



University websites in Europe between marketization and branding and traditional university discourses

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Contribution

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The analysis of marketization within higher education - especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries - has a long history (Bertelsen, 1998; Brown & Carasso, 2013; Mautner, 2005; Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). However, it often focuses on only macro policy trends and not the extent of concrete institutional adaptation to such trends. Thus the prevalence of traditional university models and academic rationales about both universities' role in society and students' roles within universities remain largely ignored. Similarly, the variety of adaptations to the marketization discourse and ideology (including the absence of them) in institutional communications for current and prospective students, the ways in which the "desired student" is constructed through university websites, and the ways in which the overall institutional identity is projected all require detailed analysis (not merely an acknowledgement of overall trends).

The impact of market and economic discourses on traditional, academic communicative genres has been studied in relation to a number of different materials. Older studies have focused on the comparison of current and historical university prospectuses (and the language use in such genres) (Askehave, 2007; Fairclough, 1993). More recent studies have focused on website analysis (Hoang & Rojas-Lizana, 2015; Leathwood & Read, 2009; Saichaie, 2011; Zhang & O'Halloran, 2013) and university promotional videos (Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2016). However, the number of such studies is small and their focus is often quite narrow. The general conclusion of these studies is that there has been a general shift towards increased marketization and the use of corporate branding discourses within university communication materials and genres

(websites, prospectuses, videos).

Traditional promotional materials, including older versions of university websites, tend to: (i) emphasise a more traditional view of the university – i.e. understanding it as an institution to integrate and initiate potential new members of the academic community; (ii) present the academic structure of the institution (departments, faculties, faculty members etc.); and (iii) explain the rules to the new members (application regulations etc) (e.g. Fairclough, 1993; Zhang and O’Halloran, 2013). On the other hand, modern type of university promotion is significantly different. There is evidence that a tendency towards marketization and competition for resources and students in many countries has led to the expansion of promotion and marketing departments at universities (Mautner, 2010) Here, the university is understood as a brand, and marketing strategies are adopted that are based on corporate branding principles; practical web-design manuals are even borrowed from the corporate world. University promotional materials often follow a branding approach based on the principle of homogeneity (e.g. the presence of the brand on all web-site subsections) and homogeneous visual identity (e.g. using the same, unique colour, layout, typeface etc.) (Mautner, 2010). Potential students are positioned as having considerable power in relation to their consumer choice and the economic lexis is also widely used (in relation to the university mission and vision, as well in communication with prospective and current students) (Maunter, 2005; Maunter 2010).

The research in this paper presents a comprehensive, comparative analysis of current (2017 versions) of 60 higher education institution websites in 6 European countries (10 websites each in England, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Denmark and Poland). The aim of the research is not just to confirm and describe general trends, but to try to explain the variety of institutional adaptations and differences in relation to these macro trends in the European perspective.

Method

Based on the previous analyses of marketization research, as well as discourse studies of university materials (statements, websites, prospectuses and video materials), several website markers were identified which represent two extreme models (which can be considered as ‘ideal types’):

- (i) the service-oriented global university as a corporate brand; and
- (ii) the traditional image of the university as a public service provider and primarily academic institution focused on teaching and learning.

Within this dichotomy, the branded, service-oriented university extreme would be expected to have: a homogeneous website with prominent use of visual elements; an “About Us” webpage explicitly proclaiming excellence; and representations of students as customers - addressing them with elaborate use of a commodified lexis borrowed from the economic social field. In contrast, the traditional image of the university as public service institution would be expected to include a separate visual identity (visible on the web-site) for each sub-unit of the institution. It would present its excellence mostly in terms of significant scientific, academic contributions; use an academic lexis of teaching and research; and view current and potential students as novices in the academic community, who need to be integrated in the academic institutional order.

Based on the outlined dichotomy and the literature review, a specific analytic matrix was developed that includes the markers for the two specific “ideal types” of university web-site. 60 higher education institutions websites in 6 European countries (England, Ireland, Germany, Spain, Denmark and Poland) were analysed in a systemic way. Some of the textual and visual materials were coded into directly, with the help of the NVivo software package, and other more complex markers with the use of content analysis score charts.

University websites are usually very complex and contain hundreds of subpages. In order to limit the scope of the analysis, the following subpages of the university websites were selected: 1) the homepage (in the case of changing banners, the first one was selected); 2) the “About us” section(s) (pages containing university profile, mission and vision statements etc.); 3) subsection(s) targeting university applicants (why study at that particular university etc.) 4) sub-section(s) targeting current undergraduate students (typically called “Study”, “Student Life”, “Undergraduate studies” etc.); 5) promotional video (where available) placed on the future applicant pages.

Expected Outcomes

The research in question is not fully completed at the time of submission of this proposal. The analysis is however aimed at assessing the following hypotheses:

The main hypothesis of this research is that the presence of corporate style web-site features and promotional discourse towards students are more present in the countries with prototypical New Public Management (NPM) governance features in higher education, combined with high competition for students who pay tuition fees (England, Ireland), followed by countries with significant to moderate NPM governance features, limited competition for students and no tuition fees (Denmark, Germany), and then countries with almost no NPM governance features (strong traditional collegial governance) but with a strong public-private divide in higher education sector (Spain, Poland). The latter two groups of countries are expected to preserve more traditional university models and academic rationales within the discourse about university and in relation to current and potential students.

The secondary hypothesis focuses on the extent of within-country variety with respect to the presence of corporate style

university websites and the portrayal of students as consumers. It is expected that more academically prestigious institutions are more able to maintain a traditional institutional practice/model and resist pressures to marketize and employ economic discourses (Tomlinson, 2016). Lower prestige institutions, which in principle experience much stronger competition for students, are expected to stress more experiential and vocational benefits of learning and adopt more readily a consumer ideology and economic discourse. In the countries with a strong private-public divide (Poland, Spain), corporate style websites, underpinned by a consumer ideology, would be more present within the private sector than among public institutions.

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