BRAND SNAPSHOT

Measuring online brand strength in world-class universities

World 100 Reputation Network research

The World 100 Reputation Network is a group of the world's most prestigious universities undertaking research that enhances reputation management, international relations and strategy.

Each year the Network undertakes a major topical piece of research focusing on the role of reputation within Higher Education. Previous topics have covered the role of reputation in recruitment of international PhD students and international faculty; structures and resources devoted to reputation management in leading universities; and the role of academics in influencing rankings.

Full details of the Network, membership rates and benefits, research projects, events and more can be found at www.theworld100.com

BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Universities are putting more energy and thought into expressing their brand position as they compete for research funding, top students and world-class academics. But there is a very weak understanding of brand difference or any formal impact assessment in the higher education sector other than via the rankings. As websites are one of the main ways audiences interact with universities and universities articulate their 'brand', The World 100 Reputation Network's 2017/18 research project looked at brands online.

HYPOTHESES TO BE TESTED

- Student brands are better articulated than research brands.
- Brand propositions are not well differentiated between world top-ranked universities; brand assets are similar among world top-ranked universities
- Brands are separated out between research, study and international, rather than offered as an integrated expression of the whole university.
- There is no correlation between a high ranked university and a university with a strong brand impact.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

We analysed the websites of the top 50 universities in the world as well as those of research members of the World 100 Reputation Network and additional institutions nominated by members. This made a total of 100 world-class university websites.

The top 50 in the world will be determined by creating an aggregate ranking from the four main rankings (THE, QS, ARWU, USWNR).

SCOPE

Our analysts looked at each website in detail and assess it for:

First impressions – this included analysis of the logo, homepage design, use of images consistency of design and initial content of homepage

News brand – analysts looked for how up-to-date the news is, how engaging it is, how it is presented and the balance of content

Student brand – analysts looked for distinctiveness, prominence on the website and how well the students' voice is represented on the website

Research brand – analysts looked for distinctiveness, prominence on the website and how well the academics' voice is represented on the website

International brand – analysis of international activities and presence including strong international partnerships which can back up claims of being global

City/location band – analysts looked at the extent to which the location of the university is used as a brand asset

Partnerships –evidence of productive, fruitful strategic partnerships

Institutional brand – recording straplines, campaigns, main messages and reputational claims the university makes

Social media – analysts looked at how consistent the social media brand is with the website brand

METHOD

Each website was assessed by two independent analysts. As content and design can change on a weekly basis, the two analysts looked at the same website in the same week. They completed the assessment in no more than half a day (four hours) using an online questionnaire containing quantitative and qualitative questions. They collected examples of best (and worst) practice by taking screen shots of interesting content.

Quantitative scores were on a 1-5 scale, and an independent judge re-read websites when scores diverged. Qualitative comments included the analyst's response to visual and subjective criteria such as style, brand values.

TIMING

The websites were analysed between 1st February and 30 June 2018. The initial findings were presented at the W100 Annual Conference in Vancouver (September 27-29 2018) and members will receive the reports during October 2019.

REPORTING

As well as a top-line report that summarises the findings for all universities in our research sample, each W100 research member was invited to select five peers from the research sample for comparison with their own brand presence, giving a detailed look at the six brands in greater depth. Reports will cover both quantitative and qualitative assessments