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A review of higher education image and reputation literature: Knowledge gaps and a research agenda

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are investing increasing resources in order to achieve favourable perceptions among their stakeholders. However, image and reputation management is a complex issue and how stakeholders perceive universities does not always coincide with the image the latter wish to project. For this reason, in this article we address a review of the literature on higher education image and reputation to identify the main knowledge gaps and establish the research lines that merit deeper examination in the future. The gaps identified highlight the need to improve knowledge about the way perceptions (image and reputation) of university institutions are shaped, pinpointing the dimensions or essential aspects that influence their formation and determining whether their degree of influence differs when considering the perspectives of different stakeholders or individuals from different geographical areas. Theoretical propositions related to the identified gaps have been set out.

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1. Introduction

Over recent decades sizable changes have occurred in the higher education (HE) environment leading to an intensification of competition between higher education institutions (HEIs). The expansion of demand experienced during the second half of the 20th century gave rise to an increase in supply in terms of reach and variety (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009) which was boosted by the effects of other phenomena such as globalization and the decrease in public financing. Globalization has favoured a growing internationalization of HE, considerably increasing the numbers of international students (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009) and interest from universities in capturing them. Reduction in public financing has stimulated greater competition for resources and has contributed to the privatization of HE and a proliferation of private institutions. All of the foregoing has stepped up international competition and rivalry between HEIs to attract home-based and overseas students, resources and prestigious teaching staff, leading many universities to perceive a need to build a solid favourable image and reputa-

tion among their stakeholders, these being factors of differentiation that influence their affective responses and behaviour vis-à-vis the institution (Alves & Raposo, 2007; Belanger, Mount, & Wilson, 2002; Drydakis, 2015; Helgesen & Nettet, 2007; Kheiry, Rad, & Asgari, 2012; Nguyen & LeBlanc, 2001).

Consequently, universities have begun to assign more resources to bolster their image (Curtis, Abratt, & Minor, 2009). However, reality in universities and the perception their stakeholders have of them do not always go hand in hand (Landrum, Turrissi, & Harless, 1999), indicating that image and reputation management is a key issue not devoid of difficulties. Indeed, there is still little knowledge concerning aspects critical for effectively and efficiently managing university image (Curtis et al., 2009), due to the scant attention paid to this to date in the academic research field (Aghaz, Hashemi, & Sharifi Atashgah, 2015; Duarte, Alves, & Raposo, 2010; Luque & Del Barrio, 2009; Wilkins & Huisman, 2015).

Nevertheless, this situation might be changing. Sung and Yang (2008) remark that the study of university image "is a new topic that is receiving greater attention" (p. 358), a view shared by other authors (Aghaz et al., 2015; Curtis et al., 2009). That is why this is the right moment to analyze and report the achievements in this area and determine challenges for the future. Accordingly, this article aims to identify the main themes and knowledge gaps associated with university image and reputation in order to encapsulate

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what is known and to steer future research effort towards the issues that might assist university managers in managing the perceptions of HEIs. To achieve the aforementioned objective we carried out a narrative review, but also employed some systematic techniques that resulted in more robust and transparent findings to be considered by scholars and practitioners in their decision taking.

After revising 70 articles published in 40 journals up until 2015, we have identified four main knowledge gaps: (1) no consensus exists regarding the dimensions that comprise HE image and reputation; (2) knowledge of the similarities and differences that image and reputation formation presents among stakeholders is still very limited; (3) there is no measurement instrument that serves for general application with various stakeholders, and (4) there is little known about the existence of common and specific aspects in the formation of the university image and reputation for different geographical areas.

This article is organized as follows. First, and after this introduction, the review process is described. Then, the outstanding features of the papers selected for analysis are shown. Afterwards, the findings are reported under headings which emerged during the analysis. Finally, the conclusions and limitations of this review are presented.

2. Methodology

To achieve the aforementioned objectives the academic literature on HE image and reputation was reviewed following the process shown in Fig. 1.

2.1. Defining the scope of review

According to the categorization made by Bearman et al. (2012) for literature reviews, we carried out a narrative review but employed some systematic techniques too. The review question raised was as follows: What are the major issues explored and the main knowledge gaps in the published literature regarding HEI image and reputation?

In our opinion, image and reputation are two different, albeit interconnected constructs, which form part of the same nomological net. However, the decision to consider both concepts as the targets of our study is because (1) both are concerned with stakeholders perceptions and (2) there are conceptual inconsistencies underpinning both terms (Barnett & Pollock, 2012; Cian & Cervai, 2014; Clardy, 2012) which is expressed in the literature in their interchangeable and overlapping use (Fetscherin & Usunier, 2012; Fombrun, 2012; Walker, 2010). The variety of definitions for the concepts of image and reputation from a corporate perspective is reflected in the adaptations proposed for the university context. For instance, Alessandri, Yang, and Kinsey (2006) defined university image as “the public’s perception of the university” (p. 259) whereas other authors understand it as “the sum of all the beliefs an individual has towards the university” (Duarte et al., 2010, p. 23; Zaghoul, Hayajneh, & AlMarzouki, 2010, p. 158). Similarly, Arpan, Raney, and Zivnaska (2003) explained it as the “various beliefs about a university that contribute to an overall evaluation of the university” (p. 100), a conceptualization that, however, Ressler and Abratt (2009) consider is consistent with the definition of reputation. For these authors, image is to do with how the organization wishes to be seen by its stakeholders (intended image) and how it believes it is seen by them (construed image) whereas reputation, in a view shared by Delgado-Márquez, Escudero-Torres, and Hurtado-Torres (2013), is concerned with the question “what do stakeholders actually think of an organization?”. This interchangeable use of the terms image and reputation and a shared

cornerstone of the perceptions and beliefs of the stakeholders has led us to take as the objective of our study of the literature review works relating to both image and reputation.

2.2. Identification of studies and selection criteria

Those works whose main objectives included further examination of some aspects associated with HEI image and reputation were considered relevant to the review’s purpose and met inclusion criteria for review. Studies were collected in June 2015 from the Web of Science, searching for works (articles, reviews, books and book chapters) that contained in their title the terms *image* OR *reputation* AND “*higher education*” OR *universit**. The terms were searched for in the “title” search field with the aim of finding works completely focused on the topic rather than studies addressing it anecdotally. 68 references were obtained, but 47 did not address the issue under study and were subsequently excluded. The considerable difference between the identified references and the documents to be reviewed was due to the large number of works containing the term “image” in the title but dealing with topics such as self-image, body-image, neuroimage or image-processing in the audio-visual field.

Bibliographies of the included references were searched to identify other relevant references that would support the objectives of our study but which had not been selected with the search strategy. This is how (1) works not included in the Web of Science (for example, those of Beerli, Díaz Meneses, & Pérez Pérez (2002) and Arpan et al. (2003)) or (2) works without the words image or reputation in their title (such as those of Krampf and Heinlein (1981) and Oplatka (2002)) or (3) with terms other than “*higher education*” or *universit** to refer to HEIs (for example, those of Kazoleas, Yungwook, & Moffitt (2001) or Zaghoul et al. (2010)) came to form part of the references to be analyzed. Thus, 49 additional studies were incorporated and, altogether, 70 works were selected for detailed study. These articles were published in 40 different journals, focussed particularly on just 14 (see Table 1).

2.3. Content analysis

Each article was analyzed using a systematic framework established by the three authors. Through iterative testing and revision, we designed a data collection form to guide the extraction of relevant information from the studies. The aim was to develop an instrument that could be used to identify issues and knowledge gaps in the literature but also to gain transparency and minimize bias. Data extraction included (see Appendix I):

- (1) Type of work, categorized according to the proposal by De Bakker, Groenewegen, and den Hond (2005) as theoretical (which is broken down into conceptual, exploratory and predictive), prescriptive, and descriptive.
- (2) Objectives reflected in the works reviewed. First, these were scrutinized following the four categories proposed by Duarte et al. (2010) to classify the research into organizational image: research examining the sources of organizational image, research measuring the multi-dimensional image construct, research addressing the way different people generate different images and research assessing the implications of organizational image. However, the data collection form had to be refined and the number of categories widened to seven as themes emerged from the analysis that could not be classified. The three researchers agreed on the definitive topics to be scrutinized in the objectives and their labels.
- (3) For empirical studies, the geographical context where samples were collected and the population under study were also coded. The latter field was only reflected when samples comprised

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