

## **CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE BRAND STRATEGY OF THE OUSL: UNRAVELING THE FLAWS, CAUSES AND ISSUES**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The potential of ODL is unquestionably high in today's context. There is adequate research in higher education endorsing the strengths of ODL in teaching, research and scholarship in a consistent and comparable manner (Leasure *et al.*, 2000; Russell, 1999). As the only single mode ODL provider in Sri Lanka the OUSL has pioneered numerous experiments to produce novel and successful ODL solutions. However, the capacities, strengths, potentials, and opportunities of the OUSL remain under explored even after three decades because we followed a path that lacked drive and enterprise. This unenergetic business model is no longer valid in today's competitive environment where many other conventional universities are venturing into dual mode delivery alongside with the expansionary policies of the other ODL providers in the world. It is this context that necessitated a strong "brand building strategy" for OUSL today.

### **THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY**

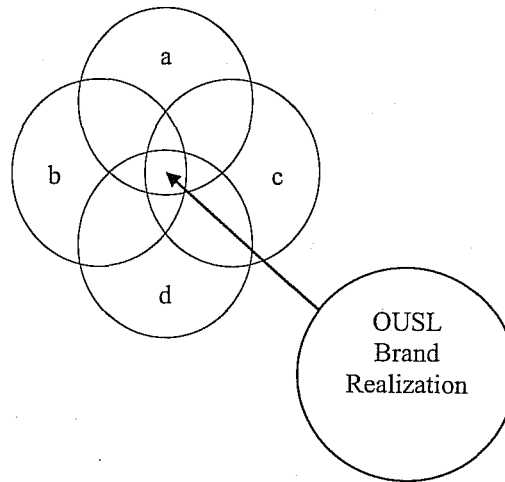
The technical definition of brand entails "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design or a combination of all of them intended to identify the goods / service of one provider and differentiate them from those of competitors" (American Marketing Association). Brand management therefore is a central organizational function that needs to be understood and developed. This is because brands affect almost all marketing activities and brands create preferential evaluations of attribute to generate higher overall preference in the minds of clients (Louro and Cunha, 2001, Hoeffler and Keller, 2002; Aaker, 1991). Recent literature on management of higher educational institutions suggests that "higher education institutions need to be managed as corporate brands" (Whelan and Wohlfeil, 2006.) Such brand strategies should focus on market related strengths, rather than generalist approaches, for them to be successful (Schubert, 2007). Bulotaite (2003) believes that university brands actually have the potential to create stronger feelings than most brands and that the key to doing this successfully is to create a "unique communicative identity".

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

This paper postulates that internal brand building and sustenance depends on four major factors that contribute to successful realization of brand identity. They are a) brand commitment of the leadership, b) Corporate culture of brand knowledge and sharing c) Brand ambassadorship of employees and d) building brand expertise within. Although each of these factors may individually contribute to the success of brand building it is the cumulative effect of all four factors that contributes to the ultimate realization of building and maintenance of brand identity and image.

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### **THE SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES**

The paper attempts to a) identify the internal process of brand building b) critically evaluate success in brand realization and c) assess whether the University's brand is properly identified and established internally.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The paper used the conceptual framework presented above to examine whether the brand creation, communication, identity and image are internally established among the OUSL's internal stake holders such as learners, teachers and other stakeholders.

The paper used in-depth discussions with a cross section of individuals representing all faculties in the university as well as members of academic support staff representing different layers of staff hierarchy at the University. These discussions were unstructured as the methodology adopted herein is mostly qualitative. This is because brand identity always deals with attitudes values and perceptions that need in-depth and qualitative treatment.

### **DISCUSSION OF FINDING**

It has been found that the concept "brand" is relatively new to the OUSL. Therefore "brand building" and brand initiatives have been conceived as wasteful by some members of staff and students. Two major reasons have been identified for this anomaly. Firstly there has been a poor conception and brand culture at the corporate level. Secondly, like in many other educational institutions academics and academic administrators are naturally conservative in their approach where any thing unconventional is seen as extravagance. Third, most of us have failed to understand that our learners are purposively recruited by the university and we got to have a explicit strategy to attract the best (and most suitable).

In the final analysis this may be identified as a leadership failure. When leadership fails to conceive challenges of brand management its negative fallouts seeps down to the other levels as well. Consequently, the concept of OUSL as a brand idea is not established even among our own academia. It should however be noted that those universities that have taken brand building

seriously have made greater strides in projecting their institutional image. Those universities that are slow in adapting brand building lags far behind in a competitive setting.

There is a third misconception that arises from false belief that brand is 'not my job'; on the contrary in a competitive setting every worker is a brand ambassador. Interestingly there are some workers in the lower levels of hierarchy who are more concerned about the brand and hence having a strong internal brand loyalty. Unfortunately staff at OUSL has not understood that every single learner is an asset because we do not get regular boatloads students or batches from the UGC. In a highly competitive market this is a survival challenge. Therefore one needs to market his programmes carefully to recruit better students, better teachers and attract better employees who would be willing to use their educational outcomes and output.

The erroneous perception that ODL is generally inferior makes this problem even more complex for ODL planners. There has not been concerted and continued effort to build and communicate brand concept to the internal stake holders undermining the brand creation efforts externally. Consequently, parents, employers and policy makers on the one hand and potential learners on the other are of the view that OUSL qualifications are inferior, second class and hence unaccredited within the system of education especially when it comes to career progression.

The core competencies of ODL model as employed in the OUSL such as prospects for life long learning, admission of matured learners, combining work experience to learning and vice versa, relevance of study programmes to national and industry needs, scale economies leading to low unit cost, and high premium on quality assurance etc are not known to both internal staff and external stake holders.

These shortfalls are evident at a time when competitive pressure is at its peak. Meanwhile the OUSL has not been able to promote its strengths through a vigorous brand strategy to attract high-end students, research programmes, and teachers. This paper therefore recommends a well conceived and consistent brand building and promotion strategy for the university which has to be communicated to all internal stakeholders irrespective their level of involvement, hierarchical position or social status. It is also proposed that the internal stakeholders must be adequately consulted to make the process of brand building to be more participatory collective.

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