

HIGHER EDUCATION IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: DRIVERS OF TOP-UNIVERSITIES' REPUTATION

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Abstract

In global knowledge economies, the relevance of higher education has been described as more important than ever as mediums for a wide range of cross border relationships and continuous flows of people, information, knowledge, technologies, products and financial capital. Moreover, in a context characterized by an increasing competition among university institutions, reputation is constantly used as a screening mechanism of service suppliers and it provides interesting benefits to educational stakeholders, such as faculty and students. In this sense, higher education ranking systems play a crucial role in classifying universities according to different criteria. Henceforth, in this paper (a) focuses on those educational institutions placed in the upper side of the hierarchy established by higher education institutions ranking systems to (b) investigate the influence of top university institutions' research, teaching and internationalization on their level of corporate reputation. To address such aim, we take two datasets from Times Higher Education Supplement ranking as basis for our analyses, i.e., the world universities ranking and the reputation ranking. Results reveal that, while research and teaching positively influence top universities' reputation, internationalization does not exert a significant direct influence.

Key words: higher education institutions, internationalization, teaching, reputation, research.

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive environment, universities seek to attract prospective students and faculty as well as to increase their levels of internationalization. Nowadays, the huge number and variety of universities worldwide shows the need for higher education ranking systems. University rankings simplify the complex world of higher education with regard to two important characteristics: institutional performance and institutional reputation. A university's ranking position provides evidence of its academic quality, and a degree obtained from a university with a higher ranking position is more valuable in the market, aiding students in finding jobs after graduation (Morrish & Lee, 2011). In this sense, a higher education institution owing high quality teaching and research and being widely recognized in the international sphere may enjoy higher reputation levels.

A university's excellent reputation may translate into several benefits. First, reputation may contribute to attract top tier teachers (Lemmink, Schuijf, & Streukens, 2003). Second, it may positively affect students' priorities in social and academic life (e.g., their perception of safety, life style, racial discrimination, friends and family, climate and culture, study programmes and courses, facilities and support services, teaching quality, teaching staff and methods, and recognition of courses) (Arambewela & Hall, 2009; Park, 2009). Additionally, a university's good reputation is also attractive to students (Bourke, 2000) because it is expected that such image and prestige will create better career opportunities for them. Third, internationalization tends to increase the permeability of established borders and respond to the demands of

the dominant world educational market and, consequently, may strength higher education institutions' reputation.

In light of these potential benefits, universities actively engage in reputation management and, specifically, seek to achieve high scores in reputation rankings worldwide. Consequently, it is crucial to contribute to identify the drivers of higher education institutions' position in such rankings. Most of prior works have theoretically identified research and teaching as relevant drivers of universities' reputation from a theoretical viewpoint without considering the role of internationalization.

Reputation of Higher Education Institutions

Concept

Reputation management requires an understanding of this construct and how various target audiences perceive and respond to reputation (Ressler & Abratt, 2009). A considerable number of recent articles have attempted to establish a definition for corporate reputation as (a) assessments that multiple stakeholders make about a company's ability to fulfil its expectations over time (Fombrun & Van Riel, 2003), (b) a collective system of subjective beliefs among members of a social group (Bromley, 1993, 2000, 2002), (c) collective beliefs that exist in the organizational field about a firm's identify and prominence (Rao, 1994), (d) media visibility and favorability gained by a firm (Deephouse, 2000) and (e) collective representations shared in the minds of multiple publics about an organization over time (Grunig & Hung, 2002; Yang, 2007; Yang & Grunig, 2005). In conclusion, corporate reputation accumulates and represents the history of a firm's interaction with various stakeholders (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Freeman, 1984).

In this context it is essential to provide a precise definition of reputation for higher education institutions that is suitable in terms of competitiveness within the education global market. According to Van Vught (2008) the reputation can be described as the image (of quality, influence, trustworthiness) it has in the eyes of others, i.e., the subjective reflection of the various actions an institution undertake to create an external image. It is important to note that the reputation of an institution and its quality may be related, but they need not be identical. Reputation is a combination of quality, influence and trustworthiness. For example, as Sung and Yang (2008) state, prospective students are more likely to enrol or decide to attend a university when they trust that institution. Increased trust is likely to influence the development of positive experiences and evaluations, which consequently help increase quality perceptions and generate positive word-of-mouth effects. All these aspects positively influence an institution's reputation.

In educational services management, concepts such as image and reputation are extensively used as positioning instruments to influence students' choice of a higher education institution (Milo, Edson & Mceuen, 1989; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001; Weissman, 1990). Understanding the role of both variables allows a more effective use of communication and institutional visibility techniques and, consequently, promotes the enhancement of universities' position in university reputation ranking systems (Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001).

Influence of Research, Teaching and Internationalization

Higher education institutions are "intensely concerned with reputation and prestige" (Geiger, 2004, p.15) to successfully operate within the educational market, where they compete with each other constantly being compared and scored in the league tables. Thus, the behavior of higher education institutions is motivated by the willing to increase their academic prestige

and to underpin their reputation (Garvin, 1980; Brewer, Gates & Goldman, 2002). In this sense, rankings function as reputation makers supporting a competition for prestige.

The competition among universities may be delimited in terms of differentiation (Geiger, 1996) in order to achieve a competitive advantage. According to Geiger (2004), such competition for reputation mainly relies on two poles – faculty scholars (i.e., scientists with relevant recognition, awards and high citation impact scores) and students' recruitment (i.e., application of special assessment procedures and grant-systems). Furthermore, additional recent studies support this idea by suggesting that university excellence has to do with quality in teaching and research so that a certain institution may build its reputation upon these pillars (Taylor & Braddock, 2007). This paper keeps in line with this prior theoretical literature and enrich it by adding the influence that internationalization may exert on universities' corporate reputation. Specifically, we analyze whether certain institutional efforts carried out to promote such differentiation (i.e. research and teaching quality as well as internationalization) lead top universities to accumulate a certain reputation that, in turn, is translated into higher positions in educational reputation ranking systems.

Nowadays, the environment places a tremendous value on research (creation of knowledge) (Linton, Tierney & Walsh, 2011). According to Marginson (2006), research capacity represents an important component that is measured and scored in rankings and contributes to the image of the institution confirming the professional profiles of staff involved and demonstrating it through high citation position in journals of impact. Most students, like other members of society, believe that universities that strongly engage in research have a better reputation than universities with lower research outputs (Grunig, 1997). In this line, Goldberger, Mather and Flattau (1995) state that a graduate program whose faculty actively engage in research is likely to achieve a more favourable reputation than a less research-producing program at another university. Thereby, research activity generates university benefits (Stephen, 1997). Most of the institutional rankings and performance indicator systems in higher education focus on the average quality of students and, in the process, overlook the research activities and accomplishments of an institution. This is especially surprising given the fact that the vast majority of research about the productivity of faculty members and academic departments has centred on their scholarly accomplishments (Porter & Toutkoushian, 2006).

Furthermore, the reputation at international level of higher education institutions arises not only from the relevant contribution of scholars within the research field but also from the quality of their teaching, (Williams & Van Dyke, 2004) and involvement into the internationalization processes. Additionally, Duczmal (2006) argues the importance of strong academic faculty since no higher education institutions may be successful without considering its academic teaching as key element for shaping such an university's reputation (Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; Soutar & Turner 2002; Veloutsou, Lewis & Paton, 2004).

In addition, this paper highlight that a key aspect in the current higher education context characterised by a global knowledge economy is the internationalization of universities. This hypothesis has led us to analyse the relationship between higher education reputation and internationalization. In the 3rd Global Survey Report of the International Association of Universities (IAU), published in September 2010, "enhancing international profile and reputation" is identified as the third most important reason for the internationalization of higher education institutions (Beelen, 2011). Thus, we consider that internationalization may have a direct effect on a university's reputation; more concretely, higher levels of internationalization may increase the visibility of a university and, consequently, its reputation.

Focused on top-universities, Frank and Cook (1995) identify, from a theoretical perspective, the concept of "winner-take-all market", according to which these institutions are searching for the best researchers, engaging the most talented students, providing innovative facilities ensuring the internal operating processes, designing creative and up-to-date plans

and programmes and, in this way, underpinning their long-lasting reputation. In this line, such top universities put a strong emphasis on their reputation management, being aware that an enhanced reputation may assist in attracting higher-quality students' applicants, more research funding or greater government financial support (Cyrenne & Grant, 2009).

On the basis of the previous statements, this paper poses the following hypotheses:

H1a: Research quality of a top higher education institution positively influences such an institution's reputation.

H1b: Teaching quality of a top higher education institution positively influences such an institution's reputation.

H1c: Internationalization of a top higher education institution positively influences such an institution's reputation.

Methodology of Research

Sample

The final sample consisted of the 50-top universities worldwide according to the World Reputation Ranking (2011). For each university, it was gathered data about its reputation, internationalization, research quality and teaching quality.

Measures

Reputation

Reputation is the dependent variable in the analysis. To measure universities' reputation, it was used the information about reputation scores published by the Times Higher Education World Reputation Ranking. This ranking, based on the results of a worldwide survey among experienced university academics around the world, is a measure of universities's reputation.

Reputation scores are based on the number of times an institution was cited by survey respondents as being "the best" in their narrow fields of expertise. Each respondent was able to nominate a maximum of 10 institutions. The number-one ranked institution, Harvard University, was selected most often. The scores of all the other institutions are expressed as a percentage of Harvard's score, set at 100.

Research quality

This variable enters our analysis as independent variable. Research quality is represented with two items: global academic peer review and citation per faculty. Global academic peer review is the key element of THES ranking and is based on an online survey distributed to academics all over the world. Results are compiled based on three years responses, reaching a total of 9386 responses in 2009. Respondents are not allowed to evaluate their own institution nor to respond more than once (only their latest response is counted). Different weights are applied both geographically and by discipline in order to ensure a representation as fair as possible. The source used to assess citation per faculty is Scopus, the world's largest abstract and citation database of research literature (World University Rankings). Hence, the more highly cited papers a university publishes, the stronger this university can be considered to be in terms of research. We compiled data about research quality covering a period of eight years, 2004-2011. As a result, the degree of research quality of each university is calculated as an average of these two indicators during the last eight years.

Teaching quality

Teaching quality enters our analysis as independent variable. In THES ranking, teaching quality is measured through the students-faculty ratio. While this may not constitute a perfectly accurate measure of teaching quality, it is the most globally available and accessible measure of commitment to teaching. Specifically, we have collected information about this variable for the past eight years (2004-2011). The degree of teaching quality of each university is calculated as an average of the indicator students-faculty ratio during the last eight years.

Internationalization of higher education

The variable internationalization enters our analysis as independent variable or predictor. Values of internationalization have been obtained from the World University Ranking, published in THES. This ranking focuses on the 200 top-ranked universities. The variable internationalization is measured through two non-subjective indicators: percentage of international students and percentages of international staff. Since this ranking is published annually, we have gathered information from the internationalization of universities for the past eight years (2004-2011). The degree of internationalization of each university is calculated as an average of the indicators of internationalization in the last eight years.

Results of Research

Provided that the dependent variable has a continuous distribution, regression analyses (Cohen & Cohen, 1983) are used to estimate the effect of the independent variables on universities' reputation. The intercorrelations for all explanatory variables are examined using both bivariate correlations and variance inflation factors (VIF). The former show that the intercorrelations for all explanatory variables are less than 0.7 (see the descriptive statistics and correlation matrix in Table 1). The VIF analysis reveals no sign of multicollinearity, and the VIF values of all independent variables range between 1.052 and 4.286, far below the acceptable upper bound of 10 (Hair et al., 2006, p. 230). Both tests suggest that the regression estimates are not degraded by the presence of multicollinearity.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlation matrix.

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3
1. Reputation of higher education institutions	20.95	23.39			
2. Research quality	79.32	12.16	0.907***		
3. Teaching quality	74.03	12.92	0.856***	0.869***	
4. Internationalization of higher education	58.24	26.01	0.036	0.013	0.121

† p < 0.10; * p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

The results from the moderated hierarchical regression analysis are shown as Table 2. The table reports standardized coefficients that indicate the effect that a one-standard-deviation change in an independent variable has on the outcome variable. The model explains 83.1% of the variance. Several conclusions may be drawn. First, there is a linear relationship between research quality of higher education and universities' reputation, as is borne out by the regression results ($\beta = 0.663, p < 0.001$). Second, the teaching quality is also positively associated with

universities' reputation ($\beta = 0.281, p < 0.05$). Third, the internationalization of higher education seems not to influence higher education institutions' reputation.

Table 2. Results of the hierarchical regression analysis (dependent variable: Reputation of higher education institutions).

Variables	β	t
Research quality	0.663***	5.320
Teaching quality	0.281*	2.239
Internationalization of higher education	0.006	0.096
R	0.918	
R squared	0.842	
Adjusted R squared	0.831	

All coefficients are standardized β weights. One-tailed tests of significance were used to evaluate the significance of the beta weights for the main and moderating effects. † $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

The results obtained in this paper show two main aspects. On the one hand, investments in promoting better research and teaching contribute to universities' reputation. This result keeps in line with prior theoretical studies that had identified both variables as crucial drivers of reputation. On the other hand, internationalization seems not influence higher education institutions' reputation. This result, although counterintuitive, may be due to the fact that the international component of higher education still has little emphasis on university rankings and the indicators used to dot accurately reflect all the variables involved in the internationalization processes.

This work has some practical implications. In terms of graduate employability, some researchers have noticed that, on an increasingly international labor market, employability comes to depend more on the global status or rank of the university conferring the degree (Montgomery & Canaan, 2004). Thus, drawing on the drivers fostering such reputation may help top-universities decide which type of policy measures to implement. Institutions already doing well in the rankings have sometimes used their position to justify charging high tuition (Merola, 2006), while those doing poorly (e.g., Irish universities) have used their performance to call for the introduction of student fees (McConnell, 2005). Therefore, undertaking actions to promote research and teaching quality may be translated into bigger chances to charge higher fees. Nonetheless, provided the huge heterogeneity observed worldwide, future lines of research may find appealing to analyze the extent to which the institutional context (i.e. economic, political or cultural) may foster or hinder universities' ability to strengthen their reputation.

Conclusion

In the global knowledge economy, the continuous and increasing competition among higher education institutions has lead universities to undertake additional efforts to offer the best products and services. The perception that universities increasingly compete for both students and private sources of funding has encouraged these educational institutions to provide greater information on their institutional performance (Cyrenne & Grant, 2009). In this sense, the classification of university institutions helps harmonize and normalize the world market of education according to different criteria (Marginson, 2006, 2007).

The achievement of a solid corporate reputation, reflected through distinguished positions

in university ranking systems, plays a crucial role and provides several benefits to educational stakeholders. As a consequence, it is of great importance to identify the main drivers justifying such a reputation. In this paper, the investigation is focused on whether top-universities' institutional performance in terms of research, teaching and internationalization influence such institutions' reputation.

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