational units. While we often think of universities as standalone organizations, in fact, they are comprised of many different entities (schools, departments, institutes) with different goals, identities, and messages. The challenge is to create a unified brand while still highlighting individual differences in order to maximize reach and efficiency.

The best way for universities to overcome this problem is to **view branding as a multilevel process**. First, they need to create an overarching brand position with relevant brand values and messages. Then, if necessary, create several sub-brands for the different organizational units as well (a notable American example is the University of Pennsylvania and its Wharton Business School brands).

This is not an easy task: there must be a clear brand hierarchy and the communication must be coordinated and synchronized in order to avert contradictory or confusing messages. For example, it is not recommended to create several distinct visual identities within a university, but in terms of messaging and communication, the different departments can create their own messages (tailored to their respective strengths and relevant target audiences).

The following branding strategy can be used to define both the main university brands and the various sub-brands. The text boxes contain specific strategies and tips for the purpose of branding for the U.S. target audiences.

PHASE	GOAL	MAIN ELEMENTS
UNDERSTANDING & DISCOVERY	Understand your current image and position, competitors, and target audience	• Goal setting • Brand audit • Press monitoring • Social listening • Surveys • Competitor analysis • Target audience research
BRAND IDENTITY & STRATEGY	Identify your brand, USP Differentiate and position	• SWOT analysis • USP • Positioning statement • Brand texts and messages
IDEATION & EXECUTION	Identify the communication tools and create an action plan	• Communications plan • Digital communications • Social media strategy • Creatives, ads, visuals • Content marketing strategy • Events • PR • Strategic brandbuilding • Project management plan • Brand trainings

UNDERSTANDING AND DISCOVERY PHASE

1. Goal setting

Identify the main business and corresponding branding goals with measurable success metrics.

BUSINESS GOAL => *Increase the number of American students at the university*

BRANDING GOAL => *Position the university as an attractive destination for American students*

2. Brand audit & research

Research and understanding are critical elements of a solid brand strategy. As a first step, universities should always take a look at their current brand image as well as analyze what stakeholders are saying about them. This will help them understand their current position in the marketplace, discover their strengths and weaknesses, and ensure their branding strategy is based on reality, not speculations or guesswork.

The output of this research and discovery phase should be a detailed evaluation of the current brand image as well as a list of areas of improvement. The brand audit is often conducted by an external branding agency in order to obtain a detailed and objective assessment and includes the following elements:

› INTERNAL BRAND DOCUMENTS

Collect and analyze all internal brand documents, and evaluate whether they truly define specific brand values:

- Mission statement
- Internal guidelines
- Brandbooks
- Operations

› EXTERNAL BRAND DOCUMENTS

Make a list of all external brand and marketing materials and analyze:

- How well they communicate the brand values
- How efficient they are (based on data and analytics)
- The consistency of aesthetic and messaging

› PRESS MONITORING

Compile recent press coverage (news, mentions, articles) of the university and analyze:

- Quantity and quality of media appearances (to gauge brand awareness and perception)
- Main topics
- Messages
- Positive/negative/neutral tone

› WEBSITE AUDIT

Conduct a comprehensive website audit and evaluate the following factors:

- Technical data – speed, mobile responsive design, etc.
- Brand alignment – is there a clear brand message?
- Design and aesthetic – modern, user-friendly design
- Structure of the website
- User experience – ease of navigation
- Content – is it relevant for international students, engaging, informative?
- Contact – share and social media buttons, clear contact points, etc.
- Traffic data – visitors, conversion rate, sessions, referrals, etc.

› SOCIAL MEDIA AUDIT

Evaluate how your brand comes across on social media:

- Own social media channels – numbers, engagement, frequency of posting
- Content audit – evaluation of current strategy, main messages, content versatility, brand alignment
- Social listening: what people are saying about the university online – review social media comments, feedback, online ratings, forum posts, blog posts, etc.

› QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE SURVEYS

It is absolutely essential to know and understand what people are thinking and saying about the university. This can ensure that branding will be based on reality and not simply on institutional aspirations.

There are several groups universities can poll to measure brand awareness and recognition as well as acquire an honest and accurate understanding of prevailing brand perceptions:

- Current students (a wide segment of different majors, nationalities, undergraduates, graduates, Ph.D. students, etc.)
- Alumni
- University leadership
- Faculty and employees
- Stakeholders (e.g. industry opinion leaders, international educational organizations, media, international recruiters, corporate recruiters, etc.)
- Prospective students within the target demographic

Use a combination of:

- Focus group research
- One-on-one interviews
- Online surveys
- Open-ended, list, and scale questions

The most important topics to cover:

- Brand awareness and recognition
- Reputation
- Qualities that best define the university
- Immediate associations
- Perceived strengths and weaknesses/areas to improve
- Academic expectations
- What makes the university different?
- Competitors and their perceived strengths/weaknesses

At the end of the survey phase, universities must have a clear understanding of the current state of their brand, prevailing brand perceptions, the values and qualities their target audience cares about, and the university's perceived strengths and weakness, which will be critical for positioning the university.

These interviews can also be used for choice research – uncovering and understanding the reasons why students choose to study abroad, how they make their decisions, or, (in the case of current international students), what made them choose Hungary.

To measure brand awareness in the US market, interview a representative group of your target demographic (high school students, graduates, undergraduates, Ph.D. students), recruitment agencies, study abroad offices at universities, educators, stakeholders, the US Department of Education, the US State Department and Study Abroad officials.

Conduct choice research within the target demographic, as well as current and former students – American students may have different motivators than other international students when choosing foreign programs.

3. Targeting

Identifying and analyzing your core target audience is a crucial part of strategy. This process involves some kind of segmentation as well – breaking down the target audience into various categories.

Targeting is important because different groups behave differently and thus require different recruitment and marketing approaches. Talking to everyone the same way and at the same time is not efficient at all. Universities need to focus on strategic targeting and be as specific and precise as possible.

In the case of university branding, there are several relevant main target groups (to be further segmented), for example:

› PRIMARY:

- Current and prospective students

› SECONDARY:

- Parents
- High school guidance counselors
- Potential partner universities and study abroad program officials
- Alumni
- Faculty, visiting professors, researchers
- International educational institutions and NGOs
- Local and international education authorities
- Industry stakeholders and opinion leaders
- Media

Gathering as much data as possible on the various target groups will help with the differentiation and positioning as well. Therefore, the target group analysis must include, among others:

- General characteristics
- Fields of education, interests
- Behavior
- Motivation, choice research, pain points
- Influencers, networks

This research will help universities understand their target audiences' main attributes, perspectives, priorities, motivators, and will be a valuable source of information in the positioning phase.

US targeting: The institutions that send the most students abroad could be prime targets for recruitment and partnership building – see p.8

4. Competitor analysis

Identify the university's most relevant competitors and create a detailed competitor analysis, including information on:

- Academic programs (length, details, courses, etc.)
- Lecturers, faculty
- Tuition
- Strengths
- Weaknesses
- Similarities
- Differences
- Communications (website, social media, videos, etc.)

It is important to keep in mind that in the case of American students, Hungarian universities' main competitors are not other Hungarian universities, but other international universities. Currently, Hungarian university websites and communications often focus on the reputation of their university within Hungary. While this is useful information for domestic students, international students need information on how that Hungarian university compares to other international universities.

BRAND IDENTITY AND STRATEGY PHASE

1. SWOT analysis

SWOT analysis is the process of listing the university's strengths and weaknesses (internal factors), and opportunities and threats (external factors). The SWOT analysis is one of the first steps towards identifying a university's USP and positioning it effectively in relation to the competitors.

Always include the findings of the research phase (especially the results of the brand audit and the surveys) in the relevant category of the SWOT matrix.

Some potential SWOT elements:

› STRENGTHS

- International ranking
- Strong academic programs
- Unique courses, services, programs, facilities
- Reputation or great authority in a particular study field
- Well-known international faculty members
- Location
- Extracurricular activities
- Strong international partnerships (with universities, high schools, recruitment agencies, etc.)
- Low tuition and living expenses
- Extensive alumni network in foreign countries
- Business partnerships

› WEAKNESSES

- Lack of brand awareness
- Poor brand perceptions
- Lower ranking
- Lack of English-language programs
- Lack of international partnerships
- High tuition
- Poor website and marketing materials

› OPPORTUNITIES

- Emerging region
- Government-backed study abroad campaigns
- The declining popularity of traditional destinations for US students (e.g. Germany, Spain)
- Emerging study fields

› THREATS

- Rising costs
- A decline in student mobility
- Changing geographical focus (emerging Asian educational opportunities)
- E-learning competitors

2. Differentiation & positioning

The next step (and probably the most important) is to differentiate the university from the competitors and position it in a way that it occupies a distinct, easily recognizable place in the international educational market. For this, it is essential to identify the university's **USP(s) – unique selling proposition(s)**.

The USP is not the same as the university's strength, even though they are strongly related. A lot of universities have similar strengths – strong academic programs or similar tuitions. The USP is the ultimate differentiating factor that provides extra benefits to the target audience and compels them to choose one university over the others.

The USP is the one factor (or multiple factors) that makes the university unique, different, and allows it to clearly stand out from the competition. It can be a combination of specific facts (relating to the educational value it provides) and aspirational, emotional benefits (relating to the student experience, community).

How to identify the university's USP?

› List everything that could be a potential differentiator: focus on unique attributes or achievements. The more specific, the better.

› Base it on your strengths and make sure you can deliver on the promises: USP should always be based on existing strengths and grounded in reality – if the student experience is different from the one the university built its brand on or if it fails to deliver on its promises, the damage will be irreparable.

› Consider the target audience's needs: Factor in the findings of the brand perception survey and the choice research (what students are looking for, what they value etc.).

› Analyze the competition: Take a look at the competitor analysis, use the competitors' weaknesses and identify gaps and potential positioning niches.

› Support it by concrete evidence: Find facts that support the brand promise and that can later be used in messaging and communications.

Once universities are clear about their differentiating attributes, they can then effectively position their brands.

Location branding could be one positioning strategy for Hungary – a strategy all universities could benefit from. As mentioned previously, the country has received a lot of positive attention in recent years and has emerged as a popular tourist destination. A campaign focused exclusively on educational opportunities could ride this wave and raise awareness of the benefits of studying in Hungary.

A Study Hungary campaign, similar to what the UK, Canada, or Australia have done in recent years, should be a collaboration between the universities, the government, educational organizations, and the Hungarian Tourism Agency. It should focus on digital communications, use innovative tools, strong messaging, and eye-catching visual imagery to attract international students' attention.

3. Messaging

Once there is a clear understanding of the university's USP and positioning, it is time to define the main messages. Once again, it is important to pay attention to the different target groups and create several variations that best resonate with their respective values and priorities.

Messaging includes writing the:

- Mission statement
- Tagline/slogan
- Brand stories (stories that are related to your offerings/USPs)
- Brand guidelines to be used internally

IDEATION AND EXECUTION PHASE

The final phase of the branding process is creating a detailed communications plan. The brand values and main messages must be clearly communicated across the various university platforms and displayed in all communications and marketing materials.

Another essential part of effective brand communications is developing a long-term plan aimed at strategic brand building through institutional relationships and stakeholder communications.

1. Communications plan

The main elements:

› DIGITAL COMMUNICATIONS

When it comes to university research, the official website of educational institutions is still the primary source of information. Therefore, it is critical that the university websites are modern, visually appealing, constantly updated, thoroughly optimized, mobile-responsive, easy to navigate, and full of relevant and engaging information.

As international students need different kind of information, the best way to cater to their needs is to create either a separate website section or a separate website altogether (easily accessible from the homepage). Content should be a mix of practical information (admission process, visa, tuition, financial aid, course, etc.) and engaging content that showcases the university's brand values, tells stories, and promises a great student experience.

The main brand messages must be clear at the first glance. International students must find specific reasons why they should choose that university.

It is important to keep in mind that the website will be visited by students at different stages in the application process: some of them are only gathering preliminary information and getting familiar with the institution, others have already applied or are on board to become students. They need different information and different content.

Suggested website content includes videos, virtual tours, FAQs, information on Hungary, student testimonials, and even student-generated content, like blogs, vlogs, online newspapers.

Innovative digital communication tools can also set universities apart, e.g. mobile apps, live recruitment webinars, onboarding courses, etc.

› CREATIVE, DESIGN, VISUALS

It is a common trend nowadays that universities rebrand their visual identity to match modern aesthetic trends and better communicate their brand messages. While a total rebranding campaign is not always necessary, some new visual elements and imagery can be useful assets in a branding campaign. These can include:

- New photography
- Print marketing materials (e.g. brochures, flyers)
- Digital marketing materials (e.g. banners, ads)
- Videos and visual stories (videos are probably the most important visual branding tools nowadays. Videos must be cutting-edge aesthetically and always use engaging storytelling to capture the target audience's attention)

› SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

Simply being present on the most important social media platforms is not enough anymore – universities must have a clear social media strategy in order to best leverage the power of these networks. Traditional one-way communication does not really work for the digital native students of today. Universities' social media strategy should be about interactive communication, engagement, fostering meaningful connections, and embracing a community mindset. This means that the strategy must focus on:

- Identifying **the most relevant social media platforms** and varying the content according to the target audience's social media habits and the institution's goals. The content strategy should also be **platform-specific** (e.g. use Facebook for sharing longer stories, Twitter for sharing short news, Instagram for videos, photos, Instagram Stories for behind-the-scenes stories, YouTube for videos, tours, and informative and entertaining content, Medium for thought leadership, LinkedIn for professional networking, etc.).
- Communicating brand values and main messages **consistently**
- Creating **valuable, engaging, versatile, fun, and informative content** (including practical information, news, feel-good stories, achievements, etc.)
- Encouraging and sharing **user-generated content** (allowing student takeovers, enlisting the help of student social media ambassadors, sharing student stories, starting relevant hashtags, etc.)
- Using storytelling to connect with the audience (professional image videos and raw and real behind the scenes stories are equally important)
- Creating **visually appealing and engaging videos**
- **Building communities** (e.g. creating different Facebook groups for students, alumni, clubs, connecting international students, etc.)
- **Participating in conversations** (asking questions, responding, commenting, hosting live Q&As, webinars, using WhatsApp, etc.)

Social media usage can vary across cultures and countries – Twitter, for example, has never really taken off in Hungary, but it is a popular site for Americans. Therefore, universities can launch dedicated international student-focused Twitter channels to share information and raise awareness of study opportunities. This way, universities can also take control of the content prospective students first find when they research the university on Twitter.

While Facebook is still the most popular social media platform globally, the younger generations prefer Instagram, Instagram Stories, and YouTube.

› CONTENT MARKETING STRATEGY

Content marketing is one of the best ways to raise brand awareness, gain credibility, and build meaningful relationships with the target audience. It entails creating content that people find engaging, helpful, and valuable and that will ultimately reinforce your messages and build brand loyalty. Content can be informative, educational, entertaining or a combination of these. Universities are ideally suited for content marketing as they are vast resources of knowledge and genuine thought leaders. The Columbia Business School YouTube channel, the Harvard Business Review, the Online Writing Lab (OWL) of Purdue University, MIT's Open Course Ware, or The State University of New York's blog are great content marketing examples.

Universities can use a variety of tools in their content marketing strategy, including:

- Blogs
- Studies
- Infographics
- Listicles
- Videos
- Webinars
- Tutorials
- Podcasts
- Online newspapers
- Newsletters

› EVENTS

- Organize and participate at:
- Career and education fairs
- Exhibitions
- Campus tours – physical and virtual
- Digital meetups with students, recruiters
- Workshops, seminars, conferences

› PR

Develop a detailed media strategy focused on both earned and paid media.

2. Strategic brand building tools

Solid messaging, great storytelling, and innovative communication tools are essential elements of branding, but there are also other strategic aspects of brand building that universities must consider. Creating partnerships with relevant stakeholders (including professors, career services, etc. and other organizations), building brand authority through various programs, and expanding a university's core offerings to reach newer target audiences are projects that may yield results only on the long run, but are nevertheless critical to success.

Potential strategic brand building activities universities can launch in order to raise brand awareness and grow their reputations include:

› STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BUILDING

Hungarian universities should focus on strategic partnership building with foreign universities, ministries of education, educators, high schools, guidance counselors, NGOs, and local Hungarian communities. These partnerships can be essential to raise brand awareness, establish relationships with prospective students, and help with recruitment.

› SHORT-TERM STUDY PROGRAMS

Organizing more short-term programs, such as study programs, summer programs, student research programs, internships, or language programs could attract a larger number and wider variety of students. These programs are important even for universities looking to recruit full-time students as they help raise awareness of Hungarian educational opportunities. Special scholarships could help with recruitment.

› LAUNCHING AND PROMOTING UNIQUE AND INNOVATIVE FLAGSHIP COURSES AND PROGRAMS

Interdisciplinary and practical courses (and programs) can be an integral part of the USP of a university, especially if they are based on unique local characteristics or long-established expertise in the field. Such courses could be flagship programs of universities and play a central role in promotion campaigns.

The combination of specialized knowledge and experiences can yield an outstanding student CV, enhancing chances on the job market. Employers are likely to find skills learned during such courses unique, compared to other, more common experiences and skill-sets of similarly qualified applicants. This makes a course that is unique, practice-oriented, and focused on contemporary issues quite attractive to students.

› FACULTY NETWORKING AND JOINT RESEARCH PROJECTS

An active working relationship between US and Hungarian university professors and centers can be an important long-term "game changer". Encouraging and assisting Hungarian professors to build such relations in their specific field is highly important (e.g. via sponsoring their sabbatical, research, conference attendance and other networking opportunities in the US).

The number and quality of faculty publications (e.g. prestige of the journals) matter when students assess a program. It is easier to get published in top-tier journals with professors who work at prestigious US universities. Publishing together with a US professor in the relevant field, therefore, raises awareness of a Hungarian university.

Joint research projects, inviting US professors to Hungary for a summer term or to hold a block seminar during the year, or organizing conferences with key players of a specific field can all lead to long-term strategic cooperation.

Furthermore, Hungarian universities can serve as a perfect target location for students and researchers interested in the sociological, political, historical, economical, etc. study of Eastern and Central Europe.

› STUDY ABROAD PROGRAMS OF US UNIVERSITIES

Study abroad programs through American universities, where students can gain credits from their institution for participating in the program, represent a great opportunity to host US students in Hungary and make them "ambassadors" of their experience with Hungarian universities. Organizing trips to Hungary for recruiters and study abroad officials can also strengthen the relationships between the US and Hungarian universities.

› TARGETING HUNGARIAN AMERICANS

Hungarian Americans and Hungarians residing in the US could be important strategic target partners for Hungarian universities. Building relationships with local Hungarian communities in the US could help with spreading the word about Hungarian university programs, and create trust in such programs via peer-to-peer connections.

It is not uncommon that US citizens (with or without Hungarian ties) are a part of such local communities, which widens the reach of such promotions. Moreover, such communities are often organized based on professional interests (e.g. in NYC and Boston), and thus have an extensive network of important connections to other US communities as well as university professors and students.

› INTERNSHIPS FOR FOREIGN STUDENTS AT LOCAL BUSINESSES AND IN THE CIVIL SECTOR

Building relations and programs with local, Hungarian businesses and NGOs can be a unique value proposition by Hungarian universities. Designing programs for students with such a practical element provides highly valuable skills sought by future employers.

An internship, or even a capstone project at a local business or NGO, not only provides practical skills, but can also teach valuable insights for US students into managing cross-cultural relationships, fitting into a foreign culture, learning about local characteristics, and solving problems of local communities.

› PUBLIC ONLINE COURSES

Offering online courses on the most popular online learning platforms could help raise brand awareness of Hungarian universities. Coursera has more than 37 million users, edX 18 million, FutureLearn 8,7 million, and many international educational institutions harness the power of these platforms to introduce themselves and their course offerings to the potential students. The British Council even formed a strategic partnership with FutureLearn and made MOOCs an integral part of their international Study UK campaign.

Such online courses can prove the expertise of professors and research centers, and strengthen the trust of (prospective) students in the quality of education. Selecting special as well as "trending" topics based on the university's strengths, and specifically creating inter-disciplinary curricula, can provide unique learning experiences for students.

› IMPROVING THE CULTURE OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

Encouraging students to give honest feedback, collecting and recording students' insights via surveys and public websites (e.g. markmyprofessor.com or user testimonials on the university's homepage) are all very valuable for marketing purposes.

Such data can prove the quality of the curriculum and teaching and, eventually, the whole program. These sources are usually highly trusted by future students as they come from peers who personally experienced the classes and the university environment.

Also, making students feel heard will more likely make them promoters of the university.

3. Institutional activities and project management

In order to ensure the successful execution of the university's branding strategy, create a project management plan:

- Set up working groups and assign project leaders
- Establish the decision-making process
- Create brand guidelines (visual and messaging) and share them internally (or even externally – a lot of universities publish their brand books on their website)
- Provide brand training for employees to ensure consistency in brand communication

VI. CASE STUDIES: UNIVERSITIES WITH SUCCESSFUL BRAND POSITIONING

MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY, NETHERLANDS

The young, international university that is an innovator in education and research

Maastricht University (UM) has been established in 1976 and today it is considered one of the top young universities in the world. Originally founded as a medical school, it has soon expanded into other academic fields, including arts, humanities, law, sciences, engineering, psychology, business, and economics (its Business School is especially widely acclaimed). Today UM ranks high on global lists and subject rankings and is a university with a growing reputation and brand awareness.

UM positions itself as a **truly global and inclusive university that is an innovator in education and research**, as evidenced by its mission statement:

"Maastricht University (UM) is a young university in the heart of Europe, with a distinct global perspective and a strong focus on innovative education and research strategies. We see ourselves first and foremost as an open and inclusive academic community, striving for a good mix between Dutch, European and other international students, and addressing European and global issues in our education and research programs."

UM's USPs and main messages are (see positioning statement and concrete evidence of USPs in the WHY UM section on the website):

› **An innovator in research and education**

- UM has a unique CORE educational philosophy (Collaborative Open Research Education).
- UM is founded on the principle of problem-based learning and embraces active student participation mainly through small tutorial groups.
- It offers unique programs in the Netherlands, e.g. Bachelor in European Public Health, Master in Forensics, Criminology and Law and Master in Global Health.
- UM has an institute for educational innovation (EDLAB).
- UM cooperates with businesses and socially relevant organizations through various programs and institutes and conducts research to solve major contemporary social problems.

› **Highly ranked on a variety of lists** – a great achievement especially considering how young the university is (rankings are heavily featured in messaging, see the Recognitions section).

› **A truly international university** – about 50% of their students and 40% of their academic staff are coming from abroad, 40% of its students participate in study abroad programs. UM has cooperation agreements with more than 400 partners and maintains Alumni Circles across the world.

AALTO UNIVERSITY, FINLAND

The international and interdisciplinary university

Aalto University was founded in 2010 from the merger of Helsinki University of Technology (est. in 1849), the Helsinki School of Economics (est. in 1904) and the University of Art and Design Helsinki (est. in 1871). The aim was to create a new innovative university combining the various disciplines. Today, the university comprises of six schools. Courses are offered across schools of arts, design and architecture; chemical technology; business; electrical engineering; engineering; and science.

Aalto University's main positioning strategy is **specialization.** It positions itself as an international and interdisciplinary university specializing in science, art, technology, and business.

"Aalto University is a multidisciplinary community of bold thinkers, where science and art meet technology and business. We are committed to identifying and solving grand societal challenges and building an innovative future."

Aalto's USPs and main messages effectively support this positioning statement:

An innovative, forward-looking interdisciplinary education

- The university may be new, but it was created through the merging of three old and prestigious universities, each highly esteemed in their respective fields. The idea for the university came from the presumption that we need different types of universities to tackle the challenges of the future and a unique interdisciplinary university could create new innovative thoughts.
- AU combines old and modern in the best way possible – it is an innovative institution with a long tradition. It can differentiate itself from other young, innovative research universities because it has a solid academic background. But it can also differentiate itself from other old, historic institutions because it uses this vast knowledge in an innovative, forward-looking way fitting the purpose of a 21st century educational institution.
- The name itself is symbolic and reflects the concept, spirit, values, and goals of the university. It is a tribute to the world-famous Finnish Renaissance man, Alvar Aalto, who himself was a multidisciplinary artist, renowned for his work in architecture, furniture and glassware design, as well as paintings and sculptures.

Entrepreneurship – Solving modern challenges is a clear objective of the University (see the University's Strategy 2016-2020: Shaping the Future). It has cross-disciplinary learning platforms (Aalto Design Factory), encourages student- and alumni-driven entrepreneurial activities (Aalto Entrepreneurship Society), has a vibrant startup ecosystem, organizes popular events (Startup Sauna, Slush, Aalto Festival), and builds partnerships with businesses.

Community and collaboration

- Aalto University champions an open atmosphere that inspires everyone to break boundaries and cooperate with each other.
- Students are encouraged to start businesses and conduct research, work with teachers, alumni, and businesses to create the future together (see the Collaboration section on the website)
- The university views its own strategy as a collaboration project as well. From name idea and visual identity contests to surveys and feedbacks, students, faculty, and alumni are encouraged to give their input regarding strategic decisions (the consultation process for the University's post-2020 strategy is currently underway).

International environment

- International student and faculty recruitment is one of the central goals of the university's strategy.
- International rankings play a central part in the university's messaging strategy – it provides credibility and proves the university is globally competitive.
- International students are important brand ambassadors of the university: Aalto Squad brings together students of 11 nationalities from multidisciplinary backgrounds and different levels of studies to share their experience.
- Aalto University collaborates with partner universities all over the world – building an international network is an important part of the University's recruitment strategy.

BROWN UNIVERSITY, UNITED STATES

The most progressive and liberal Ivy League School

While most Ivy League colleges are known for academic excellence and rigor, Brown University **positions itself as the most liberal and progressive Ivy League school**.

Its main brand messages are Innovation, Collaboration, and Impact and various USPs underline these values:

- **Open Curriculum** – there is no required core curriculum, students are free to develop their own personalized course of study.
- **Student-centered learning** – learning based on collaboration, community, and independence.
- **A unique grading system** – students can opt to be graded under the conventional grading system (but without failing grades) or opt for only showing Satisfactory/No credit.
- **Extensive mentor program** – all students are matched with faculty and peer advisors who provide counsel throughout their college career on important academic decisions.
- **Active social life** – Brown is consistently ranked among the TOP 10 happiest colleges in the US.
- **Intellectual independence and social consciousness** – students are expected to explore social issues in the classroom and use their education in public service projects and initiatives.

Appendix 1:
UNIVERSITY BRANDING STRATEGY OUTLINE AND CHECKLIST

UNDERSTANDING AND DISCOVERY PHASE

1. Goal setting

Identify business and branding goals

Output: Clear business and branding objectives with metrics and measurable goals

2. Brand audit & research

- Internal branding documents audit
  - Identify current brand fundamentals (values, mission, key messages, etc.) by examining internal documents
- External branding tools audit
  - Make a list of branding and marketing tools the university is using
  - Analyze how well they communicate the brand values
  - Analyze efficiency
  - Evaluate visual and messaging consistency
- Press monitoring
  - Compile a detailed list of relevant articles and media coverage
  - Analyze main topics, messages, positive/negative/neutral tone
- Website audit
  - Technical data (speed, mobile responsive design, etc.)
  - Structure, ease of navigation, user-friendliness
  - Brand alignment and clarity of brand messages
  - Content
  - Data analysis – visitors, conversion, sessions, etc.
- Social media audit
  - Social media channels – analyze numbers, engagement
  - Content audit – evaluate current strategy, main messages, content versatility, brand alignment
  - Social listening: What people are saying about the university online – review social media comments, feedback, online ratings, forum posts, blog posts, etc.
- Surveys
  - Current students (a wide segment of different majors, nationalities, undergraduates, graduates, Ph.D. students, etc.)
  - Alumni
  - University leadership
  - Faculty and employees
  - Stakeholders (e.g. industry opinion leaders, international educational organizations, media, international recruiters, corporate recruiters, etc.)
  - Prospective students within the target demographic

Output: Thorough analysis of current brand perceptions, conclusions regarding strengths and weaknesses

3. Targeting

- Define and analyze your target audience
- Create primary and secondary target groups and segment them further
- Be as specific as possible

- Include
  - General characteristics
  - Fields of education, interests
  - Behavior
  - Motivation, choice research, pain points
  - Influencers, networks

Output: A detailed target group analysis

4. Competitor analysis

- Identify your most important competitors (in light of concrete business goals and target audiences)
- List and evaluate services, differentiators, strengths, weaknesses, reputation, communication and marketing activities

Output: A detailed competitor analysis

BRAND IDENTITY AND STRATEGY PHASE

1. SWOT analysis

- List and analyze your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
- Include the findings of the discovery phase, research, and surveys

Output: A clear understanding of the university's SWOT that will serve as the foundation for positioning

2. USP – Unique selling proposition

- Identify the factors that differentiate your university from the competitors
- USP should be based on your strengths
- Define several concrete subfactors that support your USP

Output: A list of reasons why your university is different and why students should select it

3. Positioning

- Use your USP, target audience and competitor analysis and position your university on the educational market
- Define concrete benefits for your target audience, and use evidence to support your claims
- Base your positioning on a variation of this formula: Our university is the only one that provides (target audience) with (USP) by (evidence).
- Write a brand positioning statement

Output: A clear and concise brand positioning statement and a list of supporting facts that can be used in messaging

Note: The USPs and the branding positions can be tested and validated with focus groups. Also, pilot communications campaigns can be run to test the efficiency of messaging and new tools.

4. Messaging strategy

- Define main messages based on your brand positioning statement
- Create variations for the primary and secondary target groups
- Include
  - Mission statement
  - Tagline/slogan
  - Brand stories (stories that are related to your offerings/USPs)
  - Brand guidelines

Output: Concrete messages and branding texts

IDEATION AND EXECUTION PHASE

1. Communications plan

- Create a detailed communications plan with an appropriate toolkit
- Assign timing and budget
- Identity the platforms your target audience is most active at and personalize your plan with the following tools:
  - Creative and design (i.e. rebrand visual identity, brochures, ads, roll-ups, banners, etc.)
  - Digital communications (website, mobile version, app, etc.)
  - Social media strategy (what channels to use, for what purpose, how often, what kind of content, organic content + ads)
  - Content marketing strategy (creating valuable content to attract your target audiences and reinforce your messages – e.g. blog, studies, video content, etc.)
  - Ad strategy (print and digital)
  - Events (organize own events and participate at others, physical and virtual (e.g. virtual tour, digital meetups, etc.)
  - PR – organic (pitch stories to media) and paid
  - Storybranding – use stories to reinforce your brand values and messages (written and visual)
  - Influencer marketing/brand ambassadors

Output: A detailed communications plan

2. Strategic brand building tools

- Create a long-term plan focused on strategic brand and relationship building
- Potential tools:
  - Strategic partnerships with foreign universities, ministries of education, educators, high schools, guidance counselors, local businesses, NGOs, and local Hungarian communities (to raise brand awareness, establish relationships with prospective students, and help to recruit students)
  - Summer and short-term Study in Hungary programs
  - Innovative flagship courses and programs
  - Faculty networking and joint research projects
  - Study abroad programs of US universities
  - Targeting Hungarian Americans
  - Internships
  - Public online courses
  - Student reviews, feedbacks

Output: A strategic branding plan with long-term activities

3. Institutional activities and project management

- Set up working groups and assign project leaders
- Establish a decision-making process
- Create brand guidelines (visual and messaging)
- Provide brand training for employees

Output: Project management plan, guidelines, and branding books

Appendix 2: RECOMMENDED READINGS

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