

## **From research excellence to brand relevance: A model for higher education reputation building**

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*In this article we propose a novel approach to reputation development at higher education institutions. Global reputation development at higher education institutions is largely driven by research excellence, is predominantly measured by research output, and is predominantly reflected in hierarchical university rankings. The ranking becomes equated with brand equity. We argue that the current approach to reputation development in higher education institutions is modernist and linear. This is strangely out-of-kilter with the complexities of a transforming society in flux, the demands of a diversity of stakeholders, and the drive towards transdisciplinarity, laterality, reflexivity and relevance in science. Good research clearly remains an important ingredient of a university's brand value. However, a case can be made for brand relevance, co-created in collaboration with stakeholders, as an alternative and non-linear way of differentiation. This approach is appropriate in light of challenges in strategic science globally as well as trends and shifts in the emerging paradigm of strategic communication. In applying strategic communication principles to current trends and issues in strategic science and the communication thereof, an alternative model for strategic reputation building at higher education institutions is developed.*

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### **Introduction**

The rise of the post-industrial knowledge economy has placed a strong value on higher education institutions as 'engines of development'.<sup>1</sup> This has dramatically changed the role of higher education institutions from being an elite system to a more universal system. The previous elite system was characterised by a gross enrolment ratio of 15% of the population, whereas current ratios are up to 70% in some advanced economies.<sup>2</sup>

Governments increasingly see investment in higher education and in research and development as essential for ensuring the knowledge base necessary for economic growth. Knowledge production is regarded as more important than capital or labour.<sup>3</sup> As a result, competition in the higher education sector has become intense. How to differentiate each institution from the rest has become the main challenge. It has become evident that the most powerful differentiator is research excellence, as research is a critical function in the production of new knowledge and the enhancement of society.

Reputation building at higher education institutions has therefore to a large degree become premised on the construct 'research excellence'. While it is acknowledged that other factors contribute to the reputation of higher education institutions, such as teaching and learning, academic freedom, tradition, facilities, and student experience, research excellence is widely regarded as the key reputation builder.<sup>2-4</sup>

At the same time, research itself has come under intense scrutiny as new challenges and issues affecting the relationship between science and society have arisen. Growing tensions about the democratisation and recontextualisation of science have forced scientists to become more reflexive about their own role in, and effect on, a complex society that engages with a multiplicity of stakeholders. Even the concept of research excellence has come under scrutiny. These dynamics have an influence on higher education institutions as knowledge producers in society, although such forces also extend beyond those institutions.

In addition, higher education institutions in South Africa are struggling with their own set of challenges. They need to remain responsive to local problems while striving towards global competitiveness, and must maintain a balance between accessibility and global reputation. Resultant tensions between excellence and transformation imperatives were brought to the world's attention when the #RhodesMustFall campaign swept across the country, resulting not only in the removal of

the Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town but also a name change of Rhodes University, and the Open Stellenbosch campaign. All these issues culminated in the #FeesMustFall student protests, which have significantly changed the national scenario and have irrevocably changed the climate in which higher education institutions operate and are funded. High on the agenda are issues such as the decolonisation of knowledge, free education, and other challenges in a society fissured by educational inequalities.

While mindful of competing binaries such as global vs. local, excellence vs. relevance, and excellence vs. transformation, we argue that the current approach to reputation building at higher education institutions is steeped in modernist, fixed and linear notions. The current approach focuses strongly on excellence. However, the underlying modernist and linear assumptions are being increasingly challenged, not only with regard to the role of science in society, but also with regard to the emerging multi-paradigmatic approach to strategic communication and reputation building. We offer a novel concept for reputation building at higher education institutions, that of brand relevance. Although higher education institutions historically have been hesitant to embrace brand and business principles, and profess to be uncomfortable with the premise of university brand building, branding in the higher education sector is not an entirely new concept. Higher education branding in the past was, however, built around generic constructs or linear rankings, which in turn led to similarity instead of differentiation among higher education brands in the reputation race.

### **Research objectives**

This paper is conceptual and analytical in nature. One of our key research objectives is to reflect on the coherence that emerges from the diverse and fragmented academic, meta-scientific and industry-related literature. Such literature is relevant for higher education reputation building from a transdisciplinary perspective. Through the identification of trends and issues in strategic research, and trends and shifts in strategic communication, we adopt a multi-paradigmatic approach to reputation building and propose a new model for reputation building. The purpose is to contribute to the much-needed high-level understanding of the complex nature of higher education reputation building not only in Africa, but globally, and to raise the possibility of further debate and research.

The approach is structured in the following ways:

1. To consider key challenges and trends emerging in strategic research that affect the relationship between science and society, including the communication of science to society.
2. To compare these trends with key trends and shifts in the emerging paradigm of strategic communication, and to reflect on how challenges in science communication can be addressed by strategic communication.
3. To consider the implications of strategic communication for strategic branding and brand relevance, from a multi-stakeholder perspective.
4. To examine research excellence as a global reputation builder at research-intensive higher education institutions.
5. To build a case for changing the discourse from 'brand excellence' to 'brand relevance'.
6. To propose an alternative model for reputation building at higher education institutions, and for building a purposeful higher education brand.

### **Strategic research: Challenges and issues**

Strategic research denotes 'applied research with a long-term perspective'.<sup>5,6</sup> It gained momentum in the 1980s because of wide interest in the knowledge economy and in scientific technologies as an engine for economic growth.<sup>5</sup>

Strategic research combines two principles, namely *excellence* and *relevance*, which are not regarded as contradictory. The spread of theme-based, problem-oriented centres of research excellence and relevance across the globe bears evidence of how important strategic research has become. At the

same time, a new set of challenges is emerging that has forced strategic researchers to reconsider the role of science in society, as discussed below.

### *Research uptake*

The European Commission MASIS report (EC MASIS report<sup>5</sup>) for monitoring activities of science in society expresses reservations as to whether strategic research has not perhaps evolved into a type of basic research. Equally questionable is whether the gap between research and its eventual uptake has not become larger. Research results circulate mainly among researchers themselves, contributing to a reservoir of scientific knowledge, visible in the contents of scientific journals. Other researchers ‘fish’ in the reservoir and create new combinations of knowledge. This scenario may result in a somewhat incestuous cycle where the greatest impact of research is on researchers themselves, and other people who might have benefited from the results remain out of the loop.

Biswas and Kircherr<sup>7</sup> argue that ‘the impact of most peer-reviewed publications even within the scientific community is miniscule’. They state that scholars’ publications in the popular media must count as well, as these are far more likely to shape public debate and influence policies.

Globally and on the continent of Africa, public and private sector funders of research, as well as research chairs at higher education institutions, are increasingly engaged in evaluating the socioeconomic effects of research.<sup>8</sup> The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment, which was signed by a wide and diverse group of individuals and interest groups across the global North, calls for improvement in the way research output is evaluated. The Declaration supports assessing research on its own merits, eliminating journal-based metrics, and promoting practices that focus on the ‘value’ and ‘influence’ of specific research outputs.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Vale, in an article titled ‘Evaluating how we evaluate’, calls for the evaluation of research *quality* instead of *quantity*, and stresses the need for researchers to contribute to community, society and education itself.<sup>10</sup>

### *Reflexive research*

Reflexive research is a continual, evolving process of observing and reflecting upon knowledge itself, and about its value and applicability to new, complex emerging contexts.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of a *linear* model of innovation, strong arguments are being made for a *lateral* model, in which the transformative effect of research is emphasised. This transformative potential is especially relevant in developing societies and may be guided by leadership that spans traditional boundaries.<sup>5,8</sup> Of particular relevance here is the reciprocal relationship between research and a variety of stakeholders.

Stakeholder theory, as described in the influential work of Freeman<sup>12</sup> and other scholars,<sup>13</sup> denotes the influence of multiple stakeholders that do not have a direct stake in the institution but are viewed as active ‘influencers’ who can affect the actions of the institution.<sup>14</sup> The stakeholder concept has clearly taken root in research fields. The influence of a multiplicity of stakeholders at all levels of research is such that science has been required to become much more reflexive regarding its nature, the contexts in which it operates, and the stakeholders who affect – and can be affected by – research.<sup>5</sup> Public scrutiny of research has become a fact of life and provides a critical evaluation of expertise. Questions about how research can enhance society highlight this trend, as do calls for the decolonisation of knowledge and the development of ‘Africa-rooted’ evaluation models.<sup>15,16</sup> Reflexive research has now become the mediator between stakeholder positions and scientific interests, via expert narratives linked to evidence that is robust enough for stakeholders in society.<sup>5</sup>

### *Re-contextualisation of science*

Proposals for the re-contextualisation of science began with scholars<sup>17,18</sup> who argued that a number of changes have led to a ‘Mode 2’ of knowledge production. This new mode is characterised by the following ideals:

- fluidity and changing research teams

- a more general distribution of research
- contextualisation of application
- transdisciplinarity
- new forms of quality control and social robustness.

Similarly, Cilliers<sup>19</sup> argues that complexity must connect with contextualised information, leading to the integration of the observer with the observed. The transdisciplinary approach has gained considerable ground, guided as it is by the argument that humanity requires a research approach that transcends narrow disciplines. This broader approach would assist us to engage with complex and interlinked problems, such as the logic and ethics of natural sciences, climate change, poverty, systemic unemployment, and so on – particularly with respect to the continent of Africa.<sup>20</sup>

The debate has escalated with a growing tension between Western science and the rest of society, also referred to in the EC MASIS report.<sup>5</sup> In some quarters, Western science and notions of universality are regarded as ideology in itself.<sup>21</sup> According to Max-Neef<sup>22</sup>,

*The growing rupture in communication is, to a large extent the product of the exacerbation of rational thought, which manifests itself through the predominance of reductionism and of a binary and linear logic that, among other shortcomings, separates the observer from the observed.*

Thus, the transdisciplinary paradigm is an attempt at formulating an integrative, holistic process of knowledge production that goes beyond a multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary approach. Yet it is also partly a reaction against the 20th century features of ‘undeserved deference to authority’, ‘stifling disciplinary specialisation’ and ‘methodological commodification’.<sup>20</sup> The emerging trend is thus the need for a ‘recontextualisation of science’<sup>5</sup> and the integration of knowledge paradigms that involve a multiplicity of stakeholders.

*Is ‘excellence’ still relevant?*

‘Research excellence’ has experienced a major revival since 2000, with the establishment of research councils around the world, particularly in the global North. These councils’ mission is to support excellence, and they include the German Excellenz Initiative, Australia’s Group of Eight (CO8), the United States’ Ivy League, the United Kingdom’s Russell Group, and China’s C9 League. This revival gained momentum through the continued emphasis on measurable research output (in ISI journals) in assessments and evaluations.

Excellence and relevance are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, the question remains whether a one-sided emphasis on excellence, or the choice of indicators for measuring excellence, might hamper the pursuit of relevance.<sup>5</sup> According to the EC MASIS report,<sup>5</sup>

*A case in point is the increasing importance of the ISI impact factor system which favours decontextualized and globalised science while context-related and more local research, dedicated to specific problem solving, is disadvantaged. Sciences could lose their link to practice resulting from the pressure to publish in international journals instead of engaging in local environments and problem solving. Thus there is a (perhaps unintended) tendency to bring science back to a more separated, perhaps isolated and more autonomous activity, following its own rules and hunting for impacts in the ISI system rather than in the ‘real world’.*

That relevant research must be good research is not contested. However, the idea of excellence can be interpreted as ‘being better than others in some competition, rather than being good’.<sup>5</sup> The notion of excellence has thus become the basis on which universities differentiate themselves from one another, as evident in university rankings worldwide. The result is that diversity is ‘often ... seen

through the lens of superior or inferior status, a phenomenon which is aggravated by the halo effect of global rankings'.<sup>23</sup>

This scenario in turn relates to the linear, hierarchical approach to university reputation rankings around the globe, which is largely based on research output in accredited international journals. Mouton<sup>24</sup> warns against this vertical approach as 'a scientometric discourse' that largely occurs on the descriptive level and depicts what universities look like in terms of absolute scientific output. Instead, Mouton claims that higher education differentiation is embedded in widely different discourses. Is it a discourse about allocation of national resources, or redress and transformation, or competitiveness, or strategic positioning? Each discourse gives priority to specific criteria when measuring differentiation.

### *Communicating research*

One of the biggest challenges emerging in research is how to communicate research, and how to bridge the gaps between knowledge production, policy and application. The issue is not the supply of knowledge (which is abundant), but how to make this knowledge accessible to society and engage in communication and dialogue about it. According to the EC MASIS report,<sup>5</sup> although researchers and research councils or agencies are trying to engage the public, the practice of knowledge communication still seems to be unidirectional. It is also steeped in ideological debate, with accusations that the global evolution of knowledge – primarily flowing from the North – has influenced local knowledge paradigms, and that 'neo-liberal' concepts such as a 'knowledge economy' primarily serve the interests of economies in the global North.<sup>25</sup>

Compounding the issue of research communication is the age of interactivity. The development of Web 2.0 technology and the rise of e-science have created new opportunities for improving public understanding of science. However, these opportunities bring their own challenges. Certain scholars believe that scientists are still not realising the potential of the Worldwide Web, which was developed as a scientific collaborative workspace by Berners-Lee in 1989.<sup>5</sup> Advocates of open access systems argue that the rise of e-science requires methods that enable the open, immediate and free sharing of knowledge and peer-reviewed literature on the Web. They argue that open access is not a luxury but rather a necessity, particularly in societies where educational inequality exists.<sup>26</sup> Not only do open access systems improve the speed at which science reaches the rest of society, but they also help researchers to communicate online more rapidly and collaborate more effectively.<sup>27</sup>

The principle of open access is still resisted by many researchers. This is despite the new policies that higher education institutions have either put in place already or are in the process of doing so, in response to funder requirements. Many people still regard the primary means of scientific communication as formal scientific publications, and individual career and institutional assessments are based on such publications.<sup>5,10</sup> Internet content is regarded as volatile and perishable, whereas scholarly journals produced by prominent publishers are seen as more prestigious and lasting. Also, open access can provide public access to knowledge that might be misinterpreted and awaken the 'irrational masses'.<sup>5</sup>

In the following section, we discuss the manner in which the above issues and challenges in strategic research are reflected in the emerging paradigm of strategic communication.

### **Strategic communication: Trends and shifts**

To the extent that research has become strategic and reflexive, communication has also become strategic and reflexive. Overton-de Klerk and Verwey<sup>28</sup> discuss the trends and shifts leading to the emerging paradigm of strategic communication against the backdrop of four key epistemological tenets that underlie postmodern knowledge and communication. These are *emergence*, *reflexivity*, *difference* and *resistance*.<sup>29-32</sup>

Strategic communication, simply defined as 'purposeful communication to achieve a mission',<sup>28,33</sup> is essentially the result of the digital communication revolution. This revolution has taken the control

of information out of the hands of a limited elite and made it available to many people. Abundant literature exists on the shifts that led to strategic communication,<sup>28</sup> which are summarised in Table 1. The table also shows how these shifts have been reflected in strategic science communication.

The shifts in strategic communication, as discussed in Table 1, all essentially indicate that in a digitally interactive era, power has shifted from institutional communicators to individual recipients. Top-down, unidirectional transmission of information aimed at achieving consensus is no longer a sustainable model. Strategic communication must allow creative solutions to evolve spontaneously, bottom-up through active participation in dialogue.

These shifts in strategic communication are not necessarily equally reflected in the communication of strategic science, even if they feature in the scientific debate. Although strategic science has become more collaborative and reflexive, science communication – according to many scientists themselves – needs to open up and encourage more socially accountable, transparent and participatory modes of transaction between science and stakeholders in society.

*Purposeful brands: The case for brand relevance*

Brands are made up of a complex set of tangibles and intangibles, where the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts. ‘Tangibles’ refers to the product itself (inherent value), whereas ‘intangibles’ refers to the added value, including associations with the brand (perceived value). The latter component is the most vulnerable to risk, and can – in a matter of days, if not hours – affect public perceptions of the whole. Several South African higher education institutions experienced this phenomenon during the #FeesMustFall protests.

**Table 1:** Shifts in strategic communication

Shifts	As they manifest in strategic communication	As they manifest in strategic science communication
<b>From top-down to bottom-up</b>	Linear one-way transmission has progressed to two-way transaction. <sup>28,34</sup> An ‘evolving and emerging process of discourse and negotiations’. <sup>35</sup>	Remains stuck in transmission mode. <sup>5,18,36</sup> Prevailing model is top-down: science makes discoveries and makes them available to society. <sup>37</sup> Hidden agenda (according to some) to promote fascination with natural sciences and engineering. <sup>5</sup> ‘Public understanding of science’ nothing but marketing to promote economic and innovation interests. <sup>5</sup>
<b>From monologue to dialogue</b>	Communication flow has moved from one-way monologue delivered by top management (aimed at ensuring compliance and agreement) to an inclusive and unpredictable dialogue among institutional stakeholders at all levels <sup>28</sup> – e.g. #FeesMustFall.  Insistence on transparency, particularly among under-30 generation (more than 50% of world’s population. <sup>38</sup> )	Increasing calls to produce research communication suitable for dialogue (e.g. transdisciplinary approach <sup>20</sup> ), as a unidirectional flow is no longer sustainable. <sup>5,36</sup>  Increasing demands for open access to science. <sup>26,27</sup>

<b>From consensus to dissent</b>	Communication not intended to achieve consensus but to hear multiple voices and dissent – which is not only tolerated but encouraged. <sup>26</sup> Meaning is created through influence, not power. Emphasis on process rather than outcomes of discourse. <sup>39</sup>	Allows debate in early stages, but deliberations are closed when consensus is reached. Conflicts are ‘managed’. <sup>5</sup>  Insistence that deliberations must remain open, particularly when a diversity of stakeholders may be affected <sup>5</sup> (e.g. nanotechnology, fracking, Homo Naledi).
<b>From control to self-organisation</b>	Institutions no longer control outcomes but allow creative solutions to spontaneously evolve bottom-up, through active participation in dialogue <sup>28,35,40</sup> Emphasis on sense-giving and sense-making activities. <sup>28</sup>	Resonates with Gibbons’ call for transparent, participative and self-organising contract between science and society, based on the ‘joint production of knowledge by science and society’. <sup>37</sup> Must generate its own accountability and audit systems.
<b>From social responsibility to accountability</b>	Institutions no longer merely responsible, but now also accountable, for contributions to society and environment. <sup>41</sup> Stakeholders active and activist. <sup>42,43</sup> Accountability is not owned by institution but granted by stakeholders – earned through transparency and congruency between words and deeds. <sup>44</sup>	Increasing calls for ‘social accountability of science’ <sup>36</sup> and ‘accountable systems of knowledge production’. <sup>37</sup>  Accountability now a measure of sustainability in HE institutions, as the harbinger of transformation in developing societies. <sup>42</sup>
<b>From integration to co-creation</b>	From one voice (integration <sup>45</sup> ) to diverse voices (co-creation <sup>28</sup> ), particularly raised in consumer-generated media. <sup>46</sup> Institutions no longer control messaging and content <sup>38</sup> but rather allow for strategic co-creation in collaboration with stakeholders (important in institutional branding). Whole is bigger than sum of the parts.	Same shift has occurred in some areas of research, <sup>20</sup> where multidisciplinary (additive) research has evolved into interdisciplinary (integrative) research, or into transdisciplinary (holistic, co-creative) research that produces a single –sometimes complex – multidimensional result.  The whole differs from the parts. <sup>20</sup>

The shifts in strategic communication have also exerted a profound influence on brands. The most important shift is that brands can no longer, through the mass media, control what stakeholders think of them. Stakeholders can now rewrite the script, often in consumer-generated media and hashtag campaigns. This can place the brand reputation, however carefully constructed, at risk. As a result, institutions are now forced to engage in dialogue to minimise their reputational risk. The need for such dialogue – both online and offline – is the strongest among the so-called ‘millennials’,<sup>47</sup> many of whom are enrolled at higher education institutions.

In other words, brands can no longer rest on their laurels and rely on a reputation of excellence alone. The very foundations on which those reputations are built are increasingly being challenged. Instead, brands are required to constantly reflect upon the values they represent, the value they add, and their purpose.<sup>48</sup> The questions that need to be asked include: Who are we? What is it that we do? What difference do we make, and to whom? In short, are we relevant?

Although other definitions of ‘brand relevance’ exist,<sup>49,50</sup> in this context the term refers to brands that have a purpose which matters to all of their stakeholders. Constantly reflecting upon a brand’s relevance has become the mantra for building a sustainable brand.

#### *Current discourse: Research excellence and higher education reputation*

A growing number of higher education institutions worldwide aspire to research excellence, and claim to be research-intensive institutions. How ‘research excellence’ is best defined, achieved and measured remains an open question. The concept often presumes the exclusion of multi stakeholder collaboration for the common good. This view is enforced by widely recognised global ranking systems of higher education institutions, such as Quacquarelli Symonds (QS), the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) of Shanghai Jiao Tong University, and the Times Higher Education (THE) rankings. Although softer indicators – such as peer and employer reputation – are sometimes included in the rankings, it is indisputable that all top-ranked universities hold that position mainly due to their international published and measurable research output.<sup>2,3,24</sup>

However, when research excellence is understood too narrowly and is defined solely by rankings, there is considerable slippage between the value of research excellence as a measurable indicator and its worth to society. By consensus, the rankings themselves are biased and flawed.<sup>51,52</sup> In this paper we focus on the formulaic approach to excellence, in order to clearly juxtapose this one-sided view against the need to understand ‘excellence’ more broadly.

In the narrow rank-focused approach to ‘research excellence’, research intensive universities usually show several main features. Firstly, they emphasise postgraduate training and research, hence shifting their attention away from basic undergraduate education to the more high-powered stakes of postgraduate activity as the machine for innovation and engine-room of research. As a result, innovative models of supervision are in place, over and above the classic one-on-one training. These new models capitalise on both supervisory capacity and the peer-learning capabilities of students. Committee-based supervision and team-based hubs, where several PhD students work on a common theme under one supervisor with the help of a mentor and postdoctoral fellow, are good examples. These models are used even in disciplines that do not have a tradition of team-based research.

The postgraduate enterprise is valorised and care is taken to deliver an optimal training experience. Students present papers at conferences and spend time at the universities of their supervisors’ international research partners. The result is a next-generation of potential academics who emerge from their studies already well networked and embedded in the global community of scholars. Such graduates are able to hold their own in any research environment, and are ready to take up junior academic posts.

Secondly, strategic partnerships, particularly those of global reach, are a key ingredient. It is well established<sup>24</sup> that publications that are co-authored by international collaborators are more visible, and have a higher impact, than single-author papers that are published in local journals. Research-intensive universities seek out the most advantageous partnership agreements and prestigious research excellence networks. Agreements for research collaboration, co-supervision, and the exchange of staff and students with Ivy League Universities across the world are obvious examples. So is the membership by invitation from networks such as the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) and the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU). The Alliance of Research Universities in Africa (ARUA) that was launched in March 2015 in Dakar is a more recent example.

In addition to prestige, the obvious value of such membership is the gearing effect of structured relations and dedicated funding. These networks often create a ‘virtuous circle’ of enhanced

postgraduate experience through joint training and exposure to multiple laboratory or fieldwork sites, as well as strengthened relations between principal investigators. In turn, these factors lead to a greater number of co-authored publications and joint funding proposals.

A third key ingredient of universities that rely on research excellence as a defining factor is the clustering of expertise and critical mass to create theme-based, problem-focused centres of excellence. These hubs drive large-scale interdisciplinary projects around a common theme of global significance. Examples of such topics are climate change, poverty alleviation and sustainable environments. The research hubs have strong academic leadership and a team of researchers who spend at least 60% of their research time on related projects. As vehicles of collaboration, they drive international partnerships and leverage the biggest and best grants available globally. They train postgraduates and serve as knowledge incubators, thus creating a self-sustaining cycle of excellence and productivity.

Fourthly, staff recruitment at institutions that pursue the rankings is shaped by a passion for excellence. There is no time to nurture and slowly grow promising young scholars if that might slow down the generation of funding grants. The environment is far too competitive and pressurised to favour candidates who merely have potential over those who are already well established. In the South African context, where transformation of the science cohort is a priority, this scenario creates tensions that some say are impossible to resolve.<sup>53</sup>

Lastly, visibility is essential in a globally connected world. This has led to dramatically increased investment from institutions, over the past decade or so, in web-based platforms and open-access institutional repositories. Pockets of excellence and increased outputs are foregrounded, and researcher profiles and the institution's infrastructure capabilities are promoted. Such online visibility stimulates the imagination about the scope and reach of research as an activity per se. Interactive web-based portals and 'brag' sites display researcher profiles and tell stories about paradigm-shifting research findings. Monthly or weekly e-research newsletters are widely distributed, and a range of glossy promotional material is produced. All project an image of world-changing excellence. In the 'dating game' of international research partnerships, such visibility is a key requirement to assert a research-intensive identity.

Indeed, the *Webometrics* ranking of higher education institutions has elevated the visibility of research excellence, thereby increasing competition in this area and making investment in visibility inseparable from investment in research itself. This is sometimes to the despair of university planners.

Claiming research excellence, as defined by rankings, is therefore an expensive enterprise. Wealthy institutions in developed economies are in a position to pick and choose their students and research partners, while institutions in the developing world vie for recognition in research excellence. The recently established ARUA is a case in point, as research excellence is the suggested common denominator to make this a preferred network for global engagement. That all the member institutions are not necessarily the strongest research universities on the African continent seems immaterial, in this context of building a Pan-African knowledge economy in a highly politicised environment. No wonder then that social responsiveness and the common good are sometimes sacrificed in the quest to strengthen the image of research excellence.

Simply scorning the concept of excellence as being exclusive and elitist carries a great risk. It is essential, instead, to bring Southern perspectives to global challenges from a position of equity and strength, and so to bring insights from Africa to bear on research questions of global reach. It is dangerously simplistic to equate research excellence with the 'capitalist project' and to ignore the essential role research can play in improving the quality of life for ordinary citizens. It remains necessary, but not sufficient, to retain research excellence and to move beyond that to the notion of brand relevance.

### *Changing the reputation discourse: Brand relevance*

From the previous discussion, it is evident that a strong link exists between research output and reputation building. Indeed, research excellence – as defined by the ranking systems – is widely regarded as the most important driver of a university's national and global stature. As a result, universities tend to direct their resources into areas of high measurable output, such as research. Rankings in turn are perceived as an indication of a university's brand equity,<sup>2,54</sup> and this is especially true of universities with global aspirations. The basic argument is as follows:

*Research output = research excellence = ranking = global reputation = brand equity.*

Responding to the intense demand for higher education worldwide and the rise of the 'global university shopper', ranking systems are therefore used as a shortcut to assess the brand value of a university. Universities are arranged in a highly structured manner, giving each an absolute position in a 'hierarchical order of things'<sup>2</sup>. Strategic planning at universities therefore focuses on directing the organisation's energies and resources in line with the requirements of ranking systems, and increasing research output and visibility where it matters.

It can be argued that the pursuit of research excellence remains critically important for higher education institutions, and represents to a large degree their *raison d'être* in a knowledge economy. It can also be argued that rankings as such are important for all brands, as they have a substantial effect on what the market thinks of those brands. But there are a few problems with the argument that ranking equals brand value. It is also highly questionable whether research excellence can be the basis for brand differentiation or brand excellence. This is *product thinking*, not *brand thinking*, and will lead to 'sameness' – where ultimately few will survive. According to Gibbon et al.<sup>2</sup>:

*... while rankings may give the impression of something fairly fixed, the jostling for places, by universities with aspirations, will make for some dramatic disturbances in ranking, and will make it increasingly difficult for a university to even remain in its current rank position.*

Most higher education institutions tend to build their reputations around a cluster of generic constructs, such as research excellence, academic reputation and tradition. This approach leads those institutions into a conformity trap – and lately into other forms of resistance. For example, Teferra<sup>52</sup> describes all of Africa's flagship universities as 'identical twins.' Muller argues that if universities are left to their own devices, they 'will tend to converge, because by competing with each other, they naturally tend to imitate the institutions perceived to be of higher status'.<sup>23</sup> This convergence is aggravated, according to Muller,<sup>23</sup> by traditional academic values: the stronger those values are, the stronger the tendency towards imitation.

Indeed, it is surprising to note how modernist higher education institutions' approach to reputation and brand building has persisted, and how fixed that approach still is in linear notions of top-down rankings. According to Rensburg<sup>55</sup>, the linear top-down system signals elitism instead of relevance. A growing number of voices are calling for a more lateral, horizontal mode of thinking where 'apples are compared with apples'.<sup>5,24,55</sup> The recent announcement that plans are underway to differentiate South African higher education institutions into universities, university colleges and tertiary colleges is therefore to be welcomed, if only as a first step. It now becomes even more important for each of these institutions to find their brand purpose and craft their mission niche in collaboration with stakeholders.

In the final analysis, the challenge facing South African higher education institutions should not be trivialised. According to Mouton<sup>24</sup>,

*Scientific research and knowledge production are complex enterprises and its measurement cannot be reduced to single indicators or even very limited ranking systems. We are currently still at the conceptual stage where the challenge is to develop a more refined set of measures that will be valid and reliable... as well as sensitive to the different*

*policy and normative/evaluative discourses where these measures will be applied and used.*

Missing, still, from the current equations is the concept of purposeful university branding. Brand reputation is the perceived value added to the intrinsic value. Although the intrinsic qualities of product excellence may be a minimum requirement to become a brand leader, these remain brand *inputs*. To become brand leaders, they must have purpose and relevance that resonate with their stakeholders and transcend product qualities. Brand relevance is the great intangible, built on tangibles, that sets a leader apart. In other words, brand relevance is a way of recontextualising research excellence in praxis.

To use some examples from the leading brands of our time – such as Apple, Coke or Nike, brand relevance should begin with the creation of a brand manifesto.<sup>56</sup> This involves crafting a mission niche that can be tied to specific areas of focus. The mission niche is a social contract with stakeholders, for which the brand is held accountable. Given the needs of a society in transformation, such a brand manifesto should be co-created with a diversity of stakeholders, alert and responsive to the complex demands of a nascent democracy and continent at large.

Higher education branding can never be based upon research or peer reputation alone. This feeds into a somewhat incestuous cycle of reputation building, which places relevance and uptake into society at risk. Scientists are not the only ones to fish from the pond of knowledge; society needs to be involved in the fishing too. Branding requires *local* input so that the difference the brand makes to its immediate surroundings is of key importance. For these reasons, it may be important to include end-users (students) and other stakeholders (such as communities) in the measurement of universities' reputations. Measuring *social impact* has become the new imperative.

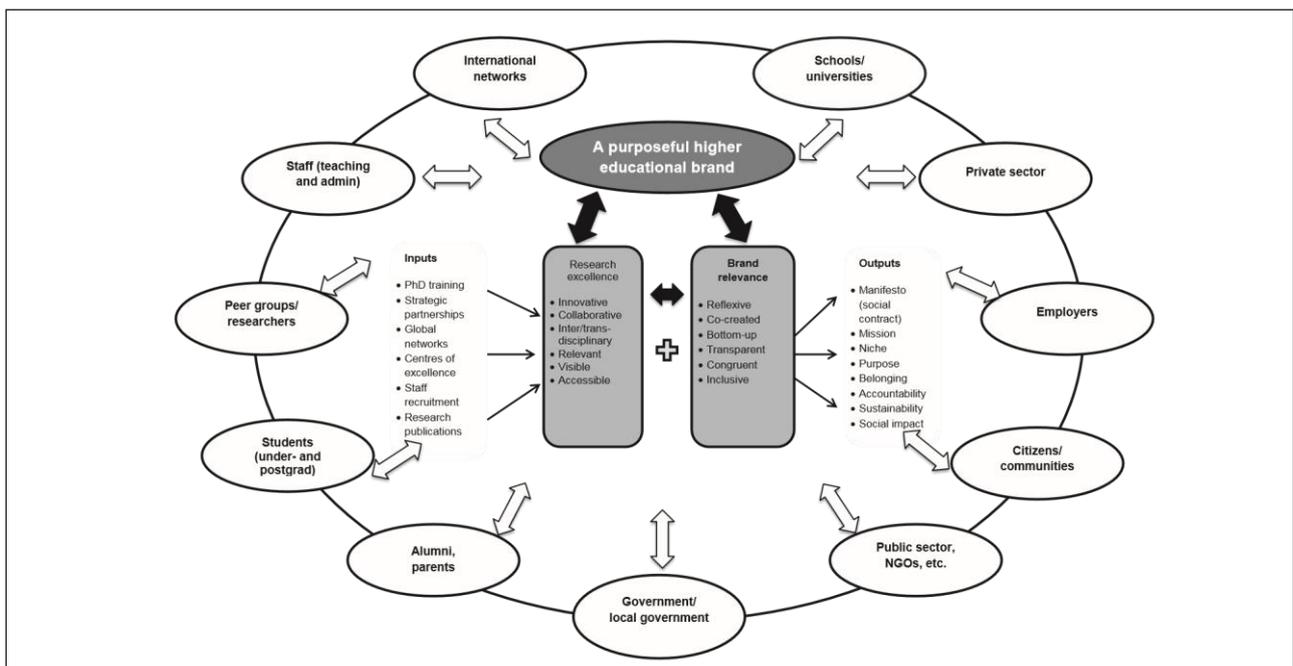
As shown in Figure 1, research publications, PhD training, global networks, centres of excellence, and excellence among staff create measurable and necessary inputs towards research excellence in a higher education institution. However, for an institution to differentiate itself and find a clear positioning in a highly competitive environment, the concept of research excellence must be broadened and combined with the concept of brand relevance. Brand relevance is reflexive, inclusive and co-created from the bottom up, in collaboration with a number of internal and external stakeholders. The outputs of these interactive processes should be the crafting of a social contract (brand manifesto), including a mission niche, against which the institution can be held accountable. The contract would also enable social impact to be measured by qualitative methods. The result is bigger than the sum of its parts: a purposeful higher education brand that instils a sense of belonging with its stakeholders, especially those that are closest to it.

### Conclusion

In this article we argue that power has shifted from institutional communicators to stakeholders. Our conclusion is based on analysis of trends and shifts in strategic science and strategic communication, in which the linear model has given way to a lateral, stakeholder-inclusive approach to strategic higher education reputation building.

The sustainability of ‘research excellence’ as the basis for higher education reputation building is questionable, for the following reasons:

- It is conceptualised in such a way that it can only be operationally measured by and ranked according to linear, singular indicators of research output. These outputs are no longer synchronous with new discourses in strategic science and strategic communication, and involve a limited number of stakeholders.
- It may lead to the conformity trap; excellence alone is not sufficient to differentiate higher education institutions and can lead to convergence, sameness and mediocrity.
- It can lead to the binary trap, thereby increasing reputational risk to the brand. This is because of exclusionary connotations associated with the concept of excellence, especially in transforming societies.



**Figure 1:** An alternative model for strategic higher education reputation building.

We therefore proposed an alternative lateral and ‘stakeholder-centric’ reputation model. Our model focuses on the brand instead of the product, so that the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts. Research excellence is regarded as a necessary product input, as it indicates intrinsic value. However, a higher education brand is differentiated only by shifting the focus to the perceived value of the higher education brand, and through reflection on the higher education brand’s relevance and purpose. Such reflection needs to be a collaborative effort with diverse stakeholders, including internal stakeholders, end-users and communities.

The output should be the co-creation of a social contract between the higher education institution and stakeholders, or a brand manifesto. Against this contract, the institution can be held accountable and the socioeconomic impact of both the brand and the research can be tracked.

Although further work is required to refine the constructs of our model, we believe our contribution is original and heuristic, and could stimulate further much-needed research and debate. Reflections on strategic research and its relevance in society can, perhaps for the first time, combine with reflections on strategic communication and the development of a purposeful higher educational brand.

A good reputation, like charity, begins at home. Only when higher education institutions have found their niche and their purpose for being, and are able to measure their brands’ role in delivering long-term socioeconomic value, can those institutions turn their attention towards building global reputation and excellence.

### Authors’ contributions

N.O-dK concentrated on the brand-relevance and communication aspects of the article and M.S. on the excellence aspects. The central argument and all other analytical and conceptual contributions were fully collaborative. Indeed, the whole is bigger than the sum of the parts.

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