Sub-sector branding and nation branding: the case of higher education

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper concerns public sub-sector branding within the higher education (HE) system. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how public sub-sector branding within HE is organized and how it is influenced by the use of national values, traits and characteristics.

Design/methodology/approach – The study relies on two data sources: first, the paper benefits from a data set of one-stop web-portals for HE from the 23 countries listed in *Times Higher Education*'s top-60 universities ranking. Second, it builds on a sample and brief overview of Norway's sub-sector branding of its HE sector.

Findings – Expert authorities within the HE sector are legally and organizationally responsible for sub-sector branding, and they establish coordinated and coherent web-portals. In practice, however, nation-branding concerns are influencing on how the HE sub-sector is branded. The paper concludes with a discussion of democratic implications, and points to paradoxes arising from the use of national clichés and characteristics in this highly international sub-sector of the public realm.

Originality/value – The paper informs discussions about public sub-sector branding within HE, a phenomenon that thus far has not been systematically studied. The practical applications of such a study are evident, as branding is becoming more important in the public sector in general, and in HE in particular.

Keywords Corporate governance, Public sector organizations, Corporate branding

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

There is growing agreement that public organizations can benefit from marketing (Wæraas, 2008), and, in recent years, branding and reputation management have become important concepts and tools even within the public sector (Wæraas and Maor, 2015; Fredriksson and Pallas, 2016). This is due to market-based reforms in western democracies, New Public Management and increased competition between private and public organizations (Byrkjeflot, 2015). Branding can generate public support for organizations, protect them from political attack, increase their power and autonomy, and help them recruit and retain employees. Maor (2015, p. 1) identifies a growing research interest in reputational considerations in decision making by public entities, although one has "only just begun to scratch the surface of the scientific opportunities awaiting investigation of this subject."

The aim of this paper is to deepen our understanding of public sub-sector branding within the higher education (HE) system, a phenomenon that thus far has not been systematically studied. The article builds on a comparison of 23 countries' presentations of their HE sectors, in combination with a sample and brief overview of Norway's sub-sector branding of its HE sector. In the process of branding their HE sectors, states tend to use national values, traits and characteristics as means of building reputation and distinctiveness (Sataøen, 2015; Sataøen and Wæraas, 2016). However, little is known about the influence of national traits and

values in sub-sector branding initiatives and programs. The analysis will therefore also shed light on the relationship between sub-sector branding and the use of national values, traits and characteristics within HE. Three potential dynamics for understanding this are outlined: a rational dynamic, a cultural dynamic and an institutional dynamic.

The main questions raised in this paper are as follows:

RQ1. What characterizes sub-sector branding in the HE system when it comes to ownership structures?

RQ2. How is sub-sector branding related to national traits, values and characteristics within the HE system?

RQ3. How can a set of dynamics explain sub-sector branding of HE and its relationship to national values, traits and characteristics?

The practical applications of such a study are evident, as branding is becoming more important in the public sector in general, and in HE in particular. As there is an intensified global competition for international students, the question of sub-sector branding of the HE system is of great managerial importance for authorities, administrators and HE organizations.

2. Background and theory
2.1 Background: HE and branding
For most countries, the HE sector is important in terms of the necessity for nations to develop a competent workforce and secure innovation and development, as well as to attract foreign students, investors and employees. There is rising global competition for international students, and between 2000 and 2010, the number of globally mobile students nearly doubled, from 2.1m to 4.1m (Choudaha and de Wit, 2014), growing at an average annual rate of 7.2 percent (OECD, 2012). The market for HE services has grown, and HE institutions in Europe have become "strategic actors," for instance, due to a "hands-on private sector style of management" (Mampaey *et al.*, 2015). The perceptions and choices of students and other third parties are also understood as shaped through growing branding activities (Mampaey *et al.*, 2015). HE branding is considered as more "important than before, and to an increasing extent, a strategic and managerial issue" (Stensaker, 2007, p. 2). Drori *et al.* (2013, p. 143) argue that "although competition among universities is not a new phenomenon, branding is a recent fashion for universities to position themselves in the field of higher education." The variations across national HE-systems are large (Huisman *et al.*, 2007; Bleiklie, 2014), creating a context where branding and efforts for differentiation are important.

Public sub-sector branding within HE involves managing its relations both with the organizational level (in this case universities), and with the overarching national level, as HE institutions tend to exploit national values in branding and communication campaigns (Sataøen, 2015). Hence, sub-sector branding of the HE sector ties in with nation branding programs and efforts. In the following sections, the theoretical foundations are laid out. Here the concept of branding, nation branding and the peculiarities of sub-sector branding are discussed in more detail.

2.2 Branding and the relationship between sub-sectors and national characteristics
Branding can be defined as "the conscious decision by senior management to distil and make known the attributes of the organization's identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition. The proposition underpins organizational efforts to communicate, differentiate, and enhance the brand *vis-à-vis* key stakeholder groups and networks" (Balmer, 2001, p. 281). Branding includes the visual, verbal, textual and behavioral presentations and expressions of an organization's identity as well as decisions and strategies underpinning such expressions. In Aspara *et al.* (2014), discussions about the

dynamics of power involved in branding are underscored, and branding is understood as an interactional process involving several stakeholders and interests. Branding is not only a strategic activity or linear process from marketers to consumers or citizens, nor is it only an institutionalized prescription. Aspara *et al.* (2014) argue that branding and the brand itself is the product of negotiations and conflicts, in which securing legitimacy is important. Within this perspective, branding in the public sector has democratic implications as it involves struggles between different interests and organizations with or without parliamentary control. In the following paper, the empirical focus will be on organizational expressions and efforts to communicate and differentiate, in line with Balmer's (2001) definition.

Although a growing body of literature is investigating university branding (e.g. Aspara *et al.*, 2014; Chapleo *et al.*, 2011; Christensen and Gornitzka, 2018; Drori *et al.*, 2013), little empirical attention has been given to the coordinated efforts of branding an entire public sub-sector by means of strategic communication (Sataøen and Wæraas, 2016). Public policy is divisible into a number of more or less clearly defined policy areas, fields or sub-sectors (Rayner *et al.*, 2001). Historically, governments have been organized around policy areas or sub-sectors, such as health care, education, infrastructure, tourism, agriculture and so on. Recent developments in public administration, for instance, "joined up government" and "whole-of-government," have focused on the interconnectedness between sub-sectors. Nevertheless, sub-sectors are institutional arrangements, which impose order and coherence to the public sector (Rayner *et al.*, 2001). Hence, a sub-sector can be defined as a policy domain or area which is part of a larger political system revolving around substantive political issues (Rayner *et al.*, 2001; Burstein, 1991). Often, sub-sectors share common norms, perceptions and reputations (Sataøen and Wæraas, 2016). As an example, Wæraas (2015) shows how municipalities share reputation, something in which affects all category members and organizations within the sub-sector – it serves as a common resource. Marsh (1998) argues that it is an empirical question whether there are networks and relationships within sub-sectors, and that sub-sector relations cannot be determined *a priori*.

Today, countries around world are reflecting upon their image, and how values and identities within the country can be strategically communicated to the external environment (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015). National values and identities are used as resources in a global competition among states, and are a multi-dimensional blend of elements such as history, nature, culture and identity expressions (Dinnie, 2008) that together constitute a country as a brand. Nation branding involves the creation of imagined communities through symbols, values and behaviors, areas that historically have been prominent products of political decisions. Today, it is argued that there is little direct political and democratic control or even involvement in the field of nation branding (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015). However, it is still an empirical question to what extent governmental interests and democratic processes are involved in sub-sector branding of HE, and how this intersects with nation branding initiatives. The purpose of using national characteristics as a discursive resource is to "stand out" in the competition among nations for tourists, entrepreneurs, events, investors and, we might add, students. To stand out, it is important to implement a brand that differs from others (Anholt, 2006). In practice, however, there is evidence that many organizations, in particular public organizations, tend to communicate in the same way, and therefore produce clichéd and uniform presentations of the organization (Antorini and Schultz, 2005). Antorini and Schultz (2005) conceptualize this as a "conformity trap." Although branding has become popular both in theory and practice, important dimensions of public sector branding remain to be explored and scrutinized (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012). Therefore, in the following sections, we argue that perspectives and concepts from the public administration literature can be fruitful for understanding public sub-sector branding within HE.

2.3 Public sector branding and public administration perspectives: the rational dynamic,
the cultural dynamic and the institutional dynamic

A particular feature of the public sector is that the organizations exist in an environment of conflicting norms, values and ideas, which makes it difficult to communicate consistently (Wæraas and Maor, 2015), and to unite the different elements and types of communication into "one single identity expression" (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012, p. 195). Although communicational consistency and identity coherence can be considered ideals by many branding practitioners, it has been argued that inconsistency can in fact be beneficial for organizations; managers can and ought to utilize it to stimulate organizational change and development (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017, p. 473). From this perspective, inconsistency is not necessarily a result of fragmentation, conflict or bad management (Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017, p. 476); instead, mobilization of inconsistency can open up possibilities for exploring new domains and developing organizational activities (Christensen *et al.*, 2013). Inconsistency between talk and action tends to arise when organizations espouse ideals and values that are not fully implemented, thereby subjecting themselves to pressure (Christensen and Christensen, 2018).

Further, public sector organizations are political in nature, as they rest upon political decisions and negotiations. Such organizations' branding and communication are products of compromises between different values, ideologies and levels in the bureaucratic order. Within public sector organizations, we must therefore expect a certain degree of ambiguity, inconsistency and lack of coherence in branding and strategic communication endeavors.

The organizational locus for sub-sector branding of HE tends to be "single-purpose agencies under the control of (but with autonomy from) a specific ministry" (Sataøen and Wæraas, 2016). Such semi-autonomous public agencies, and their role in public branding, are interesting from a public-administration perspective as they imply "[a] shift from direct to indirect government, and important policy-making powers are delegated to independent technocratic bodies with considerable political leeway" (Christensen and Lægreid, 2006). Single-purpose agencies represent a contrast to previous models of policy making within the public administration system, which were integrated and where policy making and service delivery "were unified under ministerial control" (Christensen and Lægreid, 2006). Hence, the introduction of single-purpose agencies implies a delegation of authority to non-majoritarian institutions not directly accountable to voters (Majone, 1998).

Based on classical propositions from the public administration and organizational literature, three potential dynamics for understanding public sub-sector branding within HE and the relation between such branding efforts and the use of national values, traits and characteristics can be outlined: a rational dynamic, a cultural dynamic and an institutional dynamic. These dynamics were developed by Christensen *et al.* (2007) as a particular organization theory approach to the public sector mainly used to understand the contents of public policy and decision making in public organizations:

(1) The rational dynamic builds on assumptions from the classical organization theory, arguing that organizations are solely instruments for achieving the owner's goals and desires. Decisions are reflections of formal roles and functions in an organizational structure (Lægreid *et al.*, 2006). Although March and Simon's (1958) perspective of bounded rationality has criticized such a purely strategic-instrumental perspective, we all strongly desire our (public) leaders to be rational and systematic (Brunsson, 2007). In many ways, branding can be seen as a rational effort, whereby organizations and actors use communication strategically in order to market and differentiate a particular product, service or organization. In the case of sub-sector branding, a rational dynamic implies tight coordination between organizations and actors, e.g. through active exchange of material used in actual branding programs at different levels (national, sub-sector and university level). A rational dynamic for HE sub-sector branding can be

achieved by directing unambiguous and instrumental messages to defined audiences. As to concrete organizational types, a rational dynamic implies close cooperation between organizations for HE and organizations for foreign affairs, where nation branding initiatives are imposed on the underlying sectors.

(2) The cultural dynamic is based on ideas of institutionalized organizations with unique internal organizational cultures and traditions (Christensen *et al.*, 2007). From a cultural perspective, organizations are entities that develop unique norms and values (Selznick, 1957). Organizational decision making is thus characterized by historical traditions, as organizations are "path dependent." A cultural dynamic stands in opposition to a rational model of decision making, as illustrated by the "garbage-can" model developed by Cohen *et al.* (1972). Here, problems, solutions and participants are selected and attached to each other in more unpredictable ways. In the garbage-can model, decisions are difficult to understand and explain by means of instrumental-rational logics. In our case, a cultural dynamic implies project-based cooperation and relations between the sub-sector branding of HE and nation branding initiatives. Such cooperation will also be based on cultural trajectories and historical experiences and "paths." A cultural dynamic will also explain an implementation of sub-sector branding, where administrative traditions and paths influence how brand initiatives are set up.

(3) The institutional dynamic builds on Meyer and Rowan's (1977) ideas about institutional environment and decoupling, and March and Olsen's (1998) discussions about institutions and institutionalization. Meyer and Rowan's (1977) institutional environmental perspective highlights the global social contexts within and under which different organizations operate. They emphasize that such contexts create (often conflicting) institutional pressures, leading to a decoupling between formal structure and actual organizational activities. Within the (neo)institutional theory, there is also an interest in institutionalized "myths" that travel globally (Greenwood *et al.*, 2017). Such myths represent taken-for-granted or idealized concepts, theories or ideas about how to organize or structure public organizations (Christensen and Gornitzka, 2018). For example, Røvik (2007) argues that the use of reputation management in the public sector is a "fashionable recipe." Within an institutional dynamic, sub-sector branding within HE can be seen as evidence of how international cultural processes (e.g. public branding) are made relevant in different local settings and organizational levels. As regards the actual relationship between sub-sector branding and the use of national traits, values and characteristics, institutional dynamics can explain potential similarities across nations in how the HE sector is presented, and how the nation is used to underpin this.

3. Methods

This paper builds on exploratory research and the study relies on two sources of data. First, the paper benefits from an already established data set of one-stop web-portals for HE from the 23 countries listed in *Times Higher Education's* (2016) top-160-universities ranking (see Sataøen and Wæraas, 2016). Secondly, the paper scrutinizes the Norwegian public sector agency Norwegian Centre for International Cooperation in Education's (SIU) branding campaign for the HE sector.

The first study's starting point is THE's annual list of top Universities in the world. The top-160 list is based on a complex methodology (see *Times Higher Education*, 2017), and the most important indicators for the list are grouped into four areas: research (volume, income and reputation); citations (research influence); international outlook (staff, students and research); industry income (knowledge transfer) (*Times Higher Education*, 2017). The sample includes countries with very different university systems, ensuring variation, although all countries in the sample have one (or more) well-established university. Empirical material is as follows: the

contents of the web-portals were classified and saved into Word-documents to facilitate structured comparisons. As internet texts tend to be ephemeral, with regular updates and revisions, it was important to gather the data within a short period of time. Hence, all data were collected in November 2015. Four of the countries on the THE's top-160 list did not have official web-portals presenting their HE sectors. Consequently, the database comprises information from 19 web-portals. The analysis reveals that The contents of the portals were subjected to theme-based analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Here, the data units were clustered into common themes using pre-defined categories. These categories were the ownership and administration of the portals, HTML and content structure, the absence or presence of rankings and references to excellence, and presentation of national peculiarities. Our use of these categories was motivated by an interest in the organizational set up of the portals (ownership and administration); homogenization tendencies (HTML and content structure); reputational efforts (absence/presence of rankings and references to excellence); and relationship to national traits and values (presentation of national peculiarities). In addition, information regarding the organizations/agencies administrating the portals was analyzed.

The second source of data was a study of sub-sector branding of HE in Norway. Norway was chosen as an illustrative case because its HE sector has small organizational hierarchies, making branding particularly interesting to study in this country. Further, the organizational setup of sub-sector branding in Norway's HE sector resembles the standard model in the 19 countries in the descriptive study. Empirical material is as follows: the study includes analysis of important documents about branding strategies in SIU and interviews with key informants working with branding in SIU. All data (interviews and documents) were collected during spring 2016. The documents were retrieved both from the "outside" of SIU (news reports about SIU, promotional materials and the one-stop web-portal for promoting Norway as a student destination) and from the "inside" of SIU (policy reports, internal strategies and memos, project plans and presentations). The internal documents were made available via contacts with key informants in SIU. In addition, four semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) with personnel working with the web-portal and branding of Norwegian HE were conducted. These interviews yielded additional knowledge, and were used as a way of verifying the documents analyzed. The informants were all important personnel in a particular project located at SIU, and tasked with developing the brand and reputation of the Norway's HE system. Three of the informants were employed at the department of "analysis and strategy," while one was employed at the department for "higher education and communication." Hence, the informants' work was related to strategic questions concerning branding – not operational, technical or aesthetic details. As the governmental agency responsible for promoting, branding and marketing HE in Norway to foreign students and employees, SIU is the most important organization when analyzing sub-sector branding of the Norwegian HE sector. Central themes in the interviews were: the organization of work related to Norway's one-stop web-portal for promoting HE; the history of HE sector branding in Norway and its central arguments; relations to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; and coordination activities with other parties. The analysis revealed that document studies were performed to describe the development and current situation in Norway as regards branding the HE sector. After transcription, the interviews were coded into broad categories, so that similar information (words, phrases, sentences or paragraphs) was grouped together. The categories were: arguments for branding; historical development of branding practices; the use of branding techniques; and nation-branding considerations. In the following presentation, quotes from the empirical material are presented to exemplify particular phenomena or processes. Although the study of web-portals in combination with SIU's branding campaign for the HE sector provides valuable insights to the processes of sub-sector branding, the study has its limitations. In particular, more in-depth studies on strategic considerations and coordination (or the lack thereof) between sub-sector branding and nation branding initiatives (and even individual organizations) are needed.

4. Results

4.1 The organizational forms of HE sector branding

In our data set, only official portals designed to meet prospective students' need for information regarding the national HE system are included. All the portals in the material are presented as the (one and only) official site for promotion of national HE institutions and systems. These one-stop portals are all in English (although some of the pages are mirrored in their respective national languages).

Table I shows how the different national portals are embedded in the public administrative structure.

The organization of one-stop portals takes different forms, ranging from agencies under ministerial control, organizations integrated into larger public diplomacy organizations, private companies and university associations. This variation indicates the presence of a cultural dynamic, where the organizational locus of branding a country's HE sector is selected based on unique domestic organizational cultures and traditions. This gives reason to believe that the set-up of sub-sector branding is based on bureaucratic traditions and administrative paths. It also accords with the garbage-can model (Cohen *et al.*, 1972), where problems, solutions and participants are connected with each other in somewhat less structured and rational ways.

The one-stop web-portals are for the most part a governmental task. As is evident in Table I, the dominating organizational model for HE sub-sector branding is a single-purpose agency financed by a ministry, most often the ministry of education. This is in line with recent developments in public administration systems around the world, where, during the last 20 years, autonomous and specialized agencies have become more important (Christensen and Lægreid, 2006). As Table I indicates, this also holds true for branding tasks within the HE sector.

Four other countries are represented in the THE's top-160 list, but do not have a clearly indicated web-portal for sub-sector branding. These countries are the USA, Belgium, South Africa and Singapore. Both Belgium and the USA have portals covering parts of the country (Wallonia in Belgium and several state universities in the USA), but not the countries' HE system as such. Although there could be several reasons why these five countries have not developed a coordinated promotion effort, a cultural dynamic can explain this with reference to the fact that Belgium, the USA and Canada are all federations, where the regions play a more prominent role than in centralized states. The USA and Singapore are exceptional cases within the HE system, both being countries with a number of the World's top universities, which probably are key players in their national contexts. South Africa has a portal under development, which is also related to a national branding strategy. However, this website is not yet fully developed.

Concerning the content structure of the actual web-portals, there is a high degree of coherence. The structure of the sites looks the same, and the contents of the sites are quite standardized. The user interface is usually the same, and the graphic and visual expressions agree. Most sites have the following basic structure.

Within this basic structure, the contents include FAQs, links to HE institutions and regulatory agencies, practical advice, news and events. Hence, on the structural level, there is a

Agency under control of the ministry of education and/or research	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Ministry of Trade	Integrated in larger public diplomacy organizations	Association of universities	No joint one-stop portal
China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Hong Kong, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Austria, Norway, Spain Holland, Canada	Japan	Australia	UK, Sweden	Switzerland	USA, Belgium, South Africa, Singapore

Table I.
The organization of higher education one-stop portals in different countries

certain degree of standardization, although some portals also include additional elements such as alumni information, post-study options, labor-market information and "student voices." The presence of portals in 19 of 23 countries, and the content on these portals, reflects a form of global institutionalization of sub-sector branding of HE, as there is a stable collection of practices and rules (cf. March and Olsen, 1998). This institutionalization is further reflected in the standardized and common structure of the portals, illustrated in Figure 1.

4.2 Sub-sector branding and the use of national values, traits and characteristics

The countries' web-portals for their HE sectors use and rely on national values and characteristics. This is evident in how most portals make use of the nation in their textual and visual presentations. An example is the Danish portal (www.studyindenmark.dk). This portal includes a section titled "about Denmark" where the country is described as a "kingdom of thriving cities and idyllic landscapes; an innovative society with a green lifestyle." In general, the portals share some characteristics in how they use and rely on presentations of the nation. As also indicated in Sataøen and Wæraas (2016), web-portals for HE institutions tend to give room to voluminous descriptions of national peculiarities, cultural characteristics, foods, orientations and facts and figures. The presentation from the Italian and Finnish web-portals can serve as examples. Here, the sub-sector branding makes use of general nation-branding clichés about the respective country.

> Italians are warm, welcoming people who love to relax, celebrate and socialise with family and friends. And celebration and relaxation usually take place around the table either at home or in a restaurant, where they can enjoy the traditions of the Italian cuisine. Italians have a passion for eating but also for talking. In Italy conversation is an art form. As you walk in the streets or stop at a café in one of the many squares, you will notice Italians of all ages engaged in intense and animated discussions on a wide variety of topics ranging from family, work, politics, gossip, food, wine and sports, especially soccer. (www. www.study-in-italy.it)

> Equality is the essential driving force in our society [Finland]. We have one of the most advanced educational systems in the world, and as a result of our innovative mindset and investment in education, we are blessed with a high standard of living and quality of life. Newsweek magazine rated Finland as the best country in the world to live in and the capital Helsinki came out top among the major cities rated in Monocle magazine's Quality of Life Survey. Finland's high educational standards were cited among the crucial factors in both of these comparative surveys. (www.studyinfinland.fi)

Paradoxically, although such descriptions are supposed to be conducive to differentiation (cf. Anholt, 2006), the presentations are quite similar, at least on the structural level. Values related to national traditions are highlighted in most cases, as the excerpts illustrate. Hence, the presentations might lead to conformity more than differentiation. This is in line with Antorini and Schultz's (2005) perspective, whereby organizations, though different from competitors, in practice, communicate in the same ways. As the institutional dynamics emphasize, organizations are part of institutional environments (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), where there are norms for appropriate behavior for specific groups of actors in specific situations (March and Olsen, 1998). Hence, by conforming to the general patterns, organizations demonstrate legitimacy, as they do similar things as other organizations in the institutional environment.

Figure 1.
The basic content structure of one-stop web-portals for higher education sectors

| 1. Why study in country xx | 2. Study options/higher education system | 3. Living and studying in country xxx | 4. Scholarships/how to apply |
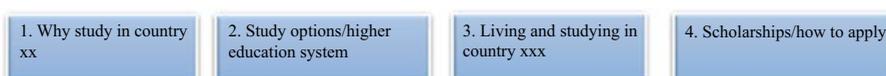
The presentations of national peculiarities and characteristics are also related to the presentations of the HE sectors in particular ways. The different aspects (HE and national values and characteristics) are related in such a way that they rely upon each other. The excerpt from the Finnish website is one example, where the standards of the educational sector are related to high scores on nation branding indexes, and where an innovative mind-set is seen as a national "meme." Another example is the Dutch website, where a national value of entrepreneurship is connected to an innovative educational system:

> Get into the Dutch entrepreneurial spirit and start pioneering! Dutch people are entrepreneurs and discoverers. What's more, they are true pioneers! The country is the birth place of Nobel Prize winners, daring philosophers, groundbreaking artists and scientists […] Students are continuously encouraged to come up with creative and innovative ideas, to think beyond conventional solutions and methodologies. (www.studyinholland.nl)

Another general pattern is that the portals make use of rankings when describing and presenting countries. An example is the French portal:

> The quality of French higher education is widely recognized throughout the world. French institutions figure prominently in the Shanghai Classification of Universities, in the rankings of the Financial Times and Times Higher, and in the European Report on Science and Technologies published by the European Commission. (www.campusfrance.org)

This tendency can be related to the co-optation of the global branding industry (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015), where brand indexes (see e.g. Anholt, 2006) and other rankings are common. However, as the one-stop portals are mostly subordinated to ministries of education, which – in contrast to ministries of trade or foreign affairs – are unlikely to have formal responsibilities for promoting the nation, it is interesting and somewhat surprising that national branding concerns are integrated with HE concerns on these portals.

As shown, there is evidence for a gradually developing institutionalized practice, at least on the organizational level, and on the structural level of the portals. The deeper organizational relations here, for example the connectedness between the foreign ministries' branding programs and sub-sector branding, are however difficult to evaluate based on this material. In order to gain more insight into how sub-sector branding is conducted in the field of HE, we turn to the Norwegian case and focus on the development of the one-stop portal studyinnorway.no.

4.3 The Norwegian case: systems for sub-sector branding of HE

Studyinnorway.no was launched by SIU in 2005, and since then SIU has been responsible for the website. When established, the portal was seen as the most important tool in promoting Norwegian HE abroad, and it was ceremoniously "opened" by the Norwegian Ambassador to the USA, Knut Vollebæk, in October 2005. The fact that the ambassador to a highly important country for Norwegian foreign affairs opened the portal illustrates its connection to general national interests. The portal's aim was to be an informative channel for prospective students interested in the Norwegian HE sector. When the portal was officially "opened," SIU's information manager characterized the essence of the portal as highlighting the "Norwegian experience." Labeling the "Norwegian experience" as the portal's essence made nature, recreation, tranquility and hiking important keywords (*Bergens Tidende*, 2005). Although the site focused on non-academic and non-curricular dimensions (e.g. "nature" and "recreation"), the "good European student" was defined as the campaign's target.

A closer look at studyinnorway.no shows that the web-portal contains information and facts about Norway and Norwegian HE institutions, with links to relevant resources and information about the educational system, tuition and scholarships. As regards national characteristics and values, studyinnorway.no has a specific section about "living in Norway," which describes Norwegian society, lifestyle, culture and nature. This section brands Norway

by highlighting certain characteristics. The main motif in this presentation is that Norway is special and one-of-a-kind – it represents a "different student experience": "Explore the unknown and challenge your own limits – the people of Norway have never been afraid of going their own way" (www.studyinnorway.no). Thus, in this context, studyinnorway.no portrays Norwegians as special and Norway as a country of individuals. Further, this is related to aspects of studying in Norway, where students are supposed to challenge their own limits. This is also supported by the interviews, as one of the informants states:

> […] we want to profile ourselves (the education system) through dramatic nature and a special scenery. But it cannot jeopardise the image of a stable and trustworthy educational system. Therefore, we link the dramatic nature with ideas of pushing borders in academic settings. (Interview, SIU)

Hence, the portal's rationale is to relate sub-sector branding purposes with national branding ideas.

In internal memos from SIU, specific countries are defined as targets for the portal. This is not, however, evident in the actual contents of the portal, which consist of rather generic presentations for prospective students or others seeking information about the Norwegian HE sector. Hence, the strategic dimension tends to be more of an ideal than a de facto organizational practice, and there is a decoupling between strategies and content.

According to the informants, SIU's portal relates to the overarching profiling goal of the state, which, in this case, is defined by the Ministry of Education and Research:

> The Government has decided that the profiling work of SIU shall focus on developing good international relations and cooperation with specific regions and countries. The Nordic region, Europe in general, North America, Japan and the BRICS-countries are defined as target countries. (Interview, SIU)

Hence, there is a rational dynamic in play, although SIU sees recruitment of foreign students as something which the institutions themselves are obligated to take care of:

> We take care of the overarching profile and ideas, and we evaluate what the foreign students think about Norway as a student destination. But it is the universities and university colleges which themselves are responsible for recruitment and marketing of their own organization. (Interview, SIU)

One reason for this attitude might be that HE is free of charge in Norway. Hence, there are no economic incentives for proactively branding the sector with prospective students as the target group. This is a paradox, as the introduction of the one-stop portal was intended to attract the "good European student." Therefore, a rational dynamic alone cannot explain the relationships between different interests. An institutional dynamic is also in play, where branding and profiling are done and reflected upon, although it might not be rational to do so. In such a perspective, branding can be seen as a fashionable recipe (Røvik, 2007).

In SIU, the relation between nation branding programs and HE branding has become more formalized in recent years. According to the SIU informants, the work with "Innovation Norway" – which is responsible for profiling Norway abroad (see e.g. Angell and Mordhorst, 2015) – is more structured and formalized, and regular conferences and meetings have been arranged. As a part of this, a dedicated project will be launched:

> In the coming years, through this project, we [SIU] will work together with Innovation Norway to set up a program for embassies and consulates abroad. The aim of this program is to equip embassies and consulates with tools to, themselves, promote and brand Norwegian education abroad. (Interview, SIU)

The project described by the informant was part of a program initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with the aim of building a digital foundation for branding, including texts, image, and education of representatives of foreign countries about the internationalization of HE in Norway. Hence, sub-sector branding intersects with nation branding on a practical and organizational level.

The presentations on studyinnorway.no are coordinated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "We have an ongoing dialogue with the Ministry regarding the contents of our portal. The work is not very coordinated so far, but we are planning to work more closely together in the future" (Interview, SIU). The one-stop portal for HE and Norway's official external website are sharing content and have mutual links and hypertexts. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, according to the SIU informants, is also working to streamline the different presentations, to focus on fewer and more specific "selling points." The informants at SIU welcome this development, arguing that generic dimensions of Norway (for instance nature, the societal models, and security) are more important for prospective students than specific aspects of the HE system: "This [nature, security, welfare] is why students want to come here and study" (Interview, SIU). From such a perspective, national traits, characteristics and values become highly relevant and important when conducting sub-sector branding of HE. Bearing in mind the global outlook of HE in general, and the growing interest in internationalization in particular, the observed use of the nation is peculiar, and will be further elaborated upon in the conclusion of the article.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper aimed to deepen our understanding of public sub-sector branding within HE. The analysis showed that, in most countries, single-purpose agencies are in charge of sub-sector branding within the HE system. The most common organizational model is that the ministry of education is the host for such agencies. Hence, it is reason to view expert authorities as the formally responsible units for sub-sector branding in the HE system. The analysis also indicated that sub-sector branding relies on national values, traits and characteristics. Further, the comparison of the different national web-portals revealed similarities between them. Both the formal structure and the actual contents of the portals shared common characteristics. Therefore, we argue, institutional dynamics are particularly important in explaining this phenomenon. Such dynamics are also evident in how web-portals for HE are standardized when it comes to presentations of national peculiarities and characteristics. The way the nation is framed and presented is part of institutionalized templates and patterns. Although the institutional dynamic is a dominating explanation for understanding the relation between sub-sector branding and the use of national characteristics, both rational and cultural dynamics are in play. This is seen, for example, in the collaborations between organizations for HE and nation-branding organizations. As the Norwegian case indicates, such collaborations are becoming more formalized.

These observations have important democratic implications that are seldom discussed or problematized in the literature. First, the power of promoting the HE sector tends to be placed in the hands of people external to the actual knowledge domain. This is indicative of a process where the political level and political dimensions are subordinated to the logic of reputation and communication. As Christensen and Lægreid (2006) show, the growth of single-purpose agencies goes hand in hand with the decline of active politics, characterized by a shift from direct to indirect government. Indirect government has opened a space for new experts, as illustrated by the Norwegian case, where sub-sector branding within the HE system has become an issue for experts decoupled from the political level. Branding might also be seen as a particularly interesting activity, as it involves the creation of imagined communities through symbols, values and behaviors, areas that historically have been prominent products of political decisions. Today, there is little direct political control or even involvement in this field. This is paradoxical, as the portals studied here portray and define the sub-sector with its values and peculiarities, which has an impact on people's expectations and perceptions.

Second, the nation's brand is considered highly important, also within sub-sector branding of HE. The Norwegian case showed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in some cases defines the rules of the game, through pre-defined selling points and characteristics. The portals are

also projecting clichéd images of the different nations. National identities and characteristics are thereby presented as solid and fixed, and as influencing the educational practices of the different countries. This is a potential democratic problem, as national identities are also highly fluid and dynamic. Diversity, difference and conflicting values are at the core of liberty and democracy. Although mixed-up and incoherent values tend to be seen as a problem (cf. Fredriksson and Pallas, 2017), completely coherent national values are not possible within a state or nation, unless it is undemocratic or authoritarian. As Naomi Klein (2002) puts it, "Unlike strong brands, which are predictable and disciplined, democracy is messy and fractious, if not outright rebellious."

Thirdly, the relationship between sub-sector branding of HE and nation branding signals an interesting ambiguity between the competitive forces in the global HE market on the one hand, and national ambitions to develop human capital and the humanities on the other. In terms of dynamics, this points to how global social contexts (e.g. for implementing branding activities) exert pressure on the different organizations involved in sub-sector branding (cf. Meyer and Rowan, 1977). This ambiguity is also important to consider for practitioners in the field of HE branding: HE sub-sector branding must take into account both global competitive forces (e.g. the discourse of excellence in HE) and internal factors related to history and identity. In accordance with Fredriksson and Pallas (2017), Christensen *et al.* (2013) and Christensen and Christensen (2018), ambiguities and inconsistencies in public sector organizations' communication could be a way for practitioners to explore the possibilities for change and innovation; they can stimulate organizational change and development. Another implication for practitioners is to evaluate critically the use of national characteristics and traits in sub-sector branding, as they tend to be used as clichés and stereotypes. Paradoxically, however, national clichés and values tend to be important, although the HE sectors are essentially international and globally oriented. This paradox – and potential organizational decoupling – should guide further research in this field. Further studies of this paradox could also be fruitful for understanding the possibilities for citizen participation in such highly important processes.

This study has focused solely on the HE sector as a case for sub-sector branding. As described, this sector is characterized by peculiar national traditions and path-dependent structures. Hence, it remains an open question whether the characteristics found here are relevant for other sectors in society. Further research is therefore needed on other sectors (such as health care, infrastructure, energy, tourism) to reveal further dimensions and traits of sub-sector branding. Further research would also benefit from focusing on broader identity matters and sense-making processes related to branding within HE.

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