

REVIEW

# Research, ranking, and university branding: Investment for excellence in health professions' education

Pascale Salameh<sup>1,2</sup> , Ourania Kolokotroni<sup>1</sup> , Constantina Constantinou<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of Nicosia medical School, Nicosia, Cyprus

<sup>2</sup> Institut National de Santé Publique, d'Épidémiologie Clinique et de Toxicologie-Liban (INSPECT-LB), Beirut, Lebanon

## Keywords

Branding  
Educational quality  
Ranking list  
Research direction  
Reputation

## Correspondence

Pascale Salameh  
University of Nicosia medical School  
Nicosia  
Cyprus  
Pascale.salameh@inspect-lb.org

## Abstract

Research is known to serve society and optimise educational institutions' reputation, hand in hand with knowledge; this applies to all disciplines, including those related to health professions education, such as pharmacy and medicine. Institutional reputation attracts high-quality students and instructors, which will, in turn, enhance productivity and lead to a further better reputation. Reputation relies on branding strategies, encompassing research excellence as an intrinsic value and institutional ranking as an external recognition; additionally, institutional and programme accreditations both include quality standards related to research. However, in educational institutions, the research-education nexus faces many challenges, including lack of time due to education overloading and administrative duties, in addition to insufficient human and financial resources. Administrators need to facilitate an optimal research culture and an adequate context for cutting-edge research to be implemented in higher education institutions.

## Introduction

Knowledge and research have demonstrated their joint and interdependent roles in the advancement of nations. Advanced knowledge-based economies are currently driven by skilled workers, intellectual property, and scientific innovation rather than industrial capabilities or access to natural resources. This same principle applies to healthcare and evidence-based therapeutics. This change has put new pressures on universities: on the one hand, they must produce an increasing number of graduates; on the other hand, they remain the main generators of knowledge. Some institutions have strategically chosen to focus on education, while others have preferred to focus on producing knowledge and have gained prominence through cutting-edge research (Arai *et al.*, 2007). The choice of the institution is reflected in its mission which may include higher professional training (associated with a transfer of knowledge based on profession-specific programmes),

training and academic research (oriented towards building quality research teams inspired by doctoral student programmes and publications in high-impact scientific journals) and mass higher education (public service mainly oriented towards education) (Laredo, 2007).

### **Branding in higher education**

Many higher education institutions choose to brand themselves to attract students (Maue & Hayes, 2015). Indeed, higher education and branding can coexist, where the image must respond to the psychological needs of the "consumer" (Temple, 2006). However, a strong, sustainable brand in higher education also requires a strong product in both teaching and research, which heavily depends on students' and the academic staff's abilities, motivations, and interactions. The transformed student will eventually make the brand: the culture, the identity, and the unique values, which would reflect in graduates' performance (Temple, 2006). In higher education,

brands will be more valuable if offered as cultural resources and beneficial ingredients to produce the “self” students choose. As current political and market forces increasingly make competition inevitable, brands can be both a strategic asset and a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Chapleo, 2015).

Branding is a complex task. Branding, brand identity, and the brand soul all work together to create value and define brand equity. Ongoing brand management within a service organisation is essential to ensure a sustainable brand identity that is consistent with the brand image of stakeholders and the brand soul experienced by employees (Williams Jr. & Omar, 2014). Thus, a brand with a distinct identity and a valuable personality will go towards development and perfection. Utilising communications between the brand and its audience will create strong links and obtain important positioning in audiences’ minds. This notable position results in attracting higher numbers of better quality students, academic staff and researchers, growing market share, and thereby increasing competitive advantage and profitability. Branding can also lead to higher donations and grant funding as the organisational functions are more obvious to funders/agencies (Javani, 2016; Fay & Zavattaro, 2016). This concept has to be well understood before it is applied. For example, some public research-intensive institutions were likely to adopt a comprehensive re-branding initiative, imitating other schools, thereby suggesting mimetic isomorphism; additional efforts are necessary in this regard (Fay & Zavattaro, 2016).

### **Research, branding, and reputation**

The higher education brand can only be differentiated by shifting the focus to the brand’s perceived value and reflecting upon its relevance and purpose in collaboration with internal stakeholders, end-users, and communities (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016). Research excellence indicates an intrinsic value and is regarded as a necessary product input (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016). Implementing research culture leads to higher university ranking, and larger and superior scientific teams, generating gain for the university, researchers, and students since it results in intellectual appropriation and recognition accordingly. Ultimately, university ranking also affects students’ choice of universities (OECD, 2007).

Studies show that many criteria may direct the choice of students to enrol in a private university. Criteria such as financial aid and scholarship availability, university accreditation by prestigious organisations, academic programmes, quality education, friendly environment, leading-edge technology, location,

faculty-student interaction, and reputation. Some students consider all university criteria to be equally important, while others place high importance on the financial aspects of attending a university, and the rest moderately evaluate all university criteria (Bock *et al.*, 2014). Additionally, some students focus on the school’s international reputation and post-graduate job/career prospects (Tas & Ergin, 2012).

### **How to build and measure reputation?**

Reputation, particularly at the global level, is thus of primary importance. Currently, the worldwide reputation development of higher education institutions is widely driven by research excellence, predominantly measured by research output, and mainly reflected in hierarchical university rankings, which, in turn, is equated with brand equity (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016). University rankings, influenced by research indicators, are now being sought worldwide. They are useful for policymakers and furnish information on an institution’s “prestige”, which increases its visibility and may, in turn, contribute to more effective resource capture (students, academic staff, funding, and projects) (De Filippo *et al.*, 2012).

Although international rankings are mainly adapted for research-intensive institutions, these rankings have spurred the debate about the quality and performance of higher education systems and have considerably impacted our global society in light of the internationalisation of higher education. Despite the fact that ranking is mainly research-focused, accounting for academic reputation, Nobel Prizes or bibliometric indicators, with no direct measure of teaching quality or a learning achievement. Ranking results influence students’ choice of the institution where they wish to enrol, and the latter is particularly considered important by foreign students (Docampo, 2008). Thus, despite the controversy, a university’s position in a given ranking is still instrumental to promoting its activity and publicising its educational or research excellence or its effectiveness in transferring knowledge.

### **Development of research strategies**

It is recommended that developing strategies in order to encourage and stimulate research, allocate time to generate or strengthen new knowledge, promote the acquisition of the necessary methodological tools and therefore increase scientific production (Rios-González, 2016) while respecting good research and ethical practices. It is noteworthy that strategic research combines two principles, namely excellence and relevance, which are not regarded as

contradictory. The global spread of theme-based, problem-oriented excellence research centres bears evidence of how important strategic research has become (Overton-de Klerk & Sienaert, 2016). The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment also calls for an improvement on how research output is evaluated, thus assessing research on merits and quality instead of quantity, promoting practices that focus on the 'value' and 'influence' of specific research outputs, and eliminating journal-based metrics. It also emphasises the need for researchers to contribute to the community, society, and education itself, inducing changes at the levels of policymaking and practice (DORA, 2012).

### **Research and teaching nexus strengths and weaknesses**

In the context of the implementation of research strategies in higher education institutions, it is widely accepted that research activity means better teaching; research involves the discovery, interpretation, and understanding of new knowledge, while teaching encompasses the dissemination of knowledge and skills (Mägi & Beerkens, 2016). Without research, education may suffer from a lack of access to prominent scientists and up-to-date information, possibly leading to a gradual decrease in the quality of teaching. Conversely, research-active teachers are more likely to integrate research outcomes into teaching, to involve students in research groups and co-publish with them (Mägi & Beerkens, 2016). Thus, the role of research in optimizing the quality of teaching and student learning is well established (Cabral & Huet, 2011). Moreover, both the academics and students involved can benefit from the research-teaching nexus, with their universities gaining reputation (Tight, 2016) while generating useful knowledge and serving the community. Students involved in research learn based on their research activity and benefit by developing skills in questioning, reinforcement of curiosity, reflection, searching for knowledge and critical thinking; they are more likely to become life-long learners. These skills are considered important for the industry and for employers in general (Qalehsari *et al.*, 2017).

While many academics might perceive the ideal relationship as positive, teaching and research can sometimes have a mutual negative influence or even be practically driven apart at the micro-level (Tight, 2016). The factors that weaken this relationship include pressures to compartmentalize teaching and research through accountability and funding mechanisms, time management of academic staff (separating teaching and research), and the competition for scarce resources. Consequently, positive relationships between teaching and research are unlikely to result

unless the appropriate and adequate resources are strategically managed to this end (Coate *et al.*, 2001).

### **The way forward: securing research-related resources**

Given the difficulties in applying strategies, research will need adequate financial and human resources to be conducted. Securing research funds is not an easy task for universities and faculty members, particularly in the current declining economic context, deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Competitively allocated research funds from public and private sources are a growing share of university revenues, often hard to obtain. Universities are increasingly inclined to secure the intellectual property of their research or actively court private industries to attract more funding in the long term (Oehmke, 2005). This approach for securing funds should be made cautiously, due to the possible loss of academic autonomy and arising ethical issues due to potential conflicts of interest; nevertheless, significant benefits of academic industries were reported, e.g., easier funds for faculty members, graduate students, and laboratory equipment (Lee, 2000).

University administration and faculty members should both deploy efforts to access appropriate funds for research. Universities that strategically prioritise their research mission are known to obtain higher funds per researcher from different sources (Rossi, 2009). Higher education institutions that wish to become research-intensive and attain a global reputation of excellence should also ensure they offer protected time for conducting research and optimise human resources to assist the academic staff in research activities and secure high-quality research. Furthermore, in the health professions' educational programmes, agreements with public or private healthcare, pharmaceutical and social institutions allow for experiential education of students; these facilities make patients' protected data more readily available for research, particularly clinical and public health. Nevertheless, involvement in this type of research can only go in parallel to the financial investment of institutions in research activities to ensure high data quality and higher impact publications and improve institutional visibility, community service and outreach.

### **Conclusion**

Higher education institutions need higher visibility through branding and ranking. The latter relies heavily on research and can be considered as an investment, which will, in turn, attract high-quality students,

excellent academic staff, and additional financial resources. The financial investment of institutions in high-quality research activities would also improve institutional visibility, community service and outreach.

## Highlights

- Research is known to improve educational institutions' reputation;
- Reputation attracts high-quality students and instructors, in turn optimising productivity;
- Reputation uses branding, encompassing research excellence and institutional ranking;
- Research needs a research culture and an adequate context to be implemented.

## Declarations

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank Hala SACRE, PharmD, for her help in putting the article in shape for publication.

## References

Arai, K., Cech, T., Chameau, J., Horn, P., Mattaj, I., Potocnik, J., & J, J. (2007). The future of research universities. Is the model of research-intensive universities still valid at the beginning of the twenty-first century? *EMBO Reports*; <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7401052>

Bock, D. E., Poole, S. M., & Joseph, M. (2014). Does branding impact student recruitment: A critical evaluation. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *24*(1), 11–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2014.908454>

Cabral, A. P., & Huet, I. (2011). Research In Higher Education: The Role Of Teaching And Student Learning.

*Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *29*, 91–97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2011.11.211>

Chapleo, C. (2015). Brands in Higher Education. *International Studies of Management & Organization*, *45*(2), 150–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00208825.2015.1006014>

Coate, K., Barnett, R., & Williams, G. (2001). Relationships Between Teaching and Research in Higher Education in England. *Higher Education Quarterly*, *55*(2), 158–174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2273.00180>

De Filippo, D., Casani, F., García-Zorita, C., Efraín-García, P., & Sanz-Casado, E. (2012). Visibility in international rankings. Strategies for enhancing the competitiveness of Spanish universities. *Scientometrics*, *93*(3), 949–966. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11192-012-0749-y>

Docampo, D. (2008). Rankings internacionales y calidad de los sistemas universitarios. *Revista de Educación*, 149–176. <https://doi.org/10.4438/1988-592X-0034-8082-RE>

DORA. (2012). The Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA). DORA. <https://sfdora.org/read/>

Fay, D. L., & Zavattaro, S. M. (2016). Branding and Isomorphism: The Case of Higher Education. *Public Administration Review*, *76*(5), 805–815. <https://doi.org/10.1111/puar.12626>

Javani, V. (2016). University Branding: A Conceptualizing Model. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, *6*(4), 227–232. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/hur/ijarbs/v6y2016i4p227-232.html>

Laredo, P. (2007). Revisiting the Third Mission of Universities: Toward a Renewed Categorization of University Activities? *Higher Education Policy*, *20*(4), 441–456. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.hep.8300169>

Lee, Y. S. (2000). The Sustainability of University-Industry Research Collaboration: An Empirical Assessment. *The Journal of Technology Transfer*, *25*(2), 111–133. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007895322042>

Mägi, E., & Beerkens, M. (2016). Linking research and teaching: Are research-active staff members different teachers? *Higher Education*, *72*(2), 241–258. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9951-1>

Maue, D., & Hayes, T. (2015). The State of Higher Ed Branding: A Survey of Marketing Leaders. 17. <https://www.mstoner.com/blog/strategy/supporting-higher-education-marketing-strategy-mstoner-presents-the-state-of-higher-ed-branding/>

OECD. (2007). Higher education and regions: Globally competitive, locally engaged. *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*. <http://www.oecd.org/education/imhe/39802910.pdf>

Oehmke, J. (2005, January). Commerce and freedom of inquiry. *EMBO Reports*; <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.embor.7400322>

Overton-de Klerk, N., & Sienaert, M. (2016). From research excellence to brand relevance: A model for higher education

reputation building. *South African Journal of Science*, **112**(5–6), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2016/20150365>

Qalehsari, M., Khaghanizadeh, M., & Ebadi. (2017). Lifelong learning strategies in nursing: A systematic review. *Electronic Physician; Electron Physician*. <https://doi.org/10.19082/5541>

Rios-González, C. M. (2016). El papel de las revistas científicas estudiantiles en la difusión de hallazgos en pregrado. *Revista Hispanoamericana de Ciencias de la Salud*, **2**(1), 103–103. <http://www.uhsalud.com/index.php/revhispano/article/view/119>

Rossi, F. (2009). Universities' Access to Research Funds: Do institutional features and strategies matter? *Tertiary Education and Management*, **15**(2), 113–135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13583880902869596>

Tas, A., & Ergin, E. A. (2012). Key Factors for Student Recruitment: The Issue of University Branding. *International Business Research*, **5**(10), p146. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ibr.v5n10p146>

Temple, P. (2006). Branding higher education: Illusion or reality? Perspectives: *Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, **10**(1), 15–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603100500508215>

Tight, M. (2016). Examining the research/teaching nexus. *European Journal of Higher Education*, **6**(4), 293–311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2016.1224674>

Williams Jr., R. L., & Omar, M. (2014). How branding process activities impact brand equity within Higher Education Institutions. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, **24**(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2014.920567>