



Branding Canadian Higher Education

Zainab Kizilbash

Introduction

The branding of national higher education systems is a global trend that has become increasingly common over the last decade. One of the main motives driving this trend is the view that branding a national higher education system will increase that country's market share of international students. This is evident as national higher education systems compete against one another in a high-stakes battle for international students by attempting to differentiate themselves in the marketplace of higher education.

This paper will undertake a historical descriptive analysis of how Canada recently came to brand its higher education system with the determined goal of increasing its market share of international students. This is followed by a critical analysis of serious considerations that need to be examined concerning the long-term effects of branding higher education as a way to draw in more international students. Lastly, the paper will suggest some implications for policy in the hopes of combating potentially detrimental effects the creation of a brand can have on Canadian higher education. Note that higher education in general is subject of the paper — colleges, institutes and universities. Some of the references are specific to universities, however.

The Marketplace of Higher Education

Market forces, globalization, internationalization, competition, new providers, cost-efficiency — these descriptors of the brave new world of higher education appear consistently in any discussion of its future.

The above quote drawn from a 2002 report by the American Council on Education entitled “The Brave New (and Smaller) World of Higher Education: A Transatlantic View” aptly sums up the continuing change that has swept the realm of higher education in the last decade. The report goes on to identify what it proposes as “an unholy trinity” — three forces for change:

During the last decade, technology, globalization, and competition have caused the ground to shift under higher education worldwide, defying national borders and calling into question honored traditions, sacred myths, and previously unquestioned assumptions. These forces on both continents (North America and Europe) are systematically — and quietly — reshaping higher education. They interact with each other, so that technology intensifies competition as well as enables globalization; similarly, globalization fosters competition.

This description illustrates how increasingly in higher education all roads lead to competition. Today universities are in constant competition with one another on the world stage for resources, rankings, reputation, staff and students. This culture of competition has led institutions to become more aggressive and entrepreneurial, following the wave of new-managerialism that has crashed upon the shores of higher education in recent decades. This entrepreneurial stance has resulted in a number of initiatives revolving around international education; however, an avenue that has been aggressively pursued is the recruitment of international students. The Director of the Higher Education Policy Research Unit at the Dublin Institute of Technology, Ellen Hazelkorn, states, “Stories of what the *Daily Yomiuri* calls the “scramble for students” or the *Economist* calls the “battle for brainpower” are increasingly common as higher education moves centre stage in the geopolitical contest for an increasing share of the global economic market” (Hazelkorn, 2008, p.8). The motivation behind the battle for students becomes apparent when the benefits they bring are examined.

With the potential to profit from such huge figures and taking into account the aforementioned culture of competition that has come to permeate higher education, governments — those that have not earlier jumped on the bandwagon, or in fact led the way — are scrambling to step up their recruitment efforts, Canada being no exception.

The Recruitment of International Students

The cited benefits of recruiting a high number of international students often include notions of an enriched academic experience through diversity, as Philip Steenkamp, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities for Ontario states in the report (2008), “The Development of Ontario’s Internationalization Strategy”:

International students bring valuable diversity to the classroom, the campus, and the larger community, enhancing the academic experience for all students. Diversity in the classroom enriches all students’ understanding of the world by allowing them to share different perspectives, approach problems from different angles, and discover different cultural experiences (p.1).

This sentiment is echoed by Bob Rae (2005) in his report and recommendations on the Ontario post-secondary education system, “Ontario: A Leader in Learning”, where he agrees that home and host institutions benefit from a more diversified student body. Paul Davidson (2009), President and CEO of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), also agrees that the diversity created by the presence of international students is beneficial as they bring diverse perspectives, expertise and skills to our classrooms, which contributes to creating global, 21st century institutions across Canada.

However, in spite of such laudable outlooks, another motive behind the recruitment of international students that must be acknowledged is the pursuit of economic gain. As Peter Scott (1998) stated more than a decade ago, “It would be a mistake to interpret the pressure to recruit international students in some countries as a reinforcement of internationalism” (p. 125). Today, this could not be more true. International students more often than not pay their institutions exorbitant tuition fees, regularly double to triple home-student tuition fees. They also contribute substantial amounts to the economy of their host country through accommodation, living expenses, travel and discretionary products and services. In many cases, the total figures have surpassed major export sectors that traditionally dominated home markets. With the potential to profit from such huge figures and taking into account the aforementioned culture of competition that has come to permeate higher education, governments — those that have not earlier jumped on the bandwagon, or in fact led the way — are scrambling to step up their recruitment efforts, Canada being no exception.

Canada's Case

Canada has now joined the parade of countries that have put into practice aggressive recruiting efforts in the world-wide competition for international students. This is often in light of mounting funding shortfalls for post-secondary education from governments. In fact, governments are now often encouraging universities to pursue international ventures (Knight & Altbach, 2007). As de Wit (2002) explains, "The more foreign students there are paying high tuition fees, the higher the economic return and the less the national government needs to invest in higher education" (p. 91). Scott (1998) agrees, explaining how universities see international students as "a market to be exploited, especially at a time when other revenue derived from public expenditure is constrained" (p. 117). This is the danger in Ontario, where cuts in funding for post-secondary institutions have been substantial. The Ontario government's per-student funding to universities has fallen since the 1970s from \$6,500 to \$4,200 (in current, inflation adjusted dollars), a full 35 per cent or more than a third (Langer, 2009). With such a plunge in funding, the lure of alternative revenue from international students has become all the more tempting.

Canada's recruitment efforts for international students have largely been shaped (some would argue hindered) by the structure of its government. In Canada the constitutional responsibility for higher education rests with the provinces and territories of Canada. The federal Parliament, on the other hand, is responsible for national interests. There is, however, no federal ministry of higher education. It is argued that since there is no national framework for higher education, the "absence of a federal ministry with responsibility for higher education means that leadership in this policy area becomes an enormous challenge" (Desai-Trilokekar & Jones, 2007, p.1). When it comes to education, the power rests with the provinces and territories and "they guard it jealously" (Desai-Trilokekar & Shubert, 2007, p.1).

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Jumping on the Branding Bandwagon

Canada's lack of a federal ministry with responsibility for higher education has meant that the recruitment of international students has historically been left up to the provinces, or even individual institutions. Canadian universities and colleges often depend on their own resources to establish credibility, as well as market educational resources (Desai-Trilokekar & Jones, 2007). Many see this as greatly problematic in light of the previously described culture of competition within higher education worldwide. This has been called a major handicap for Canada (Gee, 2007), which has led to "an identity crisis the country has had on the international education stage" (Tibbetts, 2008, p.1). The biggest problem has been seen as Canadian higher education not speaking with one voice (Birchard, 2007). In their document entitled, "Canada's Competitive Challenge: International Promotion of Education," the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) reasons, "We can't afford to *not* do something in a collective manner" (DFAIT, 2008, p.9). Opinions such as these were backed up by recent research that illustrated Canada's weakening position in the race for recruiting international students. In the fall of 2007 the Canadian Bureau for International Education reported that Canada, which once ranked in the top five destinations for foreign students, had dropped to 14th place, receiving less than three percent of the international market (Tibbetts, 2008). Such figures are used to show Canada as being left in the dust in the high-stakes race to recruit international students. Canada's categorical failure is also emphasized by frequent comparisons to other nations, mainly the United Kingdom, Australia and the USA, the latter of which dominates the international market, with over 21 percent of the world market share of international students (Wright, 2008).

The distress over Canada's falling position led to an outpouring regarding the need for corrective measures. In a document posted by AUCC on their election site in the fall of 2008 entitled, "Why universities' connections to the world matter," the organization states the following:

There is a growing pool of international students around the world. Nevertheless, to ensure that Canada remains a destination of choice for the top talent looking to study abroad, we will have to compete more vigorously with a growing number of competitor nations which are increasing their recruitment efforts. Canada needs to be positioned as a place where top international students can pursue the highest quality of education and improve their economic opportunities (p.2).

Stéphanie Mercure from DFAIT agrees that Canada needs to step up efforts to compete, stressing, “International students contribute an estimated \$6.5 billion to Canada annually, but Canada still lags behind Australia, UK, and the US, our key competitors. Our desired position is to make Canada the number one alternative to the US and UK, a spot currently held by Australia” (BCCIE, 2009, p.1). In a brief submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, AUCC (2005) states, “At a minimum, Canadian universities need to be on a level playing field with other host countries in order to attract the best international students” (p.6).

The initiative touted as the solution to Canada’s failing situation is the creation of a national brand to represent Canadian higher education internationally. AUCC (2008) called on all candidates in the 2008 federal election to commit to expand Canada’s international marketing efforts to attract more of the top foreign students to study in Canada. One of two specific recommendations made in Bob Rae’s (2005) report is a call for greater international marketing efforts, closely coordinated with the higher education sector and the federal government, to establish Ontario as an international destination of choice for students. Andrea Desmarteau from DFAIT is direct in her answer to the crisis:

Why is Canada doing so poorly? We don’t have a brand for Canada. We’re not being presented in a unified way...If we have a brand that promoted Canada students will choose Canada, and then from there they’ll do their research of where they want to go and which institution they want to study at” (Wright, 2008, p.1).

DFAIT (2008) cites the following four points for “Why Canada has been doing so poorly”: previously no international brand for Canadian education; no coordinated marketing strategy; limited government support for promotion; and Canadian missions abroad lacking policy and coherent direction. This same report cites a Conference Board of Canada entitled “Opportunity begins at home”:

...With no identifiable pan-Canadian policy leadership...progress in the promoting of educational exports has been difficult. Therefore, some policy body — most likely the re-merged Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade — should be mandated to coordinate a cohesive, proactive Canadian approach to branding and promoting Canadian education services abroad. The Trade Commissioner Service and science and technology counsellors in Canada’s embassies should be fully engaged, and objectives set (p. 6).

In addition to suggesting the creation of a national brand, the above quotation also illustrates the federal government exercising leadership in the domain of

education, a significant detour from the path that has been traditionally followed. The body recommended to mandate the brand, DFAIT, has had a longstanding interest in internationalization, going back to the 1960s (Desai-Trilokekar & Shubert, 2007). It was thus DFAIT that was given the mandate to launch a marketing campaign in the federal government’s Budget 2007 along with \$2 million to develop a Canadian international education brand to sell on the international postsecondary market. Following this, in May 2008, after extensive negotiation and consultation, the Deputy Ministers of Education in all ten provinces approved by consensus the proposed Pan-Canadian Education Brand, with the understanding that the brand would be jointly managed by DFAIT and the Secretariat of the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC) (DFAIT, 2008).

Subsequently, in June 2008 the Minister of International Trade approved the education brand concept and the principle of joint governance of the brand by DFAIT, on behalf of the federal government, and by CMEC, on behalf of the provinces (DFAIT, 2008).

On September 22, 2008, in Fredericton, the Ministers of Education officially launched the Education Brand for Canada. According to DFAIT (2008) the underlying principles of the brand use policy includes the following:

- The Education Brand for Canada is a shared Brand approach. It is not designed to represent any single entity, program or initiative. It represents the delivery of educational services in Canada to prospective international students.
- Excellence and quality of the educational services being provided is an integral part of the identity being conveyed by the Education Brand.

Darcy Rollins, Director of International Education for Manitoba and co-chairman of the federal-provincial committee working on the marketing campaign describes the approach as, “Putting a uniquely Canadian spin on what we have to offer... We’re saying we’re going to offer you high-quality education, we’re going to help you realize your potential and you’re going to help us help the world” (Tibbetts, 2008, p.1). The challenge for the brand is to occupy Australia’s current position and make Canada the No.1 alternative to US and UK education. Considering that the Canada brand has only most recently been launched, it remains to be seen whether this challenge will be accomplished.

Analysis

Whereas many countries have long had national brands for their higher education — indeed have been pioneers in the field so to speak, Canadian higher education is still only in its branding infancy. As such, there are a number of serious considerations that need to be examined concerning the long-term effects of branding higher education.

Firstly, it has already been established that there is major consensus that the way to boost Canada's national education profile is through the creation of a national brand which can then be used to recruit a higher number of international students. Given the heightened ever-growing competition worldwide for international students, one very real possibility is that Canada could get swept up in this competition in a dangerous way.

That is, at some point it may simply become a numbers game. As previously mentioned, the challenge for the brand is to remove Australia from the third-tier spot and make Canada the choice destination after the USA and the United Kingdom. It may be that the brand is only considered a success once this challenge is realized, which would lead to a fixation on securing this position and ignoring the problems it may breed down the line.

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Further, taking Australia's place may also mean experiencing Australia's problems. This has to do with the very real possibility of the Canadian higher education system becoming dependent on international students — the reality that Australia is currently experiencing after years of pursuing for-profit higher education. The fact that international students contribute a significant amount of funds towards higher education and the economy overall means that governments are encouraging universities to recruit as many international students as possible. The more money universities collect from international students, the less money the government will feel the need to put towards what is an already seriously underfunded sector. Eventually the number of incoming international students will begin to taper off as countries around the world "exporting" these students increasingly build up their own systems of higher education. Moreover their governments are becoming wary of prospective suitors from abroad

who appear focused on enticing away the best brains or attracting money students could be spending in their own country (Lightfoot, 2009). As Don Olcott, chief executive of the Observatory of Borderless Higher Education, asks, in *Times Higher Education*:

Are we really naïve enough to think that China, India, Malaysia, South Korea, the Gulf States and others do not want to build long-term, high-quality, sustainable university systems in their countries and regions to serve their students? It would certainly not be the first time, nor probably the last, that Western countries have completely misread global developments. International student mobility is fluid, and making long-term predictions of where students will go is complex at best (Baty, 2009, p.1).

At the point when this becomes a reality, Canadian higher education will be feeling the effects of a considerable loss of income on which they have grown dependent, coupled with meagre public funds that have continued to dwindle.

Another concern regarding the branding of higher education is delivering on the brand promise. An effective brand management strategy can only be maximized if the brand carries a promise and if every member institution is committed to fulfilling that promise (Lockwood & Hadd, 2007). The brand promise comprises factors such as academic offerings and student experience (Lockwood & Hadd, 2007). The Education au/in Canada brand promise is to "Provide you with guidance and with the knowledge and tools you need to develop your full future potential, while affirming the person you are today" (DFAIT, 2008, p.12). While these may be vague terms, there is a responsibility to ensure there is no incongruence between what is claimed and what international students actually experience, especially in light of the costly tuition fees they must pay. In Ontario, the lack of government funding has increasingly led to larger class sizes, fewer courses, outdated labs and equipment, and shabby facilities. As Mark Langer (2009), President of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, states, "We can't do university education on the cheap and do it properly" (p.2). It is neither fair nor ethical to lure international students to our institutions unless we are willing to improve our current deteriorating situation, instead of using them to make up for our budget shortfalls.

As well, money that is put into higher education might be allocated to the wrong areas if a fixation over occupying a top-tier position in the market for international students concurrently breeds an obsession with achieving world-class rankings. A US study by Brewer et al (2002) has shown that prestige-seeking higher education institutions tend to invest in areas such

as admission selectivity, student consumption benefits (dorms, eating facilities etc.) or other measures intended to improve their positions in the publicized rankings (Dill, 2003). Stensaker (2005) sees these as relatively costly investments, especially since it is not known how much such investments actually matter for student choice. He reasons that since institutions involved in the branding game tend to spend money in the same areas, and since competing for prestige is a zero-sum game, this means that the investments are both high-risk and may have little impact on student choice. Universities in Canada are already underfunded; it can be reasoned that our institutions simply cannot afford to pour money into development simply in the hope of raising their position in international rankings, especially considering a wealth of research that shows how such rankings are often meaningless. Lang (2005) points out that, as reliable national rankings are not possible, the prospect of a reliable ranking of world-class is remote. He argues, "There are too many different mandates and audiences for universities for a single scale of measurement to produce valid or useful results" (p.51). It would be all too easy for Canadian higher education to fall into what he deems the "curse of comparison" (p. 48).

The brand could flop if universities decline to be associated with it, choosing instead to continue marketing their own individual brands.

The branding of higher education also follows the trajectory of consumerism that has increasingly beset higher education. New managerial philosophies have led to the higher education sector beginning to function like an industry (Gumport, 2000). Branding then is a logical step "in a market where students are recognized as customers [and] universities have to implement strategies to maintain and enhance their competitiveness" (Melwar & Akel, 2006, p.41). Although as Stensaker (2005) points out, "Treating students as customers may, however, have the effect that they actually start to behave as such..." (p.4). He goes on to argue, "Students who are turned into customers may also be a very demanding and unstable group, where one faces the danger that these students are leaving universities almost as fast as new students are enrolled" (p.7). This type of revolving door of enrolment would have a negative impact on the culture, quality and reputation of Canadian institutions.

A benefit of branding is that it may be a promising strategy for improving institutional cooperation (Stensaker, 2005). As institutions are exposed to increasing competition, one institutional response may

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be to join other institutions in some cooperative effort (Huisman & van der Wende, 2004). However, within Canada and even within individual provinces, this may be easier said than done. As previously described, due to the absence of a federal ministry of education, Canadian universities have historically operated under a largely decentralized system. Universities have long handled their own marketing and recruiting measures, and as such, may wish to retain their individuality. Additionally, they may worry that any one university could potentially damage the brand image of the whole (Brown & Goodawardana, 2007). As such, it may be less likely that individual universities are willing to co-operate with one another in recruitment efforts, or even be represented in a united way internationally. In this case, the brand could flop if universities decline to be associated with it, choosing instead to continue marketing their own individual brands, which would mean wasted time, effort and resources that have been put towards the development of the Canada brand.

Finally, more than a decade ago, Peter Scott (1998) asked a crucial question: "Wider or deeper, or wider and deeper?" (p.108). That is, "Can we reach out to the disadvantaged and excluded in our own societies at the same time as reaching out across national frontiers to other systems of higher education?" (p.109). When it comes to branding of Canadian higher education, the focus is certainly directed outwards, in which case home-students could get overlooked. As long as internationalization efforts are dominated by efforts to attract international students to Canada, there may be less attention paid towards increasing opportunities for all Canadian students to pursue an international education experience as part of their university education. Statistics reveal a shocking picture of Canada's current reality: in 2005, only two percent of Canadian students studied abroad and according to the Canadian Bureau for International Education, Canadian students are among the least mobile of any developed nation (Milic, 2008). In the last ten years, the minuscule percentage of Canadian full-time students studying abroad doubled, while comparatively in the same period, the number of international university students in Canada increased

from 25,000 in 1996 to more than 70,000 full-time and 13,000 part-time students by 2006 (Milic, 2005). The obvious reason most domestic students are unable to pursue international education opportunities is the absence of financial support. AUCC (2005) stresses the need for government to step in:

It is clear that without investment to increase Canadian students' access to international education opportunities, only a small number of students from mainly socio-economically privileged backgrounds will benefit and Canada will fall even further behind its competitor nations in using international education as a strategic instrument of foreign and domestic policy to create future political, business, and research linkages and promote their international understanding (p.5).

It is clear that government and university initiatives are, for the most part, more concerned with bringing in international students because of the profits to be gained, and are paying less attention to sending home students abroad because of the money that must be spent. Acting in this short-sighted way will have long-term effects that will be detrimental to Canadian higher education.

Implications for policy

The creation of a brand is not necessarily a negative development for Canadian higher education. Rather, it is undoubtedly important to maintain a steady influx of international students and branding plays a role in this. Creating a national brand is a sensible and necessary action on the part of the federal and provincial/territorial governments, particularly in light of the fact that universities and colleges are at the centre of the marketplace of higher education. However, there are a number of measures that can be taken to combat the abovementioned detrimental effects that the creation of a brand can have on Canadian higher education and society itself.

Caution must be exercised as government and institutions use the brand to increase enrolment numbers of international students. **International students must not be depended on to make up for budget shortfalls; short-term profits could lead to long-term misery.** Funds should also be allocated towards helping international students who wish to study in Canada but are not be able to afford the high cost, which will combat what can easily become an elitist system. The initiative of the federal government pledging \$25 million over two years towards the Vanier Scholarships, of up to \$50,000 a year for top foreign or domestic doctoral students, is an excellent example of such investment.

Measures taken purely to rise in ranking schemes should be avoided. Genuine — rather than superficial — efforts should be made to enhance and improve the academic experience for both international and home students alike.

There needs to be an increase in public investment in the post-secondary system. If institutions were not so underfunded, it would be much easier to deliver on the brand promises that are touted around the world; students “shopping” in the international higher education marketplace would be more likely drawn to what Canadian higher education has to offer; and finally these students would be much more likely to be satisfied with their “purchase” and less likely to march to the complaints counter.

New initiatives need to be created by both government and institutions to encourage and assist Canadian students to gain international educational experiences. The Ontario International Education Opportunity Scholarship is an excellent example of a program that funds overseas experiences for Ontario-based students. Having Canadian students go around the world to study or work is an informal — though highly effective — way to promote Canadian higher education abroad.

These suggestions are merely a starting point for consideration of the implications and significance of the creation of a national brand for Canadian higher education. While it may seem as if the successful creation of the brand marks the accomplishment, the real work has only just begun.

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