

# UK Universities' Corporate Visual Identities

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October 29, 2018

## Abstract

Universities are under intense pressure to set themselves apart from others, they are rebranding and creating new corporate visual identities, even though not all of them have been all that successful. For those who have successfully rebranded, they provide guidelines which give a broad overview of the brand and their various identities. These brand guidelines sometimes called brand style guide, or visual identity guide were thematically analysed to provide a different perspective to HEI branding - not from students or other stakeholders perspective but how the Universities sees their brand and wants it conveyed. Analysis indicated that Universities were rebranding to refresh their brand and be more appealing, they want to remain dynamic, contemporary, and relevant while some rebranded when they were awarded the awarded University status. Logo, colours, typeface and photography were identified as components of CVI, a distinct typology of logo and typeface were presented. Universities are using these graphics elements to communicate their brands and project a cohesive and harmonious look across all relevant media. Managerial implications with regards bespoke brand identities and ideas for further research were presented.

## UK Universities' Corporate Visual Identities (CVI)

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*Universities are under intense pressure to set themselves apart from others, they are rebranding and creating new corporate visual identities, even though not all of them have been all that successful. For those who have successfully rebranded, they provide guidelines which give a broad overview of the brand and their various identities. These brand guidelines sometimes called brand style guide, or visual identity guide were thematically analysed to provide a different perspective to HEI branding - not from students or other stakeholders perspective but how the Universities sees their brand and wants it conveyed. Analysis indicated that Universities were rebranding to refresh their brand and be more appealing, they want to remain dynamic, contemporary, and relevant while some rebranded when they were awarded the awarded University status. Logo, colours, typeface and photography were identified as components of CVI, a distinct typology of logo and typeface were presented. Universities are using these graphics elements to communicate their brands and project a cohesive and harmonious look across all relevant media. Managerial implications with regards bespoke brand identities and ideas for further research were presented.*

*Keywords: Universities, UK, Brand Identities, Corporate Visual Identities, Branding*

### Introduction

Universities are under intense pressure to set themselves apart from others in the light of changing market conditions. They, therefore, seek to improve their public image by changing their corporate visual identity (CVI) (Idris & Whitfield, 2014), as this creates a distinct image for them in a competitive environment (Melewar, Bassett, & Simões, 2006). Private sector strategies such as rebranding and adopting new identities are adopted (Furey, Springer, & Parsons, 2014), and key among these is the creation of a new logo.

This has not always been a successful exercise. King's College London wanted to remove 'College' from their name and be known as King's London, but they had to drop the plan following a backlash from students, staff and alumni (Grove, 2015). Loughborough University had to abandon their initial idea for a simple logo comprised of the letters 'L' and 'U' in white on a pink octagon, which was roundly panned by students, graduates and local people (Rush, 2015). These examples highlight the creative challenges in

embarking on this process. Those who manage to rebrand successfully provide their own brand guidelines (or style guide), which is a document that gives a broad overview of the brand and its various identities.

There is no evidence of any work that explores brand guidelines to gain insight into how UK universities are conveying their brand identity. Often, the perception of university brands is from the students' perspective and not from the perspective of the brand itself. Acknowledging the multi-faceted perspectives of branding (Melewar, Bassett, & Simões, 2006), this study aims to empirically examine the rebranding of selected UK higher education institutions (HEIs), to identify their brand identities and how these are communicated, and to explore any commonalities.

Taking into consideration the effort that goes into creating brand guidelines and the quality of information therein, this study seeks to make a valuable theoretical contribution by providing a different perspective on HEI branding from the brand owner's point of view. This study provides a better understanding and insight based not on how other stakeholders – staff, students, alumni or the public – sees the brand, but on how the university as a body sees their brand and wants it conveyed.

## **Literature Review**

HEIs are making effort to stand out as unique brands among the competition. They are increasingly being considered corporations, and branding and reputation management have becoming a critical part of their business (Chapleo, 2010). They have adopted various private sector ideas in order to visibly re-brand and hence reposition themselves. Many universities have altered their visual identity (Idris & Whitfield, 2014).

Theoretically, the Corporate Identity Model (Melewar & Saunders, 1998) forms the core of this study as it focuses on visual identity, which consists of corporate name, logotype and/or symbol of the organisation. Corporate visual identity (CVI) is defined as the 'way in which an organization uses logos, type styles, nomenclature, architecture and interior design etc. to communicate its corporate philosophy and personality' (Balmer, 1995, p. 26). It is the most recognisable way for an organisation to present itself (Baker & Balmer, 1997). A good logo is essential for creating brand awareness and brand equity (van Grinsven & Das, 2016).

Although there has been extensive academic research into brands and brand identities, few studies have attempted to delineate the logo and other visual elements as the substantive components of a university brand. Also, previous studies on logos have been from the perspective of users such as students and customers (Walsh, Winterich, & Mitt, 2010; Ewing, Jevons, & Jevons, 2007) and not from the perspective of the brand owners. This is one of the gaps this study aims to fill: to understand brand identity from the universities' point of view. By analysing the university brand guidelines, this study will explore the motivations behind rebranding and features of their CVIs.

## Methodology

This research was designed to be exploratory in nature, aiming to understand the different versions and changes in university rebranding. Brand guidelines from 25 UK universities (Table1) that have rebranded since 2012 were analysed; this year was selected as it marked a landmark when university fees were significantly increased, and students had more options, which intensified the competition.

The collected brand guidelines were in PDF and imported into NVivo 10 for analysis using “grounded theory” and following a three-part process. (1) Open coding—breaking down, comparing, conceptualising and categorising data; (2) axial coding—reassembling data into groupings or families; and (3) selective coding—developing core themes which are the four components of visual identities. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Mogaji, Farinloye, & Aririguzoh, 2016).

1	Cranfield University	14	University of Creative Arts
2	Herriot Watt University	15	University of East Anglia
3	Keele University	16	University of Greenwich
4	King’s College,	17	University of Leicester
5	Leeds Arts University	18	University of Lincoln
6	London Metropolitan University	19	University of Northampton
7	Loughborough University,	20	University of Portsmouth
8	Plymouth University	21	University of Roehampton
9	Queen's University Belfast	22	University of Salford
10	Ravensbourne,	23	University of Suffolk
11	Royal Holloway, University of London	24	University of the Arts London
12	SOAS, University of London	25	University of Warwick
13	Ulster University		

Table 1: List of Universities

## Results

### *Evolving Identity – The motivation to change*

UK HEIs are rebranding to refresh their brands and increase their appeal. They wish to present themselves as active players in the sector and to remain dynamic, contemporary, and relevant. The University of Leicester noted that it was important that they should present themselves in a cohesive way, while Queen’s University Belfast wants to share their strong messages and world-beating stories with strength and confidence, demonstrating how they are shaping a better world.

In addition, some institutions had to rebrand when they were awarded university status. As one of the newest institutions in the UK, the University of Suffolk (formerly University Campus Suffolk) acknowledges that consistency in how they position and present themselves to the outside world is of utmost importance and they had to rebrand, changing their name and logo. Leeds Arts University had to rebrand from Leeds College

of Art when they were awarded university status. The following section explores the visual elements that represent some universities' brands, including the four elements that make up the CVI.

### *Logo*

As part of the rebranding exercise, some universities created a new logo while some updated their existing ones. A typology of logos is presented in Table 1. The University of Lincoln swapped their Minerva logo for swans, the University of Greenwich refined its compass, Heriot-Watt University removed the blue pennant from its logo, and London Metropolitan University completely changed its logo to black and white.






s/n	Typology	Description	Examples
1	Icon beside text		Greenwich, London Met, Loughborough, Northampton, Portsmouth, Queen's, Ravensbourne, Roehampton, Salford, SOAS, Suffolk and University of the Arts London
2	Icon above text		Lincoln, Warwick, University of East Anglia
3	Icon with text		University of Creative Arts, Ulster, Keele, Herriot Watt, Cranfield
4	Text in icon		King's College, Leeds Art and Royal Holloway
5	Text only		Plymouth

Table 1: Five Logo Typology.

Specific elements representing parts of the universities' identities were also observed such as the mosaic (Leeds Arts University), Shield bearing K (Keele University), glint (University of East Anglia), bracket (Queen's University Belfast) and window (the University of Warwick). The boldness of font, upper/lowercase and changes in colours highlights how universities are using these elements to communicate their brands. The University of Northampton, Lincoln, London Metropolitan University and the University of Creative Arts all changed their logo to black, while Leicester changed from

black to a shade of red. Northampton changed its typeface from uppercase to lowercase and a bolder font, while both the University of Portsmouth and Queen's did the opposite, replacing their lowercase logos with a simpler all-uppercase logo.

Different levels of lockup brands were also observed, all deriving from the universities' corporate identities. These included various sub-brands and co-brands for university departments, research centres and other business units, partnership organisations based at the university, equal or joint-partnership ventures, spin-out companies and affiliations. Universities have also provided strict guidelines about how these identities should be used: according to the University of Plymouth, wherever branding is required to demonstrate their partnerships, the partner's logo should sit to the left of their logo.

### *Colours*

Colours are highly communicative and play an important role in reinforcing universities' brand identity programs. The consistent use of these colours is encouraged by the universities as it contributes to a cohesive and harmonious look across all relevant media. To achieve this, colour palettes are provided as part of the brand identity, and these are specifically identified with various colour coding systems such as the Pantone® colour system, the international standard for producing colours, CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Key/Black) for print, RGB (Red, Green, Blue) for screen and hexadecimal values for websites.

Apart from the variations available in the colour palette, universities also have dominant colours which are often based on their logos. Royal Holloway's choice of a strong and vibrant brick orange contrasting with a deep slate grey as their primary colour palette was heavily influenced by the fabric and environment of its campus. Queen's has a primary colour that they describe as Queen's Red (Pantone 185c) and is the most commonly used colour within their communications, and Greenwich also has customised colours called Greenwich Navy Blue (PMS 2755 C) and Greenwich Blue (PMS 7456 C).

### *Typeface*

The typefaces used by these universities as part of their rebranding program were also examined. Results indicated that most universities have both a primary and a secondary typeface. However, Queen's has only one typeface – Brandon – in order to build brand recognition and familiarity across the university. Three typologies were identified for the typefaces:

1. Bespoke fonts such as Neuzeit Plymouth, which provides a distinctive look and feel across all formats for the University of Plymouth, and the redrawn typography of Leeds Art University, which retains a carefully crafted, established feel.
2. Commercial fonts such as Palatino, designed by Hermann Zapf and used by Keele. The university acknowledged that it is 'probably the most universally admired

and used of his type designs'. Greenwich, meanwhile, uses Antonio, which they consider to be a strong, punchy typeface that adds visual impact.

3. System fonts such as Arial and Calibri, which might be used when bespoke and commercial fonts are not available. These fonts are available on most all word processing software, and are free to use so they do not require a font licence.

### ***Photography***

Photography is one of the elements of brand identity, and should communicate a message that aligns to the whole brand's ideas and values. UK universities acknowledge this important role and provide guidance on how to go about using photography in branding. Keele University wants their image to tell a story and give the right impression. Queen's uses reportage-style photography that embodies a photo-journalistic eye to capture pure moments in the lives of their students and staff. Warwick wants their photographs to reflect the diversity of students on campus by using real students and photographs shot in a reportage style, and Queen's noted that when producing literature for international students, photographs of people should reflect diversity and their heritage through the campus/environment.

While some universities use staged or stock photography to tell their brand stories, Royal Holloway wants real people from their university which show real and relevant locations. Leicester, however, will accept staged photographs but these should be composed in an imaginative way, catching the subjects in their own environment. Queen's, meanwhile, suggested that retouching or cropping may be necessary to ensure selected stock photographs and photoshoots feel engaging and vibrant.

### **Conclusion**

This study aims to explore the rebranding activities of selected UK universities, providing insight into why they have embarked on the exercise and how their corporate identities are presented. A distinct contribution of the current study is the fact that it explores brand identity from the perspective of owners (HEIs) rather than students or other stakeholders (Ali-Choudhury, Bennett, & Savani, 2009; Bennett & Ali-Choudhury, 2009).

The study offers an insight into how HEIs want their brands to be perceived and the creative effort in creating marketing communications that stand out in a crowded marketplace. Theoretically, this study extends previous works on models and components of CVI (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002; Melewar, Bassett, & Simões, 2006; Pantea, Melewar, & Gupta, 2017) by identifying logos, colours, typefaces and photography as components of CVI as illustrated in Figure 1 and providing a typology of logos.

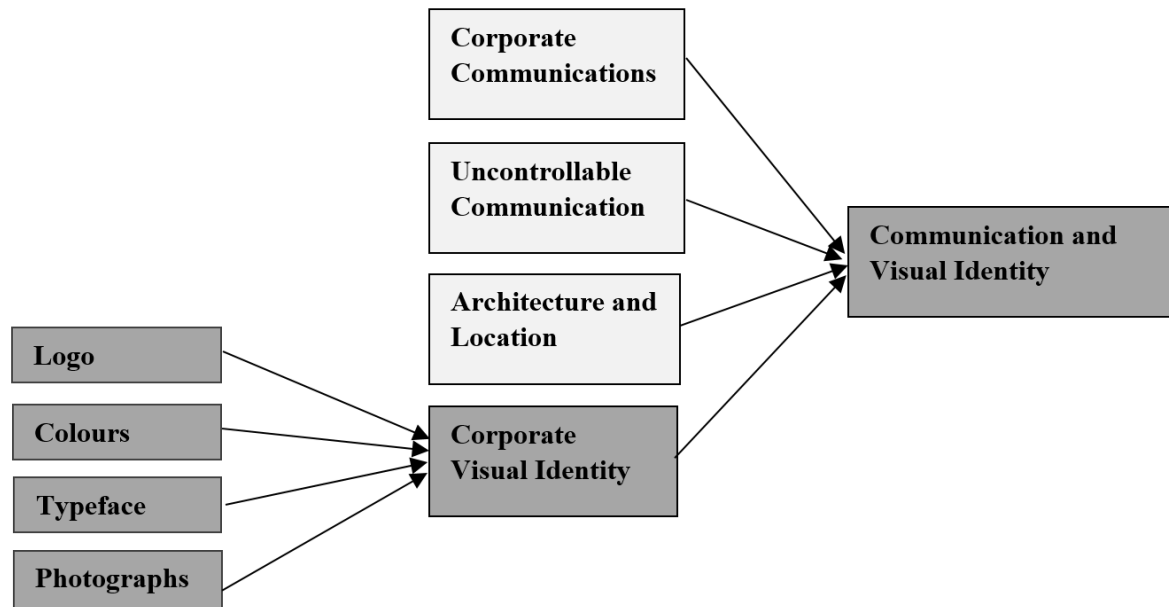


Figure 1 – An extension of the Communication and Corporate Identity, part of the Corporate Identity Model. Source (Melewar & Jenkins, 2002; Melewar, Bassett, & Simões, 2006)

Brand managers may also find these results relevant, especially with regard to creating brand identities. Plymouth had a bespoke font that was unique, while Greenwich and Queen’s also had a unique colour, which appeared to be their trademark, it shows the possibilities of taking that route to create a unique brand identity. The University of Texas has a copyright on its burnt orange (Pantone Colour 159) and no one else can use it.

As regards limitations, it is acknowledged that only 25 UK universities were explored and therefore the result may not be generalised. Further research could explore a greater number of universities to gain greater understanding. Acknowledging the multi-faceted nature of branding in HEIs, sub- (faculties) and co-branding (partners) in universities and the role of colour and typeface could be further explored.

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