# Striving for relevance in a competitive market: The case of Leeds Beckett University's brand identity.

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The trend in global student mobility has contributed to a rapidly evolving market in international education, which, in turn, has created new opportunities, challenges and an increasingly competitive higher education environment (Binsardi & Ekwulugo, 2003). This competition, coupled with increasing budget pressures, is forcing the higher education institutions to strengthen their advertising and marketing efforts in order to hold onto their corner of the global market (Maslowsky, 2013).

Universities are competing, discrediting marketing strategies of each other. University of Essex had to apologized on Twitter when it appeared they were insulting Leeds Beckett University's innovative use of a chatbot for recruitment during clearing (Stoller, 2018). It is vital for educational institutions to market themselves in such climate of competition. Extensive literature on the transfer of the concepts and practices of marketing from other industrial sectors to higher education have been formed (Gibbs, 2002).

Universities 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 simplistic 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.

This working paper explores the case of Leeds Beckett University as they change their brand identities over the year. An effort to remain relevant in the competitive market. They have changed their logo five times since 1992. Among the four Universities in UK bearing 'Metropolitan', they are the first and only to ditch that name. London, Cardiff & Manchester are still using theirs. This paper explores these changes over the years, implication for managers and researchers with interest in marketing of higher education.

Though the University takes pride in their 190-year history of education, which began with the founding of the Leeds Mechanics Institute in 1824 (LBU, 2018), for the sake of this paper, the history will be considered Post 92. Leeds Beckett University started as Leeds Polytechnic with logo in Figure 1. It was given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. Universities that had this privileged are often considered Post-92 or new Universities. No doubt they have their identity struggle. Sometimes they may be seen as the new kid on the block, not good enough like the Russel Group or older universities. They have to work harder to improve their reputation, ranking and perception among prospective students.



*Figure 1: Leeds Polytechnic Logo*

The new University as Leeds Metropolitan University. The initial logo was an Owl with a fern. It was presented in all black colour, though there is a coloured variation (Figure 2), Leeds Beckett University describe itself as a modern professional university with ambition. Based in the vibrant city of Leeds, the biggest financial district outside of London, with a vision to be acknowledged for their commitment to student success, innovation and enterprise, global reach, and strong local impact (LBC, 2018). The University has changed their name and logo several times as they strive to remain relevant within the sector.

*Figure 2: Leeds Metropolitan University's first logo*

The logo was however changed around 2010. There seems to be a story behind it. It shared the same creative idea with the Unilever logo designed by Wolff Olins The logo consists of twenty-five icons intricately woven together to form a U (Unilever, 2018). The new University's logo is a form of a purple rose with a green stem. This closely relates to the Yorkshire Rose however on closer look, its form the shape of people engaging in activities (Figure3).



*Figure 3. Formation of the Leeds Rose Logo. Image from Berry (2010)*

The logo is known to symbolises the people of all races, colour, religion and cultures; the unity of students from all over the world, hand in hand helping each other to achieve one dream and one vision for success. The stem represents Leeds Met supporting them (Berry, 2010). It became more colourful with shades of green and purple. (Figure 4) It is interesting to note however that the typography was in lowercase, even Leeds as the City and the words were not aligned. Perhaps they do not want to make so much noise about their arrival as a new University in Leeds."



*Figure 4: Leeds Metropolitan University's second logo*

While striving to remain relevant, the brand identity was revamp. The exact date couldn't not be verified as at time of writing this paper. The green stem of the rose is now changed to purple and the typography was changed to all uppercase unlike the previous one in a lower case (Figure 5). This was a sharp distinction. From the University who doesn't want to make noise when they started in 1992, now shouting from the rooftop with imposing logo all in utilitarian uppercase sans-serif, left aligned. It is time the see Leeds Metropolitan as a University to reckon with.



*Figure 5: Leeds Metropolitan University's third logo*

In 2013, The university's board of governors formally applied for permission to change the name to the Privy Council in July after a consultation. The University wanted to remove 'Metropolitan' from their name as they believe they have "outgrown" the old name they adopted in 1992. The University argued that using the name "Metropolitan", "indicated a lower quality product" (BBC, 2013). The University acknowledged that market competition and need for distinction from other post-92 Universities has contributed to the need for rebranding (Sanderson & Jackson, 2015). Though the Students Union was against changing their university's name to "Leeds Beckett" (Gevertz , 2014), the change however went ahead.

The University was renamed as Leeds Beckett University in 2014. The new name was chosen because the city's Beckett Park was the location of the university's founding colleges (Dorey, 2014). This was also followed by another redesign of the University's brand identities. The University's iconic rose logo is maintained in purple, but the name is changed (Figure 6). Both Leeds and Beckett are now in bold font. A freedom of Information request showed that the rebranding cost approximately £128,000 but it was funded solely from contributions earned through our university's commercial activities.



*Figure 6: Leeds Beckett University's first logo*

In 2018, just four years after the last rebranding, the University updated their identity once again. The University's iconic rose which symbolises students holding hand to support each other was ditched for a more regular shaped white rose of Yorkshire (Figure 7). Unlike the previous rose with the shape of people engaging in activities, the new logo has the abbreviation of the University – LBU with the B standing out, perhaps an emphasis on Beckett which makes them different from other Universities in Leeds and in the United Kingdom. Though they have adopted the white rose as a brand identity, I doubt they will be part of the [White Rose University](#) Consortium which is a partnership among three universities in Yorkshire consisting of the University of Leeds, the University of Sheffield, and the University of York. Post 92 Universities (in Yorkshire) are excluded from this consortium.



*Figure 7: Leeds Beckett University's latest logo*

Since 1992, the University has had 5 different brand identifies. Efforts are being made to refresh the brand, make it more relevant and appeal to the stakeholders. At the rate things are going, many more Universities will be changing their brand identities and there are implications for University Managers and Researcher.

1. **Everyone is doing it.** The fact that Leeds Beckett was considered in this report does not mean they are the only one making this change. This is becoming a norm across the UK Higher Education Institutions. They are rebranding themselves to stay relevant in the competitive market. Sometimes they feel it is time to refresh because of their investment in facilities, increased league table ranking or an enhanced student experience. They feel they are now mature and different. Often this is the Post-92 Universities and those that has got being awarded University status.

2. **It's more than just name.** Universities are aware of the competition and the perception of their brands, especially within the International market. Rebranding is more than just name but the attached value and perception. It was not surprising that Kings College London wanted to change its name because prospective students were seeing them as a college and not a University. Leeds has removed Metropolitan because they wanted to stand out, there are three other Universities with Metropolitan (London, Cardiff and Manchester), it will be important to see the direction in which they want to take their branding considering the competition and the struggle to remain relevant.

3. **It is often not a drastic change.** It is no doubt that Universities are changing their identity, however it often a slight change over time. With regards to LBU logo, the change in boldness of the font is noticeable. In Figure 1, Leeds was bold, later on, it was Leeds Metropolitan that was made bold and lately both Leeds and Metropolitan became bold and now even though both Leeds and Beckett is still bold, the B (in the abbreviation) stands out. As illustrated in Figure 8, Sometimes a Universities might not want to compete with other Universities in the City, so they remove or reduce any reference to the City and put emphasis on what's unique to them (Beckett – Bold B, Solent – Bold red), they introduce 'of' (Plymouth), change the whole name to uppercase (Derby) or just change colour and font (Winchester).



*Figure 8: Different changes across the sector.*

4. **These changes are not often announced.** Due to subtle nature of these changes, hardly would you see a University create much fanfare about their change in Logo. Apart from a significant change in name which requires permission from the Privy Council, the member of the public might not be aware of the rebranding. Leeds Metropolitan changed their logo without much awareness, it was a subtle change and there was no much information about it. This has become a trend as well, perhaps Universities do not want to be seen or heard change their logo even though they want to look different.

5. **The cost of rebranding.** This will keep getting higher as well as more Universities join this bandwagon and aspire to refresh their brands. There will be more consultation, research and the implementation of the brand identities. Kings College lost almost £300,000 has they were forced to abandon plans to rebrand and drop the word "college" from its name (Bawden, 2015), University of Southampton University rebranding costs about £360,000 (Daily Echo, 2008) while Queen's University was under scrutiny after spending almost £300,000 on their rebranding exercise (McCurry & Rutherford, 2017). Students (and other stakeholders) will always want to raise an objection as they may feel the money can be spent on some other things like staffing and bursary.

6. **Perception of Stakeholder.** University considering rebranding will have to navigate the maze of perception and expectation of their stakeholders. From Staff to alumni and even students, each group have an opinion about the logo. Sometimes it can be seen as Senior Management or new Vice chancellor's desire to make a mark with the rebranding, it is important that all stakeholders are carried along. Though students are mostly around for three years, they can raise objections and it is left for managers to see how best to manage this. Having the student Union on board is always important. Warwick University went on with the rebranding even with students angry at the 'aubergine' logo (Gil, 2015) while Loughborough University had to change theirs twice to meet the students' need (Rush, 2015).

7. **Managing the rebranding.** It is not surprising that some stationeries with the old logo will still be lying around. Implementing the new brand and its identities needs to be well considered. Right from the signage to digital footprints and social media profile. Importantly, staffs need to take this on board. Presentation slides, documents and email signatures should reflect the changes. Perhaps there could be need for a brand police to ensure that the new brand is thoroughly implemented across the University.

This paper has offered an insight into a UK University's effort to remain relevant and refreshed in a competing market. It presents Leeds Beckett University's rebranding activities over the years. There are indications that many more Universities will still go down this route it is important they get it right. It should not just be about the change of logo but total rebranding which affects teaching quality and students 'experience among other things. Theoretically, this study extends previous works on corporate visual identities ( (Melewar & Saunders , 1998; Melewar, et al., 2006) and higher education marketing and branding (Chapleo, 2010; Mogaji, 2018; Mogaji, 2016). Practical implications for Managers are also presented. Future studies will be needed to have a better understanding of staff's attitude towards the rebranding and Universities effort to integrate a new brand across the University.

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