

UNIVERSITIES' REPUTATION

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John Haldane
Concepción Naval
Rupert Younger
Pilar Lostao
Louise Simpson
Juan Manuel Mora (Coordinator)
Jan Sadlak (Foreword)

Victor Pérez-Díaz (Appendix)
Juan Carlos Rodríguez (Appendix)

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John Haldane
Concepción Naval
Rupert Younger
Pilar Lostao
Louise Simpson
Foreword: Jan Sadlak

Editor: Miriam Salcedo de Prado

Design: Jokin Pagola

Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, S.A. (EUNSA)

Plaza de los Sauces, 1 y 2. 31010 Barañáin (Navarra) - Spain

Telephone: + 34 948 25 68 50 - Fax: + 34 948 25 68 54

e-mail: info@eunsa.es

ISBN: 978-84-313-3101-6

Legal Deposit: 2209-2015

Printed by: Graphycems, Polígono Industrial San Miguel. 31132 Villatuerta

Printed in Spain

This book is the result of a number of people's work and dedication, and who together have made it possible to hold the *Building Universities' Reputation* conference at the University of Navarra on April 22nd, 23rd and 24th 2015.

In these few lines, I would like to thank each of them for their work, support and enthusiasm regarding this project.

To Universia, the Conferencia de Rectores de las Universidades Españolas / Conference of Spanish University Rectors (CRUE), CASE, World 100 Reputation Network, Corporate Excellence, the Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación/ Association of Communication Executives (Dircom), the European Foundation Society and Education and the British Council: Thank you for your joint work as partners.

To the Ministry of Education and Science, the Government of Navarra and Pamplona City Council: Thank you for your institutional support.

Thank you to "la Caixa" Foundation, Iberdrola, Ernst & Young (EY), and Knights of Columbus for your support as sponsors.

Finally, thank you to the whole team from the University of Navarra for their magnificent planning and running of the *Building Universities' Reputation* conference 2015.

Juan Manuel Mora

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IV. STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF UNIVERSITY REPUTATION

Pilar Lostao

Vice President for International Relations
University of Navarra

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second chapter, we reflected on the reputation of universities and the nature of quality and success in higher education.

We have discussed reputation as perceived quality that involves academic excellence in the inherent objectives of the university (teaching, research, and the transfer of knowledge), as well as other aspects that are at the service of those three basic ends.

One could also point out that reputation is something that is deserved. It is the result of good performance (quality) sustained over time, both visible and perceived, and generates authority and security.

Greatly simplifying the issue, reputation would be the resulting sum of adding an objective component (performance) and a subjective one (perception). Thus, quality is supported by objective data, such as the good grades of students, publications, and employment rates, while quality is the favorable perception held by different stakeholders, such as graduates, families, or companies. Reputation does not exist apart from this sum.

Professor Naval also points out in her chapter that it is the mission of those who make decisions and govern the university to promote the “battles” that are involved in achieving quality as a goal of the university.

Those of us who work within the university system are concerned with the reputations of the institutions in which we work and which we represent, thus we need to incorporate reputation management into governance and management tasks within our institutions. And in this area, the reputation manager should be someone “with a broad vision and the ability to take charge, not be discouraged and overcome

the initial inertia in order to focus properly on the university's initiatives and meet these challenges" of the organization ("Reputation, Quality and Success" 32).

Reputation management is highly developed in the world of business.

Moreover, at the academic level, Business Schools are leading the way in reputation management and research and can, in many cases, serve as a model.

In this chapter I will try to reflect and offer an open proposal on how to manage university reputation. But first, it seems necessary to clarify a few terms.

2. PREMISES

I think it may be useful to briefly reflect on two pairs of words: tangible and intangible; reputation or reputations.

2.1. Tangibles and intangibles

Although there is a significant emotional and experiential component in the perception of quality, it must be based on facts and data. Therefore, rankings use measurable indicators, reducing information to tangible numbers, quantifiable realities, such as the number of candidates per seat; international female teachers and researchers; the h-index of scientific production; the percentage of employability at graduation year, etc.

These numbers are entered into formulas with a weighting factor for each item that finally provides a unique number for each university located in a position on the list. Although this looks like something cold and reductionist, today these numbers have significant value because they offer information to many people who must choose their place of study or work. They also serve the university as a tool for improvement that encourages transparency. Therefore, rankings can be of great service, if properly managed; in the same way, we can affirm that they serve an important social function. The same could be said of audits, accreditation, and other quality processes, encouraging universities to translate into numbers their reality and activity.

But there are other, intangible, difficult-to-measure realities that provide great value to the university and which constitute an important component of its quality; for example, the humanistic education offered to students, the skills and knowledge of the teachers, the loyalty and pride of employees, students and alumni; the high quality of the relationships inside and outside the institution, its social responsibility, its capacity for innovation, and its sustainability.

To what extent are rankings and other metrics considering intangibles in their measurements? Here there is probably room for improvement and, in this sense, I dare to encourage rankings and universities to undertake greater discourse in order to achieve this.

2.2. Reputation or reputations?

Can we speak of a reputation, or would it not be more accurate to speak of reputations?

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the groups of people that are interested in the university are very diverse: among them we find students and employees (teachers, researchers, administrative staff and services, school governing boards and managers), and outside prospective students, families, education policy-makers, public officials, funding agencies, employers and society in general. Each of these groups looks at the quality in their field of interest: academic programs, employability, generation and transfer of knowledge, internationality and social commitment. We can speak, then, of a variety of “reputations”.

On the other hand, regardless of the stakeholders concerned, there are universities that are perceived by the general public as offering high quality education in a given field of knowledge, e.g. Medicine, Economics or Humanities, while perhaps not so much so in other areas. Here again, we can refer to “reputations”.

In this sense, I would like to consider whether those who are responsible for education in a country –students, parents, teachers, employers, and ultimately, all stakeholders– pay enough attention to the rankings when developing their standards of measurement.

Therefore, we could talk about a variety of reputations from the point of view of public interest, and a variety of reputations from the point of view of the field of knowledge. Nevertheless, all of these “reputations” or positive perceptions contribute to the overall/general reputation of the university.

3. HOW TO MANAGE REPUTATION

Moving on, I think a model for reputation management can be found in Physiology (Silverthorn).

Regulatory systems in the body are responsible for maintaining appropriate levels of different variables (e.g., body temperature, blood pressure, hormone concentration), when presented with changes in the external and internal environment, and maintaining them within a range compatible with life. A control

system is made up of a set of elements that are capable of interaction, which is responsible at any given time for a state that can change under the influence of one or more inputs (stimuli), and from which a particular result is obtained (answers) from the system. A common type of control system is one which is based on feedback: a closed circuit in which the effects produced by the system affect input into the system (fig. 1).

Take, for example, the regulation of body temperature. A decrease in ambient temperature (the stimulus) is detected by the temperature sensors located in the skin, leading to the sensation of cold. These sensors send signals to the controller (located in central temperature control in the brain), which compares them with a given reference value (37 °C), followed by another signal to the effector (skeletal muscle), causing a response which increases body temperature: muscle contraction (shivering), which produces heat. That heat production in the body is a new entry that corrects the temperature drop, returning it to its reference value, thus maintaining the healthy state of body temperature.

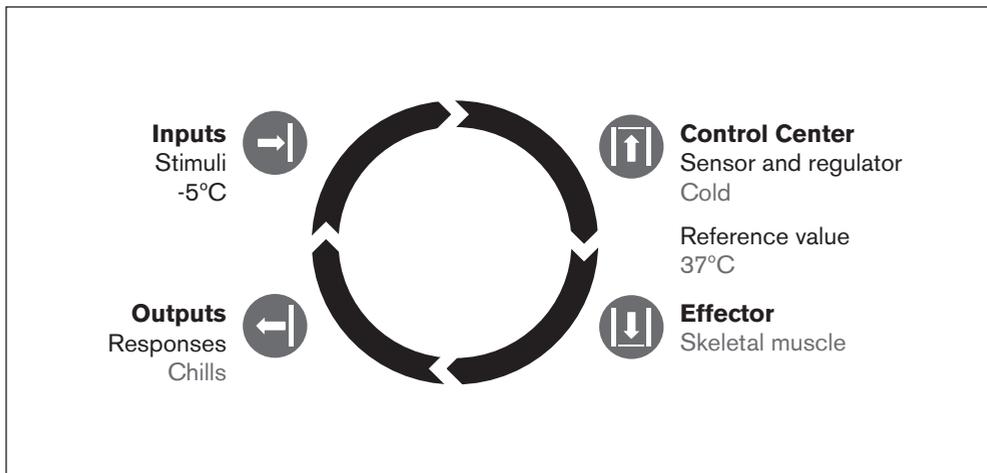


Fig. 1. Physiology. Regulatory systems based on feedback

Following the model physiology offers us, I think strategic reputation management may be divided into three phases (fig. 2):

1. *Knowledge:* We gain knowledge from stimuli, which is the (tangible) data reflecting performance, and the perceptions of others in the organization.

This information is provided by rankings, quality processes, accreditations, audits, surveys, and interviews with various stakeholders and the media, among other things.

The sources of these two types of knowledge are made available to us; establishing an appropriate strategy for referencing them and collecting the information they provide is therefore crucial. Understanding the intangibles is more difficult but a methodology can also be established although, in many cases, its development is still pending. In any case, the most difficult and important factor would be sorting through and making sense of all the information that reaches us—passing from the fragmented view to a broader overview, leaving aside casuistry in favor of strategy, adding things up and drawing conclusions.

2. *Decision*: Once we have the information that provides the stimuli, the second step would be to decide.

To do this, we first need to analyze the information and compare it with the reference value that is our identity, our thinking and our university project with its objectives, in order to find deviations. Here I would like to pause to consider that this reference value includes what makes us different, because each university can offer something distinctive in their teaching or research, in their intangibles, or in their service to society, that makes it unique and which is part of its identity.

Therefore, university governance has to be clear about the answers to the questions, what increases our value? In what area do we want to stand out? What are the most important intangibles at our university? What do I do to cultivate them?

The process of analysis would culminate in a decision as to what adjustments must be made, and how, so that we conform to our reference value. This step may include changing policies, restructuring the organization and proposing new objectives; i.e. creating a roadmap.

3. *Innovation*: The last step would be the response. That is to say, it would involve taking the necessary steps to follow the roadmap. This is the step in which the entire organization (effectors) should be involved through good communication and motivation. In this way, the process would culminate in a new phase of knowledge that might best meet the objectives and the reality of what the university wants to be, and, as a result, improve its reputation.

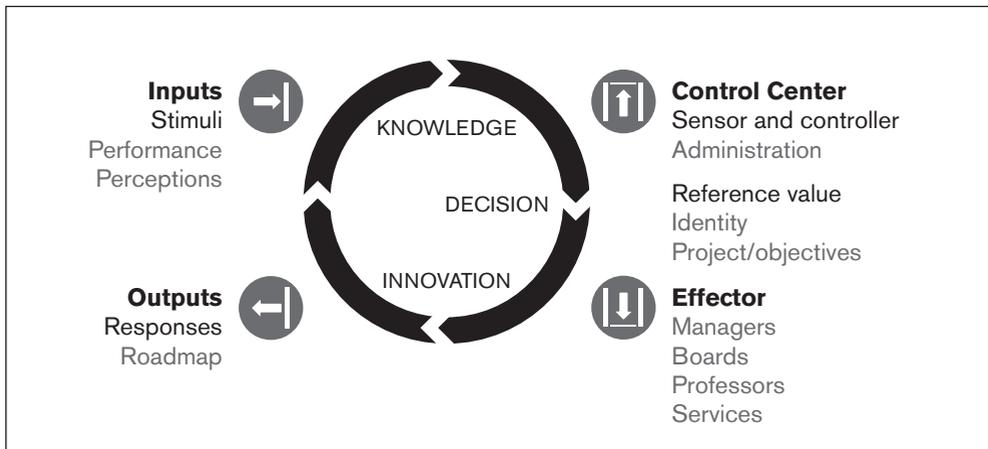


Fig. 2. Strategic reputation management

Just as in the regulation of many bodily functions, this process would be a regulation system in continuous operation that operates by feedback that is activated from a particular situation and leads to an improvement. And, just as it is necessary to maintain the health of the body, it can also serve as a model for maintaining and improving the quality of a university.

4. CONCLUSIONS

If the purpose of the university is to train highly qualified and responsible citizens, who participate actively in society, as well as promote, generate and disseminate knowledge, then it must be transformative. It must transform lives and transform society. That is to say, the university has, by definition, a clear social function. And its reputation becomes evident when this social function is fulfilled. Therefore, the role of university governance is to manage its reputation. Herein lies much of what we have to learn.