

A communication approach to strategic (ODL) positioning: pitfalls and prospects

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Abstract

Positioning of any organisation is one of the key ways to ensure competitive advantage and ultimately its survival. In the context of distance learning, this is increasingly critical, because of increased competition among higher education institutions and technological developments. The distinction between contact and distance learning institutions is becoming increasingly blurred. Currently, Unisa has positioned itself as an institution where students “*Learn without limits*”. Although this is a communication approach to positioning, it has implications with regard to the expectations created among the students. This paper examines this positioning to determine the pitfalls and prospects that it presents, and the subsequent challenge to the institution in the extent to which it can live up to these expectations.

Keywords: Higher education, Positioning, Strategic, Education, Open and Distance Learning (ODL), Communication, Strategy, Programme Qualification Mix (PQM)

INTRODUCTION

The South African Higher Education (HE) environment has recently witnessed an increase in private higher education institutions over and above the 23 public universities. This has resulted in increased competition for a fairly smaller pool of students that HE institutions can attract.

Given these developments, it can be argued that the survival and sustainability of higher education institutions depends largely on their positioning with regard to marketing, student recruitment and the content of their Programme Qualification Mix (PQM). This paper contends that institutions need to ask themselves the following question: what is our niche area? This is because they cannot be “everything” to all current and potential students. As Burrell and Grizzell (2008) indicate, this is critical to ensure their sustainability.

As a result of various developments in the educational environment, Unisa’s position as an ODL institution has come under serious competition from both private and public HE institutions. This is largely because traditionally contact institutions have also begun to teach through the distance mode. There has recently been a surge in the number of international institutions now able to attract local students. These developments present a challenge to Unisa with regard to its positioning and ultimately its sustainability.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

As Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) argue, the dynamics of globalisation and the introduction of information and communication technologies (ICT) have resulted in a wave of information that threatens to overwhelm many countries around the world.

As a result, the educational needs of individuals and society at large have changed. This makes it necessary for the institutions to transform their mode of delivery in line with the changing dynamics. In this regard, Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) further state that because the world of work is more complex and fluid, newer approaches to working and learning are in demand. As a result, educational institutions are required to prepare their students with lifelong learning skills they need to survive and meet the changes of the 21st century.

According to Keegan (1996), the term “distance education” refers to an educational approach in which there is a quasi-separation of the learner and the teacher in time and space. He further states that the teaching strategy is embedded into the learning material in such a way that the learners are able to manage the learning process on their own.

What has become most notable is that the distance mode of teaching has not been confined to distance learning institutions such as Unisa only. Traditionally contact institutions have increasingly begun to present their lessons through the distance mode. As a result, the distinction between contact and distance learning becomes blurred. It is envisaged that in the near future, the space for distance learning will be more closely contested.

Against this background, the challenge is how distance institutions such as Unisa can position themselves in this increasingly competitive environment. Currently, Unisa has positioned itself as an institution where students “*Learn without limits*”. Although this is a communication approach to positioning, it has implications with regard to the expectations created among the students. The challenge that this positioning presents is the extent to which it can live up to the expectations that it creates. This is important because positioning from a communication perspective must be preceded by making sure that the institution has the infrastructure and systems that will enable it to meet the expectations that the positioning approach creates.

This paper examines this positioning to determine its pitfalls and advantages. It contends that this positioning presents a challenge to the institution in the extent to which it can live up to these expectations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section focuses on the methodology used in the case study. According to Noor (2008), a case study refers to an event or even a unit of analysis. It is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence. It is largely concerned with how and why things happen, allowing the investigation of contextual realities and the differences between what was planned and what actually occurred. This method enables the researcher to examine and understand the complex real-life activities of the phenomenon under investigation. Rather than using samples and following a rigid protocol to examine a limited number of variables, case study methods involve an in-depth examination of a single event.

For the purposes of this paper, the University of South Africa has been selected. The idea is to look at its positioning from a communication perspective, taking into consideration the changes in the higher education environment. With regard to data collection, the paper draws data from oral interviews and other relevant documents. These include, among other things, *2015 revisited*, the *Institutional Operational Plan (IOP)*, the *Unisa ODL policy* and the *Unisa ODL communication strategy*.

Data analysis involved a cyclical process, proceeding from more general to more specific observations. In the analysis, the discussion links the identified themes to larger theoretical and practical issues.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of strategy and planning in HE positioning/marketing

As Burrell and Grizzell (2008) argue, universities have been extremely slow in positioning themselves in response to societal changes. As a result, they find themselves in a reactive position, repairing damages caused by their inability to adjust. It is, therefore, important for institutions to address their position in such a way that they demonstrate to the world a clear understanding of who they are and where they want to be in the future (Burrell & Grizzell, 2008).

In addition, institutions also need to find ways of competing in their industry that will position them favourably in relation to their competitors. As Nayeri, Mohajeri and Mashhadi (2008) indicate, HE institutions acquire their funding from both private and public sources. This requires an analysis of the HE environment to identify the institution's best approach to positioning. In this regard, Gilles and Elkund (2010) indicate that HE institutions must define an appropriate strategic positioning in order to appeal to both the students and other relevant stakeholders. The following elements of the marketing mix are briefly discussed below: product, place, promotion and pricing strategies.

Positioning in higher education

The principles of marketing as applied in the business environment are applicable to the higher education environment. The term market mix refers to a unique blend of product, place (distribution), promotion and pricing strategies (often referred to as the four Ps) (Lamb, Hair and McDaniel (2009:46). According to Kurtz (2008:48), after marketers select a target market, they direct their company's activities toward profitably satisfying that segment. In this regard, Kotler and Keller (2009:253) argue that, regardless of the segmentation scheme that is used, the key is to adjust the marketing programme to recognise customer differences.

The main objective of the marketing mix is to blend the four strategic elements to fit the needs and preferences of a specific market. It should be noted that the marketing mix can and should be an ever-changing combination of variables to achieve success (Kurtz (2008:48). In this regard, Lamb, Hair and McDaniel (2009:46) argue that all four components of the marketing mix must be blended to achieve optimal results.

Looking at the key aspects of positioning, it is evident that a higher education institution such as Unisa needs to determine the positioning strategy that will maximise its strength, whilst addressing its limitations. There is also a need to determine the appropriate mix in positioning the institution. These decisions must be taken with due consideration of global developments within the higher education environment. As UNESCO (2004) indicates, it is impossible to discuss the impact of globalisation on higher education without referring to the internationalisation of higher education.

CONCLUSION

As Burrell and Grizzell (2008) argue, institutions must be responsive to demographic shifts that have occurred in higher education by engaging in ongoing strategic planning similar to that which is done in the business world. The use of these planning methods are critical to identifying the market segments most likely to assist the organisation in achieving its goals and then design programs and schedules that will best meet the needs of those market segments. The days of relying solely on an institution's reputation and word of mouth to recruit students are long gone. The most successful institutions today recognised the importance of strategic planning.

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