

Comment to Gili Drori's lecture, '*Branding the University: Relational Strategy of Identity Construction in a Competitive Field*'

Discussant: Inge-Bert Täljedal

---

Thank you, Dr. Drori, for your succinct exposition of iconographic trends at universities! I think your observations and interpretations are largely correct. However, I should like to try to add some nuances. In particular, I should like to challenge the startling overall thesis that liberal globalization is driving a profound redefinition of the identity of universities, *i.e.* the idea that relations of trust have up to now been built on shared academic values but are presently being redefined by branded slogans and symbols. Although there is an element of truth in this observation, I should like to seriously raise the question: in whose eyes?

But first a minor comment. The very simplification of university seals and logos may not in itself be very ominous, as the analogous phenomenon occurs in all kinds of organizations. By botanizing the internet it is easy to find as many illustrative examples of this phenomenon as one wishes, *e.g.* time series of the logos of AEG (Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft), Adidas, IBM (International Business Machines), and FIAT (Fabbrica Italiana Automobili Torino). Presumably, this ubiquitous pattern of simplification has several causes (logos shown at the symposium). To a significant extent it probably reflects a change of our general aesthetic preferences, permeating all corners of society after having first emerged in modernistic art. For example, this is epitomized by Piet Mondrian's wellknown progression from a kind of realism to abstract patterns (illustrations shown at the symposium).

What matters more in the present context is the fact that universities are at all mimicking the promotional behaviour of companies to an unprecedented degree. Undoubtedly, this underscores the tendency among some to view universities as a kind of companies under allegedly rational businesslike management, rather than as a guild of truth-seeking seniors and juniors who are essentially governing themselves, collegiately, with the ultimate purpose of increasing knowledge for knowledge sake. However, before venturing a guess as to precisely how branding may influence trust in a

university, it would seem useful to reflect a little upon the things for which universities could and should be trusted, ideally speaking.

As the typical academic sees it — and that includes myself — universities must honour truth as their supreme value. Literally nothing, not even undeniable utilitarian achievements, can justify the slightest compromise with honest truth-seeking in research and education. Whatever your theory of truth happens to be — one of correspondance or coherence, or whatever — truth is an indispensable regulatory idea, *a sine qua non* for universities. Mendacious or slanted research is simply not research at all. In this respect, the rationale of universities must always differ from that of virtually all other organizations, perhaps other kinds of schools excepted. Others, too, certainly hold truth in esteem, but without being logically self-defeating they can consider themselves licensed to compromise when, for instance, profits or political power so require.

This being said, of course universities should also be trusted to have many other, more specific ambitions of importance to various stakeholders: *e.g.* high quality education of students in general, reproduction of scientific and scholarly elites, education programmes adapted to market demands, contributory involvement in local and regional development, innovative contributions to business and economy, and so forth. It appears to me that branding need not have the same effect on all of these objects of trust. There are more than one side to branding and they may relate to the various objects of trust differently.

Branding for commercial or political aims usually, or at least often, has an air of seduction about it. Its purpose is not merely to inform truthfully about facts but to increase visibility and attractiveness. When used by a university, by analogy with the branding of companies, it can be felt as signalling a less than ideal steadfastness in keeping to truth as the supreme value. This effect must be considered negative and explains why scientists and scholars are often annoyed by branding activities. To typical academics, the perceived identity of a university has very little, if anything, to do with seals and logos and ads, and all the more with the great discoveries and names of famous faculty members.

Many years ago, long before I became Vice-chancellor of Umeå University, I was very worried by what I felt to be a change in the external view of the identity and mission of universities and so wrote a debate article in one of the leading Swedish newspapers, the Svenska Dagbladet (April 16, 1994). There I heavily criticized the emerging preoccupation with marketing and branding in the field of higher education. The headline of the article was, in Swedish, 'Should universities produce company ties?'

What triggered me was a decision by our government to alter its provisions for how the universities could use a certain part of their state funding. Up to then, certain moneys had been intended exclusively for enlightening the public about scientific and scholarly research. That grant could now be used for advertisements and propaganda to increase the competitiveness of the individual university on the markets of potential consumers of university services. I saw a switch from an ideal goal of objective information to one of branding. Among other things I wrote: 'We are used to, and can generally bear, the fact that companies and politicians mix information and propaganda. [...] That universities exhibit increasing difficulties in keeping the distinction clear clashes with their identity as bastions of serious truth-seeking.'

I still think like that. However, after having been vice-chancellor for six years, experiencing the need to take the institutional competition seriously, I cannot entirely shut my eyes to the fact that there are also positive aspects of branding. If nothing else, branding demonstrates a wish to be counted upon in contexts reflecting societal involvement of the university. This aspect is likely to be appreciated mostly by administrators and politicians but also by many academics and students, who realize that societal involvement is by no means a new side to university life.

So, in conclusion, I see a contradiction between two different effects of branding on the trust to which universities are entitled. From a logical point of view, the way out of the dilemma is obvious although perhaps not so easy in practice. It is all a matter of getting the priorities right! I should say that branding is all right and indeed compatible with the traditional trust of universities as essentially and primarily truth-seeking communities, as long as the actual design of branding is not so vulgar as to seriously threaten this view.