

**PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF BUILDING AN AUTHENTIC DEPARTMENT BRAND  
IN AN ACADEMIC INSTITUTION. MIXED METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH ON  
THE DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION, PUBLIC RELATIONS AND  
ADVERTISING OF THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL, ADMINISTRATIVE AND  
COMMUNICATION SCIENCE (FSPAC), BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY (BBU)**

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*Abstract: Within the context of economic crisis and a competitive environment the higher education institutions need to develop new strategies to build and strengthen their position in the relations with the stakeholders. The new challenge for this type of institutions is to (re)think about their own identity and to establish what is their current mission and vision and which values should be promoted among their publics. Part of a consistent empirical research, this paper will provide a mixed methodological approach that can be used to collect data about brand identity on the specific case of the Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising of the Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Science, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. The purpose of this study aims to highlight the main assumptions and sizes that may be part of the preliminary analysis of building a genuine brand department within a university institution.*

**Keywords:** *analysis, higher education branding, department branding, university, mix methodological approach.*

### **General consideration**

In this topic, the authors aim to present relevant data underlying a large empirical research which started in 2013 and is still in progress. The study is part of a scientific construct dedicated to the subject of branding and re-branding in higher education in Romania, focusing on university education in Cluj-Napoca, where the authors have performed a pilot study on the Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising (DCRPP), within the Political, Administrative and Communication Science College (FSPAC), Babeș-Bolyai University (BBU). If at the beginning of the research, we found it necessary to make a review of the literature and to present publicly in international conferences, our vision on the concepts of university branding and re-branding, in this part of the study, we intend to discuss the items that formed the preliminary analysis for building a genuine brand department for the one analyzed in the pilot study, DCRPP. We basically speak about the mixed methodological approach which has supported the necessary data collection in order to collect in-depth knowledge of the current DCRPP brand image, according to the main target audience, students and teachers who work in this department.

### **Introduction**

The stepping up of commercial branding today is no longer a novelty. Branding is a process that is part of the strategic management of any company that wants to position itself favorably in the consumer market. Being a strategic element it proved to be extremely useful; branding has taken over time other dimensions than commercial ones, making today part of the management strategies of other institutions that are not companies, such as public

institutions. This category also includes institutions of higher education, where the branding process has gained new meanings folding on their specific activity.

The implication of the branding process in higher education institutions came as a consequence of the growing number of study programs offered by universities, providing future students an easier choice of the institution and program of study that she/he wants to follow during the university education. Moreover, branding accents of academic institutions appeared also in the economic crisis that favored decreasing number of candidates / students, the dropout rate studies during the academic years because of the impossibility of paying high fees (analyzing the data of 20 state universities, ANOSR found that in Romania, the dropout rate for the class of 2013 was almost 40% - data from 04/17/2014<sup>1</sup>) and a decreased interest in academic area.

In this context, the building of university branding strategy was seen as helpful in highlighting the quality of programs of study and research, the methods of teaching and interacting with students and also in shaping a positive image. Based on the mission, vision and values of the institution of higher education, branding strategies are considered to be a good solution to revitalize the academic area as “the brand image of a university plays a crucial role in attitudes towards that institution, and to the sector as a whole” (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, Boyt, 2010, 727).

### **Methodology and research design**

In order to build an authentic brand for a department within a university, we considered it necessary to establish a methodology that can provide essential data for the current image of the department, according to the students and professors working in this department. The review in detailed manner of the features of a department within a faculty of a university has as purpose the followings:

1. identifying and highlighting the key dimensions that may underlie the construction of a new authentic brand identity for the department (for the Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising, FSPAC, UBB) that can be favorably positioned in the minds of its target audience - students, future national and international students, parents, researchers, etc.
2. creating a clear and competitive identity for any department of any college
3. providing a research model in university branding, focused on an department, model that can be replicated in any university

The mixed methodology approach chosen for the prior analysis in order to building a genuine brand department, was based on several methods of both theoretical and empirical research side, following more dimensions: **1.** sociological survey based on a questionnaire, which focused on several aspects of the perception of the department by students, **2.** content analysis of documents related to the communication process of the department (posters, flyers, brochures, flyers, website, social media) and **3.** Semi-structured interviews with teachers of the department in order to compare their vision about the image of the department to the one that the students have on it (work in progress). All these research methods provide

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<sup>1</sup> according to <http://edumanager.ro/articol.php?id=14340>

us, from our point of view, data that can be used in order to shape a competitive and authentic brand identity for the department.

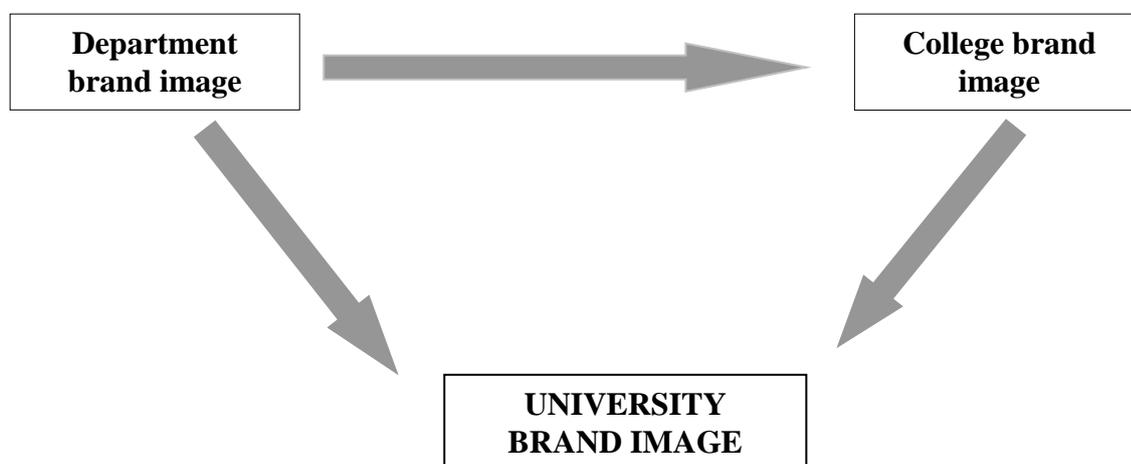
In this part of the study we will offer also some theoretical aspects on the subject using a brief review of several studies in the literature. We will also communicate data that will answer some of our research questions corresponding to this part of the whole study:

1. How can one adapt the concept and techniques of **university/higher education branding** to **college department branding**?
2. Which are the main premises and dimensions that can be part of a preliminary analysis of building an authentic brand department in an academic institution?

### **Brief literature review**

In the academic field the concept of brand is a new challenge that higher education institutions are forced to face, challenge that for Romania, for example, is still at an early stages of development, both at the literature and practical level. Since the literature does not speak that much about a department brand but about an overall brand of the institution called university, we have founded necessary to identify those elements that are composing a university brand, in order to see how those could be adapted to a department. The motivation that set behind this reasoning was the one that the brand image of a university is constructed of a plurality capital image that comes from the image of each faculty and each department in the faculties of that university.

*Figure 1: Schematic picture of the relationship between the whole university image and the addition of the image capital that came from faculties and departments*



At international higher education level, as we noted in our other papers<sup>2</sup>, the brand concept has been adapted to be part of the management architecture of such institutions (Hemsley-Brown, Goonawardana, 2007 Waeraa, Solbakk, 2008, 449), because research has shown that university branding can answer to some social needs of its primary audience, its current and prospective students and their families. By shaping the values of institutional

<sup>2</sup> See Veronica Ioana Ilieș, Paul-Alexandru Fărcaș, „Definirea principiilor de bază ale brandingului universitar în România”, in Management Intercultural, Vol XV, nr 3 (29), 2013, pp. 152-155 and „Rebranding of higher education in Romania”, in Studies on Literature, Discourse and Multicultural Dialogue, ed. Arhipleag XXI, 2013, pp.175-183.

branding, clearly highlighted in programs offer of study of the university, it will be able to position itself to the "academic market" attracting a large number of students, both nationally and internationally.

Research studies explain that in the current context of higher education, rich of institutions that are offering more and more diverse and bidding curricula, "branded universities" can position their programs more effectively and differentiate it from others through more effective communication process about its activity, thus gaining trust and loyalty (Iqbal, Rasli, Hassan 2012). The positive perceptions of that higher education institution will determine the student to desire to be part of the programs of that institution (Pinar et.al, 2011, 727). These are just some of the reasons which prompted the management of higher education institutes to include in recent years in their sustainable development programs, the educational branding lexicon (Whisman, 2009, 367)

From theoretical point of view, *academic brand image* will consist of mission, vision and values of those intrinsic and extrinsic elements of the institution, which are capitalized programs of study offered and teaching methods. If commercially a key component of branding is represented by the product / service, in the university case, one of the major components of branding is, according to the literature (Whisman, 2009, 368-369), composed of employees of that institution, teachers and administrative staff, named "brand champions" (brand champions - concept originated from the field of business and implemented by researchers within the university branding). They become the main pillars in transmitting positive information about the university and about its brand values.

From other points of view, researches on university topic are speaking about the XXI century university in terms of „quasi-commercial service industry” (Chapleo, 2010, 169). Studies are using different concepts when dealing with this topic, but essentially talking about the same thing. So if Brookes, Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka talk about marketing for higher education institutions (Brookes, 2003, Hemsley-Brown, Oplatka, 2006), other authors such as Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton talk about marketing communications for universities (Veloutsou Lewis and Paton, 2004). Also, concepts like branding for higher education institutions (Waeraas and Solbakk, 2008), the role of web pages in building a brand for a university (Opoku, Abratt and Pitt, 2006), harmony in the brand architecture of a university (Hemsley-Goonawardana Brown, 2007), models of choice by students of a university in the international education market (Vronties et.all., 2007), exploring the components of university-based brand marketing directors vision of universities (Ali-Choudry, 2009 ), university brand positioning in Asian countries (Gray et al, 2003), development of a conceptual model of brand building university management schools in India (Shahaida, 2009), speak basically all about branding strategies that universities adopt in order to different higher education institutions worldwide. Beyond the concept of "university brand", literature also speaks of academic brand (Waeraa, Solbakk, 2008). One of the authors that has focused on this issue and highlighted all the above discussed under branding programs for academic success is Chapleo (2004, 2005, 2007, 2008, 2011).

## Results and findings

The dimensions and variables analyzed in the research methodological approach conducted under the three research methods above have the following aspects:

- educational offer of DCRPP
- professional experience of teachers involved in the teaching act in this department
- the ability of teaching staff to combine the curriculum with the extracurricular activities
- prestige and reputation of the department and teachers
- trust given to them by students
- alumni loyalty
- professionalism shown
- creativity and innovation capacity

It is needed to be noted that these variables are those under which we consider appropriate to operate a department of a university that is positioned under the excellence on the aborigine market (we refer to FSPAC, UBB). We have also taken into consideration the international standards in terms of quality in university education that aims to increase the attractiveness of students on quality in higher education and especially brand loyalty in academic field. Thus, they were brought to the attention of students and teachers, in order to see if DCRPP as a department meets the conditions of an authentic brand.

We started the research, as already illustrated schematically above, from the assumption that the image of a university is made up of individual image of all his faculties and departments that operate within them. Applying the research methods described above in the DCRPP of FSPAC, UBB, we concluded that the typology of research that can be applied to identify the assumptions underlying the construction of a university brand can easily be replicated for a faculty or a department.

The study also revealed several prerequisites and dimensions that should underpin the building of a genuine brand department within an institution of higher education. For the research question *How can one adapt the concept and techniques of **university/higher education branding** to college department branding?*, the research has revealed that traditional branding elements from the commercial sphere, which have been taken over academia and applied at university all over the world, can be easily adapted and used in a department of a university.

The second research question aimed *the main conditions and dimensions that can be part of a preliminary analysis of building an authentic brand department in an academic institution*. Thus the dimensions that should stay at the bases of a genuine brand department are, from our point of view, the followings:

1. Building of a specific visual identity, formed from logo, based on a symbol and specific colors that can represent graphically the logo and give authenticity and uniqueness to the department
2. Construction of a specific set of values for the department, that can be adopted by its members and be included in educational programs offered, in teachers abilities and in their relationship with students
3. Build a strategic long-term competitive positioning vision, based on the advantages and strengths offered by that department
4. Anchor all branding elements in characteristics such as dynamic features, prestige, trust, reputation, competitiveness, attractiveness, professionalism, creativity, innovation

5. Effective communication of all branding elements by direct methods (teacher-student) and indirect offline and online

### **Conclusions, limitations and research perspectives**

In this phase of the research project, we can list some preliminary conclusions that refer more on the flaws that we identified during the application of the mixed methodological approach. Thus, the research clearly demonstrates that a department within a university can bring a major contribution to the capital of image, both of the faculty and the university as a whole. DCRPP is considered one of the most competitive departments that Babeş-Bolyai University has, enjoying a high number of students who consider that it meets the criteria of a efficient department (74.7% of the 507 students surveyed). Many of the students, 87.2%, DCRPP already consider that DCRPP is a brand in FSPAC, UBB. Therefore, students provide high percentages for the brand values that DCRPP believes that it has. Thus, the curriculum is considered to be the main brand value for a large number of students (83.2%). However, the experience and training of teachers is a brand value agreed by over 80% of students studying in DCRPP. One of the major competitive advantages DCRPP has, that position it favorably in the eyes of students, is expressed by the fact that public relations and advertising are fully ascendancy areas in Romania, offering them multiple graduate employment opportunities, as both public relations and advertising specialties are applicable to any field of professional activity. Students are attracted mostly by the various curricular and extracurricular activities offered by DCRPP, teachers' specialization and dynamic teaching methods.

Adapting the concept of „*institutional higher education branding*” to the „*college department branding*” can be achieved by any department with the condition of identifying the main premises and dimensions that could be integrated into the mission, vision and values of that department and may be communicated thru special public relations and branding tools and techniques and branding strategies.

**The limits** identified by us at this stage of the research refer to methodological issues. Thus the sample consisted primarily of first year students that after only one semester of study were not able to form a clear opinion about DCRPP. However, the timing of the survey, before the exams, was a taken compromise. The moment was propitious for applying a large number of questionnaires, but the stress of the exam could have influenced the answers of students. However, insufficient literature on this subject complicated the whole research.

**Research perspectives** refer to the complete application of research methodology, firstly the semi-structured interviews with teachers of the department and conclusion the entire study by creating a much stronger brand profile for DCRPP. We also intend to improve our research methodology and retest students of future generations, for a comparative analysis of the evolution of the DCRPP brand.

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