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## *DO HEIS COMMUNICATE TRUST WELL?*

### DO HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTES (HEIS) COMMUNICATE TRUST WELL?

#### **ABSTRACT**

*The relationship between trust and information sources for new purchasers of higher education is discussed. A range of sources is evaluated by potential entrants into UK higher education, and indicates that universities tend to be regarded as the most trustworthy when information is directly associated with them and social networks, and friends and student-derived sources the least, along with Key Information Set (KIS) data.*

**Keywords:** *higher education; communication, trust*

#### INTRODUCTION

Marketing in higher education has grown from information in a prospectus or year book into a range of communicative and relationship communication practices designed to attract students in the same way as consumers to cars, iPads and foreign holidays. The tangible benefits of fun and the economic promise of a university education have dominated higher education communications. Universities have promoted education, offering hedonistic gratification and routes to careers. to position education as their product or service as yet one more thing to be consumed (Lawlor, 2007). Furthermore, Klassen (2000) reports that in the USA the marketing of higher education institutional values and priorities is usually symbolised by the message ‘that students will not need to change in order to be successful’ (2001: 21). In Europe state-controlled universities have introduced student fees and engaged in institutional marketing to distinguish themselves at a time when higher education provision has become available to increasing numbers of students. This seems beneficial and what one would expect from institutions that have internal trust and are trusted by the public (although questioned by Tierney, 2006, and Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). Yet, in meeting this demand and securing their own financial futures as competition intensifies, institutions are ‘engaging in professional marketing activities’ (Veloutsou, Paton & Lewis, 2005: 279) rather than, perhaps, enriching the educational and the common good. These activities run the risk of displaying overwhelming consumerism (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

The impact of these changes is summarised by Hassan, who observes:

the commercialization of the university is primarily an economic and political process of transformation that has little if anything to do with education, knowledge production and the well-being of either staff or students. What is more, these changes are all being refracted through the prism of neo-liberal ideology. (2003: 77)

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With consumerism changing students into customers (Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2010; Woodall, Hiller & Resnick, 2014) and tutors into service providers (Guzmán-Valenzuela & Barnett, 2013), with ever-more vulnerable and naïve students being encouraged to enrol, competition rather than sector collaboration has become the higher education market's ethos. One consequence of such a change is that trust in the common good, once assumed of higher education (Giroux and Giroux, 2004; Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota, 2010) has been shaken by the uncertainty of the market and needs to be re-built.

### TRUST IN THE UNIVERSITY

One consequence of this move to the market has been a marketisation of higher education (Gibbs, 2002, 2011; Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009; Hemsley-Brown, 2011), an increasing emphasis by universities on how they promote themselves to potential students. The approaches have not honoured the nature of education as a distinctive transformative process of the human condition but have treated it (for the most part) as undifferentiated consumption. They have adopted marketing from consumer markets, albeit highly sophisticated and technical, best suited to selling chocolate, aspirin and supermarket discounts.

Trust has attracted attention in education, and Taschannen-Moran and Hoy's (2000) study of schools is seminal; in higher education Macfarlane (2009), and Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota (2010) have provided a review of the significance of trust within the university and the building of student–institution relationships. Furthermore, Gibbs (2007) has argued that consumers demand trust when they feel vulnerable and ignorant, and that this applies especially to university entrance because HEIs need to help people to reach beyond the frontier of what is known to what might be knowable. Moreover, Fuller (2014) has speculated that the more one trusts one's educational environment, the more one is likely to participate and believe in the principles of meritocracy. If one trusts what universities say about how they can facilitate choice and opportunities for a student's future, the more inclined they are to take what is proposed to them as credible and worthy of participation.

Indeed, Carvalho and de Oliveira Mota (2010) identify trust and loyalty in HEIs as a foundational premise for student engagement. The development of trust within HEIs and the sector is important to the study of higher education, yet they claim 'research on HEIs has yet to include student trust as an antecedent of student loyalty' (2010: 146). Perhaps this is because 'it seems that researchers across specific disciplines are in agreement that trust is a theoretically and methodologically elusive, context-dependent, multilevel, discipline – as well as a culturally and historically changeable – phenomenon' (Kovac and Kristiansen (2010: 276).

### UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS

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The conceptualisation of students as consumers (Brennan and Lynne, 2007; Eddie, 2013), co-producers or stakeholders in their education (Lomas, 2007) makes assumptions about the service they seek and receive from their higher education experience. Factors influencing student choice and preference have been discussed in the literature (e.g. Broekemier, 2002; Wilkins and Huisman, 2011; Obermeit, 2012). For instance, preference studies by Soutar and Turner (2002), and Brown Varley and Pal (2009) do not find a construct of students' trusting university communications, and while Maringe (2006) and Ivy (2010) speculate that trust might play a role in student decision making they do not follow this up. In the higher education literature there is seemingly no mention of trust in HEI's marketing strategies (Naudé and Ivy, 1999; Frølich and Stensaker, 2010). In an important study by Veloutsou, Lewis and Paton (2004), the authors suggest that they found evidence that the sources that students 'want to use and that they trust are produced and distributed by the university itself' (2004: 170), although in their paper they do not report asking questions on trustworthiness. This is the only explicit finding we have found in the literature and, given that it is inferential and that there have been changes in the media since 2004, especially growth in social media, we are interested to see if student preference has changed.

There is a potential tension, identified by Gibbs (2007), in that under certain circumstances marketing communication works against the goals of autonomous, liberal higher education by undermining critical thinking and independent action. This argument requires that advertising and other marketing communications has a primary intent to persuade rather than to inform; in being intrusive, invasive and manipulative it is potentially exploitative and can work against a goal of education for the common good. To counter such risks means striving for good faith and fair dealing, so as to contribute toward the efficacy of the exchange process as well as to avoid deception in product design, pricing, communication and delivery of distribution. A number of studies of educational choice and decision making (e.g. Maringe, 2005) have shown that institutional reputation is one of the strongest influencers of people. The development of trust in the 'brand' is critical to the long-term sustainability of an institution, Gibbs and Murphy (2009) conclude, and its ethical management builds continuity of that trust (Arpan et al., 2003). Oplatka (2002), in a study of Israeli HEIs, found a potential professional dilemma for institutional leaders of low-status institutions whose marketing did not match delivery; he argues for realistic promotion but acknowledges that they may need their marketers to elevate the institutional image to attract as many students as possible. Moreover, Astore (2009) asks what messages we send about higher education 'when we tell students that their college experience will enhance their "advancement potential" [and] speak of the need for improved marketing and "branding" of our institution so that we can better sell ourselves to students' (2009: 6)?

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Ghosh et al. (2001) argue that, since prospective 'students who trust a college are more likely to enrol or make non-contractual pre-commitments to attend the college' (2001: 324), there is a risk; the use of 'puffery to recruit students to college may get them to visit and maybe enrol and attend. However, if the promises are not delivered upon, students' trust in the college may erode' (2001: 334). More recently, Bradley (2013) examined misleading marketing claims in UK university prospectuses, building on previous research suggesting that the imagery and language of university marketing may be misleading. Specifically, he considered the use of data and statistics by universities in their advertising in a way not readily verified by students. From a UK sample of university prospectuses he developed a typology of misleading data-based marketing comprised of nine categories: omission of facts and selective reporting; misleading wording; misleading inferences about an attribute; misleading associations between attributes; misleading endorsements; claim–fact discrepancies; falsehoods; carefully-crafted comparisons; and claims without a reference point. He concludes that, 'because choosing a university is so important to students and because universities aspire to high ethical and scholarly standards, the issues raised by these findings are significant'. We agree and are more direct than Bradley; we would argue that it is a breach of trust.

Avnet, Pham and Stephen (2012) consider how the feeling and the intensity of trust act as a diagnostic determinate of informational values. This has a commonsense appeal, as we tend to value more the information from those we trust when we have no other way (or are disinclined) to check its veracity. In a series of six studies they developed a concept of 'trust in feelings' (2013: 721). Pham (1998) shows that reliance on feelings in judgment tends to be selective and to depend in a large part on perceived informative values or diagnosticity of feelings, concluding that 'affect probably plays a more central role in consumer decision making than previously recognized' (1998: 158), and that when consumers 'feel like' engaging in certain consumption episodes they are not just being emotional; they are making an informed decision, a decision that 'capitalizes on the information contained in their feelings' (ibid). A position on the 'mood as information' model is adopted by White and McFarland (2009), who recommend that the marketer both creates the mood and instructs the consumer to focus on this rather than cognitive evaluation. Pretty pictures of a clean campus, entertaining social life, integrated genders, racial harmony and a smiling friendly tutor spring to mind!

Moreover, within the perceived value of feelings there are two distinct constructs; the perceived representativeness of the feelings with respect to the target to be evaluated, and the perceived relevance of the feelings with respect to the judgment to be made. These issues are critical to how naive decision makers make sense of perceived ambiguity. Avnet et al. claim that 'evidence of the role of trust in feelings as a distinct determinant of the information value of (and reliance on) feelings was found across six different studies' (2012: 732). They conclude that 'the construct of trust

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in feelings has important implications for our understanding of the broader role of affect and feelings in judgments and decisions' (2012: 734). We attempt to explore such a concept in our study.

### THE RESEARCH PROJECT

There are two notions of trust that we explore in this research project. The first is the perceived veracity of the source of the marketing information, and the second the level of personal or self-trust that engages the student to make decisions on the data provided. Self-trustworthiness is the basis of independently knowing one's world and being in that world. Lehrer encapsulates this as being able to 'consider myself worthy of trust in what I accept and prefer' (1997: 5). Through these two dimensions we have considered self-trustworthiness as the level of information value for modes of communication, and the perceived value of the information source.

The project investigated the level of trust potential that UK pre-university students perceive in the different communication channels from which they gather information about universities in the UK, when asked about these sources' usefulness and trustworthiness. This study enriches the literature in that, for students, this was a practical example of making choices in a real world situation. In this it augments the work of Avnet et al. (2012) and earlier work by Pham et al. (e.g. 1998, 2001, 2012). We also asked our participants to identify importance as well as trust, on the basis that these two concepts are different and will appear so to pre-university students. We did not use the term 'credibility' for, as Eisend (2006) indicates, this is a nebulous concept for those unaware of the structure of organisations. The differing rankings of sources tend to support such a conclusion.

### *Methodology*

Data collection was via a questionnaire developed through a series of empirical studies at several universities that share information on student recruitment. This permitted a volunteer group of academics and practitioners from 19 universities to refine the questionnaire and to pilot it several times over a period of five months before a final draft was approved. In terms of selection, we requested UCAS (the clearing house for university applications in the UK) to select at random 5,000 of the 65,000 students to whom it had access as they applied to universities, and 1475 completed a questionnaire, yielding a respectable response rate of 29.5 per cent.

The actual questionnaire went through a rigorous process of development whereby a number of previous market research reports conducted by university marketing teams were reviewed to identify the key factors in students' choice of university and the tactics of marketing communication used by universities to inform them. Previous studies in this field were also consulted (see Moogan et al., 1999, 2001; Soutar and Turner, 2002; Veloutsou et al., 2004; Maringe, 2006; Whitehead, Raffan, & Deane, 2006; Brown et al., 2009). After several drafts the questionnaire was pilot tested at two

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different universities – one in the north and one in the south of England. The results revealed that certain questions needed refining but that the reliability of the scales was very high. Consequently, after minor refinements the questionnaire was uploaded to Survey Monkey and tested to ensure that responses were correctly coded before UCAS notified the 5,000 applicants of its URL. After three months the online questionnaire was closed and the data cleansed ready for analysis. Data editing revealed 1475 appropriate responses and subsequently a number of non-parametric tests were applied to reveal significant sources of information perceived as trustworthy by students applying to study an undergraduate course at a UK university. A breakdown of the respondent demographics is highlighted in Table 1, highlighting responses captured from all regions of the United Kingdom.

Table 1 here please

There are clear limitations to this design due to the lack of qualitative investigation of some of the counter-intuitive findings about league tables and social media, which would have benefited from closer examination. However, as an indicative piece of research it offers a direction for complementary research activity. Furthermore, there are specific UK information sources and higher education structures that may not have international equivalents; we have added a short glossary of these entities at the end of the paper.

*Results*

A range of statistical tests was undertaken to identify key sources of information significantly related to trustworthiness. Regression and decision tree analysis were applied to determine the hierarchy of their importance to trustworthiness.

The authors first determined the mean rating for the trustworthiness and usefulness of each source of information to identify the high-rating factors. The results are presented in Table 2:

Table 2 here please

Clearly, the top six factors for both trustworthiness and usefulness ascribe authority and veracity to the university itself and the esteem in which it is held. The explicit similarity in the ranking of sources in terms of being the most trustworthy and the most important is consistent with this finding (Avnet et al., 2012). Perhaps the most surprising low scores are for social networks, friends and student-derived sources (Student Room, Unistats), and league tables. Using this simple descriptive approach does not, however, give the full picture so we generated a stacked bar chart of

Figure 1 here please

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the data, seen in Figure 1, to show the lowest and highest scores for each source. It is worth noting the relatively low trust in league tables in decision making.

**Please insert figure 1**

The most revealing result from this study is the lack of trust in social media, although students with lower than expected A-Level grades are significantly more influenced and this will have major implications for specific-mission groups of universities. Other sources of information ranking low on trustworthiness are the Student Room, Key Information Sets (KIS) and university advertising.

Highly trusted sources of information are visits to a university, the UCAS and university websites, printed prospectuses, teachers and family. What appears to emerge is that trust in the authority of information about universities relies on it being impartial. This puts pressure on sources to be accurate, fair and credible, for they engender great trust and are therefore liable to deceive badly if they not provide valid data.

The most important information rated as useful on the Unistats website was the function that permits a comparison of courses, followed by graduate employability and salary data (see Figure 4 and Table 3).



Table 3 here please

We looked in more detail at two aspects of low-ranked information sources, KIS and social media. First, given the significance of the KIS data to the UK policy of openness to support student choice, we looked at how students ranked the importance of this information. The most important information rated as being useful on the Unistats website was again the Unistats option that permitted comparison of courses, followed by data on graduate employability and salaries (Table 3).

We also undertook regression analysis, revealing that the most important KIS that students found significantly useful were the:

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1. Teaching and assessment methods
2. Unistats function that permits comparison of courses
3. Student satisfaction data
4. Graduate employability and salary data.

The regression results clearly demonstrate the importance to students of a university course's teaching quality and NSS scores.

Secondly, we considered social media. In response to a bipolar question as to whether the student had been influenced by social media when deciding a course, the overall majority, just over 80 per cent of the sample, responded negatively, suggesting that they had not been influenced by information posted on such sites. When asked why they used social media, the responses indicated that the overriding purpose was to find out what other students had said about the course, although not to engage with them by asking questions, and to obtain an impression of what life is like at that university. Use tended to be passive and peer-oriented and the information, as we have shown, was given relatively little credence when making decisions.

### *Sources of Information Correlating Strongly with Trustworthiness*

Correlation analysis revealed four sources of information with a strong correlation coefficient of greater than 0.5, as Muijs (2011: 126) advises that a correlation coefficient below 0.5 is of only moderate strength. The four sources of information are a mixture of online and traditional sources of information (see Table 4).

Table 4 here please

The results in Figure 2 show, by gender and type of university, that open day visits and the UCAS website are the most significant sources of information in terms of trustworthiness. This is followed by teacher recommendations and university advertising.

Figure 2 here please

### *Significant Differences based on Gender, Intention to Live, Age and Expected A-level points*

Non-parametric analysis was undertaken to clarify the influence of sources of information considered trustworthy by students with a specific profile based on their gender, intention to live away, age and A-Level points. The results in Table 5 reveal that female students are significantly trusting of digital and offline sources of information; students who intend to live away are significantly influenced by talks given by universities at their school/college; mature students tend to trust almost all sources of

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information; and, finally, students with mid-range expected A-Level points have a preference for the UCAS website, talks given at school by a university and other university advertising (see Table 5). The analysis reveals a tendency by female prospective students intending to live away to trust more information sources than those intending to stay at home and study. This may seem counter-intuitive, given that their financial risk might be more than for those staying at home.

Table 5 here please

*Decision Tree Analysis*

The previous statistical tests revealed a pattern of agreement in terms of trustworthy sources of information. To determine the sources of information regarded as highly important to college students, a more robust technique is decision tree analysis. The results identified a hierarchical list of important sources of information regarding trustworthiness, and were then cross-tabulated with the correlation coefficient of the sources to reveal a graphical grid (see Figure 3) that highlights the key variables. The authors have labelled each of the quadrants in Figure 3 and the terms are highlighted in Table 6.

Table 6 here please

From the results shown in Figure 3 we can see that the most important sources of information in terms of trustworthiness are:

1. University website
2. UCAS website
3. Printed university prospectus
4. Talk given at school by university
5. Visit to university (open day).

Figure 3 here please

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The sources of trustworthy information that students perceive as most important are highlighted in Table 7.

Table 7 here please

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Two distinct issues emerge from the research. The first concerns the credibility of university communications relative to other sources. To a large extent this supports the findings of Veloutsou et al. (2004), evident in the trust in which students regard both the source and content of communications to them about the university to which they intend to apply. This finding is significant to the impact of university brand communications and the expectations they set up. In a consumer society, stretching the reality of a specific higher education experience in competitive communication could have adverse effect on student loyalty

The second interesting finding is students' perception of the veracity of social media, regarded as a fun, conversational mode of communication through which they may seek opinion but not detailed information with which to base decisions. This indicative result has a considerable impact on how universities deploy their communication budget (Constantinides & Stagno, 2012).

A considerable amount has been invested by the UK government in providing school/college students with information (i.e. on the teaching, assessment and employment opportunities) on each university course to permit comparison between universities. However, the results of this survey reveal that only mature students actively review KIS information, although a key finding from those who did engage is that it is imperative that courses achieve a high NSS score to distinguish them on the Unistats website.

The results of this the survey have implications for the marketing of university courses, revealing a hierarchy of importance in sources of information and that certain have a significant influence on university applicants. The main sources that are both informative and trusted are those that are perceived as factual and not as marketing from the university but from high-status educational advisors – These sources are teachers, not career advisors or high status independent advisers, and comprise UCAS rather than personal friends. Based on these results it would be prudent for universities to invest in marketing in both online (a friendly, intuitive university website) and offline (a factual, printed prospectus, and informative and engaging open days) media to ensure they reach their target group effectively, and do so in an informative rather than a marketised manner. Moreover, universities that adopt or are perceived to manipulate or be selective of the information that they make available to students or, indeed, use media whose veracity is not credible (such as advertising) risk failing to achieve their communication goals. Furthermore, a university runs the risk of damaging its brand reputation; students may openly rebel and leave unfavourable feedback on the NSS website and social media platforms, reflecting their perception of the image projected by a university through its literature compared to the actual student experience, whether social or educational.

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### *Glossary*

**Key Information Set (KIS)** appear within the Unistats website and are a collection of items that students thought were most useful in making university and course choices  
(<https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/find-out-more/key-information-set>)

**Student Room is** a student community website (<http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/>)

**Unistats** is the UK Government's official site that allows you to search for and compare data and information on university and college courses from across the UK  
(<http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>)

**UCAS** helps students find out about and apply to higher education in the UK (<http://www.ucas.com/>)

### *University organisations:*

**Million+** is a university think-tank that consists of 17 non-research intensive universities.

**Russell Group** represents 24 leading UK universities committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector (<http://www.russellgroup.ac.uk/about-russell-group/>)

**University Alliance** brings together 22 of the most innovative and entrepreneurial universities in the UK – major institutions combining science and technology with a focus on delivering for the professions, business and the community (<http://www.unialliance.ac.uk/member/>)

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*DO HEIS COMMUNICATE TRUST WELL?*

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**Figure captions**

Figure 1. Percentage category summary of sources of information based on trustworthiness

Figure 2. Key significant sources of information by gender and type of university

Figure 3. Identification of key communication factors that are highly trustworthy