Brand Positioning Strategies through Accreditation in Higher Education Institutions on the Internationalization Process

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Abstract

Higher education is a significant indicator of the development level of the countries and undertakes the locomotive role in the enhancement of the relevant country. Institutions go through accreditation processes to improve the quality of higher education output, and to verify that they meet the required minimum requirements nationally and internationally. Accredited institutions, by declaring that they provide added value in the field of education with these documents -at least in terms of requirements- aim to make their names stand out in the minds of students, industry, government, and academic staff. As in almost every field, higher education institutions may intend to gain a competitive advantage by offering a distinctive and unique set of services for their target audience. Based on the literature and empirical studies, this paper focuses on the importance of the brand positioning strategies of higher education institutions in the process of harmonization with national and international standards. It is aimed to evaluate the aspects of accreditation in brand positioning strategies by reviewing previous studies. Within the scope of brand positioning strategies, national and international accreditation processes, and outputs are planned to be reviewed in general. In this regard, through the evaluation of accreditation in terms of brand positioning strategies, a model is presented in the context of related strategies for higher education institutions. Higher education institutions have the potential to become leading international productivity centers by revealing their identities with their positioning strategies.

1 Introduction

Brand positioning strategies encourage organizations to reveal their distinctive features. For Higher Education Institutions, it is a critical priority to highlight activities in various fields, following the aim of being a center of attraction for students. Throughout such strategic processes, on the one hand, universities carry out activities with the aim of enhancing the quality of education and training. In this context, it is effective for quality assurance institutions to be equipped with national authorities in order to fulfill the standards in the international arena. (Stella & Woodhouse, 2009). On the other hand, accreditation, which is a driving force for higher education institutions is also, a set of requirements. In this manner, options to gain the advantage of differentiation in activities are likely to be limited by accreditation constraints, because universities have to carry out similar activities in order to comply with all these requirements. Distinctive elements presented in positioning strategies can fade away in the shadow of similar activities. The importance of quality assurance has increased with Internationalization, which has been a significant marketing strategy of Higher Education Institutions (Wysocka, et al., 2022). The point is that, while accreditation focuses on improving quality, it determines the framework for any enhancement work. Furthermore, the institution that continues to be accredited by the same accreditation body tends to engage in similar activities in cases when it remains within the scope of the aforementioned framework. Similarity tendencies can occur in critical processes such as when the curriculum is revised taking into account the updated needs; within the scope of the application, when there are additions to increase student satisfaction; when career centers, Erasmus offices, and units related to distance education continue to develop their activities. Critical difficulties arise on this behalf, implementing the distinctiveness principle that is at the core of the positioning strategies.

In light of the general trends in international interactions, accreditation goes beyond being an option for Higher Education Institutions. Just as it is inevitable for companies to develop strategic alternatives on the way to branding, it is inevitable for Higher Education Institutions to have accreditation processes. This is not only related to branding or marketing activities but also a requirement to be in the academic field. With this requirement, universities are subject to an external evaluation process and become responsible for their activities (Ramirez, 2015). For this reason, countries regularly and continuously inspect Higher Education Institutions in order to gain a competitive advantage in the field of international education. They set standards by reviewing and revising the requirements. It is obligatory to provide the qualifications for the students to be able to move freely in the international arena, to have their diplomas accepted, and to find international employment opportunities.

Across sectors, universities have stakeholders in the field of Higher Education. Determination of stakeholder expectations and practices to meet these expectations increase stakeholder satisfaction. The objectives of Higher Education Institutions are expected to maximize stakeholder satisfaction, and increasing the level of satisfaction requires systematic work. Better student-university interaction, distance education-based training and models, certificate programs, lifelong learning, agreements and collaborations, Erasmus programs, Higher Education Institutions, and long-term and good relations with accreditation institutions are among the extensions and requirements of stakeholder relations. With their long-term strategies, universities aim to increase their competitive power and share in the field of Higher Education with the power of various sanctions such as accreditation in order to be effective and academically strong. Universities will tend to build trust with stakeholders in the global

environment, along with the Internationalization process (Rosyidah, 2020). University education includes academic perspective and development at its core. In line with this philosophy, institutions apply corrective and remedial actions in their activities in order to achieve better. There are generally similar topics under which institutions shape their strategic goals. In this context, companies that have failed to fulfill the accreditation requirements in their strategic goals are at a disadvantage compared to other competing institutions in terms of current audits and requirements. When this situation is explained as a tangible product, elements such as physical performance, reliability, durability and aesthetic properties of a product constitute its quality. On the grounds that, it is necessary to fully meet the needs and expectations of the target audience, it is very difficult for products/services that do not have the expected minimum qualifications to hold on to the market. However, it is necessary to keep these standards by underlining that the decision maker of quality is the target customer group. When these conditions are evaluated in terms of Higher Education Institutions, the potential students of Higher Education Institutions constitute their target audience. The products/services offered to the target audience need to be impressive in terms of attractiveness and meet expectations. These are the minimum expected conditions. The common features of accreditations are to ensure that the quality of education is kept at a certain level. The acceptance of the accreditation requirements as meeting the minimum standards for Higher Education Institutions in the global competitive environment is reinforced with time. Having unique practices that differentiate them from other Higher Education Institutions with continuous improvement activities while maintaining accreditation helps them gain a competitive advantage. For this reason, accreditation is accepted as a prerequisite rather than a sufficient condition. International Roaming, the increase in the number of universities, and the increase in demand and supply for universities are among the compelling reasons for universities to pursue branding. It is advantageous in reaching a more competent student and graduate profile for universities that represent an important link in the chain as the locomotive of sustainable development and innovation to share the steps taken in this direction with the public.

2 Background

Various ranking parameters appear as performance indicators in the international arena. Among them, Education-teaching and resource use, Research and Applications (publications, publication quality, patents, projects), Graduation outcomes (metrics for students and graduates), social responsibility practices (gender equality, students with disabilities, international diversity, etc.) are critically important (Fernandes) & Singh, 2022).

Being a distinguished university in the product/service quality component, having a high number of publications and projects, efficient academy-industry cooperation and innovation activities, having competent academicians and a professional administrative team are major raising factors in the performance dimension offered by the university. Branding takes place in line with expectations when each additional contribution to this performance sub-dimension is perceived positively in the eyes of the stakeholder. The irony here is that while positioning strategies need distinctive features, the sub-dimensions that Accreditation expects from Higher Education Institutions are the same for a given accreditation. In this context, aiming to meet only the minimum requirements for obtaining the accreditation certificate can be considered natural. In order for the university to be re-accredited, it is necessary to take branding steps that nurture models that can set an example for other Higher Education Institutions by carrying out continuous improvement and preventive activities. With these Continuous Improvement activities, institutions can reveal their originality and benefit from the driving force of improvement with self-sustaining progression. Companies get accredited in order to be accepted in the international arena and to reach the conditions of cooperation in the global arena (Sziegat, 2021). At this point, Higher Education Institutions are expected to have features that they can highlight in their strategies to differentiate. Every day, institutions get accredited and as a requirement of accreditation, they update their curricula, develop their infrastructure, and evaluate students' criticisms. Accreditation gives direction to institutions on where to start in their improvement processes. In light of the standards it covers, it is emphasized that this is a continuous process and that being idle threatens the benefits obtained through quality and accreditation activities. In this direction, conditionally accredited organizations contribute to the branding strategies of the institution with the unending processes they develop in the improvement lane on the way to preparing for the next audit. Higher Education Institutions, which are considered prestigious today, have been continuing these activities for a very long time thus, their output is recognized and known by stakeholders. With their contribution to improvement, they make a positive impact on brand perception. The basis of Brand Positioning is to structure this impact to be generated in the minds of stakeholders in a way that is consistent with the long-term strategies and objectives of the organization. That is, brand positioning strategies ultimately seek to achieve long-term goals (Heslop & Nadeau, 2010). Accreditation institutions also regularly review and revise their requirements so that Higher Education Institutions can put forward better models. As the achievements of the institution going beyond the requirements increase, the perceptual added value it ensures for the stakeholders also increases. Accreditation and Institutionalization efforts in Higher Education Institutions resemble the necessity of companies to establish Quality Management Systems in order to gain competitive advantage. Companies offer products/services whether they have a quality certificate or not, and the products offered may be of high or low quality. How customers

perceive products and services constitutes the concept of perceived quality which is one of the main components of brand value. In case companies have a quality certificate, they also have the opportunity to improve their product/service quality. Over time, these processes become an integral part of the corporate culture in which, the improvement cycle is continuous. Higher Education Institutions can be compared to companies in the sector. However, it has its own characteristics in terms of its field of activity and due to the nature of the academic environment. Occasionally, the pressure of accreditation makes Higher Education Institutions part of the mechanism of continuous evidence creation and submission to meet requirements. In other words, the focus can be directed towards fulfilling procedural requirements rather than improving education activities. Many institutions are often be accredited with minor errors in their initial accreditation process due to too much focus on meeting these requirements. However, accreditation is not an application that is received at once and becomes permanent once received. It requires a lot of sustained work and determined effort, and if these intensive efforts remain at the paperwork level, deviations from meeting academic requirements may occur. For sustainable competitive advantage, institutions need to focus primarily on their main fields of activity. Although obtaining accreditation is considered a high requirement by institutions, focusing on constantly improving activities remains indispensable.

3   Main Focus of the Paper

Academic practices and activities of universities can be evaluated by both national and international Quality Boards in line with Accreditation requirements. In this context, the necessity of accreditation for Higher Education Institutions continues to become indisputable in the perceptual dimension. The Internationalization of Education and Training and the requirements for the global mobility of students regarding study and work, force Universities to gain a competitive advantage in the international arena. At this point, the brand positioning strategies of institutions that go through similar business processes gain importance. The aim of this study is to provide a perspective and various alternatives for Higher Education Institutions to gain a competitive advantage through international accreditation.

4   International Accreditation Institutions and Branding

With the increase in the variety and number of international accreditations, the need for accreditation bodies to position themselves emerges. Managers, visionaries and enhancement policies contribute to the improvement of processes based on various parameters through accreditation and rating agencies (Fernandes & Singh, 2022). Despite the fact that there are currently different accreditations only for different fields of education, it is expected that the differences in terms of criteria and standards will become more evident as the number of well-known accreditation institutions increases. For example, when we look at institutions that provide education in the field of Business Administration, AACSB, AMBA, EQUIS, etc. different accreditation bodies appear (Miles, et. al., 2016). In addition, the positively perceived image of the Higher Education Institution contributes to increasing the awareness of accreditation companies. Therefore, the interaction between Higher Education Institutions and Accreditation Institutions can also be considered as cooperation based on bilateral benefits. Accreditation is the result of a procedural peer review study aimed at providing quality assurance in the internationalization of companies (Pathak & Pwhar, 2022). Accreditation in the academic field essentially provides the benefit of academic development to be present in the international arena. At the same time, this contribution to academic development is a potential driving force in the emergence of more efficient models. Therefore, this interactive process is a source of opportunity for Accreditation Bodies and Higher Education Institutions in the cycle of continuous improvement. It is possible to clarify and introduce possible differentiations in corporate practices shaped by similar requirements in this competitive environment. In today's world, with the digitalization of marketing processes, it is a priority for institutions to find a place in the world rankings, and in this context, they aim to be in the top ranks with international accreditation and branding activities. (Demidova, et. al., 2020). Many countries have begun to effectively carry out evaluation processes and quality audits, especially accreditation, in order to provide Quality Assurance in Higher Education Activities (Stella & Woodhouse, 2009). Regarding international accreditation, students and parents have critical expectations over the diploma. Factors such as employment, ranking reports, and stakeholder expectations cause organizations to prefer accreditation voluntarily (Staub, 2019). With the increase in the availability of digital applications through advances in technology, the opportunities offered by Information Technologies nurture the potential to facilitate, enrich and differentiate practices in Education and Training.

5   Brand Positioning Strategies Through Accreditation in Higher Education Institutions

Accreditation Practices provide a framework aligned with the standards for the educational activities. The implementation of the accreditation requirements and the establishment of the system are related to the institution's own processes. There are differences between Higher Education Institutions and companies in the sector in terms

of academic structuring and profit motive. In this context, there are also differences in the strategies on accessing resources and positioning efforts in higher education institutions. Similarly, the factors determining the positioning strategies of state universities and foundation universities may also differ (Demirci, 2021). It is expected that institutions have their own visions, missions and strategies, and departments have their own unique program outputs. Companies getting prepared for accreditation can examine the work of other institutions and make self-assessments during this preparation phase. At this point, there is the need to analyze the situation with all its constraints and reveal the strategic framework. With various analyzes, organizations can also more clearly demonstrate at what points they can make improvements. Sectoral analyzes and stakeholder analyzes are of critical importance so that companies can clearly explain the needs and expectations of their target audiences, demonstrate what they can do to meet and exceed these expectations, and develop long-term targets. It is possible to reach the top places in competition in a way that attracts the attention of stakeholders with effective brand strategies (Salameh, et. al., 2022). With the increase in the number of higher education institutions and the demand for these institutions, the university elections of the students have gained high importance (Cristancho, 2019). What makes it easier for a university that wants to attract international students to be preferred by its students? What are the applications of the University that serve this process? What should be done to ensure that these applications are known by students and stakeholders? Is there any differentiation in terms of priorities with other universities? If there is, how should this differentiation be revealed? What are the messages, slogans and discourses that have the potential to affect the student preference order for the university and provide diffrentiation despite similarities? The tools used while constructing the brand identity should serve these expressions. How can it ensure that universities benefit from marketing activities within the framework of social responsibility and academic awareness? Has the Public Relations department effectively shared information regarding the achievement of accreditation with stakeholders? How long does accreditation have the potential to contribute to the differentiation of institutions? As most universities become accredited internationally, how will the perception of accreditation bodies and accreditation bodies themselves be affected? Just as companies receive quality awards over their models, it is an expected result that accredited higher education institutions seek awards for their best model applications. In fact, by examining the requirements of other accreditation bodies with high brand awareness, different requirements can be combined, and put into practice by including them in the organization's planning during the accreditation process. Measuring and evaluating consumer expectations provides companies to gain a place in the minds of target audience through the point of view of consumers (Kethuda, 2023). Differentiation and memorability are two important elements that serve and provide brand positioning. In these circumstances, institutions strive to provide more evidence for their differentiations and capture market gaps. Having many differentiating aspects does not directly mean that the brand positioning is very clear and strong. In order to strengthen the brand, it is necessary to know the target audience well and reach them with a clear and distinct message. After Brand Positioning has been clarified, the strategic infrastructure needs to be planned accordingly. Slogan ideas, appropriate messages to stakeholders, sharing organizational culture, providing strategic collaborations, and providing efficient marketing communication channels can be counted among these (Subbarayalu, 2022). There is a need to evaluate the departments and programs of Higher Education Institutions in terms of their own internal dynamics. That is, there may also be departments that pursue a branding strategy on their own behalf; just like the Business School or the Engineering School at Technopark which is famous for its incubation centers. While the primary target market of Higher Education Institutions is students, other institutions and organizations in the stakeholder category may have different market segments with different market segmentation criteria (Story, 2023). Each different department within Higher Education Institutions can be considered as a strategic business unit that offers different products and services. These departments also have the potential to compete among themselves. However, since they are differentiated as an academic field, successful branding of each academic department can contribute to the brand equity of the University as a whole.

6   Productivity Through Higher Institutions

Sustainable research and its outputs have critical potential to contribute to the country's productivity. Higher Education Institutions, which have been the locomotive of knowledge production, various inventions, and innovation for centuries, make a systematic effort to maintain these missions (Gutierrez, et. al., 2023). Accreditations nurture the strive to maintain the continuity of systematic quality improvement. From this perspective, universities' scientific and artistic studies and their outputs, qualified personnel, and graduates play a significant role in contributing to productivity. In this context, accreditations serve as a catalyst in this productivity flow. While universities continue their research activities, they also support sustainable development activities. At the same time, they continue to attract the attention of local and international stakeholders within the scope of academia-industry cooperation. Measurable goals contribute to the outputs of the research and the realization of the projects (Alfirevic, 2023). Conducting research on productivity and analyzing productivity indicators in various sectors are again the return of research. Some performance indicators are used by the business world as an important tool in calculating productivity. There may not be a parallelism between advances in technology and productivity growth. At this point, it is necessary to analyze the technology diffusion appropriately. The importance

of the effect of intangible variables on total productivity has begun to be investigated. In other words, the effects of knowledge, data, and technology variables affect total productivity by being integrated with other diffusion factors (Gong & Zhang, 2023).

7   Future Research Directions

This paper is a guide on the importance of accreditation, its requirements, the importance of Accreditation in Higher Education, and Brand Positioning Strategies. In further research, long-established Accreditation bodies and newly emerging accreditation bodies can be compared according to the requirements and conditions of the Accreditation market. The reasons why internationally recognized Accreditation Bodies are primarily preferred by world-ranked Universities can be investigated. The harmonization and integration conditions of institutions' brand positioning strategies in compliance with the accreditation models can be researched. Different accreditation options can be evaluated through target audience differentiation for different student profiles and departments. Competitive Analysis studies can be carried out in Higher Education Institutions by considering the models used in the way of Branding for the target audience.

8   Conclusion

In this paper, a framework for accreditation processes in Higher Education Institutions and Brand Positioning strategies in the international arena is presented. It is obvious that the importance of accreditation will continue to increase. Institutions continue to evaluate accreditation also as a competitive advantage. However, it is expected that accreditation, which is a necessary condition for branding, will not be considered a sufficient condition with market saturation in the future. Intense accreditation efforts bring along intense competition in this field as well. Effective brand positioning and differentiation strategies of companies form the basis of sustainable competitive advantage in the international arena.

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