

## Higher education as object for corporate and nation branding: between equality and flagships

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Branding has become an important issue within higher education. The use of core value statements and visions are expressions of this. To be a successful brand, organisations must also make sure they are different from others. However, in both the scholarly discourse and in political rhetoric, the Nordic model highlights equal access to education and opportunities for all. Values such as egalitarianism and diversity may be difficult to fit into a frame of reference where excellence is at the centre. Historically higher education has also been an important part of nation branding initiatives. This paper asks how different branding perspectives (corporate branding and nation branding) are matched and harmonised with respect to higher education in two Nordic countries. The study shows that there is a lack of harmonisation between nation branding and corporate branding, and that the discourse on excellence is not conducive to differentiation at the organisational level.

**Keywords:** branding; differentiation; egalitarianism; higher education; nation branding

### Introduction and main objective

Branding of higher education institutions has become a prevalent issue in recent years (Stensaker, 2007). This has made universities more aware of the links between what they stand for (their values and characteristics), how they are perceived and their reputation (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009). The use of core value statements and visions are expressions of this trend. In the process where organisations are branded, values and characteristics are used to profile the organisation. It is also considered important for an organisation to differentiate itself from other organisations (Antorini & Schultz, 2005). To be a successful brand and to acquire a competitive advantage, organisations must make sure they are identified as ‘different from others’. As Aaker (2003, p. 83) puts it, ‘differentiation is the engine of the brand train’. Hence, higher education institutions must be clearly visible and distinct in order to ‘stand out’ in competition for students, staff and resources. In addition, there has been growing international competition among higher education institutions, as well as increased interest in creating ‘flagships’ and excellence (Aula & Tienari, 2011). Hence, branding has become an important part of managing this sector. What is seldom recognised, however, is the fact that higher education historically has been a very important part of nation branding initiatives. The higher education sector played a central role in the post-war belief of education and culture as ways to prevent international conflict in Western countries (Angell, 2015). Today, one can argue that education also

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plays a role in the so-called 'competition state' (Cerny, 2010; Kettunen, 2004). Within this perspective of the state, a crucial feature is to present a distinct and clearly communicated image of the nation in order to 'stand out' in the competition among nations on the international scene. Different (relatively) autonomous higher education organisations becomes part of such nation branding practices as they are used to promote the country for foreign students, employees and other stakeholders.

This situation creates the point of departure for this paper: how are different branding perspectives (corporate branding and nation branding) matched and harmonised in higher education in two Nordic countries?

The starting point is higher education in Norway and Sweden. In both scholarly discourse and in political rhetoric, the Nordic countries are characterised as highlighting equal access to education, providing opportunities for all, and offering social welfare. It may be difficult to fit values such as egalitarianism, diversity and equality into a frame of reference in which excellence and global competition are at the centre, and where creating a unique brand necessitates 'standing out' and being special and distinct. The paper, therefore, taps into questions of how higher education copes with the tension between differentiation, on the one hand, and an interest in promoting equality and being similar to other institutions, on the other.

The paper focuses on the values used for branding the national higher education systems in Norway and Sweden. It also investigates how Norwegian and Swedish higher education institutions brand themselves through core values. Two data sources have been used. The first pertains to an analysis of how the national higher education systems in Norway and Sweden have been promoted abroad. Two websites ([studyinnorway.no](http://studyinnorway.no) and [studyinsweden.se](http://studyinsweden.se)) provide the empirical basis for this analysis. The second data source is a comparison of the core value statements employed by higher education institutions in Norway and Sweden. A total of 387 core value statements were gathered from 75 strategic plans produced by the institutions.

Branding in the higher education sector is a prevailing phenomenon, but we need more knowledge about its functions, formulations and consequences. In addition, as far as the author is aware, no studies exist on how corporate and nation branding initiatives are in step with each other.

To fill some of this research gap, this paper describes and analyses the grey zones between corporate and nation branding, a topic which has been neglected in the literature for too long. In the paper, the perspective of corporate branding is engaged in order to understand university branding initiatives. Conceptually, the paper ties in with perspectives on nation branding and corporate branding, and in particular what role higher education plays in these concepts.

## **Background and central concepts**

### ***Corporate branding in higher education: the case of Norway and Sweden***

The higher education sector's transformations in recent years have been characterised by market-based reforms and the introduction of competitive elements, new budget instruments and quasi-markets for education all over Europe (Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008). As Stensaker (2007) points out, national and international competition has been a catalyst for branding in the higher education sector. He stresses that 'the image or brand a given higher education institution has in its surrounding seems to be considered as more important than before, and to an increasing extent, a strategic and managerial issue' (Stensaker, 2007, p. 2). Drori, Delemstri, and Oberg (2013, p. 143) argue that 'although

competition among universities is not a new phenomenon, branding is a recent fashion for universities to position themselves in the field of higher education'. The focus on global competition, flagships and excellence provides an indication for corporate branding in the higher education sector. For example, in a study of university mergers in Finland, Aula and Tienari (2011, p. 7) show that the need 'to become an innovative «world class» university act as an imaginary incentive' in the sector. Global rankings and accreditations have also become important, and reputation and branding have, therefore, emerged as a key issue for decision makers. According to Aspara, Aula, Tienari, and Tikkanen (2014, p. 23), branding of universities has been welcomed in the Nordic countries 'as a positive development by policy-makers, while reactions within universities remain mixed'. Another aspect of Nordic university branding is that it has been 'holistic' and gone 'beyond the design of seals, slogans, and marketing communications' (Aspara et al., 2014, p. 2).

Nevertheless, how can corporate branding be defined? Moreover, how is it related to higher education? The American Marketing Association defines a brand as 'a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers' (The American Marketing Association, 2011, as cited in Suomi, Lemmetyinen, & Go, 2013, p. 204). This definition implies a clear and linear relation between producer, product and consumer. Aspara et al. (2014) understands branding as more of an interactional process, involving struggles and dynamics of power, and where different stakeholders take part. This is in contrast to traditional perspectives of branding which are based on 'one-way supply of brand images from marketers to consumers, who were rather passive recipients of brand' (Aspara et al., 2014, p. 1). According to Suomi (2014), the core of a brand is its identity, conceptualised as its vision and culture. Wæraas and Byrkjeflot (2012, p. 195) argue that conventional brand management focuses on how 'an organization should make sure to unite its different elements and types of communication into one single identity expression as if it were one "body" (hence corporate reputation or branding)'.

In the public sector, however, the organisational complexity makes such 'corporate' communication and branding difficult. This is particularly evident in the higher education sector (Jevons, 2006). Nevertheless, Chapleo (2008) writes that several scholars argue that traditional branding concept applies as well to higher education institutions as to other organisations. It has, therefore, been argued that a university brand represent 'a manifestation of the institution's features that distinguish it from others, reflect its capacity to satisfy students' needs, engender trust in its ability to deliver a certain type and level of higher education, and help potential recruits to make wise enrolment decisions' (Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009, pp. 85–86). Hence, formulations regarding visions, values and culture are important if one is to grasp central aspects of branding in the higher education sector. In addition, differentiation is an important feature of branding in the higher education sector, although researchers (such as Chapleo, 2005, 2010) show that there is little 'real' differentiation in university branding initiatives. With reference to Deephouse (1999), Wæraas (2015) argues that there exists an underexplored tension within branding theory between an organisation's need to cope with pressures for similarity and pressures for differentiation. According to King and Whetten (2008), organisations must conform with dominant logics in order to maintain legitimacy and demonstrate membership in a field of similar organisations. At the same time, however, there are incentives to stand out in order to achieve a competitive advantage (Porter, 1985). Hence, 'similarity and differentiation pressures are contradictory and prescribe different behaviours' (Wæraas, 2015, p. 284).

Although there has been a growing interest in brands and branding in the higher education sector, one can argue that the literature on university branding has taken a

relatively traditional perspective (Aspara et al., 2014), ignoring the organisational complexity of higher education institutions (Chapleo, 2010). There have been surprisingly few studies regarding the relationship between university branding and *the place* (Suomi et al., 2013, p. 203): 'To date this issue has aroused surprisingly little academic attention, although in practice it is clear that certain universities carrying the name of the city in which they are located could profit from its fame'. Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana (2007) is one example where the study of university branding ties in with the idea of nation branding as they study marketing activities of UK universities and the coordination through the British Council. However, studies particularly focusing on the relation between the organisational and national level of branding are few. As demonstrated, the tension between differentiation and similarity is another key issue still in need of scrutinising within university branding.

### **Nation branding**

The concern for image and branding is seen today as highly important in countries all over the world. As an example, during the last five years Norway and Denmark have established new programmes for nation branding with annual budgets of 13 million EUR (Angell & Mordhorst, 2014). Historically, education and educational institutions have played a key role in nation branding initiatives, through exchange programmes, cultural cooperation and the dissemination of knowledge abroad about the home country. Accordingly, perspectives that elaborate on nation branding are instructive for the present paper.

Concepts of nation branding, cultural diplomacy and national reputation management are multifaceted and ambiguous. Angell and Mordhorst (2014) distinguish between 'nation marketing' (Kotler, 1997), 'nation branding' (Anholt, 1998), 'the brand state' (van Ham, 2008), 'competitive identity' (Anholt, 2007), 'national image reputation' (Fan, 2010), 'public diplomacy' (Nye, 2004) and 'cultural diplomacy' (Wang, 2006). These concepts all deal with how countries develop and reflect upon their images, and how values and identities within a country are strategically presented to their external environment. Today, 'nation branding' is the most commonly used concept within this stream of literature. Dinnie (2008) defines a nation brand as 'the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provides the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences' (Dinnie, 2008, p. 15). According to Angell and Mordhorst (2014), nations are forced to compete against each other for resources. In the process, values, national characteristics and myths are used for branding as a way to 'stand out' in a competition among nations.

Looking more specifically at Norway, an official Norwegian report on Norway's cultural cooperation with foreign countries states that cultural cooperation and cultural diplomacy have always been important (NOU, 1985). Historically the aim for this work evolved mainly from having a focus on 'international understanding' also to incorporating elements of 'nation promotion'. Regarding Sweden, the Swedish Institute, founded in 1945, has played a central role in promoting Swedish interests for a long time. As Glover (2009) emphasises, the institute's profile has changed radically over the last decades: 'If the Institute in its first years sought to be perceived as something of an educational institution, today it far more resembles a marketing agency' (Glover, 2009, p. 255). Hence, the concerns regarding nation branding are intensified and more directly orientated towards promotion and marketing at the expense of cultural cooperation, education and cultural diplomacy.

Nation branding and branding in the higher education sector share an interest in using values as a means for building a durable brand. Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) argue that the standardisation of external communication, visions, core values and identities are all essential parts of branding. It is important to have a platform of (unique) values and a brand identity, and the public must recognise these elements as well. At the same time, very different countries' branding campaigns tend to use similar core values, such as 'friendly', 'beautiful', 'adventurous', 'peaceful' and 'caring' (Mossberg & Kleppe, 2005). Looking at descriptions of Norwegian and Swedish values, there are some similarities. The Nordic Council of Ministers has tried to promote the Nordic countries with reference to welfare and values such as neutrality, equality and openness (Lundström, 2008). Norway is visualised today as a commodity-based commercial country dominated by shipping, timber, fish and oil (Steen Jacobsen, 1991) where ideals around equality, universalism and anti-elitism are central (e.g., Lien & Lidén, 2001; Østerud, 2005). Others have underlined peacefulness (Hylland Eriksen & Neumann, 2011) and 'individual egalitarianism' (Gullestad, 1992). Within its foreign policy, Norway has a self-image as a Good Samaritan, a peacemaker and a prime advocate for the United Nations (Leira 2007). The image of Sweden gravitates around Sweden as 'ultra-modern' (Musial, 2002), as the cradle of the welfare state, as a 'middle way' (Childs, 1936), as a democratic 'Sonderweg' (special path) and as a 'specific egalitarian community' (Stråth & Sørensen, 1997). The analysis below elaborates further upon these reflections by discussing how such values are used (or not used) in the branding of the higher education *systems* and *institutions*.

## Methods

This paper is based on two data sources: (a) two websites, [www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no) administered by the Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education and [www.studyinsweden.se](http://www.studyinsweden.se) administered by the Swedish Institute, are employed for analysing how the national higher education systems in Norway and Sweden are promoted abroad; and (b) core value statements from higher education institutions in Norway and Sweden are compared. The analysis is a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, and the analytical approach is interpretive and comparative.

The first part of the empirical section focuses on how Norway and Sweden promote their educational system abroad. The aim was to detect which values are presented, and whether there are differences between Norway and Sweden. Qualitative content analysis was used, and the focus was first on the manifest component of the texts, rather than the latent content (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The manifest components refer to those elements that are physically present and countable (Berg, 2007). The two websites were read carefully several times and related to the aim of the study, namely to detect sections where education was used in the name of nation branding, focusing on pictures, heading and concepts. The websites were scrutinised and juxtaposed across several dimension, mainly the organisational set-up of the sites and main focus in the presentations. Recent trends in the evolvement of the sites were also identified. The second step of the analysis was to analyse the latent components of the text. This implies an 'interpretive reading of the symbolism underlying the physical data' (Berg, 2007, p. 242). Finally, the interpretations of the two contexts were compared and contrasted to identify patterns and differences. By doing this, key themes, ideals and values were revealed.

The comparison of visions and core value statements includes all officially accredited universities and university colleges in Norway and Sweden, except educational institutions internal to specific departments or agencies (e.g., Defence University Colleges,

Police University Colleges). Hence, 39 universities and university colleges in Norway, and 36 universities and university colleges in Sweden were analysed. The higher education systems in Sweden and Norway comprise both universities and university colleges. The systems are centralised with uniform rules for the universities and university colleges, while they also comprise a certain division of labour between the two institutional types (Bauer & Kogan, 2006). Whereas the universities traditionally provided general academic education, the university colleges provided shorter profession-oriented educations. However, the boundaries between those two types of institutions have become more blurred in the last decades.

The material was collected through a study of the institutions' strategic plans. According to Kirkhaug (2013), an organisation's core values appeal to the required standards in that organisation and can be analysed as expressions of identity. Such values represent the organisation's identity and are therefore important for branding strategies. The data were analysed through quantitative content analysis, and the overall data consisted of a list of 197 values in Norway and 188 values in Sweden. Franzosi (2008) presents quantitative content analysis as a method consisting of tabulating the occurrences of content units, and a way of exploring empirical problems in a systematically way. The purpose of a quantitative content analysis is to reveal systematic tendencies in the material (Hellevik, 2002). Hence, the objective in this particular part of the study was to scrutinise systematically what kind of values that are presented by higher education institutions in Norway and Sweden in order to detect differences and similarities. The analysis is concentrated on general institutional values such as 'focus on *diversity*' and 'an *active* institution', and not on specific values related to education, research or dissemination/third mission.

A limitation concerning the paper's overall research strategy is that negotiations regarding the making of values and profiles are not covered. Qualitative interviews or observations would have generated additional information and strengthened the validity. In order to contextualise the study, some notes regarding nation branding in a Nordic context are added in the following sections. This will contribute to increased validity and outline similarities and dissimilarities between the Norwegian and Swedish higher education systems.

### ***The study's context: branding in the Nordic***

The Nordic countries provide a methodological prism for empirically discussing the tension between similarity and differentiation in branding theory. As will be demonstrated, there are strong pressures for similarity in a Nordic context, and this is particularly interesting when studying higher education branding, where there has been focus on flagships, rankings, excellence and differentiation. The Swedish and Norwegian higher education systems have some similarities that are important when considering their branding initiatives, but also clear differences. The post-WWII period was characterised by gradual expansion and the establishment of new post-secondary education institutions (both universities and university colleges), as well as degree- and market reforms since the 1980s. Both Sweden and Norway belong to the Scandinavian political-administrative tradition (Painter & Peters, 2010). This means, among other things, that both countries have a universal welfare system, strong equality and fairness norms, consensus orientation and a focus on democratic values, which have also influenced the higher education sector.

During the last 25 years, both Swedish and Norwegian universities have been influenced by managerial and corporate ideals (Bleiklie, Høstaker, & Vabø, 2000; Ek, Ideland, Jönsson, & Malmberg, 2011), and higher education in both countries are implementing branding strategies (Sataøen, 2014). Corporate governance systems were introduced in both countries in the late 1980s. Hence, on the structural level there are some similarities in how the two countries' higher education sectors have developed and how they are managed and structured. In addition, the higher education sector in Nordic countries has traditionally been governed by a powerful nation state and has had strong ties to regional and local authorities and industries. Equal access to education and opportunities for all has also been an important imperative. Nordic higher education institutions have been characterised by quality, equality, freedom, student choice and influence, and accountability towards society (Fägerlind & Strömqvist, 2004).

Although Norwegian and Swedish higher education institutions have become more aware of promoting their identity and identifying their core values, the context of Nordic values may create tensions in how branding occur. It is also an open question as to how branding initiatives for individual higher education institutions match branding strategies at the national level.

## Results

### *Norway: [www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no)*

Studyinnorway.no was established in 2005, and when implemented it was Norway's main effort in promoting Norwegian higher education abroad. According to centre's information manager, the new website should contribute to the 'branding of Norway as a study country. Values such as recreation, tranquillity, nature, and hiking will invite students here. Here they will be able to combine study with a *Norwegian experience*' (Bergens Tidende, 2005). The hope was to attract students from countries that Norway already collaborated with: 'The good European student is the target for the new campaign', according to the centre's information manager.

Studyinnorway.no contains information and facts about Norway and Norwegian higher education, with links to relevant resources and information regarding the educational system, tuition and scholarships. Studyinnorway.no has a specific section regarding 'living in Norway', which describes Norwegian society, lifestyle, culture and nature. Hence, this section actively 'brands' Norway by highlighting certain values and characteristics. The main motif in this presentation is that Norway is special and one of a kind – it represents a 'different student experience'.

Although the website does not go into detail regarding Norwegian history, the historical narrative of the nation is related to a transition from a barbaric Viking heritage to a frontier of technology, innovation and modernity through a particular 'explorative mind-set.' This quite one-dimensional and modernistic view on history is illustrated in the excerpt below:

A thousand years ago the Vikings sailed their ships south to the Mediterranean, east to the Black Sea and all the way west to Greenland . . . Today, Norway is a modern country where our explorative mind-set is geared towards technology, innovation and developing a knowledge based society. ([www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no))

This narrative about Norwegian history fits well with the description of Norwegian lifestyle: Norwegians embrace new technology but still praise the traditional life in the

mountains and their cabins. One can, therefore, argue that *studyinnorway.no* depicts Norwegians as ‘modern traditionalists’.

The presentation of Norwegian lifestyle also strongly emphasises nature: Norway has harsh living conditions but beautiful scenery, and this is presented in commercial-like language: ‘The scenery is, to put it plainly, spectacular, with breath-taking vistas almost everywhere’ ([www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no)). The particular Norwegian nature–human relationship is represented by the cabin. Cabins are said to be particularly important in the Norwegian lifestyle: ‘These are often very simple accommodations, with bunk beds, no running water and outdoor toilets’ ([www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no)). As the technological standards of Norwegian cabins have risen significantly in recent years (Berker & Gansmo, 2010), this naïve characterisation is no longer accurate and tends to reproduce historical clichés.

Such clichés are also evident in the presentation of the Norwegian welfare state. According to *studyinnorway.no*, the welfare laws are superior and built on egalitarian and collectivistic ideals:

Norway undoubtedly has one of the best welfare systems in the world, making sure that people who are sick and unable to work, or who are unemployed for whatever reason, are not left out in the cold, but are given support so that they are able to live with dignity. ([www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no))

The welfare system is also related to the fact that Norway is rated by the United Nations as one of the best countries in the world to live in, according to the website.

Norway as a peacemaker is also an important part of *studyinnorway.no*’s presentations. Interestingly, this focus on peace is connected to egalitarian values and an effective welfare state: ‘Our privileged situation, coupled with the egalitarian values on which Norwegian politics are based, have often given Norwegian politicians a moral imperative to engage in peace processes and advocate human rights and humanitarian aid’ ([www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no)). Hence, the website tends to place Norway in an ethically and morally superior position.

The latent values and norms embedded in *studyinnorway.no* are summarised in Table 1.

Norwegians are also portrayed as having a relatively stable national identity. Paradoxically, this stable and coherent identity is implicitly questioned in one of the last

Table 1. Central descriptions regarding Norway and Norwegian higher education institutions in [www.studyinnorway.se/](http://www.studyinnorway.se/).

Descriptions	Latent value/norm
Egalitarian values	Welfare state, equality
Nearness to nature	Environmentalism
Informality	Non-hierarchal
Growth in outlying districts	Welfare state, distributional state
Advocate human rights and humanitarian aid	Peacemaker
Norwegian experience/different student experience	Exploration
One of the world’s highest penetration rates for cellular phones and broadband connections	Technologically advanced
Exploring the unknown	Individualism

descriptions: ‘Education patterns; gender roles and family structures; social patterns and habits; values and cultural status: it is all changing with each passing month. What Norway is, is hard to define’ ([www.studyinnorway.no](http://www.studyinnorway.no)). One could argue that a stable and coherent national identity is difficult to fit with a description that also portrays Norway as modern, changing and innovative. At the same time, it is remarkable that the site concludes that ‘what Norway is, is hard to define’, when one of the objectives of the website is precisely that – to define Norway and Norwegians.

As a whole, the presentation of Norway in [studyinnorway.no](http://studyinnorway.no) highlights nature, egalitarian values, the welfare system and Norway as an international peacemaker. The Norwegians are characterised as having a particular mix of individualistic collectivism and modern traditionalism. References to academic institutions and academic values are, however, difficult to detect.

**Sweden:** [www.studyinsweden.se](http://www.studyinsweden.se)

[Studyinsweden.se](http://Studyinsweden.se) is administered by the Swedish Institute, established in 2003. Like the Norwegian site, this is an information portal for international students. The main aim of establishing the site was to improve interest in Sweden as a student country (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2004):

The Swedish Institute acts as a coherent representative of Sweden and of Swedish skills, values and experience in the world. The institute operates within the framework of public diplomacy – understanding, informing, influencing and developing relations with people in other countries. . . . ([ww.si.se](http://ww.si.se))

During the early 2000s, the focus on branding and the higher education system evolved in the Swedish Institute’s strategies. Indeed, in the annual reports from the 1990s, little was written about presenting the Swedish higher education sector to an international audience. However, in the institute’s annual report from 2003, the Swedish higher education sector in itself plays an important role. A new objective for the institute is added, namely ‘to increase knowledge of and interest in education in Sweden for students abroad’ (Swedish Institute, 2003). In the annual report from 2003, [studyinsweden.se](http://studyinsweden.se) is highlighted as the main instrument for implementing this new objective. Looking at the annual report from 2010, the branding of Swedish higher education sector is intensified, and a new slogan – *Sweden as a study destination* – is employed. A specific project – ‘student destination Sweden’ – was also launched to establish a coherent marketisation of Swedish higher education institutions. According to the annual report from 2010, the core of the coherent and joint marketisation was based on a specific perspective on Sweden: ‘Sweden as a country focused on development of human and environmental conditions. A progressive country that is characterised by social and ecological sustainability’ (Swedish Institute, 2010).

Regarding how Sweden is ‘branded’ through [studyinsweden.se](http://studyinsweden.se), the website’s sections about ‘Life in Sweden’ and ‘Why Sweden?’ are important. The subheading of the section ‘Why Sweden?’ is ‘Don’t just pick a place – pick a future’. Hence, the message is clear: Sweden is modern, innovative and future-oriented. The site gives five reasons why Sweden is a good choice for international students. These arguments are all related to the higher education system’s qualities. The first reason is that as a student in Sweden you are ‘encouraged to think independently, creatively and critically’. Second, the Swedish higher education system has a good academic track records, presented in a commercial-like fashion: ‘long and proud history of academic excellence and despite its relatively

small population, it is home to some of the world's best universities'. The description further points at international placements, where the Swedish higher education system is ranked highest in relation to the country's GDP. The third argument is linked to sustainability. According to [studyinsweden.se](http://studyinsweden.se), environmental thinking and sustainability pervade all aspects of life in Sweden. Sustainability is also incorporated as crucial for Swedish higher education institutions. In addition, sustainability is related to Sweden's natural environment. This is presented in a language which resembles travel magazines: 'breath-taking, with vast forests, pristine beaches, rolling hills and snow-capped mountains'. Fourth, a mix of diversity and equality is promoted as a key characteristic of the Swedish temperament and society. Part of this picture is a particular Swedish 'consensus approach' where everyone takes part in decision-making processes. This is also an integrated part of Swedish higher education and teaching. The final reason is that studying in Sweden will foster a specific 'competitive edge' which can be important in a global career. Creativity is part of this competitive edge – and, as [studyinsweden.se](http://studyinsweden.se) states, 'creativity is exactly what studying in Sweden will encourage, along with other in-demand skills such as how to combining theory and practice, and how to navigate in complex situations where there's no easy solution' ([www.studyinsweden.se](http://www.studyinsweden.se)).

To sum up, most of the reasons for studying in Sweden relate to characteristics of the higher education sector, not of society as such. There are also parts of the website which characterise Swedish values and society. In the part titled 'Life in Sweden', there is a section about 'things to know before moving to Sweden'. In this section, factors characterised as 'distinctly Swedish' are presented, hinting to latent societal norms and values that are regarded as important. In Table 2, some of these factors are summarised.

Compared to the Norwegian site, [www.studyinsweden](http://www.studyinsweden) is more related to the higher education sector. Values related to welfare systems, informality, equality, regulation and well-organised societies are also important.

### Core values in Norwegian and Swedish higher education institutions

As demonstrated, values such as egalitarianism, diversity and welfare are important at the national level in both Norway and Sweden. In addition, Norway highlights peacebuilding

Table 2. Central descriptions regarding Sweden and Swedish higher education institutions in [www.studyinsweden.se/](http://www.studyinsweden.se/).

Descriptions	Latent value/norm
'Get in line'	Patience, collectivism, well-organised
'Get your shopping done before 17:00'	Regulation
'Be on time'	Respect, punctuality
'Many businesses shut down in July'	Well-organised industries, good working conditions
'Lagom is an important word'	Societal behaviour, which encourages blending in, behaving appropriately without displaying emotion
Competitive edge	Creativity, innovation
Consensus approach	Democracy, deliberation
Think independently	Creativity, independence
History of academic institutions	Excellence
Sustainability	Nature and environmentalism

efforts, nature and a generous state, whereas Sweden stresses sustainability and democratic decision-making processes. Many of these values identified at the national level may be difficult to fit into a frame of reference where excellence and global competition are at the centre of individual higher education institutions' branding strategies. This situation creates a tension which is highly relevant to examine empirically. Hence, the values promoted by higher education institutions in Norway and Sweden provide the basis for the following analysis. In [Table 3](#), the most dominant core values of Norwegian and Swedish universities and university colleges are presented.

When comparing the most commonly used values at universities and university colleges in Norway and Sweden, the most striking result is the similarities between different types of higher education institutions and also between the two countries. The differences between the universities' and university colleges' core values are surprisingly small. The same values are used in both types of institutions. The somewhat different centres of gravity in the two countries' presentations should also have been reflected in greater differentiation among the higher education institutions' core values. This suggests a strong homogenisation of expressions, although the literature emphasises stronger vertical differentiation (Ferlie et al., 2008). This could indicate that the core values are decoupled in practice and used for demonstrating membership in a field of similar organisations (cf. King & Whetten, 2008).

The most commonly used values are the same in both countries. These include 'openness/transparency', 'diversity', 'quality', 'critical', 'commitment', 'academic freedom', 'closeness, presence' and 'cooperation'. The values of openness, diversity and quality can be seen as general positive values which are ideals for many organisations,

Table 3. Core values in Norwegian and Swedish higher education institutions.

Core values in Norway	Number	Per cent	Core values in Sweden	Number	Per cent
Openness/transparency	14	36	Openness/transparency	11	31
Respect, respectful	11	28	Quality	8	22
Equality	10	26	Diversity	8	22
Quality	8	21	Democracy	7	19
Critical	6	15	Creativity	6	17
Commitment	5	13	Critical	6	17
Ethics	5	13	New-thinking	6	17
Integrity	5	13	Sustainable development	5	14
Diversity	5	13	International	5	14
Closeness, presence	5	13	Equality	5	14
Cooperation	5	13	Curiosity	5	14
Academic freedom	4	10	Cooperation	5	14
Sustainable development	4	10	Liberal education	4	11
Humanistic values	4	10	Engagement	4	11
Inclusion	4	10	Innovation	4	11
Generous	4	10	Closeness, presence	4	11
Tolerant	4	10	Active teaching	3	8
Independent	4	10	Multidisciplinary	3	8
Academic/liberal education/	3	8	Flexibility	3	8
Creative	3	8	Freedom, academic freedom	3	8
Innovative	3	8	Pioneering, ground-breaking	3	8
Relevance	3	8	Attentive	3	8
			Respect	3	8
			Independence	3	8

particularly in the public sector. These values have no specific meaning for the higher education sector. Values such as ‘critical’, ‘commitment’ and ‘academic freedom’, which are central to both Norwegian and Swedish value statements, relate more directly to a traditional academic discourse on freedom of research and being a critical corrective in society. The value base in universities and university colleges can, therefore, be characterised as a combination of a general public ethos and traditional academic virtues. Because of the strong homogenisation of core values, there is little evidence of higher education institutions using differentiation as part of their competitive strategies. Many of the commonly used values have affinities with values associated with the Nordic model, such as equality, transparency, openness, tolerance, democracy and closeness/presence.

### Discussion and conclusion

The question raised in this paper is: how are different branding perspectives (corporate branding and nation branding) matched and harmonised in higher education in two Nordic countries? This is an important question as corporate branding and nation branding has become important perspectives in higher education management. Seen together, the analysis has revealed strong homogenising tendencies, both as regards nation branding and corporate branding within the higher education sectors of Norway and Sweden. This homogenisation, however, does not conduce to a common and coherent branding of the country and its higher education institutions. The initiatives which brand Norway/Sweden as student destinations, on the one hand, and the initiatives for branding individual higher education institutions, on the other, are not harmonised. Different aspects and values are highlighted. Seen from the outside, there is little evidence of ‘corporate communications’ from the sector as such (cf. Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012).

Regarding nation branding, the presentations of Norway and Sweden as student destinations reproduce clichés. As demonstrated, the Norwegian and Swedish descriptions have slightly different focal points. Whereas the Norwegian site highlights nature and the democratic/equality traditions, [www.studyinsweden.se](http://www.studyinsweden.se) put weight on academic history, creativity and innovation as important aspects. Another interesting tendency is the newly engaged concepts for branding the countries as student *destinations* (in Sweden) and in terms of the student *experience* (in Norway). By using such concepts, higher education is discursively related to the growing experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), and this may even be interpreted as a part of the so-called ‘pleasure industry’ (Alvesson, 2012).

Both [studyinsweden.se](http://studyinsweden.se) and [studyinnorway.no](http://studyinnorway.no) represent nation branding efforts. The analysis of the two websites highlights a peculiar resemblance between the websites’ descriptions, and similarity in the traditional and commonly used descriptions of the two countries. Hence, the two websites tend to be clichéd: Norway is breath-taking and egalitarian, and Sweden is ultra-modern and well-organised. By presenting the two countries in these ways, the websites contribute to maintaining traditional images.

The national efforts to branding Norway and Sweden as student destinations are more proactive than the institutional branding initiatives. The different values presented by the higher education institutions are quite modest compared with the prose found in the nation branding of Norwegian and Swedish higher education. Hence, Aula and Tienari’s (2011) argument that the need to become an innovative world-class university acting as an imaginary incentive in this sector is not easily detected in the values presented by Norwegian and Swedish higher education institutions. On the contrary, popular values

like 'respect', 'equality' and 'diversity' are not suited for standing out as flagship universities. The two countries, on the other hand, are branded as having superior qualities on certain fields: Norway as a morally and democratic superior country, whereas Sweden is branded as ultra-modern with technological superiority.

As the discussion of branding theories indicated, there are pressures towards both conformity and differentiation. Similarity and differentiation pressures are contradictory (Wæraas, 2015), and as shown in the discussions, it conduce to different behaviours within the field of higher education branding. The tension between excellence and differentiation, on the one hand, and egalitarian values, on the other, is evident in both corporate branding and national branding initiatives in Norway and Sweden. Paradoxically, the discourse of excellence in the higher education sector is not conducive to differentiation on the organisational level. On the contrary, the similarities regarding core value statements used by different universities and university colleges are most striking. The individual higher education institutions conform to a standard repertoire of values, such as 'openness/transparency', 'diversity', 'quality', 'critical' and 'commitment'. Further, there is little evidence of close connections between how Sweden/Norway are branded and the particular values and ideals used to brand universities and university colleges. This, of course, is a managerial challenge if the sector is to be presented and branded in a coherent and concurrent way. An implication of this study is that higher education administrators should be more aware of the variety of branding initiatives within the field of higher education. One can argue that there are some outlets that could guide further developments: in Norway, there is a tendency of highlighting democracy and equality by the higher education institutions, something that also resonances with the national branding initiatives. For the Swedish case, the focus on academic history and creativity represents a common rudiment. Hence, a managerial implication of this study is to focus more robustly upon such ideas and values that are common for the nation brand and the higher education institutions.

The article has contributed to the research field by adding knowledge about the relationship between nation branding and corporate branding in the higher education sector. Further, the analysis has shed light on the tension between similarity and differentiation, which is important in the university sector, and in particular within a Nordic context. Although this paper has given some clues for understanding branding in the higher education sector and the relationship between nation branding and branding at the organisational level, this relationship needs to be explored in more detail. The findings are limited to the presentation of certain values, not the processes by which such values are defined. Research on the process whereby core values and national identities are negotiated and built would certainly be instructive for understanding how core values and national identities are similar as well as different. We, therefore, welcome further research based on interviews and observations of how brands and values are shaped; or as Kornberger (2010, p. 271) neatly put it: 'How does the poetry of brands relate to the prose of everyday organisational life in different industries?' One way of approaching this is to focus on how different groups, actors and interests within the higher education sector assess and evaluate branding initiatives: what questions are considered important? What are the disagreements? Moreover, who has the power to influence branding decisions?

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