Building a Sector Reputation: The Strategic Communication of National Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

What characterises strategic communication aimed at building the reputation of an entire public subsector? This is the main question for this study, pursued through content analysis of one-stop web portals for national higher education from the 21 countries listed in the Times Higher Education's Top 150 Universities ranking. Findings show that strategic communication is formed by national governments to depict their higher education sector as a coherent whole without letting prominent universities "represent" the higher education sector. The tension between similarity and difference that often occurs in public sector reputation-building is handled partly by emphasising similarity concerns in the structure and format of the presentations, and partly by emphasising differentiation concerns in the contents of the presentations. Furthermore, in contrast to previous studies addressing either the reputation management and branding efforts of single institutions, specific public sector entities, or those of nations, this study shows how higher education reputation-building integrates these different levels through strategic communication.

Introduction

Strategic communication has become increasingly important in most OECD countries as a vehicle for managing the reputation of public sector entities. Globalization, standardization, and marketization of public sector services not only put the reputations of central and local government agencies at stake, but also those of the entire public sector and the nation, for which central governments have a particular responsibility of promoting and protecting. This recent development highlights the need for governments to address strategic communication of sectors and specific entities *at the same time*.

In this article, we are interested in how strategic communication is used by governments to build the reputation of an entire public subsector. More specifically, we seek to draw attention to how central governments present and promote their national higher education (HE) sector to the outside world. Analysing 21 countries' web-based, one-stop portals for HE, the article ties in with well-established definitions of strategic communication through its focus on "the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission" (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 2). It also connects with the research on the role of reputation and strategic communication in public sector organisations, which is an emerging area of interest in several academic fields (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Wæraas & Maor, 2015).

Our empirical attention to one-stop portals for HE reflects their growing significance. The portals are developed to attract students and contribute to greater understanding of the different countries' HE-sectors, values and national characteristics. As education plays a role in the "competition state" (Cerny, 2009), presenting a distinct and clearly communicated image of the nation in order to "stand out" in the competition among nations on the international scene is a concern of major importance. As a result, the one-stop portals serve a key role in providing information about national HE systems, making strategic communication a highly relevant practice for national governments in building the reputation of this specific subsector.

How this is done in practice, however, is an underexplored area of research (Nan, Yu, & Lo, 2015). Little is known about the extent to which these one-stop portals are means of promoting national HE sectors as *different* from their 'competitors' by communicating, for example, national HE characteristics and idiosyncrasies, or whether they are means of highlighting *similarities*. This is a pertinent question given that tensions between difference and similarity, and hence reputation and legitimacy, are likely to arise in competitive environments (Deephouse, 1999).

Furthermore, although most of the research on reputation management and strategic communication in the public sector focuses on single entities (e.g., Abolafia & Hatmaker, 2013; Carpenter, 2010; Maor, 2010, 2011), little empirical attention has been given to the coordinated efforts of building the reputation of an entire public subsector by means of strategic communication. Thus, given the need for studies of subsector reputation and for scrutinizing the interweaved pressures of similarity and differentiation, the following research questions are posed:

RQ 1: What characterises strategic communication aimed at building the HE sector's reputation in the case of the one-stop portals?

RQ 2: How is strategic communication of the HE sector used to handle the tension between differentiation and similarity?

These questions are pursued through an empirical investigation of one-stop HE portals from 21 countries listed in the Times Higher Education (THE)'s top 150-Universities ranking (2015).

Theoretical perspectives

The research on strategic communication by governments and government entities include related topics such as branding, reputation management, crisis communication, and political communication (Wæraas & Maor, 2015). These are growing fields of research, covering the strategic efforts of not only central government agencies and entities but also local government entities, health care institutions, military divisions, and HE institutions. Most, if not all of these types of entities must adhere to many contradictory concerns, demands, and expectations because of their political nature. Given this complex setting, strategic communication can be a pragmatic and effective way of handling and satisfying these demands (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2015), ultimately contributing to a favourable reputation (Gilad, Maor, & Bloom, 2015; Maor et al., 2013).

Our article relies on two strands of literature: (1) literature on organisational reputation in the public sector, and (2) literature on branding and strategic communication in the HE sector. Despite common characteristics, the two strands of literature have rarely been seen in relation to each other.

Subsector reputation and public sector strategic communication

Different subsectors within national governments have varying reputations (Luoma-Aho, 2008). However, research on coordinated efforts to build subsector reputations by means of strategic communication is largely missing in the literature on organisational reputation within the public sector. This is despite the fact that the problem is well known within the literature on private sector

firms' reputation. Being a member of a specific industry means sharing a reputation (Barnett, 2006; King, Lenox, & Barnett, 2002). A shared reputation affects all members of the industry, especially when outside stakeholders cannot distinguish sharply between members. Each member thus has an incentive to improve its own reputation so that it can distinguish itself from the others. Such a differentiation strategy minimizes any negative spillover impact of a crisis encountered by a different member. Alternatively, it can engage in a communal strategy to build the reputation of the entire industry, depending on the prospect for mutual collaboration among members. If no one wants to build the reputation of the industry because of free-riding issues, each member is still constrained or enabled by the shared reputation, depending on the latter's strength.

As a whole, the public sector comprises multiple subsectors whose members share common reputations. Perceptions related to central government ministries and their associated agencies constitute the shared, general reputation of the central government. Similarly, public hospitals, the military, schools within a city or municipality, counties, municipalities, respectively, all represent subsectors sharing reputations. For example, a study by Wæraas (2015a) of the municipal sector in Norway indicates that municipalities are well aware of how their reputations are interconnected at different levels and form a reputation commons worth protecting and building through collaborative efforts. None of these subsector reputations, however, are considered by national governments to be of such importance that they merit carefully orchestrated strategic communication by the government itself. Because this is the case with the HE sector, it follows that it is an important exception. This, we argue, is likely so because strategic communication is important for national governments not only in building the reputation of the HE sector but also the national reputation.

Strategic communication of higher education

National and international competition are catalysts for strategic communication and branding in the HE sector, and branding has become a strategic managerial issue in education (Stensaker, 2007). At the same time, HE institutions are under pressure to conform to a new global "common sense of quality" (Paradeise & Thoenig, 2013). Global standards, rankings, performance audits and common approaches to New Public Management reforms force local institutions within the field of HE to align in a standardised manner. Rankings and global indexes are becoming important for measuring the performance of both institutions, cities, and nations (e.g., Anholt, 2006). For the HE sector, this global standardisation is enforced by soft law indicators, rankings and international accreditation associations as well as international organisations such as the OECD and the European Commission, "foster[ing] the vision that there is one good way, and only one, to produce and judge quality in higher education and research" (Paradeise & Thoenig, p. 191). This form of quality is *excellence*. The quest for excellence has become important in all parts of the HE sector, as evidenced by a study by Aula and Tienari (2011, p. 7) of a university merger in Finland where the need "to become an innovative 'world class' university act[ed] as an imaginary incentive."

The proliferation of global quality standards implies strong conformity and legitimacy pressures, but it also—paradoxically—invites a quest for differentiation. Standing out is necessary in order to achieve competitive advantage (Deephouse, 1999; Porter, 1985) and a favourable reputation (Fombrun & van Riel, 2004). As a result, it is not surprising that differentiation is considered an important feature of strategic communication in the HE sector. Previous studies have noted increased attention given to strategic communication aimed at creating differentiation in the HE sector (Ivy, 2001; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015), although some researchers (such as Chapleo, 2005, 2010) have shown that there is little 'real' differentiation in practice.

This is similar to the findings of other studies on strategic communication and reputation strategies in public subsectors such as health care (Blomgren, Hedmo, & Waks, 2015; Wæraas & Sataøen, 2015) and local government (Wæraas, 2015a). The challenge for individual HE institutions, then, is to respond successfully to similarity and differentiation pressures at the same time, taking into account that "the pressure to conform dampens the impulse to be different" (King & Whetten,

2008, p. 193) and that legitimacy pressures may conflict with reputation-building pressures. For the HE sector as a whole, the challenge is to differentiate successfully from other countries' HE sectors in order to build reputation, while at the same time conforming to expectations of quality and excellence in order to satisfy legitimacy requirements.

Presentations of national HE sectors tend to rely on strategic communication of the nation's history, nature, culture, and identity expressions (Sataøen, 2015). The purpose is to 'stand out' in the competition among nations for students, staff and resources, although at the same time, very different countries' general branding campaigns tend to involve the communication of similar core values and characteristics, such as 'friendly,' 'beautiful,' 'adventurous,' 'peaceful,' and 'caring' (Mossberg & Kleppe, 2005). This paradox is the same as the one concerning individual HE institutions (Chapleo, 2005, 2010), underscoring how the desire to differentiate effectively from competitors sometimes leads to a "conformity trap" (Antorini & Schultz, 2005). Thus, while the strategic communication of a brand, e.g., an organization, a specific sector, or a nation, is aimed at securing differentiation, the exact opposite may end up in practice.

More precisely, the growing interest in university flagships both in theory and practice (Fumasoli, Gornitzka, & Maassen, 2013) is likely to be reflected in the contents of strategic communication, as these universities have a unique position not only in terms of the market but also historically (Sataøen, 2015). By promoting flagships and making them represent the entire HE sector, governments may be able to achieve a positive spillover effect from the flagship to the HE sector, and ultimately to the nation as a whole. However, similarity concerns can also be expected to shape strategic communication efforts because of the need to maintain the legitimacy of the HE sector; i.e., of demonstrating that it adheres to general standards and norms. For example, the proliferation of global standards and rankings increases the chances of the HE sector being presented in a standardized manner.

Research context and methods

Sample

The findings from this study emerge from a content analysis of 21 countries' one-stop portals for HE. On the THE's top 150 list (2015), 21 countries are represented, summarized in Table 1.

Internet searches (Google Search Engine) were used in order to build a database of the 21 countries' one-stop web portals for higher education. A number of global portals include information about educational offers in different countries (e.g., www.topuniversities.com, www.studylink.com, www.thecompleteuniversityguide.com), but these websites were not included in our database as we were focusing on the official one-stop portals. As four of the countries represented on the THES top 150-list did not have a specific official website for presenting the country's HE sector (United States, Belgium, South Africa and Singapore), the database comprised 17 websites. By having all countries represented in the top 150 list as a point of departure, the sample includes European as well as non-European contexts, thereby ensuring variation on multiple levels. The HE sectors in the countries comprise both public universities, private universities and nonprofit institutions. In the HE sector, institutional diversity continues to be important across the world (Huisman, Meek, & Wood, 2007, p. 563), and there are various educational traditions (Bleiklie, 2014). The rising global competition for international students is also an important context for the portals we study.

Table 1. Countries represented in the sample.

Africa	America	Asia and the Pacific	Europe
South Africa	Canada, USA	Australia, China, Hong Kong,[2] Japan, Singapore, South Korea	Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, UK

[Between 2000 and 2010 the number of global mobile students nearly doubled from 2.1 million to 4.1 million (Choudaha & De Wit, 2014), growing at an average annual rate of 7.2% (OECD, 2012)].

Analysis

The data used in this article has the character of texts in the sense that they are "data consisting of words and images that have become recorded without the intervention of a researcher" (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008, p. 74). Websites, web portals, internet forums and blogs, can be considered a "text" (Gulanowski, 2011), and the websites in focus represent integrated gateways to a sector as they are single points of contact for online information (Grant & Grant, 2002). To facilitate the analysis, the textual contents of the websites were saved into Word files. The website texts were subsequently read carefully several times in order to identify patterns concerning the form, presentation, and layout of the websites. After developing the database and facilitating the word document, the portals were analysed using predetermined analytical categories, and content from the portals were extracted for each category. Specifically, in our case the websites were searched for the following components: ownership and administration of the web portals, HTML-structure, the absence or presence of flagships in the presentations, the absence or presence rankings, the absence or presence of references to excellence, presentations of sectors, and presentation of national peculiarities.

Further, the portals' language was coded, ranging from informative/descriptive to argumentative/promotive. Informative means using descriptive and concrete language, whereas the promotive style makes use of positive adjectives and pro-active arguments for the respective countries' HE sectors. The data extracted from the portals were recorded in tabular form as Excel files, enabling structured analysis and comparisons. As our study focused on textual aspects, the portals' visual components, external hypertextualities and social media aspects were not objects for study. The reason for choosing this strategy was that the portals' texts and prose about the educational sector and the different countries peculiarities enable us to grasp and understand how the HE sectors are presented as part of their respective governments' reputation-building efforts. The data do not constitute reputation data or rankings per se, but they do describe strategic communication that can be used to make inferences about reputation-*building* efforts in the case of HE.

The aim of the analysis was to discover new connections and formulate potential hypotheses, not systematic testing of hypotheses. Hence, the content analysis has similarities with Julien's (2008, p. 120) definition: "the intellectual process of categorizing qualitative textual data into clusters of similar entities, or conceptual categories, to identify consistent patterns and relationships between variables or themes." Such a design must recognise that texts are open to subjective interpretation, reflect multiple meanings, and are context-dependent. In the following discussion, particular poignant quotes from the material are presented to exemplify and illustrate tendencies in, and important dimensions of, the one-stop portals. All quotes presented are derived from the national web-portals, unless otherwise is indicated.

Results

Seventeen of the 21 countries represented on the THES top 150-list have a clearly communicated one-stop portal for stakeholders seeking information about HE in the country. Looking more closely at those portals, we note that these are mostly owned and funded by a ministry (ministries for education or foreign affairs), either as single purpose agencies, integrated in larger public diplomacy organizations (British Council, the Swedish institute), or as private companies with official tasks (TUPA in Turkey); or even as an association of universities (as in Switzerland). Hence, there is a variety of organizational setups of the portals. The dominating model, however, is that the portals are run by a single purpose agency under the control of (but with autonomy from) a specific ministry. Although one could expect that different organizational set-ups

produce clearly different portals, this is not the case. As we describe below, the portals share the same purpose, namely to inform foreign students about the countries' peculiarities as well as the HE-system.

Strategic communication between similarity and differentiation

On a spectrum ranging from argumentative promotion to descriptive information, several positions can be identified: Some countries (four) only present descriptive information about their HE sectors (the types of institutions, scholarships, etc.), while others (13) are more actively promoting the country as a student destination by providing arguments for why *this* particular educational context is preferable. Table 2 provides some examples, illustrating that Italy, China, and Japan have informative descriptions of the HE systems, whereas the other countries present their HE institutions in argumentative ways, exemplified here by Australia, Ireland, and Sweden.

In contrast to what could be expected from a strictly differentiation perspective, single top-end universities (flagships) are not dominant in the descriptions of national HE systems. Flagships are not mentioned by name, but sometimes in generalized forms. The UK portal is the best example of such presentations. Here, HE institutions are presented as "world class," without mentioning any specific university or program:

> "With a strong reputation for research, innovation and creativity, UK universities and colleges attract some of the world's leading academics and industry professionals. […] This attention to quality is reflected in the UK's excellent results: Four of the top six universities in the world are in the UK (World Rankings, QS). The UK ranks in the top five in the world for university-industry collaboration […]."

As all countries represented in the material have one or more universities on the top 150 list, the omission of these flagships in the portals is interesting. One likely reason could be the portals are meant to form the reputation of the entire HE sector and that highlighting flagships at the expense of 'ordinary' HE institutions could create conflict. However, it could still be seen as a paradox that

Table 2. Informative and argumentative presentations.

Informative descriptions	Argumentative promotion
Italian higher education is structured in a binary system, consisting of two main articulations: - the university sector - the nonuniversity sector.	In fact, eight of Australia's universities feature in the top 100 ranked universities in the world in the latest QS ranking (2014–15). And, if you have a specific study area of interest, there is every chance Australia has you covered, with at least three Australian universities in the top 50 worldwide across the study areas of Arts and Humanities, Engineering and Technologies, Natural Sciences, Life Sciences and Medicine and Social Sciences and Management.
Foreign students can enrol in one of five types of institutions of higher learning: Universities (undergraduate courses), graduate schools, junior colleges, professional training colleges (postsecondary courses) and colleges of technology. Furthermore, various types of Japanese language schools are available for those who want to study Japanese in Japan.	Ireland's longstanding reputation for high quality education is built on a solid foundation of commitment to excellence. Today we have one of the best education systems in the world and an internationally renowned reputation for academic quality.
According to relevant Chinese laws, international students studying in China are forbidden to be employed, and work-study opportunity is relatively small. So, self-financed international students should make the financial preparation before arriving in China.	The entire Swedish higher education system is ranked as one of the best in the world, and several Swedish universities are ranked by the Times Higher Education and the Academic Ranking of World Universities as being among the world's top seats of learning. In Sweden you'll find a strong focus on rationality, reason and applying knowledge so that it makes a real difference. Look no further than the Nobel Prize, the world's most coveted and prestigious academic distinction, for an illustration of the Swedish approach.

[1]Hong Kong is an autonomous territory on the southern coast of China, defined as a "Special Autonomous Region." However, on the THES list, it is treated as a country; therefore, it is also included in our sample.

within such a competitive global HE market where excellence is a main imperative, top-end flagship universities are not used to differentiate the countries' HE sectors.

Although flagships rarely are mentioned in the portals, the excellence of the HE-sectors is still highlighted in most (15) presentations. The HE institutions tend to be presented in a standardized, similar way; by reference to rankings and global standards, thereby underscoring excellence of quality in teaching and research, and supporting the legitimacy of the system more than a unique reputation. The different countries' presentations of their HE-sectors tend to have the same structure and language (same concepts, rankings, references).

Another distinctive feature characterizing the strategic communication through the portals' presentations is that they convey a picture of the national HE-system as a coherent whole. An example is the French portal: Although the French HE system is characterized by institutional diversity and highly specialized institutions, the portal communicates coherence:

> "The quality of French higher education is widely recognized throughout the world. French institutions figure prominently in the Shanghai Classification of Universities, in the rankings of the Financial Times and Times Higher, and in the European Report on Science and Technologies published by the European Commission. Each year, France makes massive investments in education and research."

Thus, despite potentially vast differences between universities and university colleges within the respective countries' educational systems, illustrated in Huisman et al. (2007) description of variety and institutional diversity, the one-stop portals downplay this diversity by emphasizing their HE sector as a consistent whole. Further, the portals' embeddedness in a global market for HE is evident in the descriptions, illustrated in the Canadian presentation: "[T]he cost of living and tuition fees for international students are generally lower than in other countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom." Here, Canada is presented relative to other relevant countries in the international market for students, and in particular the presentation differentiates Canada from the United States and UK. Hence, the rising global competition for attracting international students certainly is an important context in some portals.

Sectorial reputation and global rankings

Three of the countries (Australia, Hong Kong, and Japan) do not include any descriptions of country peculiarities or characteristics in the portals. The other countries, however, give room for quite voluminous descriptions of peculiarities, cultural characteristics, food, orientations and facts and figures, which are related to the presentation of their respective HE sectors. These presentations tend to share the same style, as these two excerpts illustrate:

> "Ireland is a dynamic, lively, modern country with a young population and a successful, technologically orientated economy, but it also remains a country where music, conversation, culture, traditions, time to relax, listen and make friends are important."

> "As a country that preserved its millennia-old tradition and culture, Korea has developed many unique cultural heritage and traditions. Various features of Korea's deep-rooted culture, tangible and intangible, pervade every corner of Korean society to this day […]. Studying in Korea, a rising cultural hub of Asia where tradition and modernity have joined harmoniously, students will be able to develop the leadership and insight necessary to lead humanity towards a better future."

These descriptions are indicative of how the different nations' cultural history tend to be presented. The text describes characteristics regarding the country, its history, population, and future prospects. As is also evident in the excerpt, many portals underscore a peculiar mix of tradition and history on the one hand, and modernity and innovation on the other.

Historical descriptions and national characteristics are sometimes used as explanation for particular aspects of the HE sector. The Dutch portal can serve as an example:

> "Holland is a creative nation. Dutch people enjoy innovating and constantly ask themselves and others questions to come up with new ideas. […] The Dutch teaching style is interactive and student-centred. […] Studying in Holland means developing an open mind and increasing your international orientation."

Potential divergences within national identities and values are toned down or not communicated in the portals. The modernity-tradition dimension pointed at earlier is one example. The Swedish site's presentation of the Swede as highly individualistic, while at the same time presenting Swedish society as collectivistic, is another example. Yet another illustration is the Danish portal, where the HE sector is presented as having high and «outstanding academic standards», although the learning environment is «friendly and relaxed».

The presentations of the HE sector and the country are *harmonized*. Rankings and standards are also sometimes used to describe the country, and in particular to highlight the more advantageous parts. The Australian one-stop portal can serve as an example. Although this portal does not provide details regarding Australian history, national peculiarities or characteristics, the country is presented in relation to rankings and standards. "As Australia is the fourth happiest country in the world (Prosperity Index 2012) and we have five of the 30 best cities in the world for students (Top University Rankings 2012), you are sure to enjoy your time here."

The use of rankings and standards when describing and presenting countries is part of the global nation branding industry, where brand indexes (Anholt, 2006) and other rankings play a crucial part. This is also in accordance with the competition state thesis, where presenting a distinct image of the nation in order to "stand out" in the competition among nations on the international scene, is important.

Discussion

The study of one-stop portals for the HE sector is a case of how central governments present and promote their national HE sector to the outside world. Governments are faced with pressure to explain the mission of their HE sectors and why they are a good place to work and study. Hence, the portals are important parts of central governments' strategic communication, serving a key function in building the reputation of the HE system in the international HE market so as to attract students and funding. In the introduction, strategic communication was defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission" (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 2). Although Hallahan et al. (2007) understand organizations in their broadest sense, this study has illustrated that the purposeful use of communication by a national government may be aimed at fulfilling the mission of one of its subsectors. As such, the HE sector constitutes a promising object of inquiry for students of strategic communication in a public sector context: The HE portals are in the very difficult position of handling tensions between not only differentiation and similarity (Deephouse, 1999), but also (national) coherence and diversity—tensions that are at the core of much public sector activity (Wæraas & Maor, 2015), inevitably manifesting themselves in strategic communication and reputation-building efforts (Wæraas, 2015b).

The main contributions to our understanding of strategic communication in a public sector setting from this study are the following: First and foremost, the study demonstrates how strategic communication is used to build the reputation of an entire subsector. Although previous research on strategic communication and reputation management in the public sector has provided accounts of reputation management efforts by single public sector organisations (e.g., Abolafia & Hatmaker, 2013; Carpenter, 2010; Maor, 2010, 2011), this study is the first to highlight how governments seek to form the reputation of an entire sector through strategic communication, in this case the HE sector. The reason is evidently that the reputation of the HE sector is considered to be of such importance to the country that the government assumes responsibility for how it is communicated by establishing a specifically designated web portal. As we have seen, this portal contains strategically designed

communication characterised by active promotion of the HE sector and emphasis on general sector characteristics such as excellence and quality instead of single flagships.

The use of a web-based portal for a single sector stands in contrast to other public subsectors such as health care and the military, which to our knowledge do not have portals that resemble HE portals in any way. However, the case presented here is not an example of a communal strategy because the members sharing the reputation—i.e., the HE institutions—are not in charge of the portals. They all benefit from the portals without having to worry about free-riding issues, contrary to situations where members choose to engage in a communal strategy together (Barnett, 2006; King et al., 2002). To the extent that the portals contribute to a favourable reputation of the HE sector, positive spillover effects from the sector to single HE institutions are plausible. This is regardless of whether the HE institutions are funded by the government or not because the portals do not distinguish between public, private, and nonprofit HE institutions. Many of the countries in focus in this study have multiple private universities not funded through national government budgets. In this sense, the study provides evidence of a case where the government communicates strategically on behalf of entities that exist outside of the public sector, and whose reputation may benefit from positive spillover effects if the HE sector reputation is favourable.

Second, the study of one-stop portals has demonstrated that the HE sector tends to be depicted as a coherent whole without making prominent flagships or single HE institutions 'represent' the HE sector. We know from other studies (Ivy, 2001; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2015) that single HE institutions undertake considerable efforts and spend vast amount of resources in order to differentiate and strategically communicate their interests. This is not reflected in the national portals. It is the sector *per se*, and characteristics regarding the country, which are highlighted. National differences between HE institutions are toned down in order to foster coherent, positive perceptions of the HE sector as an overarching whole, either through informative or especially argumentative rhetoric. This strategy appears to be shaped largely by similarity pressures concerning global standards and rankings, as the HE sectors are presented using the same language and referring to the same sets of standards and objectives. Research outputs, rankings, and quality assessment systems are examples of such references. And, as we have seen, even in the country presentations, the agencies tend to use rankings as a means of communicating advantageous features of the country context.

Thus, the tension between legitimacy and reputation appears to be resolved in the governments' strategic communication of their HE sectors partly by emphasising legitimacy requirements concerning the *structure and format* of the presentations, and partly by emphasising reputation requirements concerning the *contents* of the presentations. There is some emphasis on differentiation and unique reputation-building, but mainly in association with country characteristics and the HE sector as a whole, not with flagships. Similarly, there is emphasis on conformity and legitimacy, but mainly by associating the HE sector and the country with rankings and standards. In this case, the findings illustrate that strategic communication undertaken by national governments can be a highly flexible instrument, capable of reflecting contradictory demands in various ways at the same time as it contributes to both legitimacy and reputation.

Finally, and in contrast to previous studies addressing either the reputation management and branding efforts of single HE institutions (e.g., Chapleo, 2005), specific public sector entities (e.g., Maor, 2010), or those of nations, (e.g., Anholt, 1998), this study shows how HE reputation-building integrates subsector, institution-specific, and country level concerns through strategic communication. The sections of the portals presenting the country, its peculiarities, identities and values, are given generous space, allowing for the portals to enhance the national reputation in addition to that of the HE sector and ultimately of single HE institutions through positive spillover effects. Furthermore, national identities and characteristics are used to explain the development of certain educational profiles. However, it is a paradox that such portraits, which are underscoring national culture, at the same time make use of rankings and standards, which are embedded in an international globalized system. Rankings are presented in such a way that they are made legitimate. And, as

such, rankings are producing students as "customers," as these rankings and standards become important information for choosing among different educational alternatives.

Conclusion

In this article, we wanted to explore the characteristics of strategic communication of the HE sector in the case of the one-stop portals. In particular, we have focussed on how the strategic communication of a public subsector is used to handle the tension between differentiation and similarity. Although highly standardized in the structure and format, with references to global standards and rankings, the HE sectors differentiate through national peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, emphasising similarity concerns in the structure and format of the presentations, and differentiation concerns in the contents of the presentations. Paradoxically, however, such national peculiarities share a common structure as the sector mainly is presented and understood as a function of the cultural history of the nation. These aspects of strategic communication in the public sector have so far been left unaddressed in the research literature. The presentations of the sectors are externally orientated, aimed at attracting prospective students. Internal concerns, for instance more nuanced presentations of differences and contrasts within the national HE-systems, are not evident in the material. Hence, the construction of a common internal horizon of what the HE-sector represents is not the purpose of the portals. On the contrary, the presentations are framed within an external and commercial context. However, university identities are historically and culturally also embedded in ideals of autonomy and anti-commercialism. Possibly there is a discrepancy between this way of communicating HE and internal values of different HE systems and organizations.

This kind of hybrid complexity in the set-up of strategic communication in the HE should guide further research. In general, we suggest that sector reputation and strategic communication of different public subsectors are promising research topics that deserve more attention, in particular as a means to examine the competing influences of reputation and legitimacy and how strategic communication is shaped by these concerns. Future research may be conducted in other sectors exposed to global competition (health care, foreign policy) and it should utilize different methodologies in examining tensions such as similarity versus differentiation and convergence versus difference. Future research should also be designed to explain the different responses towards contradictory pressures and ambiguities. Although this article includes different countries and cultural contexts, more in-depth, cross-cultural comparisons would be particularly beneficial.

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