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Brand Building & Reputation Management in Indian Higher Education

Background

Higher education in India is represented by its 799 universities, with a break up of 44 central universities, 540 state universities, 122 deemed universities, 90 private universities, 5 institutions established and functioning under the State Act, and 75 Institutes of National Importance which include AIIMS, IIT's and NIT's among others. Other institutions include 39,071 colleges as Government Degree Colleges and Private Degree Colleges, including 1800 exclusive women's colleges, functioning under these universities and institutions (UGC Data 2016). In addition there are thousands of technical colleges belonging to engineering, medical, management, architecture and others. While since decades there has been a focus on the spread of higher education across the country and increase in Gross Enrollment Ratio, in the recent past while there has been a greater emphasis on the qualitative aspects of education setting new benchmarks and a global orientation. The Govt. has

been highlighting the need for global benchmarking for the institutions and universities with an objective of establishing India as a global hub for quality higher education. However when it comes to on-ground realities they show a dismal picture and any talk of building Indian Higher Education as a brand appears to be a wishful thinking and nothing more.

0.000025 per cent; 0.015036 per cent!!!!, these are the highly abysmal percentages which work out for Times and QS rankings of the Indian Higher Education institutions which feature in those rankings out of the total number existing in the country as per UGC data 2016. 0.11 is the percentage for the management institutes which feature in FT rankings of the total estimated 3500 B schools in the country including IIMs, IITs and ISB. It doesn't take much to understand the reasons behind these abysmal status as everyone can see for themselves the sad and pathetic state of affairs around the country even with the institutes of national importance and central universities. Several



authors have penned down in volumes, well researched, deeply analyzed and well explained reasons for this malaise. Lack of vision and futuristic outlook on one hand and stuck up with the old and archaic system, mostly crippled on the other, lack of basic resources – intellectual and monetary, scarcity of requisite faculty strength and their capabilities towards teaching and world class research, absence of leadership and ownership compounded by poor accountability and above all the learning environment which has become archaic and devoid of present or future realities are few of the basic reasons behind this shameful scenario of a nation which at one time in history was the flag bearer of knowledge and intellectual power in the whole world.

The GMAC 2017 application trends for Management programmes worldwide show that for India international application figure is abysmally low which is less than 1% of application volume. India is equally bad in the regional break up and has less than 1% application destination wise of the total international applications for all 956 institutions covered in the survey. International application pipelines were largest for programmes in Canada, Europe and US. International applicants represent 57% of US application volumes, 70% in Canada, 89% in Europe, 20% in East and SE Asia. On the contrary, India and China represent the largest volumes of international applicants to programs worldwide indicating interests of students outside their own country. This reflects a very sad state of affairs for Indian management education as far its quality and standards are concerned which stand nowhere in the international arena in spite of IIMs(A,B,C), ISB, select University MBA programmes and a set of well-meaning autonomous PGDM institutes in the country.

Against the above background of the higher education in the country, the focus in this article is on its brand building and reputation management. Brand as a concept, we understand, is an entity or a subset of organizational identity. The other entities of organizational identities are names, symbols, logos, tag lines and self-presentations. These all identities are perceived by images inside the mind of customers, community, investors and employees. If all these images are amalgamated it is called overall organizational reputation. Therefore the essence of reputation management is bigger than or it is a holistic approach of brand building.

For an educational organization to build the images, it is essential to innovate at the basics, for instance - the hygiene, infrastructure (building, class rooms, desks, labs, IT, library, books, software tools etc.), teaching-learning environment, updated curriculum, skill impartation, vocational or job orientation, faculty competence and more. Basic hygiene level, what to talk about cutting edge standards in higher education can only be ensured if it provides the right relevance for youth beyond degrees. Only after that comes the next level of research, innovation.

Study and Findings

The most appropriate approach felt and adopted for this study for understanding these aspects of higher education in the country was to conduct interviews with any of the stakeholders of higher education institutions across the country and find out the realities.



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Starting with a relatively new university and that too in the heart of national capital Delhi in Greater Noida, Gautam Budha University started functioning in the year 2008. Dr Pooja Mishra an accomplished academician working in a leading B School who attended this university and completed her Ph D in management in the year 2016 found the facilities and infrastructure state of the art and stated that it has an extensive library and also has hostel facilities for students. The work environment and culture was found to be extremely healthy. The IT facilities are extensive and provides easily accessible computational facilities to both students and faculty. Dr Pooja added that the university has huge volumes of books and e-journals which covers books related to a variety of disciplines such as humanities, information technology, computer science, management etc. It also provides access to online databases. The teaching and learning process is well designed and mapped out. The Ph.D. programme is well structured where students undergo extensive coursework so as to speed on research areas such as review of literature, writing a research paper / case study etc. Additionally, there exists a mentoring process which provides an insight and overview of the subjects. The curriculum especially with regards to Research methodology and Statistical tools are extensively designed and updated which helps researchers in their research journey.

Most importantly, Dr Pooja Misra highlighted that the Gautam Budh University had a leadership with a vision to become a globally acclaimed brand with integrated, academic and research orientation wherein students should be able to manage seamlessly continuity and change.

Dr Soni Sharma alumna of another central university Jamia Milia Islamia established in the pre independence days in the year 1920 in the heart of national capital could not find any futuristic approach by government or university for masters students in humanities even though Central universities have a good brand value because of their approach to maintain quality in academic system. Dr Soni who is a Business Communication Faculty added that, “the curriculum was not revised and were out dated till, we were never asked to prepare any project unlikely the recent times, there was very less opportunity of research for postgraduate students and I only wish if there could be more research orientation like dissertation or project submission during my post-graduation study, I would have done better in research”. Another important aspect she highlighted was Hygiene and cleanliness which she found was always a problem at education institution. This is the least preferred priority. Washrooms are never maintained or cleaned.

Prof Chanchal Kushwaha a marketing professor who studied B.Sc., down South in University College, Thiruvananthapuram, University of Kerala 25 years ago shared that in last 25 years the university has not changed much, though very few would know that this is one of the oldest and most prestigious institutions of higher education in India, established in 1866 and has distinguished alumni like former President late K R Narayana, ISRO Chairman, Kris Gopalakrishnan, CEO Infosys, many civil servants, ambassadors from Indian foreign service, sports icons, poets writers, film stars and others. Until 2 years back when 150 years celebrations happened, Dr Chanchal found the same old heritage government college building with a huge centralized library. Though the university was



strong in research, the university in 1993 had only conventional courses and still after 25 years it remains the same with no professional courses being added.

The Business School, Jammu University, Head and Professor (retd.) Dr B C Sharma is highly disappointed with the state of affairs in Indian Higher education in general and in J & K in particular and finds that the entire system is crippled by the shortage of faculty and the out dated curriculum, teaching – learning methods which is devoid of the connect it should have with the stakeholders i.e. the society or the industry. As one moves away from the city of Jammu things get even worse in terms of basic amenities such as infrastructure, faculty strength and competency, he highlighted. Dr. Sharma blames the contractual culture prevalent for decades now in the institutions which neglects accountability and ownership on one hand and is a demotivation for worthy to join this noble profession. Another dedicated academician from Jammu region Prof Ajeet Angral, retd. Principal of a prestigious degree college highlights the absence of a strong mechanism for teaching- learning process and between teacher and student, teacher is more important, teachers role is basic and critical which is missing these days. Dr Angral added that the availability of teachers in campus for knowledge sharing and the ability to understand the language of students were important. He felt that no doubt teacher is also a part of society but need of the hour is that he or she should be more like a ‘Fakir’ rather than acting like a bureaucrat. According to both of them this aspect of teaching learning and role and commitment of teacher is most critical for a sustainable brand building process in addition to infrastructure, digital/networking, research, international exposure, capacity

building & students support system, governance vision etc.

In a state like Bihar in eastern part of India, the higher education system is almost dead. Session for Undergraduate and Post graduate programmes at the B P Mandal University Madhepura are running late by 2 years and 3 years late implying that a undergraduate students finishes his degree in 5 years instead of 3. Students who passed their examination in 2013 have not got their certificates yet. UGC while initiating a global outlook for higher education institutions has mandated a faculty – students ratio of 1:20, as against which the university colleges have a pitiable ratio of 1:1000. Sri Krishna Mahila College Begusarai in Bihar has a strength of 10,500 girl students for which sanctioned faculty number is 30 out of which the college has just 9 faculty implying a ratio of 1: 1200 students. C M Science college a NAAC A grade college in Bihar is supposed to have no system ensuring financial accountability. Cases of no classes being held and only examinations taking place is prevalent in majority colleges across the state. Situation of Patna University is no different.

However there are exceptions like St Xavier's College under Ranchi University which is in Jharkhand in the neighbouring state of Bihar. Ms Madhuri Kumar an alumnus and presently working as a journalist in The Times of India considers it as one of the best institutions in the country. Right from its state-of-the-art infrastructure to hygiene, teaching and campus discipline it has everything in its agenda, she shared. “With the passage of time, now an autonomous body, the College is imparting courses in various vocational courses. The faculty is motivated enough to guide the



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students on the right path. There is ample opportunity for students coming from poor tribal background and the learning process is rather scientific and research oriented. The curriculum I know has been updated according to the need of the hour” Ms Madhuri added while highlighting the focus on inclusivity in a predominantly tribal state.

In the west of India one of the leading universities is MLSU at Udaipur in the state of Rajasthan. HOD Dept. of English, Dr Pradip Trikha talking on Inclusivity highlighted that the university is in tribal region and it has taken effective measures to increase gross enrolment ratio, and check the dropout percentage from the degree courses by introducing skill developing courses. Measures are taken to conduct regional economic surveys from time to time to inform the govt, about effective implementation of its schemes in social sectors. Super-numeric seats are reserved for tribal students to conduct their Ph.D. in all the departments. These All such measures have enhanced branding & reputation of MLSU. But apart from these few exceptions, the problem of faculty shortage and crippled higher education system is found length and breadth in the state and also in the state of Maharastara from Kolhan to Mumbai.

From the above study conducted on a broad spectrum from north to down south and east to west, rural / semi-urban to national capital, state level college to central universities, institutions from pre independence days to institutions established during last one decade bring out few starling evidences of the stage and the status of higher education in the country calling for a transformative approach to rebuild it and with contextual objectives. Merely slogans of Building world class institutions or Global education hubs with

stray initiatives will not help. Few of the evident value propositions for stakeholders which have made exceptional higher education institutions successful and the lack of them making the majority a failure so far are important to identified and focussed upon such as:

- vision and futuristic outlook
- stakeholders perspective enabling them with skills and vocation
- basic resources – infrastructural and monetary
- requisite intellectual base and faculty strength, their competency
- capabilities towards teaching and world class research, absence of leadership and ownership teaching – learning process and the learning environment
- technology as a strategic driver
- inclusiveness
- accountability and ownership
- value system and ethics

The Way Forward

Dr. Neeraj Viswakarma, Ph D and alumnus of IIT Kanpur and a faculty of Decision sciences at one of the IIMs highlights the role of technology in education branding in the present times as he explains the rapidly changing technologies are the process of transforming a higher education by reducing the barrier of time and space requirement. “Now, the learning resources are available round the clock and around the globe with the help of the modern technology. The availability of latest resources like software self to changing requirement of the industry. Institutes readiness to adopt and use the software



packages and research databases for learning and skill enhancement increases its acceptability in the business world that ultimately leads to students' employability in the business. And the employability of student in the industry is a very big factor to institutes brand image”, Dr Neeraj emphasized.

Echoing similar emphasis Mr Sanjiv Dubey, formerly Asia Pacific executive IT Service Delivery at IBM and a prolific author of books on IT and Strategy of organizations said “I feel any brand is primarily its product so I would leave everything else and focus on student academic and industry preparedness, nothing else, ... any may disagree but here applies the doughnut principle i.e. the core and the fringe. If we give more importance to fringe then the core we compromise the core without realizing or realizing it late. I would still go by the axiom एकहिसाधेसबसधेसबसाधेसबजाय।

The authors agree to the views of the experts like Dr Neeraj, Mr Dubey that the role of higher educational Institute not only limited to teaching but also to train, to undertake research and provide the services to the society for the social uplifting of the society. The quality research requires the deeper understanding of the subject matter of the study and current progress in the field of study. It is possible by looking into journals, books, magazines, and other related documents. A library full of these (journals, books, magazines and etc) resources is the one of the biggest support to achieve the quality research. The equity research increases the visibility of the organization on the globe and hence it increases the prestige and brand of Institute globally.

Dr Vinita Srivastava, Ph D from GGSIP University carrying industry experience from an MNC firm Cipla and presently a marketing faculty shares her experience of teaching at IIM Kashipur and highlights the faculty, academics and student triad on which education stands. She adds branding will depend on the quality of all three. Moreover on the academic curricula because other two will align to it and curricula will demonstrate physical evidence to this service category called education. Academic curricula shall demonstrate originality of thought process, recency and fore thoughtfulness. Highlighting the triad relationship and its effectiveness, Dr Neeraj, other experts and the authors highlight the triad's quality aspect of brand building in today's globally competitive environment. The institutes are required to bring innovative teaching methodology in the classroom to fulfill the need of increasing social geographical diversity of the students. The teaching quality can be improved through information technologies and innovative teaching physiology is like case-based, simulation-based audio & video visuals and simulation games by creating a virtual environment. For creating the virtual environment of industry through the technology and encourage the student to participate in the problem solving and critical thinking. It will help the student to understand the real world problem in the virtual environment and their analytical and problem-solving skill will be enhanced by it that ultimately help the student to become a better manager in the future. It will ultimately help in Institute brand building and recognition.

An example of quality enhancement can be seen at MLSU despite being in a state which is otherwise a



laggard. Dr Trikha shared that regular FDPs for faculty enhanced potential of the human resources in strengthening quality research, mentoring & guiding for the betterment of institution. He further added that higher education especially in terms of infra, classrooms, software data base, library resources and cleanliness, hygiene etc. are on the upsurge due to RUSA, but areas of student discipline requires effective measures.

Brand Building and Reputation Management

Brand, organizational identity and reputation as they relate to large organizations have been around for quite some time with an established wealth of published research and extant literature. The underlying wisdom of the gained knowledge is: the greater the alignment between these three concepts, the more consistent and therefore the more successful the branding efforts will be. The challenge is how to align those three. Reputation is distinct from the actual character or behavior of the company and may be better or worse. When the reputation of a company is more positive than its underlying reality, this gap poses a substantial risk. Firm with strong positive reputation attracts better stakeholders and hence the better brand. There are various risks associated with reputation namely.

1. Reputation – reality Gap
2. Changing beliefs and expectations
3. Weak internal and basic coordination

To manage the reputation it is essential to manage the said risks, therefore following may be the ways of managing reputation

1. Objectively assess reputation versus reality
2. Assess the impact of changing expectations and manage it
3. Focus on reputational risks
4. Appoint single point solutions to manage the reputation to build a strong and sustainable reputation

Every interaction with customers and other stakeholders influences and adds to the accruing brand equity of the firm: the more positive the customer experience, the stronger the brand, and greater is the positive reputation for the organization. Fombrun and Rindova (2000) explain that reputation is the more or less favorable regard in which a firm is held by its stakeholder. Such regard, which translates into a greater reputation when compared to competing firms, allows them to cope with the intense nature of competition and offer intuitive, relevant and customized values to their customers.

These can be applied in the context of Higher education institutions in the country. A Brand building model for Higher education institutions has been attempted as shown in Figure 1, that shows branding framework for higher educational institutes. The framework is based upon the expectations of the students and industries that is accomplished by value propositions and activity centers. The model has taken the value chain of management education however this can be replicated for other streams too.

Branding and Reputation Management in higher education in India should carry a stakeholders perspectives focusing on the expectations of the students and the society which includes the corporates, industries and the community. Addressing



these expectations, the right value propositions should be identified within the context of times to be created in the different activity centres of the value chain of the institutions around the values of CRU i.e. credibility, relevance and usefulness. Dr. Harivansh Chaturvedi, Alternate President, EPSI adds further

that CRU (credible, Relevant and Useful) value propositions should create the ‘differentiators’ for the institutions while meeting the stakeholders expectations. Moreover, branding should be aligned and conform with the vision and values of higher education institutions in India, he concludes.

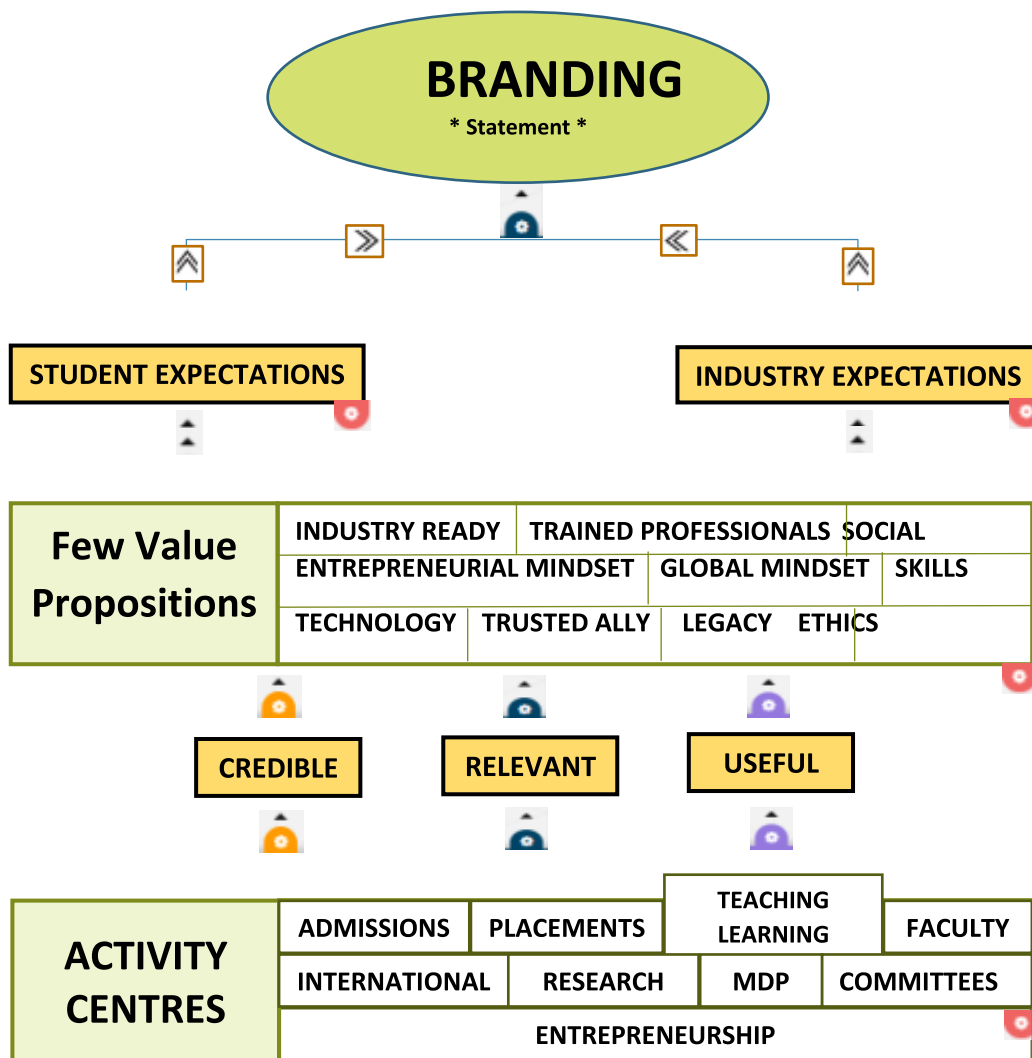


Figure 1: Branding Framework