

University Logos and the Commoditisation of Higher Education

Donell J. Holloway, Edith Cowan University
David A. Holloway, Murdoch University

Abstract

This paper explores the manner in which university logos and other media imagery have been changing over the last decade or so. It proposes that this reflects changes in the revenue generating circumstances Australian universities now find themselves in. It also questions whether corporate-style imagery that strays too far away from the conventional university image is appropriate in light of the federal Education Minister's recent questioning about the very definition of a 'what a university is'.

Keywords: higher education, corporate logos, commoditisation, imagery

Introduction

Australian universities are in the process of being commoditised and are developing more of a consumer and customer culture. They are no longer focussing exclusively on an educational mission in which teaching and research are paramount. Instead they are "...transforming...to fit the economic and social conditions of consumer culture. One representation of this transformation is the university logo" (Hunsinger, 2003, ¶1).

The first part of this paper explores the reduction in publicly sourced revenue streams and the development of market pressures in the University sector in Australia. It then proceeds to analyse changes to university logos as part of their new corporate identity. The last part focuses on whether or not the recasting of a university's image away from conventional university imagery is appropriate in light of Education Minister Brendan Nelson's recent implied suggestions that Australia should revert to a multi-tiered Higher Education system (Fullerton, 2005).

Public funding decline

Prior to the 1980s the Australian University sector was a publicly fully funded system (Eveline, 2004, p.17). Nowadays less than half the recurrent funding required by universities is supplied by the Federal government with the remaining revenue shortfall being made up primarily by local students' fees and charges, such as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), and by overseas fee paying students, both onshore and offshore (Kneist and Rosenfeld, 2004).

Slaughter and Leslie (1997) argue that this trend is part of the negative effect of globalisation on universities whilst Gibbons et al. (1994) more succinctly describe this as the international move towards a 'massification of education': that is, the higher education system absorbing larger numbers of students, with fewer staff and a decline in the traditional status of academic values as part of a push towards corporatism and the emergence of a user-pays and profit-making mentality. This is "...now a strongly

entrenched phenomenon, it is international in scope and is unlikely to be reversed” (Gibbons et al., 1994, p. 11).

There is a sense of accelerated change in which the university image and identity as a public good is under challenge. Universities in Australia are becoming education “degree factories” as claimed recently on the ABC Four Corners program (Fullerton, 2005). They are no longer calm and quiet places for reflective thought and critical thinking. The individual institutional emphasis appears to focus more on corporate issues such as: revenue generation through the deployment of significant marketing initiatives; internal cost reduction; and managing within allocated ‘budgets’—all within the frame of an organisational ‘strategic plan’.

A corporatist notion of the need for increased productivity has been a feature of the Australian university sector since the early 1980s. The actual changes have been substantially higher than was first expected. The Labor government’s Dawkins Green Paper predicted that a target of 125,000 students would be achievable by 2001; this was in 1987 when university students numbered 78,000 (Karmel, 2001, p.160). Instead the 2001 total was in excess of 600,000 of which more than 144,000 were overseas fees paying students (Kneist and Rosenfeld, 2004, p. 9). This exponential expansion of the university sector has occurred without corresponding and appropriate increases in resources.

Government funding has been on a continuous decline since the 1980s: “In 1981 universities obtained 90 per cent of their funding from government sources; by 2001 that proportion had dropped to 55 per cent” (Eveline, 2004, p.19). There have been two main ways that universities have coped with this reduction in direct public funding. The first, a government initiative, was the introduction of HECS charges for domestic students by the Hawke Labor government in 1989—a form of deferred fees paid for through the tax system (Eveline, 2004, p.18). A part of the shift, therefore, was to ‘users’ of the system—a user pays approach advocated by successive Australian governments in many sectors of the economy, which is widely and uncritically accepted (seemingly) by the taxpaying public. The second was to rely increasingly on recruiting overseas fee paying students, both onshore and offshore. There has been a sustained growth of revenues from this component alone (Kneist and Rosenfeld, 2004).

The mantra that pervades senior management thinking and strategic planning is the increasingly urgent ‘need’ to diversify revenue streams. This corresponds with a significant growth in marketing activities both domestically and offshore, which highlights the shift towards an enhanced corporate and competitive mentality amongst universities. This ongoing privatization of the system by the conservative Coalition federal government (since 1996) is likely to accelerate given the recent election results with the re-elected government gaining control over the Senate (and control over both houses of parliament) in July 2005. The market forces approach is here to stay for the foreseeable future.

University Logos: From Heraldry to Corporate Logos

In conjunction with the far-reaching changes to the funding circumstances of universities the public imagery of Australian universities has also undergone significant change. Generally speaking, in the last twenty years there has been a move

away from traditional university imagery based on the insignia and traditions associated with old-world (European) universities, to a current imagery that is often more in tune with corporate imagery and logos. The heraldic imagery (such as the crests, shields, lozenges and mottos) used by our universities are founded on an ancient system of “...identification markers that outline territory and affiliation. They are tribal, associative and symbolic references” (Hunsinger, 2003, ¶2). These traditional images were/are often intended to symbolise the antiquity of a university—as it is a commonly held view that the older a university is (or seems to be) “...the more they would gain in respect and authority” (Potts, 2003, p. 102). Within the Australian context, this seems to have been an attempt to ‘invent’ a sense of antiquity and tradition not present in a New World country such as Australia.

In recent times corporate-style logos are beginning to eclipse the traditional crests, mottos and other insignia conventionally used by universities. The new corporate-style logos make use of clean lines, large bold fonts, minimal (but bold) colours and/or stylised symbols. They represent the visual identity that the corporate body (university) wishes to use to ‘brand’ itself and hopefully construct a readily identifiable or memorable association in the consumer’s (the student’s) mind leading to some level of consumer commitment to the business (university) and its products/services (university degree).



Figure 1, 2 and 3: The new Edith Cowan University promotional logo (1999) alongside the previous crest (1991-1999). All reference to heraldry and antiquity (through the use of a crest and motto) has been dropped in favour of a bold corporate-style logo.

The re-branding of Australian university imagery, through changes to universities’ logos, has not been uniform in manner. Some universities have retained references to ‘antiquity’ within their new corporate logos and imagery with the incorporation of their university crest—albeit in less prominent positions—or stylised versions of their ‘sandstone’ buildings. Others have taken the bull by the horns and divested themselves of all crests or shields in promotional materials and are, thus, quite noticeable in their efforts to construct a corporate-style name and image.

Not only are universities’ logos undergoing a corporate-style transformation but the form and content of all university imagery is, in general, going through a similar process—towards more sophisticated and commercialised texts and practices which emulate the style and form of the corporate environment. Gewirtz et al (1995) identify three key ways in which the imagery of schools is being changed in light of the new

incentive structure of the marketplace in education. These changes readily apply to the university environment. They are

- The use of more sophisticated production techniques and the resulting ‘glossification’ of school imagery;
- The commercialization of texts and an associated focus on ‘visual images’ and explicit indicators ‘quality’ and
- a growing emphasis on middle-class symbolism (1995, p. 127).

This ‘glossification’ process has no doubt been accelerated through internet technologies and the World Wide Web. Universities seem to have grown a ‘second skin’—virtually broadcasting and promoting their institutions in what can only be described as a competitive market environment. Youthful, cheerful, fresh-faced, often multicultural groups of students engaged in learning activities embellish many university web sites.



Figure 4: Images on the University of Tasmania’s homepage (September 13 2005).

The university corporate logo: A UK example.

Universities in the UK are facing a similar decline in public funding becoming increasingly reliant on full fees paying overseas students. Local student contributions (tuition fees) are also set to double in 2006 when top-up fees are introduced. Within this free-market framework UK universities are finding it necessary to promote themselves and compete for student enrolments: “UK universities are [currently] employing private marketing consultancy firms to advise them on how to sell themselves....and branding will become crucial as a way of distinguishing one university from another” (Ebbols, 2004).



Figures 5, 6 and 7: The Birmingham University Crest (1900-1980); The Birmingham University Crest (1980s-2005); and, the new Birmingham University Logo.

One example of these changes is The University of Birmingham which has recently had a rather public dispute over changes to its logo and imagery (figures 5-7 above) of their 105 year old (red brick) institution. After employing a brand consultancy firm to transform its image in 2004 (Ebbols, 2004) the university began introducing its new logo in preparation for the 2006 academic year. News articles, Web-based articles, newsletters, petitions and blogs have been circulating in protest about the new logo (BBC, 2005). For the most part, these complaints centred on the loss of an identifiable ‘university’ image, “...that the new logo makes the university look like a polytechnic” (UB or not UB, 2005) and that it is “...important that they [the students] have arrived at a real redbrick university as opposed to a former polytechnic, and are concerned that the new logo doesn’t adequately reflect this” (Van Gans, 2005, ¶11).

Discussion

Corporate identity is more than a design image. Schmidt (1995) argued that it is a combination of corporate culture, corporate behaviour, products, services and communications as well as the visual image projection of the logo. Corporate identity is deeper than the external visual image and comprises all the elements of the organization that influence the way people see and think about the corporation. Corporate visual identity (logo) belongs to the realm of the graphic designers and artists, whilst corporate identity is the realm of organizational theorists and spin-doctors. They both need good corporate communications to project to the general public what the organization is, what it stands for, and what it in fact does. Nonetheless, recent changes to university imagery reflect the corporatised, marketised and glossified environment in which the Australian tertiary education system is currently embedded. Government imposed (and increasing) reliance on ‘self-generated’ funding has necessitated that universities immerse themselves in a competitive market oriented system¹.

But have some universities gone too far in their move towards corporate-style imagery within their universities? We would argue that the use of corporate-style logos that have no reference to conventional university imagery may, in some ways, construct an image that strays too far from customary university images, and in doing so help diminish the institutions’ public status to one that is comparable to previous ‘schools of technology’ or TAFEs—or in the UK ‘polytechnics’—and in turn dissuade some prospective students. One final point needs also to be considered. Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson is currently raising questions about the very definition of a university in Australia (Fullerton, 2005) while at the same time overseeing proposed major changes to funding in both research and teaching. It may therefore be prudent at this time for universities to project a conventional university appearance rather than a corporate style image. The future of Australian universities is waiting to be written.

¹ This move towards a free market in higher education shifts the administrative function of universities towards a marketing and consumer focus, and puts in jeopardy the quality of educational outcomes of universities. It is becoming more apparent that “within the current context of neo-liberalism and its mythically ‘natural regulator’—the free market—the vision of what constitutes a good society and a good student appears to have changed profoundly towards competitiveness and entrepreneurship” (Beckmann and Cooper, 2004, p. 16). A conflict now exists in the core meanings and values of higher education, that is, between “pedagogic discourse and the discourse of business” (p. 16).

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