

# **UNIVERSITIES' REPUTATION**

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Juan Manuel Mora

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# V. HOW INTERNATIONAL PHD STUDENTS CHOOSE TOP UNIVERSITIES AND INTERPRET REPUTATION AND RANKINGS

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**Louise Simpson**

Director of The World 100 Reputation Network  
The Knowledge Partnership

## 1. INTRODUCTION: OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

Our previous World 100 reputational research in previous years had shown that academics moving jobs were very motivated by reputation, and that universities were creating strategies to improve ranked position, which was serving as a proxy for reputation. Reputation was clearly critical at an institutional and also a personal academic level. However, we had not yet undertaken any research with students until this point.

Other academic research shows the importance of reputation in student choice, but often place and student experience is more important for undergraduate decision making than reputation per se. What, however, matters to top international students at PhD level? Does reputation matter more or less than place, cost, supervisor, or other choice factors?

With research taking place in 2014, this project therefore set out to consider the extent to which international PhD students valued reputation, and how reputation figured in their destination choice for a PhD. The findings might be useful to inform university communications, marketing and leadership.



The World 100 Reputation Network provided members for the in-depth PhD student interviews, and the British Council in Japan and *findadegree.com* circulated the surveys to a wider group of international PhD students<sup>1</sup>.

The project objectives were to discover:

1. How do international PhD students define university reputation? What clues do they seek in terms of defining a reputable university?
2. To what extent do these students use rankings/other information in decision making?
3. What role does reputation play in attracting student talent relative to more tangible or factual factors such as location, facilities, price?
4. To what extent do rankings correlate with reputation and act as a proxy for reputation?
5. How do international PhD students regard the reputation of their university?
6. Do students understand the concept of brand, in the wider sense of character?

There were 100 international PhD student face to face hour-long interviews at world-class universities, and 600 international PhD students responses to the online survey.

## 2. FINDINGS

### 2.1. How do PhD students define university reputation? What clues do they seek in terms of defining a reputable university?

PhD students define reputation in terms of the amplification of the university as a name (being well known internationally and for some time), and quality of research. Indicators of university reputation include: being well known to the public in different countries (ubiquity as well as prominence); having a high ranking (in any or all of the world rankings); having a long history/heritage; being

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<sup>1</sup> We are very grateful to the following for allowing us access to their PhD students and for helping distribute the survey: Aarhus University, Peter Damgaard Kristensen; Cardiff University, Sandra Elliot; British Council Japan, Azusa Tanaka and Tom Mayes; FindaUniversity.Com, Andy Pritchard; LSE, Robin Hoggard; Lund University, Caroline Runeus; McMaster University, Andrea Farquhar; Queen Mary University of London, Tania Rhodes Taylor and Fran Dodd; UCD, Eilis O'Brien; UCL, Mark Sudbury; University of Aberdeen, Shaunagh Kirby; University of Copenhagen, Jasper Steen Winkel; University of Edinburgh, Russell Bartlett; University of Glasgow, Elizabeth Gray; University of Helsinki, Tiina Kosunen; University of Madrid Autonoma, Amaya Mendikoetxea Pelayo; University of Manchester, Alan Ferns, Janice Ellis; University of Melbourne, Anne-Maree Butt; University of Michigan: Lee Doyle, Rebecca Lowenstein, Matt Schlientz; University of Nottingham, Dawn Munro; University of Sheffield, Nick Agarwal, Carrie Vernon; University of Tokyo, Tomoko Yamaguchi; University of York, Hilary Layton.

AUSTRALIA	University of Melbourne
CANADA	McMaster University
DENMARK	Aarhus University University of Copenhagen
ENGLAND	London School of Economics and Political Sciences (LSE) University of Manchester University of Nottingham Queen Mary University of London University of Sheffield University College London University of York
FINLAND	University of Helsinki
IRELAND	University College Dublin
JAPAN	University of Tokyo
SCOTLAND	University of Aberdeen University of Edinburgh University of Glasgow
SPAIN	Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
SWEDEN	Lund University
US	University of Michigan
WALES	Cardiff University

**Table 1.** Universities involved in the qualitative research

the best at a particular subject (exemplified by Nobel Prizes, top professors); having strong professors (visible in citations, on conference circuit); having outstanding academic facilities; performing excellent research; teaching in English (and therefore international and global); offering fully funded PhD places; being in a country/city that is well known, characterful and safe. Both of the last two, teaching in English, and fully funded PhD places, are critical choice factors, as most students would not undertake a PhD without funding or the guarantee of English tuition. However, these are not subject to marketing and communications inputs, as the teaching in English will be an institutional leadership decision, and funding will also be restricted by financial decisions.



**Fig. 3.** Key indicators of university reputation for PhD students

**2.2. To what extent do students use rankings and other information to support decision making?**

The sources of information PhD applicants utilize when seeing to discover the reputation of a university are notably rankings, university websites, their current supervisor (i.e. at master’s or undergraduate level when applying), and citations and references. Rankings, along with websites, are the number one information source, and used widely by PhD students, both to make choices, and to verify choices. Most students seem familiar with the three main world rankings (THE, QS, AWRU) but THE seems marginally more influential. However we need to be careful not to overstate their importance. Rankings tended to be used at the

start of the process to exclude universities, but they were often not used later on in the decision-making process. Websites are also a highly influential source for interviewees and survey respondents (nearly as important as rankings in the qualitative findings, and more important in the quantitative findings), and this is much easier to influence by good communications and marketing than rankings. Leaders and academic directors can also influence supervisors, rankings and citations, by ensuring that their academics are international active, research active, and appearing in journals and in conferences.

### **2.3. What role does reputation play in attracting student talent relative to more tangible or factual factors such as location, facilities, price?**

Reputation is a critical driver in student decision making. Reputation was second only to supervisor in the final choice of where a student went (interviews and survey results), but it is also arguably similar to, or even part of, the factors of 'quality university' and 'quality department'. Therefore, taken together, these reputational factors have great weight. Reputation is also more likely to appear at the early stages of student choice journeys, as being an essential. Supervisor is essential for some, but for others, supervisor only appears salient in the final stage of decision making. Funding is both essential and a deciding factor, as for some students they one had one or two fully funded offers, and this then dictates choice. But for those top students who had several offers, they choose on the basis of reputation, quality, and supervisor. The out-take from this is that universities need to be perceived as reputable to win the best students (corporate activity), and supervisors (individual academics) have a critical role in converting students who are choosing between several equally reputable universities with similar funding packages.

It is also important to note that attractive country and attractive location are also very important decision making factors across the whole student choice journey, albeit not usually influencing final decisions. Evidence of integrative research and collaboration is also an important factor for many students, who see this as essential for cutting-edge universities.

### **2.4. To what extent do rankings correlate with reputation and act as a proxy for reputation?**

Over three quarters of students in the quantitative survey said that being a Top 200 university mattered to them. In both the survey and interviews, we saw that PhD student perceptions of university reputation are very close to the

rankings. If we compare where the students in interviews ranked a sample of top universities with the world rankings, half were identical to the world ranked order, the remainder were within a few places of the world ranked order. The results were very similar in the online survey. Copenhagen was thought of much more highly than its ranked position, which suggests very good marketing, and Pohang was seen to be much lower than its high ranked position. This suggests a need for more marketing for Pohang (Korea), but it also reflects its comparative youth as a university and the fact that it is not in a familiar place name to most international PhDs. Tradition and age are certainly indicators of reputation. When students also discussed brand, they immediately reverted to discussions of rankings. Thus we conclude that rankings are a proxy for university reputation.

### **2.5. How do PhDs regard the reputation of their own university compared to peers?**

Whilst we see a strong correlation between perceived reputation and ranked order for other universities, students display a bias in favour of their own university, ranking it higher by reputation than ranking. Interestingly, they rank their own university on average in the third position of some of the best universities in the world, although they all chose to put Oxford and MIT above their own, which arguably shows they are prepared to admit to being beaten by the very best but not their more direct peers. This mirrors the findings of our research into academic behaviours, which showed the same tendency to overinflate the reputation of one's own university, when using rankings as a benchmark. This is positive in the sense that students are clearly very supportive of their university, but it may also mean they are unreliable witnesses for true positioning evidence. It may indicate the triumph of internal communications, i.e. students absorbing internal rhetoric, but it is probably more likely that students become prime endorsers of their university, and cease to have objective vision. Whichever is true, it means that students are likely to be passionate advocates of the PhD experience.

### **2.6. Do students understand the concept of brand?**

Students are, in the main, able to explain brands, and they are loyal to particular brands, and able to explain (in fairly basic ways) what makes them buy certain brands (e.g. Nike, Estee Lauder, and Starbucks) over competitor brands offering similar products. They are, on the whole, brand loyal and brand conscious. (However, we noted that their examples were products and not services. Does this mean that services and experiences are not yet perceived by them to be brands, or

that they are too young to be able to explain a service brand and feel loyal to it?). When it comes to explaining the brand of their university, PhD students were, on the whole, not able to do this. There were very rare examples where some highly attuned students could name academics, academic flagships, brand personalities and even explained the graphic design of the university. Most students interviewed, went silent, or told us this was ‘very difficult’. Those who attempted an answer discussed rankings or rather generic characteristics like ‘friendly’, or they told us that the university sold branded caps and T-shirts. Thus our research shows that students are not effective at explaining the brand personality of the university. Is this because they are too young, that it doesn’t matter, or that they simply haven’t been told in an effective way what it is? Finally, students were also not able to explain what their university did to market itself to students, and they did not recognize campaigns or brand promotions, even when they were sitting a few feet away from a university brand banner across a street! This suggests that either brand and marketing campaigns/efforts are too dilute, or they fail to engage them, or that students tune out of ‘marketing’ once they are at the university. Perhaps students could play a more active role in marketing and endorsement if they were engaged and able to communicate some of the narratives of the university and reflect its successes beyond that of their own area.

### **3. CONCLUSIONS**

Reputation is critical for universities and needs to be amplified clearly, and internationally to attract top PhDs. One of the most striking discoveries was that these students were able to move between talking about quality and reputation with ease, and were adamant that the two were different concepts. It is clearly important for the university to communicate the inner academic quality to wider audiences so that it becomes part and parcel of that external reputation, ensuring that the two are closely fused and wholly authentic.

Whilst it was pleasing to see that the supervisor is the most critical decision making factor, closely followed by reputation, few universities make the most of their academics when it comes to marketing, nor establish strong campaigns around academic performance. Those that are beginning to do so understand that, at the top end of universities, the academic offer is essential, and must be articulated to attract the best people. However, there are plenty of high ranked universities that don’t understand this, and fail to integrate the academic quality of their university in their reputation.

There is also a communications gap with branding in the sense of the wider unified character of the university. Whilst understanding the concept of branding (in the full sense of character rather than graphic labels), PhD students are not able to describe the brand of their own university, and tend instead to rely on ranked position as a descriptor or the degree to which it is or isn't known in their home country. Because of this, perhaps, rankings have even more significance for these young people; the interesting and resonant 'analogue' character or brand narrative of the university is not percolating through the colder 'digital' world of rankings. If universities want to be more than 'just a number', they need to inject personality into their websites and communications. There is a significant piece of work for universities to get better at marketing their character or 'brand', and telling their story, to these brand savvy students, in order to stand out amongst their close numerical competitors.

Finally, we must be open to the fact that students are very influential as marketing ambassadors in their own rights, able to encourage or dissuade the next generation with a word or two on social media. Ignore the PhD students as marketers, and you ignore one of your most powerful resources. Students should be given a better explanation of the university brand, and asked to comment on and engage with branding campaigns in order to increase their own familiarity, seek improvements, and gain their support for word of mouth endorsements (both as alumni and as current PhD students).